



School leadership in the context of accountability policies*

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This paper explores the unique implications for leaders of the accountability-driven policy contexts common to schools in many countries at the present time. A four-fold classification of government approaches to educational accountability is used to frame this exploration. These market, decentralization, professionalization and management approaches are each rooted in different assumptions about the basic problems for school reform and the nature of the desirable solutions. The paper reviews both theoretical and empirical literature identifying school leadership practices likely to be productive in response to each of the four approaches to accountability. Discussed as well are the additional challenges facing school leaders arising from the eclectic adoption of different accountability approaches as part of most reform packages. The paper ends with four suggestions for future leadership research aimed at better understanding the important influence of context on leadership practices.

Introduction

Some leadership practices are useful in almost all organizational circumstances, a claim made recently by Bernard Bass (1997) for 'transformational' leadership practices. Evidence from many schools varying in size, location, and level provides support for this claim in the context of educational organizations (Southworth 1998, Leithwood *et al.* 1999a). However, transformational leadership practices ought to be considered a necessary but not sufficient part of an effective school leader's repertoire. In addition, the practices of school leaders need to acknowledge salient features of the contexts in which they find themselves. This paper explores the unique implications for school leaders of the accountability context common to school leaders in many countries around the world at the present time. Educational reform initiatives most closely associated with 'new right' (Marchak 1991) and closely related political ideologies often are

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responsible for this context, although, it must be noted, the same sets of initiatives are sometimes attractive to groups with very different ideologies (Whitty *et al.* 1998).

The framework used for identifying leadership practices associated with increased accountability is grounded in evidence from a recent, seven-country study by Leithwood *et al.* (1999b). Data for the study included written policies and other related documents identified by two or more people close to government initiatives. Analysis of this evidence resulted in a four-fold classification of approaches to educational accountability: market, decentralization, professional, and management approaches. While this classification system encompasses most approaches currently used for holding schools more accountable, there are other alternatives (Adams and Kirst 1999). In this paper, the purpose for the classification system is limited to helping identify leadership practices suitable for the policy contexts in which many school leaders find themselves.

Subsequent sections of the paper describe each of the four approaches to accountability and their consequences for school leadership. Each approach can be distinguished by the key tools or policies used for its implementation, advocates' views of the problem to be solved, plus their views of the nature of the proposed solutions. Table 1 summarizes these characteristics and provides examples of leadership practices associated with each approach; these are practices anticipated by theorists and advocates of each approach, as well as unanticipated practices evident from a review of empirical literature.

The literature review was undertaken in three stages. First, an ERIC search was conducted using the keywords leadership, accountability and principal, together with keywords related to specific accountability initiatives (e.g. decentralization). Second, the American Educational Research Association 2000 meeting programme was scanned for relevant papers. Finally, relevant articles in reference lists were obtained. From this search, 52 articles were used to inform this paper, with 31 of them forming the empirical basis for the claims.

Market approaches to accountability

Sometimes referred to as the exit option, market approaches to accountability increase competition among schools for students. An especially prominent approach currently, versions of it are evident in several European countries, Canada, the USA, New Zealand, Australia and parts of Asia, for example. Specific tools for increasing competition among schools for student-clients include allowing school choice by opening boundaries within and across school systems, school privatization plans, and the creation of charter schools, magnet schools, academies and other specialized educational facilities. Competition also is increased by altering the basis for school funding so that the money follows students (e.g. vouchers, tuition tax credits), and by publicly ranking schools based on aggregated student achievement scores. Often these tools are used in combination.

Table 1. Summary of approaches to accountability and implications for school leaders.

Characteristics	Market	Decentralized	Professional	Management
Examples of key tools	Open boundaries School privatization Charter schools Magnet schools Vouchers Tuition tax credits	'Parent control' and 'administrator control' forms of site-based management	'Professional control' forms of site-based management Professional standard setting	Planning (strategic, school improvement) School reviews, inspection Student testing
Assumed problems	Schools are unresponsive, bureaucratic and monopolistic. Insufficient attention to client needs and wants	Curriculum ought to reflect the values and preferences of parents and local community Inefficient distribution and use of school resources	Inadequate use of teachers' knowledge in such key areas as budget, curriculum, and personnel Inadequate reflection in the work of school personnel of what is known about 'best practices'	Schools not clear about goals and inefficient in efforts to achieve goals (not as rational as they could be) Inadequate attention to performance
Proposed solutions	Empower clients to choose the school that best suits their needs	Award greater decision-making authority to parents and other community members Award greater authority over distribution of resources to school administrators	Award greater decision-making authority to teachers Codify knowledge about 'best practices', in statements of standards; monitor professional work using standards as the basis for evaluation and development	Establish processes for developing clear, manageable goals and priorities, and strategies for their achievement (emphasis on student achievement) Systematically monitor progress and 'fine tune' as needed through cycles of continuous improvement

Table 1. Continued.

Characteristics	Market	Decentralized	Professional	Management
Examples of leadership practices Anticipated	Create marketable product Develop good customer relations Respond to quickly changing market conditions Clarify mission Considerable variation among leaders	Empower parents and other community members to make wise decisions on behalf of students and school; encourage sharing of power and distribution of leadership Skilled resource management	Create professional learning communities Distribute leadership to staff Know about best professional practices Assist staff in identifying appropriate standards for their work Set expectations and monitor progress	Strategic management Skilled in collecting and interpreting systematically collected data Manage planning processes
Not anticipated	Ability to deal with wide variety of constituencies; people with ideologies	Radical increase in time spent on managerial duties/less attention to curriculum and instruction Intensification of role	Buffer staff from distractions	Establish culture of inquiry Create high levels of stakeholder involvement

Among advocates of these different tools are those sharing a belief that schools are unresponsive, bureaucratic, and monopolistic (Lee 1993). Members of such organizations are assumed to have little need to be responsive to pressure from their clients because *they* believe they are not likely to lose them. In relation to schools, this means that they will come to view their major task as offering programmes that they believe are good for their clients. Members of such organizations, it is argued, seek efficiency on their own terms and are prone to view clients as objects 'to be treated' rather than customers 'to be served'.

Advocates of market approaches to accountability (Chubb and Moe 1990) hold a series of assumptions about how such competition is likely to result in greater student achievement. First, increased competition allows parents and students to select schools with which they are more satisfied and which better meet their educational needs. Second, parents who are more satisfied with their child's school provide greater support to that school and to their child's learning. Third, students are likely to be more deeply engaged when their own learning styles are matched to a particular school. Fourth, when teachers have chosen their work settings and have been active in designing their own schools' programmes, they will be more committed to implementing those programmes effectively. Finally, all of these outcomes will combine to increase student achievement, attendance, and educational attainment (Elmore 1990, Raywid 1992).

Market approaches to accountability assume an ideal set of responses from school leaders (Kerchner 1988). Of course, having a good 'product' to sell is the first order of business. These leaders are able to market their schools effectively, develop good customer/client relations, and monitor 'customer' (student and parent) satisfaction. To prosper in such contexts, school leaders continuously redesign their organizations in response to fast-changing market conditions. They collect data about competitors' services and prices, and find niches for their schools. They have exceptional levels of clarity about their missions because these missions are viewed as a central criterion in parent and student choices.

However, evidence about how school leaders actually respond to increased market competition, although still relatively limited, suggests a more complicated reality. First, choice arrangements vary considerably in the autonomy awarded principals. As an explanation for the few differences found in the practices of US principals of magnet and non-magnet schools, Hausman (2000) pointed to the wide array of district policies regulating all principals in the district. Second, evidence demonstrates that some school choice settings actually put very little pressure on leaders and schools to compete. This is the case when a school is over-subscribed (Hausman 2000), or when it serves parents and students who, for economic and other reasons, feel unable to travel to a school outside their own neighbourhood (Lauder and Hughes 1999). Finally, school leaders facing the same competitive conditions may respond quite differently for reasons associated with their individual abilities, values, beliefs, and motivations.

Grace (1995) interpreted his evidence as capturing three quite different responses by individual school leaders to increased competition for students. One group of leaders welcomed the more managerial role they

believed was implied in policy changes. A second group was preoccupied with the loss of a professional orientation to schools, and concerned about managerialist values encroaching on their work. The third group of school leaders actively opposed those features of market approaches to school reform that they believed were unlikely to lead to school improvement. Other evidence suggests that competition has unpredictable effects on the propensity of school leaders to engage in instructional leadership: some find little time for it while others increase their attention to it (Hausman 2000).

This brief review of theory and evidence suggests, most obviously, that school leaders implementing market solutions in truly competitive environments need marketing and entrepreneurial skills. By themselves, however, such skills do not acknowledge the growing evidence that market approaches to accountability can be, and usually are, highly inequitable (Lee 1993, Lauder and Hughes 1999). When equity is a strongly valued goal, school leaders will need the ability to market their schools in ways that make access possible even for those children and families from diverse and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bauch and Goldring 1995).

Decentralization approaches to accountability

When decentralization of decision making is used for purposes of increasing accountability, one of its central aims often is to increase the voice of those who are not heard, or at least not much listened to, in the context of typical school governance structures. When this is the goal, then typically a *community control* form of site-based management (Wohlstetter and Mohrman 1993) is the instrument used for its achievement. The basic assumption giving rise to this form of site-based management is that the curriculum of the school ought to reflect directly the values and preferences of parents and the local community (Ornstein 1983). School professionals, it is claimed, typically are not as responsive to such local values and preferences as they ought to be. Their responsiveness is greatly increased, however, when the power to make decisions about curriculum, budget, and personnel is in the hands of the parent/community constituents of the school. School councils in which parent/community constituents have a majority of the membership are the primary vehicle through which to exercise such power.

Devolution of decision making, however, is sometimes rooted in a broader reform strategy for public institutions, which Peters has referred to as 'new managerialism'. According to Peters (1992: 269), new managerialism 'emphasizes decentralization, deregulation and delegation'. Although there are variations on this approach to accountability among countries, there is a shared shift in emphasis (a) from policy formulation to management and institutional design, (b) from process to output controls, (c) from organizational integration to differentiation, and (d) from 'statism to subsidiarity' (Peters 1992).

In countries such as New Zealand and Australia, where school reform has been substantially influenced by the philosophy of new managerialism, creating more efficient and cost-effective school administrative structures is

a second central goal for devolution. Typically, this goal is pursued through the implementation of an *administrative control* form of site-based management that increases school-site administrators' accountability to the central district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources. These efficiencies are to be realized by giving local school administrators authority over such key decision areas as budget, physical plant, personnel, and curriculum. Advocates of this form of site-based management reason that such authority, in combination with the incentive to make the best use of resources, ought to get more of the resources of the school into the direct service of students. To assist in accomplishing that objective, the principal may consult informally with teachers, parents, students or community representatives. Typically, site councils are established to advise the principal, but with membership at the discretion of the principal.

Decentralization approaches to accountability assume that school leaders will become teachers of those with newly found voices, usually parents and/or staff. The school leader's task is to 'empower' these people and actively to encourage the sharing of power formerly exercised by the principal (Tanner and Stone 1998). School leaders, it is assumed, will act as members of teams rather than sole decision makers. This role entails helping others to make defensible decisions and clarifying their decision responsibilities. In addition, school leaders will embrace the belief that, through participation in decision making, not only will teachers and parents be more committed to the results of such decision making, but also the decisions themselves will be better. The school leader becomes the keeper of the process, not the outcome of the process (Harrison *et al.* 1989, Williams *et al.* 1997).

Evidence of the effects on school leaders of decentralization or school-based management in its various forms is quite extensive (Bullock and Thomas 1997, Leithwood and Menzies 1998, Tanner and Stone 1998, Wildy and Loudon 2000). This evidence indicates that, although assumptions about the role of school leaders in decentralized settings sometimes describe what actually happens in practice, it is often not the whole story. Decentralization is associated, as well, with a radically increased emphasis on budgetary considerations and less attention to providing leadership about curriculum and instruction (Daresh 1998). Decentralization greatly increases the time demands on school leaders and the need for more attention to time management (Cranston 2000), intensifies their role (Williams *et al.* 1997) and, in quasi-market conditions, may isolate them from administrative colleagues outside their own organization.

When parent-dominated school councils are part of decentralization, frequently principals provide leadership in respect to both internal and external processes associated with councils. Internally, principals often find themselves setting the agenda, providing information to other council members, assisting council decision making, and developing a close working relationship with the council chair. Externally, principals often act as strong, active supporters of their school councils, communicating with all stakeholders about council activities, and promoting the value of councils for the work of school staffs (Leithwood *et al.* 1999a, Parker and Leithwood 2000).

As an approach to accountability, site-based management is widespread, and experience with it relatively long-standing. Considerable empirical evidence suggests, however, that by itself it has made a disappointing contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning (Leithwood and Menzies 1999). In those exceptional cases where teaching and learning have benefited from this approach to accountability, school leaders have, for example, adopted a supportive leadership role themselves, nurtured leadership on the part of others, and strongly encouraged councils to adopt a capacity-building agenda (Beck and Murphy 1998). Leadership practices such as these help transform an otherwise impotent strategy into at least a modest force for improving teaching and learning.

Professional approaches to accountability

There are two radically different accountability strategies that have a professional orientation. One of these approaches manifests itself most obviously in the implementation of *professional control* models of site-based management. The other approach encompasses the professional standards movement as it applies to the practices of teachers and administrators. What proponents of both strategies have in common is a belief in the central contribution of professional practice to the outcomes of schooling. They differ most obviously on which practices they choose for their direct focus. In the case of professional control site-based management, the focus is on school-level decision making, whereas classroom instructional practices and school leadership practices are the primary focus of the professional standards movement.

Professional control site-based management (Murphy and Beck 1995) increases the power of teachers in school decision making while also holding teachers more directly accountable for the school's effects on students. The goal of this form of site-based management is to make better use of teachers' knowledge in such key decision areas as budget, curriculum and, occasionally, personnel. Basic to this form of site-based management is the assumption that professionals closest to the student have the most relevant knowledge for making such decisions (Hess 1991), and that full participation in the decision-making process will increase their commitment to implementing whatever decisions are made. Participatory democracy, allowing employees greater decision-making power, is also presumed to lead to greater efficiency, effectiveness and better outcomes (Clune and Witte 1988). School councils associated with this form of site-based management typically have decision-making power and, although often many groups are represented, teachers have the largest proportion of members.

A standards approach to accountability in the traditional professions emphasizes heavy control of entry to the profession by government, with responsibility for subsequent monitoring of accountability turned over to members of the profession itself (e.g. colleges of physicians, lawyers' bar associations). Such an approach requires clear standards of professional knowledge, skill, and performance: something the professional standards

movement in education set out to define, beginning in the USA, for example, in the early 1980s. Different products of the standards movement are available as the basis for the licensure of entry-level teachers (e.g. INTASC's Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessment and Development) and school administrators (e.g. State of Connecticut Department of Education) as well as for recognizing advanced levels of teaching (e.g. The National Policy Board for Teaching Standards), and school administrator performance (e.g. Education Queensland's 'Standards Framework for Leaders').

Professional approaches to accountability imply an increased need for school leaders to stay abreast of best professional practices and to assist staff in the identification of professional standards for their work. School leaders, in the context of professional approaches to accountability, need both to set expectations and to create conditions for professional growth (Prestine 1999). Also, these leaders need to: monitor the progress of staff towards the achievement of professional standards; buffer staff from external distractions; assist parents to understand and appreciate such standards; and mobilize resources to meet not just higher but more sophisticated standards. Maintaining teacher morale in schools identified as low-achieving, and helping to ensure equitable treatments for the needs of students also are challenges for school leaders responding to this form of accountability (Bay *et al.* 1999, ERIC Clearinghouse 1999).

There is little direct empirical evidence about the extent to which these implications for school leaders are actually effective in implementing professional approaches to accountability. So these leadership practices need to be viewed as especially tentative. Furthermore, the professional standards approach to accountability and school improvement is severely limited by its focus on the capacities of individual professionals. Although improving the capacities of teachers and leaders one at a time undoubtedly is worthwhile, the collective effort of these professionals has a significant impact on what students learn. Among the more important school leadership practices associated with a professional approach to accountability, therefore, would seem to be those which foster the collective capacities identified in recent research about 'professional learning communities' (Louis and Kruse 1995), 'organizational learning' in schools (Leithwood and Louis 1999), and 'collective teacher efficacy' (Goddard *et al.* 2000). Many of these are transformational leadership practices.

Management approaches to accountability

Not to be confused with 'new managerialism', this approach includes systematic efforts to create more goal-oriented, efficient, and effective schools by introducing more rational procedures. The main assumption underlying this approach is that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with current school structures. The effectiveness and efficiency of schools will be improved, however, as they become more strategic in their choices of goals, and more planful and data-driven about the means used to accomplish those goals. This approach encompasses a variety of procedures

for 'strategic planning', especially at the LEA or district level, as well as multiple procedures for school improvement planning (see the states of Illinois, Florida and Missouri, for example), school development planning (Giles 1997), and monitoring progress (e.g. the accountability reviews managed by New Zealand's Education Review Office).

Management approaches to accountability assume that effective school leadership conforms to what is sometimes labelled 'strategic management'. Heads or principals exercising this form of leadership are skilled in collecting and interpreting systematically collected data. They develop with their staff clear, manageable, goals and priorities for school improvement. Progress in accomplishing such goals is carefully monitored and plans refined accordingly. Since frequently district resources and cooperation are needed to accomplish school priorities, school leaders find it productive to develop especially good working relations with their district colleagues.

Evidence reviewed by Southworth (1998) both confirms and extends these assumptions about effective leadership for school improvement. Results of two projects carried out by the University of Cambridge Institute of Education suggest that successful school improvement depends on establishing and sustaining a culture of inquiry and reflection, a commitment to collaborative planning and staff development, high levels of stakeholder involvement, and effective coordination strategies. Establishing these conditions depended on school leaders emphasizing the use of systematic evidence, focusing on student learning, and encouraging careful monitoring of both teaching and pupil progress. 'Strategic management' in these projects also entailed developing school improvement plans from the results of inquiry and reflection, and carefully monitoring and evaluating the implementation of those plans.

While often used as part of other approaches to accountability, the establishment of student standards (widespread student testing of their achievement, and judgments about schools and teachers based on the results) is a strategy most often associated with management approaches to accountability. However, there is considerable evidence that this strategy can have disastrous unintended consequences. For students, such consequences may include: minimizing their individual differences, narrowing the curriculum to which they are exposed, diverting enormous amounts of time from instruction to test preparation, and negatively influencing schools' willingness to accept students with weak academic records (Bay *et al.* 1999, Ohanian 1999, O'Neil and Tell 1999, McNeil 2000). Consequences for teachers include the creation of incentives for cheating, feelings of shame, guilt and anger, and a sense of dissonance and alienation. Especially when multiple choice tests are exclusively used over extended periods of time, teachers' efforts to prepare students for them may lead to the atrophy of teachers' instructional repertoires (Nolan *et al.* 1989, Lee 1993).

To be included in a school leader's repertoire, then, are practices designed to minimize or eliminate such consequences. In the face of the high stakes created by many states and districts, this is likely to call on more moral courage than many administrators will be willing to demonstrate by

themselves. Building strong community support for a humane, well-balanced curriculum will be especially crucial in the face of such high stakes.

Summary and discussion

This paper began with the claim that much research on school leadership aims to describe practices likely to be useful across organizational and other contexts. While recent research on transformational leadership was cited as a case in point (Bass 1997, Leithwood *et al.* 1999a) the same claim could be made for research on 'instructional', 'moral', and other forms of leadership frequently examined in the educational leadership literature (Leithwood and Duke 1999). Practices associated with these forms of leadership, however, ought to be considered a necessary but not sufficient part of an effective leader's repertoire. The central purpose of the paper was to illustrate how unique features of the context in which many school leaders work require additional responses from them, responses not yet well codified and so not easily available for purposes of leadership development.

Among the several contexts in which school leaders are enmeshed, the context created by educational policies is among the most powerful influences on the nature of their work. Furthermore, in many countries over the past 15 years this policy context has been dominated by a similar set of initiatives designed, in part, to increase the accountability of schools. A four-fold classification of these accountability initiatives was used in this paper as a framework for organizing the results of a review of the literature concerning the leadership practices called for by an accountability-oriented policy context. Results demonstrated that each approach calls for unique responses by school leaders.

One approach to accountability is the creation of quasi-markets. By providing students and parents with greater choice, schools are encouraged to become much more responsive to their clients. This approach assumes that, among other things, school leaders will recreate their schools as marketable products, develop good customer relations, and respond quickly to market demands. A second approach to accountability includes several forms of decentralization. By empowering either parents or administrators, schools are expected to better reflect local priorities in their curriculum and to use resources more efficiently and effectively. This approach assumes that school leaders, for example, will distribute leadership broadly among those who have been empowered and provide ongoing support for their work.

Professional approaches to accountability, a third type, aim to hold schools more accountable for making use of the best available knowledge about effective professional practice. In the context of this approach, school leaders are called on to create professional learning communities, to assist staff in determining areas for continued professional growth, and assist them in finding the means for such growth. Finally, management approaches hold schools more accountable for their rational and strategic decision making. To do so, school leaders work with staff and others to set

clear priorities, to design explicit strategies for their accomplishment and to engage in continuous cycles of monitoring and strategy refinement.

Expectations for leadership associated with each of four approaches to accountability, however, do not fully capture the range of leadership practices called for in accountability-driven policy contexts. Additional leadership practices are called for by the shortcomings of the policies themselves. For example, market approaches to accountability often have inequitable consequences for students (Lauder and Hughes 1999), giving further advantage to already advantaged students while eroding the educational chances of students most at risk. Thus, school leaders who value equity need to ensure that their enrolment practices are free of bias.

Each of the four different approaches to increasing accountability in schools makes one of four quite different sets of assumptions about the status of schools and what is required to improve them. Because of these assumptions, each approach places unique demands on school leaders, and these demands require at least partly distinctive responses by leaders in order to be 'effective'. Putting aside, for the moment, possible disagreements with the assumptions themselves, leading school reform premised on any one of the four approaches to accountability is likely to be a manageable, though by no means easy, task.

But almost no one uses the term manageable in reference to the job of school leaders these days. And one of the most plausible reasons is that most reform initiatives are eclectic. Performance-based approaches to large-scale reform (Newman *et al.* 1997) as found, for example, in England's 'National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies' (Earl *et al.* 2001), Victoria, Australia's 'Schools of the Future' project (Caldwell and Hayward 1998), and initiatives flowing from the Kentucky Education Reform Act are illustrations of such intentional eclecticism. They bundle together into a single reform package elements of all, or most, of the four approaches to accountability touched upon in this paper. This creates significant leadership dilemmas (Wildy and Loudon 2000), and school leaders attempting to respond to their government's demands for change can be excused for feeling that they are being pulled in many different directions simultaneously. They *are* being pulled in many different directions simultaneously.

Considerable evidence suggests that much of the variation in the extent to which externally initiated reforms actually result in school improvement can be explained by the ability of potential implementors to make sense of the reforms, i.e. to find them meaningful (Fullan 1991). Thus, in the face of policy eclecticism and the resulting sense of confusion and uncertainty, school leaders, with their staff, parents and other stakeholders, need to locate and adopt elements of external initiatives that cohere with their school's directions, and that make sense in light of the school's goals and priorities (Forsyth and Tallerico 1998). No matter the particular nature of the eclectic mix of policies and assumptions faced by a school, effective leadership will always include, for example, buffering many teachers from their conscientious tendency to feel they must respond comprehensively to demands for policy implementation from governments. It will include, as well, providing individualized support to staff (Bays *et al.* 1999, Gantner *et*

al. 2000), challenging them to think critically and creatively about their practices (Tacheny 1999), building a collaborative culture, developing structures that allow for collaboration to occur (Gantner *et al.* 2000), and fostering parents' involvement in the education of their children (Bauch and Goldring 1995, Detert *et al.* 2000). For most it will mean also acquiring additional knowledge in new and more varied domains (Tanner and Stone 1998, Jones 1999, Erbe and Holloway 2000).

Conclusion: implications for theory and research

Perhaps the most practical implication to be drawn from this review of research concerns the training of prospective educational administrators. Most of the formal models of leadership used to guide such training identify only the tip of the leadership iceberg, as compared with the full array of practices actually used by effective leaders. These school leaders always find themselves immersed in multiple contexts, each of which makes unique demands on what they need to do. Until more contextually sensitive (and this means considerably more elaborate and detailed) models of leadership are available, administrator preparation will be sorely incomplete, by design.

There are significant implications for leadership theory and research if they are to help solve this eminently practical problem, four of which are outlined here by way of conclusion.

Empirical research on productive leadership in accountable policy contexts

One obvious implication for future research is to ratchet up the empirical study of productive leadership practices in accountable policy contexts. Although the literature about leader practices reviewed for this paper included 52 citations, only 31 of them reported original evidence. Furthermore, of these 31, only 16 aimed to discover 'productive' forms of leadership, clearly the most practical focus for such research.

Further research about productive forms of leadership in accountable policy contexts, however, cannot take the meaning of 'productive' for granted. From the perspective of policy advocates, productive is most likely to mean those practices that result in high levels of policy implementation in schools. However, the problem with this meaning is, as we have seen in this paper, that frequently accountability policies seem to have few positive, and sometimes many negative, consequences for students.

Now the basic responsibility of school leaders, in my view, is to improve education for students in their own schools. But this does not mean that school leaders can, or ought to, ignore external accountability policies, even those with a poor record of improving the quality of education. Rather, their job is to make what use they can of such policies in the process of serving the best interests of their students. So 'productive' means leadership practices that help improve education for students while,

at the same time, acknowledging the legitimate demands of policy makers to have their initiatives authentically reflected in the work of the school.

A new sub-field of leadership research

Policy contexts may be relatively unstable, changing in concert with the political platforms of newly elected governments. It is the unique demands placed on leadership of changing policy contexts that creates some of the greatest challenges for those engaged in leadership research. This is the case because the pace of policy change often far outstrips the pace of research about its consequences and implications for leadership.

While these circumstances often frustrate thoughtful inquiry, the leadership research community cannot afford to abandon the effort if it is to remain a viable source of influence on leadership practice. However, the agenda for research with this focus needs to be understood from the outset as ongoing, and possibly requiring a unique repertoire of methods. As policy contexts change, so too do the demands on school leaders. Indeed, it may be useful to consider the development of a distinct sub-field of leadership research closely aligned with the content and methods of policy analysis.

Explaining weak leadership effects

So far we have distinguished leadership practices intended to be useful in most contexts from those that are uniquely suited to the policy context in which the leader works. Research with the first of these foci describes practices that are assumed to be relatively stable in their value, changing in value over time only as the knowledge base about such practices change. Such practices may be considered the 'basic skills' of leadership on which additional, more contingent, expertise is built. These basic skills are the primary focus of leadership research included, for example, in Hallinger and Heck's (1996a,b, 1999) recent series of reviews of quantitative leadership studies, which report significant, but quite weak and indirect, effects of school leadership on a variety of student outcomes.

The contextual perspective on leadership developed in this paper suggests one plausible explanation for the small magnitude of school leadership effects evident in quantitative studies, an explanation supported by the considerably more dramatic leadership effects found in many qualitative studies (Mullen and Graves 2000). For the most part, the quantitative studies reviewed by Hallinger and Heck measured only those leadership practices intended to be common across all contexts; they did not measure, as most qualitative studies have, the additional practices in which virtually all school leaders engage as a means of dealing with the challenges presented to them by the unique contexts in which they work.

That quantitative leadership studies may substantially underestimate school leadership effects is even more evident when we acknowledge that, in addition to educational policies, individual schools and their commu-

nities also provide contexts for leadership. And these contexts also may call for their own unique leadership responses if the authentic aspirations and problems unique to the community served by the school are to be honoured. Such responses depend on targeted (or 'domain-specific') knowledge about the school's problems or challenges. The knowledge needed by leaders to assist schools to improve students' early literacy skills, for example, is quite different from the knowledge needed to help schools to develop more effective partnerships with local businesses.

There is evidence to suggest that a substantial portion of the variation in school leaders' problem-solving expertise is explained by the possession of such domain-specific knowledge (Leithwood and Steinbach 1995). Therefore future, quantitative, leadership research would be advised to expand significantly the range of leadership practices measured, in order to challenge the conclusion, to date, of significant but weak leadership effects.

Adopting a distributed perspective on school leadership

Schools will continue to face increased demands for greater accountability for some time to come. Thus, learning more about what this means for school leadership seems, in its own right, to be an important challenge. But this effort also may contribute to a broader agenda for understanding school leadership, one focused on 'distributed' school leadership (Gronn 2000; Spillane *et al.* 2000). Distributed orientations to leadership acknowledge, better than most alternatives, growing appreciation of just how badly more hierarchical and positional orientations to leadership have squandered, underestimated, or overlooked the collective leadership capacities of schools.

Distributed orientations to leadership recognize the flatter structures advocated for schools in such widespread restructuring efforts as site-based management, as well as the substantial, ongoing, efforts to professionalize the teaching force. Distributed orientations to leadership are the antithesis of 'great man' orientations, assuming as they do that leadership is shared by many people. Such orientations also assume that people are not the only sources of leadership, and that the situation or context of the school is considerably more than a background influence on what leaders and other organizational members think and do. Rather, they 'both structure and mediate thinking' (Gronn 2000: 12).

The generic meaning of organizational leadership, although highly contested, is encompassed for present purposes in the concept of 'influence relationships'. These are relationships among people and between people and non-personal entities (e.g. policies) that shape both the goals that people pursue in their work and the means used to pursue them (Leithwood and Duke 1999). A complete understanding of leadership, however, includes more than just the relationships themselves, as Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) have argued. Such an understanding also includes the tasks performed by leaders, the way those tasks are carried out (leadership practices), and the cognitive processes engaged in by persons exercising leadership which explain how such practices arise.

This is a view described by Spillane *et al.* (2000: 13), who suggest, as well, that leadership is 'stretched over the practices of actors within an organization ... [and] is distributed in and through an organization's situation or context', a position rooted in theories of distributed cognition (Hutchins and Klausen 1998). This may occur, for example, by distributing leadership across two or more people who perform different parts of the same overall task, or who act separately on the same goal or challenge. Leadership also is socially distributed when two or more people act together (as a group) on the same goal or task. The relationship between leaders and followers is also a form of leadership distribution, one which has been given considerable attention in non-school organizations by developers of 'leader-member exchange theory' (Schriesheim *et al.* 1999).

Finally, non-person sources of leadership tasks and relationship captured, for example, in the 'substitutes-for-leadership' literature (Jermier and Kerr 1997) need to be more fully developed. From this view, research on distributed school leadership would inquire about the leadership tasks demanded by different contexts for leadership (as in this paper), how those tasks are (or could be) distributed among person and non-person sources of leadership, and the nature of the relationships that exist in order to carry out the tasks.

Better understanding of school leadership as a distributed network of relationships within and across people and organizations represents a major new challenge for those engaged in research on school leadership. Research about leadership in the context of accountability policy contexts ought to be undertaken in a way that addresses that challenge.

The four implications discussed here, for future theory and research about school leadership, constitute an ambitious agenda for the leadership research community, and one that promises to have considerable payoff for leadership practitioners.

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