

## **International Perspectives on Developing Educational Leaders**

**Jacky Lumby**

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### **Challenging Narcissism**

This paper has two starting points; first, the belief that education is a significant global phenomenon in terms of the resource it consumes and in its contribution to the economic and social well-being of societies world wide. Primary and secondary schools provide education for approximately 1.5 billion children and employ around 50 million teachers. About four per cent of the sum of global gross national product is expended on education (Foskett & Lumby, 2003). The development of leaders of education is therefore a critical global challenge. The second starting point is a belief that given that education is indeed a global enterprise, the necessity for all those who have responsibility for shaping it to do so with a perspective that comprehends the place of their organisation within the global enterprise. There are resulting implications for how leaders model a stance as citizens of the world and not just of their local community or state. The paper explores the pressures urging a more than local outlook, and what the concept of an international perspective might mean.

## Globalisation

Globalisation is a frequently cited pressure towards a wider perspective that is world wide. The term is of course highly contested and used in multiple ways to indicate both positive and negative flows of power, culture and commerce (Ohmae, 2000; Rosenberg, 2000). Levin unpacks the multiple meanings in the term:

Globalization is a multi-dimensional term. It suggests a condition: the world as a single place. It is viewed as a process: the linking of localities, separated by great distances and intensifying relations between these localities. Globalization is also implicitly connected to international economies, as in the concept of a world economy; and to international relations or politics, as in the concept of global politics; and to culture, as in the concept of global culture. Furthermore, the term *global* is used as an adjective for both singular and plural nouns, suggesting that there are multiple economies, political systems, and cultures globally as well as a single integrative economy, political system, and culture.

(Levin, 2001, p 8)

The final part of Levin's definition indicates the tension implicit in the term globalisation, as individuals, organisations and societies attempt to find accommodation between values, culture and practice which are indigenous and something approaching a unified global ubiquitous and homogenised set of values, culture and practice. Burbules & Torres indicate something of the challenges that face educators in considering the existence, nature and impact of the concept:

How can globalization be defined? Is globalization "real" or merely an ideology? If globalization is an inexorable trend how does this affect the political economy of countries and, in turn, their culture and education? How are moves towards economic restructuring affecting educational systems worldwide? Is there an international educational organisation and agenda that could create a new hegemony in curriculum, instruction, and pedagogical practices, in general, as well as in policies concerning school financing, research, and evaluation?

(Burbules & Torres, 2000, p. 4)

Burbules & Torres (2000) highlight the positives in a more uniform practice, which potentially could delete to some extent the inequities in the experience of education of children throughout the world. If there were agreement, for example, on minimum resource levels, or what makes excellent pedagogy, or what kind of attainment might be the target for learners throughout the world, this might be interpreted as a pressure underpinning attempts to achieve greater equity and social justice. Generally, such a view is not accepted, and globalization is frequently interpreted negatively, as resulting in the 'McDonaldisation' of education and in world wide trends which are inimical to the professional values of educators. While resistance is understandable in the face of the inappropriate imposition of exogenous culture, to the detriment of the unique individuality of societies, it may also in part be a reflection of the historic predilection of individuals and societies to adopt an in group bias in seeing their own as preferable and superior and what is elsewhere as both irrelevant and inferior. Protection of local individuality may be in part reflective of tendencies towards xenophobia.

Such an orientation is evident in the attitude of those who research and develop leadership and management. The current orientation of educational leaders and those that research

and develop them is widely believed to be circumscribed. For decades, various commentators have noted what Walker (1984) termed the narcissism of those researching and developing people and organisations. Most research adopts a firmly national perspective (Hills, 1983; Crisci & Tutela, 1987; Hoy, 1996). While it is appropriate to link values, practice and the development of practice to the local context, to do so without placing them within the global enterprise of education diminishes the role of leaders, renders it inward-looking and unlikely to fit staff and learners to take their place within a globalised world. A wider orientation suggests the necessity to place the school, college or university on a worldwide stage. However, globalizing pressures demand much more than this. Increasingly each education organisation reflects a diverse community, comprising children and young people with ties not only to the local, but also to transworld communities enmeshed by religion or nation of origin. Scholte (2000, p. 170-171) speaks of ethno-nations and the diasporas of 'global tribes' (Kotkin, 1992). An assumption of the pre-eminence of the local avoids engagement with the difficulty of adjudicating what is local. When increasingly children and young people in a single class reflect multiple cultures, religions and ethnic origins, an orientation which recognises that the local is but a reflection of the global is more likely to model what it means to learn, to be a citizen and to function in a diverse society.

### **Acculturation and an international stance**

There are profound barriers to any individual leader moving beyond a focus on the local, leaving aside for the moment the fact that a discernible and coherent 'local' maybe a chimera (Lumby with Coleman, 2007). One such is the tendency of all human beings to react with anxiety and defensiveness to all those whom they consider to be 'other'. Gudykunst (1995) suggests that habitually we avoided confronting those who we deem to be strangers,

and when faced with an unavoidable encounter, tend to reach quickly for stereotypes. The latter are generalised and often false assumptions about a group and about an individual's membership of a group (Stone & Colella, 1996). He argues for the necessity to become mindful, that is, consciously to begin to adopt attitudes which reject assumptions about individuals and groups, and to process information about them more accurately. Such a state is challenging given the deeply rooted nature of psychological self protection mechanisms of distrust of all that is different. Becoming mindful implies ongoing and persistent efforts to counter habituated thinking. A second perspective on the challenges facing leaders who wish to adopt an international stance is acculturation. Adler argues that the way we view the world is constrained in a number of ways by culture:

Perceptual patterns are neither innate nor absolute. They are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent and inaccurate.

- Perception is ***selective***. At any one time there are too many stimuli in the environment for us to observe. Therefore we screen out most of what we see, hear, taste, and feel. We screen out the overload and allow only selected information through our perceptual screen to our conscious mind.
- Perceptual patterns are ***learned***. We are not born seeing the world in a particular way. Our experience teaches us to perceive the world in certain ways.
- Perception is ***culturally determined***. We learn to see the world in a certain way based on our cultural background.
- Perception tends to remain ***consistent***. Once we see something in a particular way, we continue to see it in that way.
- Perception is ***inaccurate***. We see things that do not exist and do not see things that do exist. Our background, values, interests, and culture act as filters and

lead us to distort, block, and even create what we chose to see and hear. We perceive what we expect to perceive. We perceive things according to what we have been trained to see, according to our cultural map.

(Adler, 1997, pp. 71-72)

Adler is suggesting that our capacity to learn is impeded by the dominance of patterns of seeing and knowing which are accrued by a lifetime's acculturation. It is not that we do not wish to see what challenges our experience, but that we cannot. The metaphor of spectacles is useful. If our seeing has been dependant on using spectacles which offer a particular colour to the world, setting them aside may leave us blind, or at best deeply confused by what we see. The results of acculturation and a habitual adoption of stereotypes may be a profound limitation of researchers, practitioners and those who develop leaders to the extent that their interface with the values, culture and preferences not only of those who lead schools in locations far distant from their own, but within their own organisation is tenuous and potentially negative.

### **Adopting an international stance**

How then might leaders and those that develop them consider the various facets of adopting an international stance? First might be, at a personal level and embedded within development programmes, consideration of the values which unite or divide those that lead schools and colleges. Assumptions tend to be polarised, that there is little in common between the values of say a US high-school principal and those of an African, or alternatively that because they are educators they must inevitably share the same values. Both extremes may be deceptive. Consider the words of two principals, the first from an African high-school

principal in a rural area in South Africa and the second from a female high-school principal in a US city:

There is a lack of funds .. to repair the old buildings of the school... therefore during rainy days my teachers and pupils suffer very much as the corrugated iron has big holes and rust. I have written many letters to the inspectors but the funds are helping better schools near big main roads. As I have worked here at school for 22 years as principal, riots and faction fights in the area have depressed me, as the whole of the good work that I did in my first year has gone. Hooligans, thieves, robbers have stolen doors, tables, chairs, desks and burnt valuable schoolbooks. They have killed a female teacher near the school.

(Lumby, 2003, p. 181-182)

I wondered if I could do it... if a woman could do it... if I had the guts to do it. Knowing I would be the one to walk into a volatile situation and maybe in some cases put my life on the line as opposed to somebody else's. Those things you have to think about before you become a principal, because when you become a principal, you don't have time to think about it then.

(Parkray & Hall, 1992, p. 1)

Both principles might assume that their situation and that of the other differs radically. The African principal might assume that a US high-school is much safer than his own given the level of violence that has been experienced at times in South Africa. Listening to the words of the female principal, he might understand that in fact physical danger is very much a reality for many principals within cities in the US. Equally, the American high-school principal might assume that resource levels in Africa are considerably less than in the US. While there

may be some truth in this, the words of the African principal will resonate in terms of the problems of vandalism and theft in many US schools. It is not that there are no differences between the contexts in which each works. Rather it is that the nature and degree of difference may startle by its similarity as much as its difference. An international stance which looks at experiences mindfully, with a conscious attempt to set aside acculturation may enlarge the community of educators for each leader beyond those with whom he or she comes into daily physical contact, and provide a source of strength and support in addressing issues of family and child poverty and conflict which abound throughout the world.

### **Learning from each other**

A second factor of an international stance is the role of 'confrere' (Walker & Dimmock, 2004, p. 275) that is, a relationship of mutual professional interest where one colleague learns from another. Numerous commentators have argued that the world has learned much, sometimes appropriately and sometimes inappropriately from the West and the US particularly (Dimmock, 2000; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000; Heck, 1996). Educators throughout the world have much to learn from each other, not so much in terms of learning what may be lifted and adopted within their own practice, cherry-picking what is perceived as 'good practice' from a global stage. While there may be developments which no doubt offer useful lessons of that kind, more valuable may be an enhanced understanding of the relationship between local values and practice and the context within which it is embedded. Such understanding is likely to then be transferable in terms of addressing the necessity to lead and to develop leaders within the local diverse context. The primary lesson to be learnt on a global stage is how to achieve fit in societies which are no longer homogeneous. Such a

stance is far distant from the kind of approach which sees practice elsewhere as merely curious, interesting, but largely irrelevant 'travellers tales' (Crossley & Watson, 2003, p. 12).

### **Implications for developing leaders**

Generally the suggestion to adopt an international perspective in relation to the development of leaders is met simultaneously with approbation, and with a deeply limited conceptualisation of what this means. 'International' is interpreted as international exchange visits, or consultation with internationally renowned researchers, or the adoption of Anglophone theory. While such activities no doubt have value, they remain a peripheral and tokenistic injection of alternative views unlikely to impact to any extent on the boundedness of the local. This paper has suggested something quite different. It has suggested an international stance as a primary vehicle to unsettle, to destabilise the psychological limitations of leaders who often react to the 'other' with an unconscious assumption of the superiority of indigenous practice, or alternatively, an unjustified assumption of the superiority of Western theory and practice. It is not an exotic means of demonstrating oneself to have a global reach remain while remaining firmly entrenched in habituated values, practice and culture. It is an integral part of reshaping research and development to reflect a commitment to democratic and socially just processes.

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