RESEARCH SUMMARY

School leadership in the Primary Years Programme

Summary developed by the IB Research department based on a report prepared by:

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Background

International research has consistently found that the principal's influence on students is second only to that of the teacher (Leithwood et al. 2006). Successful principals encourage the development of communities of learning, supporting a strong, mutually supportive collective service ethic. These leadership practices are common across contexts in their general form but are also highly adaptable and contingent in their specific enactment. This study explored the links between school leadership and the implementation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP). The research was conducted in six schools, with different histories of PYP use, located in six different European countries: Austria, England, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Research design

The researchers employed a mixed method, multi-perspective case-study design, using staff surveys and in-depth interviews. The research was based upon the case-study protocols for studying school leadership established and validated by the International Successful School Principals' Project (ISSPP) (Day 2010).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed primarily as a supplementary source of data to contribute to the qualitative analysis of the six case studies. The questionnaire comprised five main sections with a total of 147 items. In total, 86 questionnaires were completed by respondents across the six case-study schools.

Case-study schools

This research included case studies of leadership in six PYP schools. Table 1 provides an overview of these six school contexts. Qualitative data was collected through interviews conducted with a purposive sample of school leaders and teachers from each school. In addition, school management documentation was collected and incorporated into the analyses.

School pseudonym	Number of PYP students	Number of PYP staff	Number of interview participants		Year of authorization
			Teachers	**Leaders**	
School 1	500	27	6	4	2003
School 2	600	28	6	3	1999
School 3	200	33	12	4	1999
School 4	38	5	2	3	2012
School 5	66	11	7	2	2010
School 6	663	86	5	3	1997

Table 1. Summary of school contexts

Findings

Questionnaire results

PYP implementation

The first portion of the study examined respondents' attitudes towards the implementation and operation of the PYP within each school. Results showed very positive views of both the PYP, in general, and PYP implementation, in particular. The most positive participant responses indicated that the principals were committed to the PYP and teachers were satisfied with the opportunities for professional development. The lowest median scores related to specific aspects of the principal's role, communications with parents, and student empowerment to participate in decision-making.

The school principal

This section examined respondents' attitudes towards their school principal. The questions with the highest median scores referred to personal qualities, specifically with reference to their passion for the well-being and achievement of students, and to the strategic elements of their role, specifically in expressing high expectations of staff. The two questions with the lowest median scores referred to the work of the principal with the local community.

A key finding from this research concerns the role of the principal in developing and sharing a vision, which provides clarity with regard to the mission and goals of the school. In this study, principals were seen as "guardians" of the school culture. As one principal explained:

A curriculum is only part of the PYP. It is a mindset, a culture. It's the whole package. Although [the PYP coordinator] will look at the curriculum and make sure that the teachers are ticking the boxes … my job is the bigger vision about the school being an international-minded, inquiry-minded place …

How principals choose to undertake their work (including how they articulate a vision for the school) who they choose to appoint and how they support staff, all have an effect on the school culture and thus on the ways in which other leaders, particularly the PYP coordinator, operate and are able to implement the PYP. This strategic work can be seen as the principal's most significant contribution to the PYP.

The extent to which the principal and PYP coordinator display qualities of the IB learner profile

Responses to the final two sections of the questionnaire suggest that respondents believed that both the school principal and the PYP coordinator displayed the qualities associated with the learner profile. One of the consistent features in the analysis of the questionnaire data was that, in all schools, the PYP coordinator was perceived to display more of the characteristics of the IB learner profile than the principal. A closer analysis revealed that within this, respondents believed that PYP coordinators were more willing than principals to listen to others and were more enthusiastic about their own learning.

Case-study results

Fostering PYP values

International schools are dynamic institutions in which, for the most part, there is regular movement of parents, students and teachers in and out of the institution. Inevitably, this challenges the ability of leaders to ensure stability, continuity and quality. The leaders in every case-study school demonstrated a firm and passionate commitment to IB values. However, although their collective sense of identity and "belonging" was clearly evident, this was not always mirrored by the teachers. A number of the schools had appointed teachers with little or no experience with the PYP. Some of these teachers, because of a lack of in-depth understanding and/or a lack of opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD), were unable or unwilling to abandon their previously successful teaching practices. This has the potential to affect the strength of the communication of core PYP values to students.

Schools dealt with these issues through a range of strategies. Informally, they facilitated collaboration between teachers so that new teachers could be socialized into the working practices of the school, including the PYP. Schools also made use of formal mechanisms such as the establishment of induction programmes, which included allowing new staff to attend IB professional development as well as "in-house" training.

Continuing professional development

Many participants highlighted the importance—but relative lack—of CPD linked directly to the PYP. PYP practices are likely to improve and to be adopted consistently by teachers when there are coherent and continuing policies for induction and on-going professional development for all PYP teachers. However, the outcomes of CPD need to be put into practice. In addition to providing CPD, school leaders should also foster an environment in which teachers are encouraged to innovate, reflect upon and develop their practices.

PYP coordinator status

In all but one case, PYP coordinators were part-time leaders and were managing classroom teaching commitments alongside their coordinator responsibilities. The PYP coordinator was described as assuming a "hands-on" role.

She coordinates all our planning and does a lot of coordination of the pre-assessments and keeps us all on track. She coordinates all the information from our pre- and post-assessments. She is on hand if you want help with conceptual learning […]. She is very supportive of us and if you need help or support she is always there. (School 2, Teacher)

Inevitably, time to fulfill the needs of the role was perceived as problematic. This impacted on both their capacity to lead and their status within the schools. Often, coordinators were not members of the senior leadership team and so were not party to key strategic decision-making processes. The coordinator's appointment is a very significant one for the operation of the PYP. The findings from this study highlight the importance of not only identifying the right person for the role, but also of ensuring that they have leadership authority and support within their school.

Collaboration between the PYP coordinator and the principal

Another recurring theme in this examination of the links between school leadership and the operation of the PYP concerned the differing leadership roles of the school principal and the PYP coordinator (only one school combined both roles). Whereas the PYP coordinator had responsibility for establishing operational procedures for planning and implementing the PYP, the principal's position was to oversee implementation and to ensure that the culture of the school was consistent with the principles and goals of the PYP. The PYP coordinator was generally seen as being more directly involved in the work of teachers while the school principal was perceived as being responsible for the overarching strategic elements of leadership. How these two roles collaborate is a significant issue for schools that adopt the PYP.

Managing multiple roles: Small-school constraints

Many of the challenges of leadership were related to the constraints associated with being a small school with recent staffing changes. A clear message that emerged from the study was that the PYP coordinator role was one requiring dedicated time and a high status. One PYP coordinator described the frustrations of having to cover so many roles and the impact this has on him.

I do find it sometimes overwhelming, the number of responsibilities that I personally have. Sometimes I feel like there are too many things and I'm distracted and can't focus on one thing. Other people might handle that differently or better. So, in that sense, I find it stressful sometimes." (School 5, PYP coordinator)

The leadership of small schools creates something of a challenge to all staff members. In leadership terms, this requires people to take on multiple roles, but such intensity and diversity can also result in high staff turnover. Recruiting and retaining teachers in these circumstances is likely to remain a challenge.

Developing parental understanding

Questionnaire respondents suggested that one of the important roles of the principal was to liaise with parents; however, this was also an aspect of their practice that appeared to be less successful than others. As a result of the transient international population in many schools, not all parents or students had prior experience with the IB, and not all were convinced of its value.

All schools in some way tried, and often succeeded, in sustaining dialogue with parents about their children's development and progress through the programme. This occurred through structured occasions, such as regular meetings between teachers and parents, and at the concluding presentation of the PYP exhibition. It occurred, also, through dialogue between parents and staff at the beginning and the end of the day. School 3, for example, had established an informal start to the school day to facilitate this kind of interaction. There were also examples of offering an "induction" to the PYP for parents. This provided some basic information about the programme and allowed for discussion of questions or concerns.

Implications for future practice

Based on the study, the researchers identified a number of implications for future practice. A selection of these findings are presented below.

Principals' values and practices

- The kind of structures and cultures established by the principal are likely to have positive or negative effects on the quality, effectiveness and practices of the PYP coordinator.

- Unless principals understand the concepts, values and practices of the PYP, its development within the school is less likely to be accelerated.

Reducing within school variation

- Where recruitment practices are better able to attract experienced PYP teachers, there is likely to be less variation in PYP teaching practices.

Ensuring fidelity with PYP values

- Schools in which principals have themselves had experience with teaching the PYP are more likely to model PYP values and practices.

PYP coordinator status and time to lead

- The success of the PYP is likely to be enhanced when the PYP coordinator is part of a core senior leadership team and is provided with appropriate "time to lead" the induction and CPD of PYP teachers.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

- PYP practices are likely to improve and be adopted consistently by teachers when there are consistent CPD policies for all PYP teachers.

References

Day, C. 2010. *Conducting research on successful school principals: Associate member's guide*. Nottingham, UK. University of Nottingham.

Leithwood, K, Day, C, Sammons, P, Harris, A and Hopkins, D. 2006. *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Nottingham, UK. National College for School Leadership.