




## Leading international schools: The questions of cultural and social justice

Nidal Al Haj Sleiman 

UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Photo by Jeremy Bezanger on Unsplash

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on international school leadership and raises questions on the mono-dimensional approaches to leading, teaching, and learning in diverse contexts. The growth of international schools all over the world represents increasing patterns of geographic and economic mobility, and the growth of socially and culturally diverse communities. While international schools generally represent different elements of internationalisation, their policies and leadership do not demonstrate an adequate response to the social and cultural needs of their communities. Based on her doctoral research, the author argues that internationalisation in educational leadership is not given sufficient attention and that the field requires further development of learning and exploring the contextual elements in which leaders lead. The article draws on a set of approaches to educational leadership, mainly contextually and culturally relevant leadership, and theories of internationalisation in educational leadership and management, in addition to transformational and engaged pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.

### KEYWORDS

Leadership; international schools; social justice; engaged pedagogy

## Introduction

There are many changes in today's world which require researchers and practitioners to rethink what educational leadership is. The world has been changing steadily over the last few decades, but the last 18 months have witnessed the most crucial change due to the global pandemic and many political and environmental occurrences worldwide. These changes made it imperative for education and educational leaders to (re)consider their role amidst unparalleled insecurities. These difficult times raised many questions and called for reflection on what it is that we want to accomplish through education. It could be simplistic and naïve to think that the same old thinking would successfully lead the future since the present has surely not been efficient at different levels. Western and Garcia (2018) suggested that 'it is time to look for new ways to conceptualise and

understand leadership beyond our twentieth century frameworks'. A futuristic approach to education and its leadership does not mean only imagining a better future but also learning from the past and analysing the root causes of many systemic issues and unpacking the paths leading to current injustices. An educational future based on social justice and equity is only possible if the mistakes of current systems are avoided.

This short commentary discusses the role of leadership, particularly in the context of today's international schools. The growing scope of international education has led to increasing evidence that the internationalisation of education requires changes in how educational leadership is understood and practiced, and what leaders should prioritise. Schools are not isolated entities but social spaces where interactions within and beyond school walls are inevitable, and where the cultural and social capital of people shape how they work and learn. Educational leadership that only focuses on inter-organisational matters might be at the risk of falling behind thresholds of equity and social justice.

## **Context**

The role of leaders in directing the path of the school and shaping its culture is widely established by scholars worldwide. Robinson's (2011) research suggests that some of the most effective dimensions of leadership are "establishing goals and expectations and ensuring that the school is a safe and supportive place". She argued that schools can be safe when leaders build trusting relationships and dialogue with teachers, families, and students. While different scholars have offered general theories and models of effective leadership, Hallinger (2011) challenged the conservative assumption of leadership and the established policy narrative that one style of leading schools could be applicable in different contexts. He argues that "leaders who possess a single set of tools will find themselves bouncing around from success to failure without knowing why" (Hallinger, 2011, p. 137). Similarly, Leithwood et al. (1999) argued that "outstanding leadership is exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised" (p. 3). When we discuss international schools, the question is not about what leaders do but how they do, and how they respond to their school contexts. These might be difficult questions due to the prevalence of multiculturalism and multilingualism, as well as different demographics, faiths, historical, and socio-economic backgrounds of students. The questions require more than discussing leaders' behavior and dispositions but going a step forward to discuss curriculum leadership, teaching and pedagogy, teacher recruitment and preparation, and the sources of texts and other teaching and learning material.

According to Walker (2004), leaders should work on creating an environment that allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning and offer guidance, and dialogue that is relevant. Understanding the needs and the values of the school community requires learning about the local, regional, and global political and historical issues, as well as the socio-economic conditions. Crossley and Watson (2003) suggest that leaders initiate dialogue between various stake holders, and between their own values and those of the local communities. They emphasize "the ethical imperatives of cross-cultural dimensions" when leading internationally (Crossley & Watson, 2003, p. 142). Nonetheless, studies on international school leadership showed that leaders are not prepared and do not have opportunities to engage in culturally relevant professional learning (Fisher, 2019).

## **Methodology and findings**

This commentary draws on relevant literature in the field, and on data collected for a doctoral study over the last 12 months using multiple research methods. In this study, international school leaders in England and Qatar discussed their practice in leading teaching and learning, leadership

development, and their response to the social capital of teachers and students. Teachers and students also shared their views on how their cultural and social capital is perceived by leaders and teachers.

The findings showed that leaders focus on setting the direction for the school, encourage leader and teacher professional learning, and take part in leading teaching and the curriculum. They also work on developing partnerships and relationships with authorities and local organisations. However, curriculum and teaching activities do not reflect the diversity of students and are prevalently predesigned and mono-dimensional. While values of diversity and internationalisation are mentioned widely through the data collection, they are limited to surface-level policy and practice. Cultural learning and contextually relevant practice are lacking in most schools. Schools are more focused on attainment, accreditation, and reputation than on understanding and responding to their communities.

### **International Schools**

In areas and eras of political and economic instability, geographical mobility becomes the norm. Many people are forced to migrate while others choose to seek better opportunities and avoid the difficult situations in their countries. Multiple generations in South West Asian and North African (SWANA) countries have migrated north or resettled in new locations across the region. Many migrant families tend to avoid national schools in the host countries due to their single educational path and mono-dimensional values. They choose international schools, if they can afford them, where their children can meet other international students who might identify with their experience of mobility. In these schools, being “international” is the norm and most students view the school as a place that can offer a sense of belonging, or a compensation for the lost home or the home they never knew.

International education is also viewed as a better option when expat families return to their countries or move to a third country where qualifications can be easily attested. Due to their Western (Anglo-European) identity and curriculum, international schools are seen as places which offer opportunities for local and migrant students, mainly, equipping them with quality education and English language skills, and preparing them for a global economy (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). Schools are also considered a source of high social and cultural capital which could help students to secure social mobility. Similarly, many Western families relocate to the SWANA region to work for local and multinational corporations in areas where the oil and gas industries are flourishing, thus, giving international schools market another reason to flourish.

### **Responding to Diversity**

While international schools work towards internationalisation, their work on incorporating international values is mostly based on broader frameworks of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) or British international schools overseas. Despite their wide differences, they promote a philosophy of internationalisation which refers to promoting values of international mindedness, diversity, and global citizenship. They differ in identities, fees, salaries, nationalities, and cultural backgrounds, but all of them represent an element of internationalisation.

The number of nationalities in participant schools ranged between 48 and 75 nationalities of students. Staff and teachers’ body was less diverse than students, with the majority being White Anglo-European and a minority of non-White international staff who teach foreign languages or work in support positions. While they promote values of diversity and multiculturalism, schools predominantly hire teachers and leaders from Western Anglo-European backgrounds. Despite having multiple flags on campus, celebrating cultural days, and teaching an international or a foreign curriculum, elements of inter-cultural representation are least evident.

Recognising student diversity requires that students learn what is relevant to them and in ways that value their voices and thinking. Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) debated that leaders “need to be aware of the possible inappropriateness of uncritically adopting their own context curriculum and pedagogical proposals deemed entirely suited for another” (p. 171) in multiple contexts. Other scholars such as Samier (2014), ElKaleh (2019) and Walker (2004) discussed the importance of culturally relevant leadership, while others argued against the widespread evidence-based approaches to leadership which are based on Western research and models of practice (Osborne et al., 2002).

## **Curriculum and pedagogy**

In all participant schools, many students come from the SWANA region, the rest of Asia, Europe, Africa, or Latin America and speak multiple languages; but they all use the same set of predesigned curricula, read the same texts, and undergo the same assessment tasks. Curriculum is largely mono-dimensional and does not take into consideration their cultural backgrounds and heritage. They learn history from a single perspective and read texts which are predominantly written by Western authors. Almost everything they learn is different from their home narratives and cultural values. Thus, they either end up internalising this Westernised version of history and culture, or resenting it - an experience that could lead to fractured identities and embodied symbolic violence (Bourdieu et al., 1999).

Adopting an inclusive curriculum and pluralistic pedagogies are by no means an easy endeavor for school leaders. Pluralistic learning environments such as international schools could benefit from teaching approaches that allow students to play a more active role in their learning and offer diverse resources, particularly, those authored by writers who resemble and represent cultures and communities to which students belong or where they come from (ElKaleh, 2019). This also requires allowing time and freedom for students and teachers to engage in critical reflection and discussions around key topics and share stories from their own worlds in different curriculum contexts (Hooks, 1994). Using student input, including their knowledge traditions, ideas, and belief systems as a source of instructional content and activities is key to engagement and sustainable learning.

Responding to the needs of the diverse community of students requires more than awareness of internationalism; it requires making decisions that ensure respecting and recognizing students' backgrounds and identities, redistribution of decision making which allows families', students', and staff's voices to be heard and to contribute to transformational policy making. It also includes a dialogic practice which is based on mutual appreciation and respect between teachers, school leaders, students, and the whole community. Education in this sense is an inclusive, engaging, and transformative process where teachers and students learn from each other (Hooks, 1994). Engagement with students' values, cultures, and knowledge can bridge the gap between schools and their communities and build an interactional and multidimensional learning environment.

## **Leading international schools: the questions of equity and social justice**

A part of the literature on international schools is descriptive or promotional, while the other is critical (Bernard, 2020; Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). The field needs a more detailed approach that explores and discusses alternatives or adaptations to current practice that would involve learning from and about each other rather than reproducing the same single pathway of teaching others what we know best. The one-size-fits-all approach represents a mono-dimensional hegemonic approach that has not and will not serve 21<sup>st</sup> century students and societies. Delivering a preset curriculum with a fixed set of assigned readings that have no connection to diverse students can hold biased messages to young learners which could lead to resentment towards what the school represents or lead to a form of self-blame for not speaking like their teachers and leaders, or not

thinking like the authors of these texts. These rigid approaches will not lead to equity in the long run, nor are they socially and culturally sustainable. They could also offend students who do not feel recognised and valued for who they are.

A modern and equitable approach to school leadership requires understanding internationalisation beyond the traditional knowledge and skills embedded in leadership and management preparation. It also requires critical reflection to respond meaningfully to the school's international community and embed internationalisation in leading, teaching and curriculum.

Frameworks of internationalisation of leadership and management preparation programs and in-service training are still limited (Dimmock & Walker, 2005) and have not been given much attention in the field, particularly in the private and corporate world that governs international schools. Kreber (2009) has criticized the globalized and neoliberal approaches in international education and suggested focusing on academic, socio-cultural, and ethical factors instead. Milley and Dulude (2020) have gone farther to discuss "maladministration behaviours" (p. 2) if internationalisation is not embedded in leading and managing practice. They suggest that "governance, hegemonic discourses encourage maladministration" (p. 18), and that leaders need not only an understanding of education internationally, but also locally.

Engaging with local narratives, migrant communities, and the history of the city or country in which the school exists is essential for leadership. It also requires understanding and respecting the complexity of the new context and learning to see history through their eyes. In the case of international schools, acknowledging colonial legacies and post-colonial practices could be very helpful to initiate an environment of trust, collaboration, and transformation. Crossley and Watson (2003) suggested that it is essential for leaders in international education to understand the relationship of power, identity, and culture, and how these dynamics influence learning. They recommended that leaders focus on cross-cultural communication, critically reflect on what they regard as knowledge, and take time to learn the depth and complexity of the history and culture of other nations.

## Conclusion

According to Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017), it is advisable that researchers, policy makers, and school leaders consider the crucial importance of considering "matters of context alongside leadership theories" (p. 178). Whether an international school hosts a majority of local or a diverse community of expats, developing a pedagogy of appreciating diverse knowledge and different styles of learning is essential for a pluralistic learning environment. Pluralistic and engaged pedagogies will transform international schools from being mono-dimensional into being safe and inclusive environments. Recognition of students and their cultures, learning their culture and history, recruiting diverse leaders and teachers, designing a pluralistic curriculum, and adopting engaged pedagogies are a starting point for a more equitable and socially and culturally just leadership approach.

## Notes on contributor

*Nidal Al Haj Sleiman* is a PhD candidate at UCL Institute of Education. Her research explores the practice and social impact of international school leadership. Nidal worked as a teacher and a principal in international contexts, and is an Associate Fellow of Higher Education and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

## ORCID

Nidal Al Haj Sleiman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8944-8933>

## References

- Bernard, M. (2020). Cultural capital in non-White majority schools: A critical exploration of cultural ethos and pedagogy. *BERA Blog*. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/cultural-capital-in-non-white-majority-schools-a-critical-exploration-of-cultural-ethos-and-pedagogy>. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1788618>
- Bourdieu, P., Accordo, A., Balazs, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, E., Bourgois, P., Broccolichi, S., Champagne, P., Christin, R., Faguer, J.-P., Garcia, S., Lenoir, R., Euyvrard, F., Pialoux, M., Pinto, L., Podalydes, D., Sayad, A., Soulie, C., & Wacquant, L. J. D., (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (P. P. Ferguson, S. Emanuel, J. Johnson & S. T. Waryn, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Clarke, S., & O'Donoghue, T. (2017). Educational Leadership and Context: A Rendering of an Inseparable Relationship. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65, 167-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1199772>
- Crossley, M., & Watson, K. (2003). *Comparative and international research in education: Globalisation, context and difference*. Routledge Falmer.
- Dimmock, C., & Walker, A. (2005). *Educational leadership: Culture and diversity*. Sage.
- ElKaleh, E. (2019). Leadership curricula in UAE business and education management programs: A Habermasean analysis within an Islamic context. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33(6), 1118-1147. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-10-2016-0220>
- Gardner-McTaggart, A. (2018). International schools: Leadership reviewed. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 17(2), 148-163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240918793955>
- Fisher, D. (2019). *In what ways and for what reasons do leaders of international schools deploy their leadership behaviours in response to the cultural context of staff with whom they work?* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Bath.
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(2), 125-142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111116699>
- Hooks, B., (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kreber, C. (2009). Different perspectives on internationalization in higher education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2009(118), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.348>
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D. and Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Open University Press.
- Milley, P. & Dulude E. (2020). On maladministration in higher education: Towards a multi-level theoretical framework for understanding its emergence and persistence in an era of neoliberal, managerial and corporatist reforms. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1757158>
- Osborne, R. N., Hunt, J. G., & Jauch, L. R., (2002). Towards a contextual theory of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(6), 797-837. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(02\)00154-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(02)00154-6)
- Robinson, V. (2011). *Student-Centered Leadership* (Jossey-Bass Leadership Library in Education). Hoboken: Wiley.
- Samier, E. A. (2014). Designing public administration curriculum for the United Arab Emirates. *Administrative Culture*, 15(2), 222-246.
- Walker, A., (2004). *Priorities, strategies and challenges. Proactive leadership in multi-ethnic schools*. National College for School leadership.
- Western, S. & Garcia E.-J. (2018). *Global leadership perspectives: Insights and analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714845>