

Leading schools successfully against the odds

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings obtained from the Polish part of the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context: Strategies for Improvement project, which involves a nine country partnership between higher education institutions and thirty six schools in disadvantaged urban contexts. The paper consists of two main parts. The first part gives the overview of the project and presents the methodological approach used in the research. In the second part, the underpinning areas of inquiry are: What do the researched successful leaders have in common? What do most of the researched successful school leaders do? What kind of people become the researched successful school leaders? The answers to these questions are given on the basis of the preliminary findings.

Keywords: successful leadership, school improvement, good practice, challenging schools

Introduction

This paper is about the heads of the urban schools that served children in poor communities and achieved impressive academic results. These schools have attained higher levels of achievement than most schools in their school districts or most schools in the nation. Instead of focusing on schools that merely did better than other high-poverty schools, this study examined the heads of high-poverty schools that performed better than the average for all schools in their school district.

The paper consists of two main parts. The first part gives the overview of the project and presents the methodological approach used in the research. In the second part, the underpinning areas of inquiry are: What do the researched successful leaders have in common? What do most of the researched successful school leaders do? What kind of people become the researched successful school leaders? The answers to these questions are given on the basis of the preliminary findings obtained from the Polish part of the research project, entitled Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context: Strategies for Improvement, supported by the European Commission. The project involves a nine-country partnership between higher education institutions and thirty six schools in disadvantaged urban contexts. The aim of the project is to increase the understanding of the

characteristics and strategies of successful headship within and across each school and each country in order to produce and disseminate a European document on 'Leadership Strategies for Improving Schools in Challenging Urban Contexts', which will assist other heads in similar schools in their efforts to improve the integration of pupils from different social and cultural environments and to raise the levels of their achievements. The project focuses on issues connected with the transformation process, especially concerning the school leadership and leadership strategies, so that others might gain deeper understanding of how a school begins, maintains and sustains the journey toward excellence for all students. Special attention is paid not only to what leadership strategies were used by the principal but also to why they were used. Its purpose is to contribute to the knowledge of successful school leadership, to increase the understanding of successful leadership and leadership strategies in high-performing schools situated in challenging urban environments. This knowledge can be used to guide leadership practice, policy, and research. The paper provides a good starting point for a dialogue with diverse audiences about the successful school leadership in disadvantaged urban communities.

1. Overview of the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context. Strategies for Improvement project

1.1. The rationale and background of the project

The participating countries have met formally in a preparatory meeting in England. This was a result of previous work in individual countries which identified two key developments: i) school reform policies which resulted in decentralisation and consequent increased responsibilities for heads; and ii) increased alienation of students from their schooling, particularly in high-poverty, inner city schools. Each country identified also the lack of training for heads who work in these environments.

For each of the participating countries the project is a timely initiative. In all participating countries, there is an urgent need for examples of good practice which identify and examine the characteristics and strategies of successful leadership and management

in urban schools that served children in poor communities and achieved impressive academic results. For example, in Greece, the administrative structure and functions of schools are being decentralized and school-level evaluation strategies established; in Ireland, considerable resources have been spent in disadvantaged school contexts over the last decade, but little attention is paid to the effects of school leadership; in Portugal, the project will provide the basis for a broader understanding and analysis of school leaders' roles in the new reform contexts of increased autonomy in school administration and management; and in Poland, there has as yet been no work directed towards understanding the role of heads in supporting high-performing, high-poverty schools.

Over the years, in Poland, we have failed to fully understand the true meaning of educational leadership. In educating and training leaders of schools and departments, we focus too much on technical proficiency and neglect the area of character. We tend to pay attention to areas like financial management, strategic planning, data analysis, etc., and probably we are good at teaching these. We are inclined to view leadership as an isolated component, as something to be added on to other skills. In my opinion, we are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to teaching people how to behave like great leaders – to somehow instilling in them capacities such as courage and integrity. These, as Teal (1996, p.36) points out, cannot be taught and, as a result, many tend to downplay the human element in managing. 'Managing an organisation is not merely a series of mechanical tasks but a set of human interactions' (Bell & Harrison, 1998). It is worth noting that the period of political transformation, started in Poland in 1989, has brought about new legislation, which has become the basis for changes in education. From the former communist regime, a more open educational system is being built and its core curriculum has been developed. Now, the Polish school system is distinctly decentralised. The state is constrained to providing guidelines and creating a basic framework for schooling. Each school is administered locally and possesses a high degree of autonomy. Each school has a high degree of control over its own decisions and destiny. The basis for this is the conviction that a market approach will lead to greater efficiency and higher standards. Therefore, school

leaders are sometimes torn between their educational tasks and economic pressures, between the local school council, the staff and different groups of interest within the community. Market orientation also characterised the training and development opportunities for school leaders. The provision of school leader training and development is driven by market, which is characterised by diversity and choice. There is a wide range of providers (universities, advisory boards, professional associations, independent training organisations) and programmes, which differ in content and methods as well as quality; however, as it has already been mentioned above, they are focused mainly on administration and management, not on leadership. As to the development of school leaders, the state does not interfere at all. The school leader, particularly the 'Principal', is seen as the manager of a public institution. In his or her work, emphasis has traditionally been put on administrative tasks. However, in the last few years, the scope of site-based educational responsibility has been enlarged, bringing with it new tasks for school leaders.

1.2. The overall aim of the project and its specific objectives

The aims of this joint European-wide three-year project are to identify, analyse, evaluate and disseminate strategies to improve school leadership in primary and secondary schools in disadvantaged urban communities in nine countries: United Kingdom, Ireland, The Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and Finland. It consists of two sets of complementary, interactive working partnerships, i) between universities and schools at the in-country level and ii) between the partnerships from each country at the European level. The main objectives of the project are to:

- conduct case studies in two primary and two secondary schools in each country (the total number of 36 schools, schools which are sustaining success in communities of social and economic disadvantages) in order to identify and examine the characteristics and strategies of successful leadership and management in those schools;
- compare and contrast the findings (components and strategies of successful leadership) with those in other countries;

- identify and examine the (beneficial) effects upon school culture, pupil behaviour and community
- gather data in order to develop supportive curriculum materials for urban principals used to integrate pupils from different social and cultural environments, to build the individual and organizational commitment of all staff, and to raise the level of achievements;
- increase the understanding of successful leadership and leadership strategies in high-performing schools in challenging urban contexts in different countries;
- produce the European-wide results in the language of each country as a means of improving school leadership and, through this, teaching, learning and achievements, pilot these with other heads in each country.

1.3. Project's beneficiaries

Heads, teachers and school pupils of all involved countries shall be the main beneficiaries. In-country participation by heads and others in the data collection will allow all participants to gain a wider perspective on their own work. Heads participation in key partnership meetings will enable them to understand better not only the factors and strategies which promote improvement in schools in their own countries but also to look for similarities and dissimilarities with others; and to understand the on-going processes of contemporary urban challenges in other European countries. The production of a CD containing a set of contextual models and examples of good practice, supported by well-grounded theoretical perspectives, in English and in the language of each participating country will be one important outcome of the project. The European-wide dissemination of strategies for improving schools through the conference will also constitute an exciting occasion for understanding and bringing closer together researchers, and heads from across Europe.

1.4. Research design and methodology

1.4.1. Selecting the case study schools

Schools were selected by using the existing criteria for judging successful Principals in high-performing schools in each country. As a result of a pre-

paratory meeting between the parties, we agreed to define a successful leader at school level as the one:

- who has worked at school for at least five years (or one year beyond the normal cycle in particular countries);
- who is widely acknowledged by his or her professional peers as being a 'successful' leader;
- who achieves a rising level of: 'value-added' results regarding pupils' achievements, teacher retention, pupil attendance and social climate in the school and community.

Schools selected for the project are schools with the majority of their students coming from economically and socially deprived backgrounds where attendance and behaviour problems have existed. The selection of schools in which the principals met the criterion of providing 'successful' leadership was an important element of the research.

Success was defined by a combination of factors, including the reputation of the school within the senior ranks of the State Department of Education and with other school Principals, the reputation of the current Principal, and the State recognition of success in terms of outcomes for students, including outcomes for students at risk.

1.4.2. Characteristics of the schools

This paper describes findings from four case studies of Polish schools involved in the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context. Strategies for Improvement project. The schools are:

School A, Primary School. This is a medium-size public primary (elementary) school of 430 students (17 units), 33 teachers and 13 non-teaching staff. The total number of teachers employed in the school: 34. The teaching in the school follows the framework curriculum containing the obligatory core elements of the integrated teaching in 1-3 forms and teaching in 4-6 forms. Education in this school lasts six years. The graduation from this schools entitles to obtaining the certificate and to continuing education in a gymnasium (lower secondary school in Poland). The school is situated in the southern part of the city, on its outskirts. The location of the school means that the community in which it operates is very varied. Apart

from the areas which are occupied by the families in dire straits, there are areas where middle-class families live: it means that there are students from different social and cultural environments in the school. The economic status of the children's families is very differentiated. On the one hand, there exists the problem of financially challenged families, while on the other, there are quite many pupils coming from families living at the average standard. There is also a group of children coming from well-to-do families.

The school is run by the principal: the principal of the school is a woman, who has occupied this position since 1991. The principal manages the school activities and represents it outside. The principal manages the current didactic and educational work. The principal, in order to carry out her duties, cooperates with the teaching staff, parents and student council. In running the school, the principal is supported by the deputy principal and the chief accountant. Thanks to the principal A's leadership, the school gained a reputation for excellent literacy programmes, with results comparable to most other schools despite the challenging circumstances experienced by many of the students. The school won awards for the excellence of its programmes and staff. The school accomplished a lot of projects. It has lots of achievements in country-wide competitions. Despite the majority of students living in challenging circumstances, school performance is comparable to statewide averages. The school has belonged to the Polish Leading School Club since 1997 and to the Schools Promoting Health since 2000.

School B, Primary School. It is a six-year public school, the graduation from this schools entitles to obtaining the certificate and to continuing education in a gymnasium (lower secondary school in Poland). The teaching in the school follows the framework curriculum containing the obligatory core elements of the integrated teaching in 1-3 forms and teaching in 4-6 forms. The school has 31 teachers and 387 students (15 units) in the school year 2005/06 and 31 teachers and 362 students (14 units) in the school year 2006/07. There are 16 non-teaching staff. It is an inner city school, the majority of its students live in the surrounding neighborhoods, challenged with poverty. The school assists these pupils financially in the form of free schoolbooks, clothing, stationery and free meals.

The principal, Principal B, is female, she began her principalship at the school six years ago and it is not her first principalship. She was a principal for 5 years (1996-2001) in another urban school and a vice-headteacher for a year (school year 2000/01). Principal B has managed, together with the teachers, to change the negative school reputation from the past, the school has changed its cultural climate, has established positive links with the community on a whole range of levels. In the past, staff's morale had been low and individual self-esteem had been eroded by successive criticism from the school. Consequently, the principal B consistently and vigorously promoted staff development, whether through in-service training, visits to other schools, or peer support schemes. All the teachers share the commitment to provide the best learning experience possible for every child by adapting sound educational practice to the individual student's learning style, strengths, and areas of needed growth. Many extracurricular classes and activities have been introduced, a day-care room has started to operate. The students have started to take part in various competitions on the local and national levels and they are successful. The school belongs to the network of Schools Promoting Health.

School C, Secondary School. It is a 3-year compulsory public school (lower secondary school) for pupils at the age of 13-16. Education in this school is completed with an exam and graduation from it makes it possible to learn further in a specialized higher secondary school (the so-called profiled lyceum) or in a vocational school. The school was established and is run by the City of Łódź. It is supervised pedagogically by the local school superintendent. The school has 485 students (18 units) and 41 teachers. It is situated in the city centre, on the outskirts of the Central Łódź District (this district lies in the centre of the city) and neighbours with the poorest and most neglected Łódź-Bałuty District. This central position means that the community in which the school functions is diverse, next to the places that are described as "Łódź's poverty enclaves", there are areas which are occupied by middle-class families. That is why the economic status of the children is so differentiated. The school's pupils come both from neglected communities (60% of pupils come from the families affected

by unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, family violence etc.) and from well-functioning communities. The school assists financially these pupils who live in the financially challenged families in the form of free schoolbooks, clothing, stationery and free meals.

The principal, Principal C, is male and has held the position of the principal for 6 years. The school is noted for the development of a very positive, friendly climate, the development of good facilities, improving student literacy results, a high level of parent involvement and highly qualified, motivated and committed staff. From humble physical circumstances, when he became the principal, the school has changed to be one of the best equipped lower secondary schools in the city. It is a school that has a comprehensive library, two good computer labs, and well equipped classrooms. Feedback from parents and the good reputation of the school suggest that this is a quality learning environment. Since the school enjoys a fine reputation, every year the number of students from outside this school's district increases (they often come from remote areas outside the city), these are students with high attainments and from well-to-do families. The principal was recently awarded the Order of the President of Lodz for his services to education.

School D, Secondary School. It is a 3-year compulsory public school for pupils at the age of 13-16. Education in this school is completed with an exam and graduation from it makes it possible to learn further in a specialized higher secondary school (the so-called profiled lyceum) or in a vocational school. The school was established and is run by the City of Łódź. It is supervised pedagogically by the local school superintendent. This is a small-size public secondary school of 270 students (11 units), 23 teachers and 10 non-teaching staff. It is situated in the centre of the city, in the Central Łódź District, in the region of the old Łódź, which is dominated by old, nineteenth century buildings – especially tenement houses from this period. The old housing infrastructure, lack of green areas and generally of areas promoting sports or other forms of physically active pastime contribute to gradual degradation of the facilities in the area, as well as to the worsening of the citizens' health in this part of the city. The location of the school means that the community in which it operates is quite difficult be-

cause most of the families dwelling there belong to the group of the so-called high social risk families. Many of these pupils are brought up in single-parent families or in common-law families. This situation often results in financial and parental care problems. Many pupils come from families with three or more children and these families also have serious financial problems, as well as difficulty in obtaining a decent flat. They are often affected by serious alcohol problems and are under the supervision of a probation officer.

The principal, Principal D, has been at the school for over 20 years, the last five years of which as the principal. She had to struggle to shake off the inherited negative local reputation from the past. Through her leadership, the school has changed its cultural climate, has established positive links with the community on a whole range of levels, its students have started to achieve very good academic results. The school is known from the successes in various competitions on the local and national levels. It belongs to the network of Schools Promoting Health.

1.4.3. Method

The data collected from the selected schools consists of: i) documents illustrating school achievements and student attainments, documents about school aims, management, teaching and learning structures, staff development, monitoring and assessment procedures, school development planning; pupils' social characteristics, attendance, behaviour, achievements; ii) individual interviews with the principal (three interviews), the assistant principal, the curriculum coordinator (or equivalent), up to six other teachers, the school council/board chairperson and a school council/board parent member, up to eight other parents; and iii) group interviews with students (two groups of 5-8 students).

The results will form the central core of the materials to be developed. This core will be augmented with contextual information and the final documents will be in a form which can be used as a means of in-service training and development for school leaders in all schools in challenging urban contexts.

Procedures

A variety of quantitative data was used to identify schools. Once schools were identified, the research team used qualitative data to generate case studies for each school. A team of two or three researchers visited each school. During the visits, the researchers interviewed principals, teachers, parents, pupils, and other school personnel. The researchers used focus groups to gain the perspectives of several pupils. Before the site visits, phone conversations with the principals were helpful in identifying important informants and arranging interviews. After the site visits, phone conversations with the principals helped provide clarifying information.

It is worth stressing that the reliance on principals as the primary source of data about principal leadership limits our understanding. Findings from studies of student (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), teacher (Berends, 2000; Silins & Mulford, 2002) and teacher, student, ancillary staff, governor and parent (Day, et al., 2000) perspectives provide particularly rich sources of evidence about principal leadership. Whilst there is evidence that principal and teacher views on principal leadership are often congruent (Gurr, 1996), there is also evidence of difference (McCall, et al., 2001; Mulford, et al., 2000, 2001). Reliance on principal evidence may not only be limiting, but it may lead to ill-founded conclusions. Therefore, within the case study research design, the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context: Strategies for Improvement project includes the voices of students, parents and teachers.

In addition to interviews, the researchers observed a variety of settings, including classrooms at different grade levels, cafeterias, playgrounds, and hallways. Where possible, researchers observed staff meetings or other professional development activities. A variety of documents were reviewed as well, including campus planning documents, programme descriptions, meeting agendas, school budgets, achievement reports, and other documents.

Each case study report was intended to describe the school, what it had accomplished and the major changes that had led to success. Each case study begins with background information concerning the school and the community. There is a description of

the population served and the academic improvement achieved in recent years. Then, the majority of each case study report is devoted to: i) the description of the topography of the school – school organization, management structure, curriculum, extra-curricular and support programmes, and success; ii) school principal's perceptions – biography and narrative profile; iii) characteristics, qualities and strategies of successful leadership and management aimed at integrating pupils from different social and cultural environments, at building the individual and organizational commitment of all the staff, and at raising the level of achievements; iv) and beneficial effects upon school culture, pupil behaviour and community. In most cases, the reports demonstrated the contrast between the achievements of the school in years prior to the recently introduced reform efforts by the heads and the current state of the school.

2. Findings

2.1. How critical is leadership to school success? What do the researched successful leaders have in common?

Case studies of exceptional schools that served children who are from low-income families, especially those that succeed beyond expectations, provided detailed portraits of leadership and significant evidence of the critical role played by the principal. What the researched leaders have in common is the fact that each principal was described as making a significant difference to the quality of education in his or her school, each of them had a direct impact on the school and were seen as the engine rooms that powered their schools' success. The positive impact of leadership can be demonstrated through the various achievements. School communities acknowledged the principals' contribution. These contributions are significant and have made 'a difference' to the quality of education for the whole school community.

2.2. What do most of the researched successful school leaders do?

There were a number of similarities identified: the principals focus their efforts on four sets of tasks:

i) building powerful forms of teaching and learning – the principals provided direction through their vision and enthusiasm; created an air of expectation and excitement of what the school could achieve, especially, they held high expectations of student learning and student behaviour; they were focused on recruitment and retention of good teachers, use of differentiated or contingent student promotion policy.

ii) creating strong communities in the school – the inclusive community of students, staff, parents and others.

iii) expanding the proportion of pupils' social capital valued by the school – principals were focused on students and families; they put efforts to increase the proportion of children's social capital valued by the school and create meaningful partnerships with parents;

iv) nurturing the development of families' educational cultures – the principals with the teachers provided not only financial and material support for the families but, first of all, are focused on providing culturally sensitive parent education programmes.

Apart from these similarities, I identified other important ones in the strategies used to promote school quality by the researched principals:

- They painted and articulated their vision of a successful school that was augmented by infinite possibilities, creating an air of expectation and excitement of what the school could achieve.

- They identified and pursued an important, visible, yet attainable first goal, they focused on the attainment of this first goal, achieved success, and then used their success to move towards another ambitious goals.

- They created a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement. The shared sense of responsibility was nurtured by joint planning processes and reinforced by efforts to involve everyone in key components of the school's work.

- They pay attentions to the share responsibility for learning at school teachers – they wanted their teachers to foster students' sense of responsibility for appropriate behaviour and to create an environment in which students were likely to behave well. Discipline problems became rather rare as the schools implemented multi-faceted approaches for helping students learn responsibility for their own behaviour

- They redirected time and energy that had been spent on conflicts between adults in the school toward service to children.

- They created opportunities for teachers to work, plan and learn together around instructional issues. Time was structured to ensure that collaboration around instructional issues became an important part of the school day and the school week.

- They made efforts to win the confidence and respect of parents, primarily by improving the achievement of students. Then they built strong partnerships with parents with a view to supporting student achievements.

- They created additional time for instruction. In some cases, the efforts focused on creating additional time for attention to critical instructional issues during the school day. In other cases, the efforts focused on creating additional time beyond the regular school day.

- They persisted through difficulties, setbacks, and failures. In spite of various challenges and frustrations, they did not stop trying to improve their schools – they see barriers as challenges not impediments.

- They take care of their staff retention – each school managed to make dramatic improvements without great turnover in teaching personnel.

To sum up, the case studies indicate that the researched successful leaders of schools in challenging urban contexts faced challenging circumstances that required them to sort through a complex set of competing factors in order to establish shared vision, priorities and strategies. The principals acted as role models and were hands-on, they aligned people with the school goals which they set and reset. Once goals had been achieved they were reset and adjusted upwards which helped establish a culture of continuous improvement. They were not satisfied with the status quo, they have an agenda that they keep pushing. They created a sense of confidence, empowered the staff and aligned community and school, staff and school goals.

The four Polish schools participating in the project were different from the other ones in important ways. These differences suggest that a broad range of urban elementary schools serving poor communities can achieve high levels of student achievements. Also, the differences suggest that schools may be able to achieve academic successes through different means. Some

of the differences observed included the following:

- Among the four schools, there were schools with small and large enrollments.

- Even though none of the schools would have been considered high-performing basing on the achievements data from eight years ago, some of the schools made remarkable improvement over a three or four-year periods, whereas others took five years or longer before experiencing impressive gains in student achievements.

- In a few cases, the district office played a major role in the school's improvement efforts. In contrast, there were other cases where the district played a modest role in the improvement process.

2.3. What kind of people become the researched successful school leaders?

The four case studies have demonstrated that there are some similarities in the principals' personal qualities, characteristics, behaviours and approaches. These features are consistently associated with successful leadership.

Four key preliminary findings are particularly important:

1. Successful principals have personal intentions concerning their job and embody them.

2. Successful principals place a high premium on their and their staff's personal-professional development.

3. Each of the successful principals possesses some distinct, individual, personal characteristics, typical only of him/her. There are also a lot of similarities between the examined principals.

4. Successful principals create circumstances that are favourable to their work.

All the principals in the study fundamentally experienced it as a very important and meaningful job to be a principal and a leader. Being a principal was an active choice for these successful professionals. Their most popular reason for entering school was 'always having wanted to work with people and for people' and they frequently spoke of the role of their commitment to the job, the motivation to work with enthusiasm. They said that their commitment to being a principal had increased over the course of their career and that their motivation remained the same, al-

beit their work seem to be much more intensified today than it was in the past (more bureaucratic work).

These principals often stressed that their personal values guided their decision-making, and used phrases like, “it’s a calling” or “I have a responsibility to the children, the teachers, the school”. The important quality was that the intentions concerning their work were not just the educational inspectors’ intentions or the aims of the official curriculum – they were the principals’ own. As one interviewee said: “I felt that my work at school requires that I intend something and what I do ... I constantly take up that challenge”. Thus, not only is it important for these principals to have a personal desire or intention to work but experience is another key factor which facilitates the teachers’ effectiveness and their professional successes. The researched heads said that experience should not be limited to doing the same thing year after year, it is essential to seek new challenges.

During the observations of the principals’ work at the schools I noted that every principal was energetic, enthusiastic and created a positive and work-oriented atmosphere among the staff and students. They embodied the fundamental message to the teachers and students: teaching and learning are worthwhile activities.

Generally, we can state that among the researched heads there exists a strong drive to self-improvement and usefulness. Self-improvement is an important motive and at the same time an aim for teachers. Each of the successful principals stated that the high level of his/her and his/her teachers’ professional competences is a result of professional development. They pointed out that the ability to take care of one’s own personal and professional development and their teachers’ professional development is an important aspect of their job. The emphasis that principals placed on the continuing development of themselves and of their staff was an endorsement that principals and teachers were the most important asset of the school. The principals believe that it is important to invest in teachers and their capabilities, to raise morale and to foster ‘can do’ culture.

It is a very interesting feature that what the examined principals do is so full of their personality. Each of the principals has some distinct characteristics of his/her personality which make him/her stand out among others; frequently, it is a particular talent in a particu-

lar field or a particular ability or hobby. These principals use these characteristics at work, and through that they “make use of” themselves, thus they are authentic, interesting and engaged. Successful principals turned to people with varied professional backgrounds who worked in collaboration with teacher leaders and showed respect for the teaching culture. During the observations I noted that each of the principals viewed teachers as partners. They respect the teachers’ autonomy, their attitudes and intentions and they do not try to manipulate them. They do not distance themselves from the teachers by hiding themselves behind a detached and impersonal principal role. They protect teachers from extraneous demands (they try to minimize their bureaucratic work), and look ahead, anticipate change and prepare teachers for it so that it does not surprise or disempower them.

The excessive burden of work as a result of increasing external demands, longer working hours, increasing numbers of duties at school, making use of technical criteria and tests for the assessment of pupils’ work, reduction of time planned for relaxation during work are all factors that influence principals’ work. However, the examined principals stated that they work out various ways of coping with the worsening working conditions. They do not passively accept the conditions of their work, they do not tolerate school conditions. They believe that school should add value to pupil learning and address the inequalities accounting for large gaps in the learning of different groups of students. They try to behave in a creative and pro-active way. They treat difficulties as some kind of a challenge and despite the fact that from time to time they have to face disappointment, they believe that successes are dependent on how active they are, which, in turn, depends on their perseverance and consequence in achieving the planned goals. They see barriers as challenges not impediments. Playing the role of principal is, in case of our principals, accompanied by the need of successes, which is closely linked with the assessment of their own potential and with their goals.

They do not make the successes they achieve dependent only on such work conditions as earnings or school equipment. These factors are very important; however, the principals ascribe a much greater role in achieving successes to:

- child-centered orientation in their school, their universal philosophies are that every child is important, every child can achieve success (every child has potential), they are focused on what is in children's best interest. They also believe that not only children need to be supported but all members of the school community as well;

- good relationships between teachers and their commitment to provide the best possible learning experience for every child by adapting sound educational practice to the individual student's learning style, strengths and areas of needed growth.

Conclusions

The four case studies have demonstrated that principals have a key role in the success of schools broadly and, in particular, on student outcomes. Even though each of our principals had a different personality and interpersonal style, they all were expert at working with and through others to improve their schools. There was evidence that they had a significant impact on student learning through a number of key interventions that focused on teaching and learning and building professional commitment and capacity for school improvement. In the confines of this paper, it has only been possible to address the overview of the project, present the methodological approach used in the research and on the basis of the research results, make the attempt to answer the following questions: What do the researched successful leaders have in common? What do most of the researched successful school leaders do? What kind of people become the researched successful school leaders? Nevertheless, a wider study would also be appropriate.

There are numerous research studies on successful school leadership. They have revealed that school leadership is most successful when it is focused on teaching and learning and that it is necessary, but not sufficient, for school improvement that leadership can take different forms in different contexts. They have also pointed at some of the mechanisms through which school leadership has its effects. However, there are still many gaps in our knowledge about successful educational leadership. For example, what leadership strategies are used by the principals of urban schools that served children in poor commu-

nities and why they are used? Stories of high-performing urban schools from economically deprived environments and simultaneous attempts to explain how these schools managed to transform themselves into high-achievement schools seem to be vital, so that others might gain deeper understanding of how a school begins, maintains and sustains the journey toward excellence for all students. Special attention can be paid not only to what leadership strategies were used by the principals but also to why they were used. The purpose of further consideration might contribute to the knowledge of successful school leadership, might increase the understanding of successful leadership and leadership strategies in high-performing schools situated in challenging urban environments. This knowledge, on the one hand, can be used to guide leadership practice, policy and research and, on the other hand, it might call for vigorous debate among the practitioners, policymakers and academics who are part of the educational leadership profession.

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