

School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform

STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Louis Volante
Editor

School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform

International Perspectives

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*To Filomena, Alexander, and Alyssa for
making me smile . . .*

Foreword

In the 1980s and 1990s, education moved from the shadows to the spotlight for policy makers, largely driven by concern about competitiveness in a complex global economy and a realization that education of the young is a necessity for creating educated citizens and ensuring a successful future. Words like standards, accountability, and effectiveness became part of the educational lexicon. As Fullan (1997) pointed out, the pressure for reform emerged in the 1980s without the reality. By the mid 1990s, however, large-scale reform was emerging, particularly in England and the United States, with a national curriculum in England in 1988 and a relentless focus on “education, education, education” by Tony Blair, and George Bush being called “the Education President”, as he introduced “No Child Left Behind” in the United States.

Much of this reform was wrapped up in a package called “standards-based reform”. Even at that time, however, the meaning of the term was different in different places. In the United States, the focus was on creating detailed and specific content and process standards at the state level and developing or choosing a quantitative instrument to assess whether the students knew the required content or could perform the required tasks. In England, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy focused on ambitious standards for learning but did not define specific content or processes. Instead, they established targets for success at a school level and inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspected and reported on the performance of every school in the country. In both cases, there was reliance on large-scale assessment, as a mechanism for deciding about success.

Although standards-based reform emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom, the idea has spread across the world as an approach to systemic reform. It might appear that there is a worldwide “tsunami” of standards-based reform that will standardize and homogenize the educational system across the globe. This book makes it very clear, however, that there is no one approach to standards-based reform and countries change—there is a danger in paying attention to its evolution and impact in only one context. This makes the book so valuable. Louis Volante has drawn together descriptions from a wide range of countries, all involved in large-scale reform and using standards and assessments as part of their process. What becomes very obvious is that the language may be the same but the words reflect different contexts and can represent very different ideals, values, and processes.

The collection of papers in this book makes it very clear that large-scale reform is indeed a local issue. Countries, states, and provinces address the issues of improving schools and holding educators accountable in dramatically different ways. Also, the approach to large-scale reform changes over time, sometimes gradually and sometimes dramatically with new governments or changing economic circumstances.

Leaders cannot assume that there is only one way for reform to proceed. Instead, they need to understand their own context well and make decisions within that context to serve the students and their communities by improving learning conditions for students. At the same time, if leaders are going to be visionary and lead for a time that is different from the current conditions, they have the responsibility of understanding the broader global approaches to large-scale reform and learn from other places. This book provides readers (e.g., leaders at all levels, students of educational reform, policy makers) with a powerful tool for standing outside their own particular context and understanding the fundamental issues related to educational reform, not only to move the collective knowledge base forward but to learn from one another and use this knowledge to shape current leadership decisions and actions.

Reading this book has stimulated my thinking and raised a number of questions that I leave with you as you read it—questions that I found myself asking as I considered the leadership issues associated with standards-based reform. As you read each chapter you might want to consider:

- What is the prevailing orientation toward accountability in this country?
- What does the word “standards” mean in this country?
- How is assessment used for educational reform in this country?
- What influence have these assumptions and policy decisions had on the role of leaders at different levels (i.e., schools, districts, states/provinces, and national governments)?
- What are the implications from this comparative analysis for leaders at different levels in your country to consider?

I am sure you will find this book as interesting and challenging as I have—a gem that pushes your thinking and does not allow readers to remain neutral.

Lorna M. Earl, Ph.D.
Director, Aporia Consulting Ltd.
and President of the International Congress
of School Effectiveness and School Improvement (ICSEI)

Acknowledgments

First, and foremost, I would like to thank each of the international contributors for the research and insights they provided. My hope is that their work will inform research, policy, and practice outside their particular educational contexts and ultimately improve school leadership.

I would also like to acknowledge the series editor, Dr. Ken Leithwood, who provided support and advice during the various stages of the writing process. I was fortunate to have guidance from such an esteemed scholar and noted expert in educational leadership.

Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, and now colleague, Dr. Lorna Earl for her willingness to engage in this work. Dr. Earl understands the critical issues affecting the international community and is an exceptional communicator—for both academic and school-based audiences. The latter is a rare quality and one that is essential if research is to inform practice.

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About the Editor

Dr. Louis Volante is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. His research focuses on assessment policy and practice, evaluation of large-scale reform, comparative and international education, and educational program evaluation. He recently completed a longitudinal project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which examined the influence of policy contexts on school leadership and teacher assessment. His research has appeared in *Policy Futures in Education*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Assessment in Education*, *Assessment Matters*, *Journal of Educational Thought*, *Action in Teacher Education*, *Canadian Journal of Education*, and the *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* among other scholarly journals. Professor Volante is a past recipient (with Dr. Lorna Earl) of the R.W.B. Jackson Award for the most outstanding English language journal article from the Canadian Educational Researchers' Association. He recently served on the Ontario Education Research Panel to help develop research priorities for the provincial education system.

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Dr. Esther Care entered the academy after a successful path working in secondary education, mental health, and human resources over a 15 year period. Her lecturing career has been focused on differential psychology, multivariate statistics, and assessment in education. Her research interests fall broadly within the area of educational psychology and assessment and have been sustained through the common theme of factors influencing educational development and achievement. Esther's applied approach to the use of quantitative methods both for research and in practice has enabled many postgraduate and doctoral students to see the relevance and effectiveness of using this approach to evaluate practice as well as academic literature. Together with Professor Patrick Griffin she has extended this approach in working with teachers to interpret assessment data for enhancing student learning and was a coinvestigator in the development of the leadership framework for school Principals in Victoria, Australia. The current work in helping teachers use data to make instructional decisions brings together skills developed from teaching in the secondary education sector, research in schools, large-scale testing in educational psychology practice, and specific expertise in testing and scale development. Esther publishes both in Australia and internationally, and has focused on the development and measurement of interests, on cross-cultural factors influencing educational outcomes such as literacy, and on assessment of those educational outcomes. Of specific

relevance to working with the teaching and academic communities, Esther's interest in the identification of the contribution of nonverbal abilities to higher order thinking and problem solving has interesting implications for the development of skills essential for successful navigation through the twenty-first century.

Dr. Lorna Earl is a Director of Aporia Consulting Ltd. and a retired Associate Professor from the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. She is currently the president of the International Congress of School Effectiveness and School Improvement and an adjunct Professor at the University of Auckland. She was the first Director of Assessment for the Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office, and she has been a researcher and research director in school districts for over 20 years. Dr. Earl holds a doctorate in Epidemiology and Biostatistics as well as degrees in education and psychology. Throughout her career, Dr. Earl has concentrated her efforts on policy and program evaluations as a vehicle to enhance learning for pupils and for organizations. She has concentrated her efforts on issues related to evaluation of large-scale reform and assessment (large scale and classroom) in many venues around the world.

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These interests have allowed him to publish research in both national and international journals considering the uses of data for supporting educational decisions, specifically teacher practices and school policies. Dr. Klinger continues to explore the changing assessment culture surrounding large-scale testing and the impact of such testing programs. Much of the work published by Dr. Klinger uses Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) to explore those student and school-level factors associated with differing educational outcomes for students.

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