Introduction and Overview

As the title signifies, our aim in writing this book is to explore the relationships between school leadership and culture. Both concepts have proven difficult to define, despite both promulgating a wealth of past and present literature. However, the voluminous writing on both educational leadership and culture has mainly focused on each as separate entities, with relatively little consideration to their interrelationship. It is this interrelationship between leadership and culture that is the focus of this book.

Our aim is to begin to redress this situation. Our research and publications over the past ten years have been focused primarily on studying educational leadership from a cultural and cross-cultural perspective. Our interest in this aspect of leadership emanates from the fact that we were Westerners living and working in a Chinese city (Hong Kong). At first hand we became aware of important and significant differences in people's expectations and in how things were done in society and its organizations. Equally, when it came to improving practice in those organizations, we realized a high dependency in that environment on Anglo-American ideas, policies and practices that often seemed to be misapplied and adopted unquestioningly in settings that were very different from those in which they originated. This concerned us.

Educational leadership is a socially bounded process. It is subject to the cultural traditions and values of the society in which it is exercised. In this it is no different from other social processes. It thus manifests itself in different ways in different settings. In this sense it is remarkable that many current debates in educational leadership continue to be couched in general or universal terms without taking into account the particularities of the local cultural context that influences and shapes. A good example is the current somewhat sterile and overly generalized debate taking place around the concept of 'distributed' leadership, most of which focuses on clarification of the concept and its wholesale advocacy, irrespective of context or culture. Yet, the relevance and the form of the concept should be seriously questioned, especially in those societies whose cultural and power relations assume a totally different configuration from more egalitarian 'Western' countries. Even for schools within the same societal culture, their conditions may be so diverse that factors such as recent problematic history, size, characteristics and functions render statements about the appropriateness of 'distributed' leadership highly questionable.

This book aims to explore and highlight the cultural and contextual basis of leadership. It argues against assumptions underpinning much of the current

leadership literature that would have us believe in the universalistic nature of leadership. It holds that leadership studies are needed that identify the particularity and diversity of cultural and contextual conditions within which leadership takes place. While acknowledging the importance of generic and universal leadership characteristics, it argues that previous studies have ignored the particularities and contextual diversity of leadership, and it is this aspect that needs redressing. It challenges the universalistic nature of much that is written about leadership, especially from a 'Western' perspective. It is highly suspicious of Western ideas, theories and frameworks applied to non-Western settings as means of understanding leadership. Rather, it champions the cause of developing authentic leadership studies grounded empirically in the distinct societal and cultural conditions of particular societies and their organizations.

Another way of making the point is that, as we have documented elsewhere (Dimmock and Walker, 1998a; 1998b), far too much of the current educational leadership literature is ethnocentric and written from a monocultural standpoint. This phenomenon not only leads to the overgeneralized nature of claims and applications; it also means that opportunities to learn about leadership, a process that can enhance the understanding of leadership in one's own culture in other societies, are lost.

We freely acknowledge that both of the core concepts of the book – leadership and culture – are contested and difficult to define, in education, as elsewhere. Hence it is a further aim of the book to attempt to bring some further clarification and definition to these hitherto loosely defined terms.

Our research agenda to date has emphasized two thrusts within the nexus of societal culture and leadership. As elaborated below, the first concerns societal cultures per se and their relationship with leadership and schooling; the second relates to the leadership of multi-ethnic schools, and the mix of different societal cultures within the same organization and community.

Connection between societal cultures and multi-ethnic schools

When we discuss societal cultures per se, we tend to look at the interrelationship between particular societal cultures and schooling and educational leadership within their defined geopolitical boundaries. However, when attention shifts to multi-ethnic schools, the focus changes to the interrelationships between a mix of societal cultures within particular schools. These interrelationships refer, on the one hand, to the mix and juxtaposition of different societal cultures forming the school and its community, and on the other, schooling and educational leadership. Furthermore, this interaction and the relationships between the different cultural groups within multi-ethnic school communities are invariably complex and variable. For example, the relationship is often one of coexistence between a prevailing culture and minority cultures. The complexity to which

we refer may apply to a predominant culture associated with an indigenous group and one or more minority cultures. Alternatively the situation might be reversed, that is, the so-called minority cultures paradoxically become the predominant influence in a particular school community.

While the previous paragraph clarifies the shift in focus from societal cultures to multi-ethnic school communities, the process by which we link the two remains unexplained. Accordingly, we set out below the steps in our research agenda in moving between and linking up the twin thrusts of, first, leadership and societal cultures, and, secondly, the leadership of multi-ethnic schools.

1 Our agenda to date has been to investigate how particular societal cultures influence schooling and school leadership in their indigenous settings. This work has focused on how particular societal cultures influence schools and leadership in the same geopolitical area. An example would be how the Hong Kong Chinese culture influences understandings and behaviours in Hong Kong schools. Much of our work over the past few years has drawn attention to the relative neglect of such work and to its importance in furthering the knowledge base in educational leadership. In our opinion, this remains a significant avenue of research deserving of further development.
2 Increasing mobility and migration characterizing the world today inevitably results in people from different societal cultures forming communities within the same geopolitical areas. These multi-ethnic communities give rise to multi-ethnic schools.
3 Multi-ethnic schools themselves comprise complex and varied relationships, depending on the composition of, and relative influences among, the different ethnic groups and between them, and what is seen as the indigenous group.

Three main propositions

Threading through the book are three central propositions. These are presented as follows. First, leadership is a culturally and contextually bounded process that means it is inextricably intertwined with its larger environment – at levels ranging from the organizational, to local community through to larger society. Writers and practitioners who continue to ignore this fact fail to appreciate the conceptual and practical complexity of leadership and invariably present a piecemeal picture at best.

Second, the cultural influence on leadership is multidimensional, often difficult to discern, subtle and easy to overlook – to the point that it is underplayed by many, and even dismissed and ignored by some. Yet it is no less important for that. Its true recognition by researchers and practitioners often involves them in 'mining deep' to find it.

Third, we contend that recognizing the nexus between leadership on the one hand, and cultural and contextual influences on the other, can lead to improvement in its practice. For example, we argue that given the multi-ethnic nature of schools around the world, leaders nowadays shoulder responsibility for shaping their organizations in ways that value and integrate heterogeneous groups into successful learning communities for all. The successful leadership of such communities calls for very specific knowledge and skills attuned to ethnicity and multiculturalism. More generally, according to our argument, improving leadership practice and effectiveness involves a more integral and harmonious fit between leadership per se and the particular characteristics and requirements of the context with which it interacts and within which it is exercised. Among a host of considerations that need to be taken into account in this respect, 'distributed' leadership may need to assume a very specific form, and may not even be a priority.

Target readership

The book has been written with a wide audience in mind. To begin with, every society has educational leaders and its own culture(s). We have written the book for broad appeal across a wide and diverse spectrum of cultures – including those grouped and labelled as Western and Asian. We have combined theoretical, conceptual and research-based ideas with very practical material. Hence, the ideas and issues discussed will be of relevance and appeal to professionals in education – practitioners and academics alike. As stated above, one of our aims is to provide a better understanding of why leadership assumes the form it does, and how it is shaped by, and differs according to, context and culture. We intend the book to enable practitioner-leaders to understand their own contexts better, while appreciating the contextual differences with their counterparts elsewhere.

School principals and leaders at all levels – including middle managers and teachers – will find substantial sections of the book helpful to their practice. Many such practitioners may also be studying for postgraduate degrees and/or professional qualifications, such as leadership training programmes aimed at preparing for, or improving, the principalship. If so, then this book contains much that will be of assistance in furthering understanding of leadership and placing it in context. In this regard, because a key aim is the consideration of leadership in its cultural context, the book is of relevance for practitioners wherever they happen to be – whether in Asia, the UK and Europe, the USA and North America or Australia.

Lastly, the book will be of interest to academics engaged in lecturing, course development and researching who are increasingly looking for references and ideas to extend knowledge of leadership beyond their immediate environments.

This book will help them to gain an understanding of their local practice and, moreover, to place it within a wider, international setting.

Structure of the book

In keeping with the book's central theme, each of the 12 chapters addresses a key aspect of school leadership from a specifically cultural viewpoint. Chapter 1 provides a backdrop by juxtaposing the ubiquitous trend of conformity through globalization with the equally compelling influence of diversity represented by societal cultures. The rather contradictory tensions that both of these present to educational leadership are noted. In Chapter 2, we outline a framework within which to map and locate a systematic approach to leadership and culture. We argue the need for such frameworks in attempting to bring clarity, rigour and systematization to culturally based studies of leadership. Some of the present deficiencies in studying leadership from a cultural perspective are acknowledged in Chapter 3. Many of these are caused by the infancy of the area as a field of study, and prompt a sketching of the problems and possibilities of applying research methodologies as the field develops.

Our approach to leadership engages culture at two levels – societal and organizational. Much of the book centres on the former, but in Chapter 4, we address the theme of leadership and organizational culture, mapping and explaining a model by which to gauge and understand the relationship between leadership and culture. We acknowledge that more has been written about organizational culture and educational leadership than about culture in its other manifestations. Yet, despite this, the symbiotic relationship between leadership and organizational culture remains ambivalent and difficult to chart. In Chapter 5 we turn attention to the wider societal context, and major comparisons and contrasts between Asian and North American societies in terms of family, home, socializing and parenting influences. Many of these differences provide a backcloth against which to understand significant diversity in school leadership behaviour and priorities.

Chapters 6 to 9 address key aspects involved in leading and managing schools. Chapter 6 specifically argues for a particular new approach to strategic leadership in schools – one that encompasses culture as part of the organization's future design. Chapter 7 focuses on the important axis between teaching and learning, and leadership, a relationship increasingly accepted as vital in achieving school improvement. However, little credence hitherto has been given to the cultural aspect. For example, learning, teaching and leadership are all activities and processes that are culturally influenced. They will thus reflect differences (and similarities) around the world and, often, differences within schools in the same society. In Chapter 8 we approach the leadership and management of staff from a cross-cultural perspective. Chapter 9 continues the

theme of approaching human resource management from a cultural perspective
by focusing on appraisal. Both Chapters 8 and 9 argue the danger of overgener-
alizing about human resource management when cultural differences come
into play. The cultural differences to which we refer may be found between
schools in different societies, and even within schools in the same society.

In Chapter 10 we move the discussion forward by considering leader reactions
and responses to dilemma situations. It is our belief that we often learn most
about cultural influence on leaders when they find themselves in situations of
extreme difficulty. At such times there is a tendency to revert to basic cultural
values, and these seem to differ cross-culturally. The focus on culture shifts in
Chapter 11; here, we discuss cultural difference within multi-ethnic schools and
the implications this phenomenon has for their leadership. Besides the fact that
such schools are increasing in number, it is somewhat surprising that relatively
little attention has been devoted to their leadership. Finally, in Chapter 12 we
summarize key points from the book, and point the way to possible future devel-
opments in leadership as a field of study and practice that necessarily embraces
culture in one guise or another.