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Educational Leadership: A Small Country's Response to Globalisation—The Slovenian Case

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1 The Impact of Globalisation on Leadership and Education

1.1 School Systems and Leadership Tend to Be Similar

An awareness of the importance of school leadership in education systems is common in most countries nowadays. It has come into political and professional focus over the last twenty years. This is one of the impacts of expanding globalisation, where marketplace logic is spreading through numerous channels, for instance transnational agencies

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such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), and the restructuring of government and governance in terms of decentralisation, autonomy and site-based management.

Due to globalisation, new relationships and new coalitions and liaisons between countries have been formed. Some of them are ad hoc and others more formal. Most of them have been established first and foremost to promote economic cooperation. The World Bank, the OECD, and the EU are just a few of these powerful players.

In the field of education policies, the OECD and EU Commission are interested in international collaboration and 'inspiration'. However, neither agency has any direct influence over the school systems of their member countries and thus over the recruitment of headteachers, or their preparation and professional development. Since they do not use direct forms of power, such as regulations, they have developed the so-called 'soft forms of governance' within what seem to be very general trends. The EU has developed the 'open method of coordination' (Lange and Alexiadou 2007) and the OECD a method of 'peer pressure' (Schuller 2006). An important common feature is reflexivity: member states and institutions should inspire each other through 'peer reviews' and policy learning, such as best practices. The research and recommendation of best (next) practice is also beginning to prevail as a trend in leadership.

The OECD and EU have an impact on education policies through studies, reports, committees, recommendations, funding streams and programmes, etc. The main influence of the OECD is in setting the agenda by conducting international studies (comparisons) such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). Member countries can also ask for OECD help and support if their government wants to establish new priorities in the national educational agenda, but lacks the strength to do so itself. The agency has developed a comprehensive team framework for reviewing the state of affairs in member states. The team's report often forms the basis for political action in individual states (Pont et al. 2008).

1.2 The Establishment and Capacity Building of Slovenian Governmental Educational Institutions to Match International Trends

Education, including school leadership discourses and practices, is influenced by globalisation through transnational agencies and through the homogenised influences of national and local authorities. Slovenia is a member of both the OECD and the EU, and therefore takes part in many activities and studies, and follows and uses several recommendations, guidelines and ESF (European Social Fund) projects to develop and implement current trends in the national context. To mention just two examples, Slovenia took part in the OECD studies 'Improving school leadership' (Pont et al. 2008) and 'Review on evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving schools outcomes' (Brejc et al. 2011). Slovenian experts and institutions are actively involved in professional associations in the field of school leadership and quality, such as the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), the European Network for Improving Research and Development in Educational Leadership and Management (ENIRDELM), and run or are involved in international projects, to develop different aspects of school leadership collaboratively.

In 1995 the National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE), was established. The newly appointed staff were recruited from a group of 15 students, most of whom were headteachers enrolled at that time on the Management in Education Master's Study Programme at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. After gaining their degree, eight of them found employment at the NSLE and became the professional core of the new institution. At the same time, they continued their studies at doctoral level at Manchester Metropolitan University and the Ontario Institute for Education, Canada.

In the light of soft influence, it was important that the NSLE succeeded in setting up international cooperation, which later enabled Slovenia to become a member of transnational agencies and especially professional international associations in educational leadership, so that the flow of ideas did not remain unidirectional. Between 2000 and

2010, the NSLE also played the role of mediator or knowledge transferor in the training and development of headteachers in countries outside the OECD and EU. It provided intensive training of trainers for headteachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It was an educative experience of both the advantages and limitations of international knowledge transfer.

The NSLE tries to maintain a noticeable role in international trends, although active collaboration and professional input have proved to be a challenge. It is necessary to publish a certain amount of work at the national level, in the national language and, above all, in the national context: publishing in English, which enables the flow of information in both directions and brings wider recognition, can create additional work written solely for the purpose of being published abroad. This can, in some cases, distract focus from national activities and, as a rule, requires that the national context be explained over and over again. Without this constant ‘evidencing’, few editors are ready to publish texts from non-English-speaking countries, particularly small ones. One solution is co-authoring with established English-speaking experts, with the ‘ethnic’ author sooner or later assuming a secondary role.

The NSLE is, in a way, constantly balancing its efforts between monitoring and implementing international trends, national studies and the practice of training headteachers—between areas which are difficult to maintain equally. This effort is further complicated by the constant struggle to gain recognition within the national context in terms of academic validity, competition among theories or universities, as well as education policies where professional arguments often fail to prevail and many decisions are rather politically motivated (Koren 2012). The same probably holds true in all countries, but it is presumably more pronounced in a small country where there are fewer experts in the field of leadership in education.

In any case, international collaboration in school leadership research is a prerequisite for professionals being able to look into local discourses and practices. It is a key component of continuous capacity building (Brejc 2014). An international perspective basically makes experts more aware of what to look for, and more clear about what is found. Professionals, when presenting their findings and arguments in

publications or at conferences, form international and shared discourses. Without this capacity, knowledge transfer into national contexts cannot be realised.

If they are to survive, national institutions must not only work professionally, but also fight constantly to assert themselves at both national and international levels, maintaining their professionalism, especially during the formation of new governments.

But even by adopting this approach to work, it is hard to maintain the capacity and 'common beliefs indoctrination' of the staff, to ensure the mode of cooperation with headteachers and schools, and to keep in touch with global developments.

2 The Dilemmas of Transnational Knowledge Transfer in Educational Leadership

Following trends encourages member states to be aware of and prioritise educational leadership and the role and importance of the headteacher. Building on various comparisons and recommendations, soft influence, and policy borrowing, school leadership in different countries is therefore becoming increasingly similar.

From this perspective, international research collaboration is an important precondition for attaining transparency in all local discussions and practice: the international dimension makes us better aware of what to look for. Without such shared understandings, the transfer of theories and research between various countries would prove impossible.

While education may display some global characteristics, at the same time every national education system seeks to preserve its values and identity (Koren 2006). In this context, Halpin and Troyna (1995) focus mostly on peculiarities in education, calling them 'policy borrowing' and 'knowledge transfer'. Their impact is strong, despite all the limitations and dangers that come with the simplification imposed by such comparisons (Stronach 2009).

Attempts to transfer innovations in such complex areas as education and educational leadership may be more complex than foreseen in planning processes (Fidler 2000). The complexity of such intercultural

transfers of education policy, institutional arrangements, knowledge, and practice may not be fully comprehended (Bauman 1998). Issues of what can be transferred because of divergent institutional and cultural contexts and practices may complicate what many may assume is a simple, straightforward process.

Educational policy should, therefore, never depend simply on the professional expertise of comparisons, for even professionalism may succumb to the illusion of expertise, shared language and the like. Numerous authors have argued that the practice of using common terminology can create an illusion of shared understanding regardless of the context. Significant differences may, however, be uncovered by a more precise analysis. The same terminology can hardly be used to describe different activities in different countries (Koren 2006).

Knowledge transfer, therefore, is not a simple, straightforward process or even an instance of 'buying' a package of policies. Because of the above-mentioned considerations, knowledge transfer can raise many obstacles and problems, even if it is in some way perceived as 'international knowledge'.

Only some of the issues deeply embedded in the tradition of the 'model' country can be transferred. The peculiarities relating to one particular country may reduce the possibility of effective transfer to another tradition, context or organisation.

Evidence may be used selectively by those who take decisions in the school system and those who oppose any changes. It is always possible to find a country which can serve as a supportive argument for their standpoints.

One can never be certain what stage of changes the country you imitate has reached—it may be just about to abandon the existing policy or practice (Koren 2006).

These processes tend to be associated with the notion of 'developed' and 'undeveloped' countries. The idea of a direct line transfer may be limited in that each nation has developed a culture and numerous sub-cultures over long periods of time which make it different from even its closest neighbours (Appadurai 1990; Smith 1990).

In terms of policy borrowing, therefore, one country may borrow elements of policy and institutional practices from another which may

turn out to be incongruent with its own cultural traditions and context, and which may produce results which diverge from those expected from the donor culture's experiences (Koren 2006; Coulby and Jones 1996).

These limitations highlight the need for international research projects to have some degree of shared understanding of their subjects when studying school management if they are to be able to understand and communicate their observations.

2.1 Knowledge Transfer in Leadership in Education—The Slovenian Case

Slovenia has gained significant experience of knowledge transfer in the field of leadership in education; there has been a long process of interaction between 'foreign' knowledge and the Slovenian context. The transfer has mainly been implemented through NSLE staff as 'mediators' able to transfer experiences and knowledge into the national context of education and leadership.

This experience has shown that consideration must be given to more than adapting transferred knowledge to national, and national leadership, contexts.

Theories, or rather their applicability at the operational level, need to be tested; national mediators (NSLE) exist in the space between theory and its implementation, its life in school practice.

The national institution for the preparation and professional development of headteachers tests not only its own approaches and knowledge, but also to a great extent international paradigms and models. These, especially in a period when leadership paradigms, effectiveness and improvement face limitations, cannot be formed definitively; they are still emerging and developing. Moreover, schools (and the NSLE) cannot wait and hope for a perfect paradigm to appear.

When brought into contact with practice, academic dilemmas seem distant and unimportant—practice itself has already solved many dilemmas, and the principles it has adopted are neither overly demanding nor idealistic, while at the same time everything that is recognised by practitioners as useful for their work has been preserved.

The process of basing theories and paradigms on transnational trends tends to be so standard, and so smooth, that critical factors may easily be missed. Even research and literature often follow on, asserting the importance and success of particular paradigms which should be implemented and followed without empirical evidence. This problematises knowledge transfer not only in the light of the transnational context, but raises questions over the validity and usefulness of theories and paradigms in the approach to leadership.

The Slovenian experience shows that, in fact, schools and headteachers themselves prove to be the best testers of transferred knowledge—in light of both the national context and the theory-practice gap. In their schools and leadership, only those solutions that are based on theories but at the same time take into account the reality of practice and feasibility can take hold, determining the extent of change which can be followed through within their capacity. In relation to this, it has been shown that schools do not implement theories and trends in their entirety, but rather as approximations, differing from theories to a lesser or greater extent. We could argue that this is not only a matter of knowledge transfer between different national systems, but also a question of the transfer of theories and paradigms into the reality of school practice. Just as nation states need to contextualise their international knowledge, so schools must contextualise the paradigms and theories they adopt within school policies (Koren 2012).

3 The Role of School Leaders in Implementing Transnational Trends

3.1 Why Leadership?

The focus of national policies on school leadership is connected with international research that points out a significant (in)direct correlation between leadership and overall school improvement in terms of student achievement (Southworth 2011; Day et al. 2011; Robinson 2011).

Studies and reviews within the professional literature deal with the role and importance of headteachers for the success of a school system

and the individual school, and all of them credit headteachers with an important role in school success and influence on student achievement. In this regard, they have pointed out a significant correlation between leadership and overall school improvement (DuFour and Marzano 2011; Hattie 2009).

However, in spite of extensive international research on leadership, the amount of information available is still small, so a certain degree of caution is necessary. Other reasons for caution include the considerably different starting points of research, and the significant differences in the research itself. Indeed, research proving a direct correlation between leadership and the improvement of student achievement is rare (Bruggencate et al. 2012; Scheerens 2012). DuFour and Marzano (2011) point out that among the eight factors influencing improvement in student achievement, headteachers take seventh place.

Headteachers not only have influence through leadership, but also play an important role with regard to other factors. They can have a direct individual influence on student achievement, but are also the force behind other factors influencing the schools' level of education and the competence of teachers (Sergiovanni 2001).

The importance of school leadership tasks connects headteachers with the realisation of transnational policy trends in schools: leadership involves setting and negotiating directions, explaining and—when it comes to outcomes (standards, inspections and tests, national priorities)—finding ways to achieve them.

4 Leadership as a Tool for Making International Trends Work

According to research on the roles of school leaders, national policy makers expect that a headteacher can and will translate external expectations and policy influences into professional explanations and direction for their school.

Leaders and schools do not work in a vacuum: schools are built on relations with the wider world, which means that school leaders are responsible for bringing external expectations into the school and

implementing them by cultivating acceptance, through adjusting and adapting them to the self-understanding of the school. There are many legitimate and legal expectations from stakeholders outside and inside schools that create, limit and direct their work (Koren and Moos 2012).

Many of these expectations contradict each other, and many external expectations, demands and structures can seem strange and meaningless to professional cultures. This puts the school leader in a position where she/he needs to interpret, translate and mediate these external demands in order to facilitate explanation and the creation of a shared direction within the school.

They have to interpret demands and signals from the wider world and choose the means by which they will respond to them. It is a major challenge for school leadership to interpret signals and make them into narratives (Weick 2001). It gives the headteacher a crucial role in harmonising external demands with the school's priorities, values and culture.

They should develop their schools according to the general aims and directions as described in the 'organisational ideas' (Røvik 2007). Røvik stresses the difficulty of implementing ideas within organisations in effective ways which will form their practices and thinking. He argues, therefore, that new ideas need to be understood and accepted by the organisation, leaders and teachers in order to have an effect on practice and thinking. It is the headteachers' role to translate and fit ideas into the mental models of their staff. They receive information and demands from outside while also knowing the organisation, its culture and the professionals in it. They are better positioned than anybody else to translate, reformulate and negotiate the direction of what needs to be done so that it makes sense to teachers.

To enable headteachers to translate external demands in their schools, policy makers need to lead education policies and change according to the capacity and context of headteachers and schools. The study on limited visibility (Koren 2002) shows that, at any level, at any position in society, people have limited visibility, and this research similarly succumbs to this limitation. In the school system, teachers see the classroom and relate all questions to it. Their focus is the curriculum, while headteachers are focused on operational matters, and the minister on processes in the whole system.

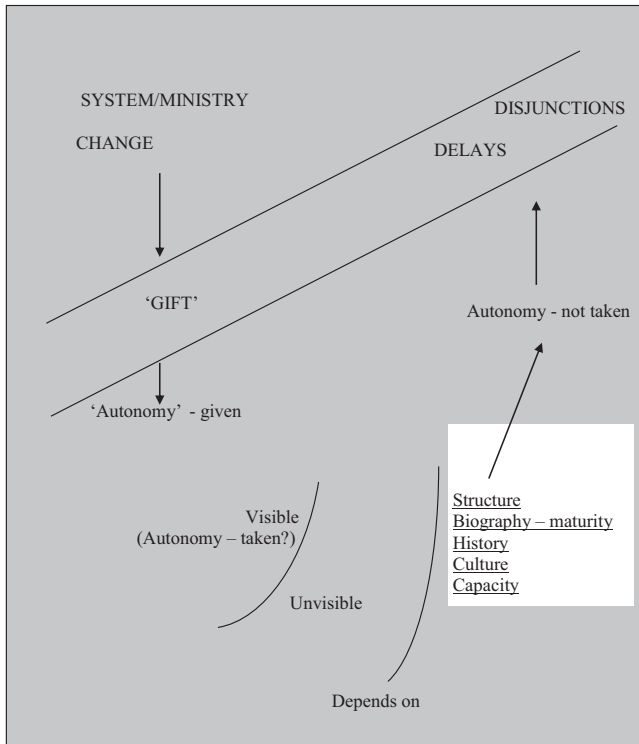


Fig. 1 Translating outside expectation and visibility (Source Koren [2002])

If new and changing policies are not adapted to the practice and capacity of schools, they will not be ‘seen’ inside them. Successful changes depend on maturity, knowledge and experiences in schools. The schools will ‘take’ from what is given to them by the centre the things that are visible to them (Fig. 1).

4.1 External Demands Place Severe Pressure on Headteachers

Slovenian experience and evaluations in the preparation and professional development of headteachers show that external demands place severe pressure on school leaders, who can easily fall for the siren song

calling them to involve their school in any new national trend, project, and training. If they are taken on too willingly, they can overload headteachers and their staff, and if they are not contextualised with their school culture, priorities and values, they can disorient and disrupt their activities and efforts.

The situation becomes even more difficult if the government implements the trends and recommendations of the transnational agencies through national priorities in the same, unsustainable and non-systematic way. Unsustainable national priorities and transnational knowledge transfer have a significant impact on school systems and schools, and are unproductive in terms of efficiency and quality of the education system and schools.

Constantly applauding the leader's role and importance in some way strengthens the 'heroic position' (Bush 2003) that comes with their formal power, and allows fewer chances for distributed leadership and professional relationships with their teacher colleagues.

Data collected by evaluation show that headteachers—particularly in the early stages of their headship—are too overloaded with activities in their schools to cope with external demands. They are overburdened with routine assignments whose sole aim is the uninterrupted operation of the school. The lack of time appears to be due not only to insufficient knowledge in individual areas, inexperience and the wide spectrum of work, but also to the fact that headteachers often do not recognise the scope of their school's activities, and therefore get lost in individual leadership fields and insignificant details (Koren and Logaj 2007). They therefore need and seek external help and support. If external institutions are not aware of that fact, they can, instead of supporting headteachers, overload them even more—for instance by involving them unselectively in different projects and activities.

High expectations of the headteachers' role and the impact they have on student achievement foster their preparation and professional development at the national level. Transnational recommendations promote personal and non-directive methods like action learning, mentoring and coaching over more practical and generic ones, such as facilitation, teaching and training (West-Burnham and Koren 2014).

These methods should therefore have a greater impact on their professionalism, but they can also 'take' headteachers out of schools: being involved in activities outside your own school can be attractive, with its concomitant feeling of less accountability.

We started this chapter with a subheading 'School systems and leadership tend to be similar'. One of the premises or facts about education systems, schools and school leaders is their need for autonomy, which is constantly shaped and influenced by global trends and local demands. So at the end we raise some questions: What is the real impact of globalisation on educational leadership and what impact does that have on the quality of schools? Can policy borrowing and knowledge transfer standardise the way headteachers lead their schools? Is that rather a trap that we should emphasise and be significantly more aware of than we currently are?

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