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## Leadership and Context connectivity: Merging Two Forces for Sustainable School Improvement

### Abstract

School improvement is admittedly the main business of school leadership. However, while there is agreement on the importance of school improvement, sustaining this improvement remains a challenge. The challenge seems to lie in the disconnection between the leader and the context in which the school operates. This chapter presents contextual intelligent leadership as a new type of leadership that can create a link between context and improvement to ensure sustainability.

Keywords: contextual intelligence, school improvement, leadership, student learning, sustainability

### Introduction

It has now become a universally accepted fact that school leadership cannot be divorced from the context in which it operates. In other words, leadership cannot function in a vacuum, as Fiedler (1967) once observed. In the same manner, Bezzina and Vedoni (2006, p. 7) have remarked that for leadership to be meaningful to people's lives, it should be understood within a broader context. It is no wonder, therefore, that quite a significant number of studies across various disciplines present the common view that leadership is context-bound (Foley, 2013). In a randomly selected literature review on leadership and school improvement covering at least three decades (Bennie & Nanus, 1985; Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2006), the concept of *context* featured prominently to give a substantial grounding for the existence of a close connection between leadership and context. This leadership-context connectivity appears to underpin any theoretical and practical discourse on leadership, regardless of whether such a discourse is on leadership perspectives, functions or styles. For instance, the manifest shift in leadership research over the years from the classical leadership perspectives (Bass, 1985; Gorton, Alson & Snowden, 2007) to the contemporary leadership perspectives (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009) illustrates sufficiently just how increasingly complex leadership has become over space and time – both of which define context. Just as leadership is recognised as complex and dynamic (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007), so is context (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). The latter, as studied specifically in an organisation such as the school, is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Considering the unique nature of school leadership and context and the link between them, this chapter argues for a contextual intelligent school leadership. It begins with the assumption that the nature of the link between context and leadership *determines* sustainable school improvement to the conclusion that a *contextual intelligent school leadership* is critical for sustainable school improvement.

## **Theoretical grounding: Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence**

To understand how the connection between school leadership and context contributes to sustainable school improvement, reference is here made to the *Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence*, rooted in psychology and popularised as Contextual Intelligence Theory by its proponents. Based on Sternberg's (1985) work, the theory presents contextual intelligence as 'the ability to influence anybody, in any place, at any time' (Kutz, 2015, p. 11). According to Sternberg (2005, p. 189), a successfully intelligent individual demonstrates the ability to set goals, capitalize on strengths to adapt to, shape and select environments through analytic, creative and practical abilities. Relating the theory to leadership, Kutz (2008, p. 5) presents contextual intelligence as the ability to 'recognize and diagnose the plethora of contextual factors' in a given situation and adjust one's behaviour to influence the situation. It includes the combined knowledge of technical skills and practical know-how. In the nutshell, *contextual intelligence* involves the application of common sense to a situation (Wagner, 1987). More intelligent individuals, according to the theory, have better chances of fitting into an environment than a less intelligent individual (Bray & Kehle, 2011), because they can relate to their environment through selection, adaptation, and reshaping (Sternberg, 2005). Of fundamental importance to learn from this theory is that the world is there and changing with the passage of time and how to react to or act upon the change is an individual's choice.

## **What shapes contemporary school context?**

The world is changing and so is the context in which school and its leadership interact. This context is shaped by many internal and external factors which influence the leader's behaviour and to which the leader must adapt. Among dominant contextual factors with influence on students' learning and achievements are the school's climatic conditions *school safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and organisational structure* (Bascia, 2014). External factors include *technological advances, socio-economic conditions, globalisation and accountability systems*.

## **Review of literature on context-leadership connectivity**

There are as many various perspectives on school leadership as there are contexts from which such perspectives are drawn. However, the review of literature on school leadership and context show two recurrent themes, namely: a) leadership as context-bound process; and b) school context as complex and dynamic.

There is a symbiotic relationship between context and school leadership. While the school context influences leadership, leadership shapes the school context. For instance, while the situation in which leaders work influences their behaviour, approaches, practices and style (Bolden et al., 2003), school leaders restructure the context to develop followers (Keller, 2006). Their success in this regard depends on how context-responsive they are. For instance, Reed and Swaminathan (2014) have found that contextually responsive school leaders tend to use a multiplicity of

context-based best practices to solve complex problems, rather than relying on a single best practice.

As a subsystem of a broader education system, a school constitutes a complex and dynamic context (Uhl-Bin et al., 2007). Considering the various processes, people, structures, resources, objectives and activities involved within the school, its context is undeniably complex. Snyder (2013, p. 8) defines *the complex* as “a space of constant flux and unpredictability.” The dynamic nature of the school context derives from the fact that it involves a mix of interactions between people, their work (leading, teaching and learning), their actions (what they think, decide and do) and their environment (situation).

### **Why context matters for school leadership**

The academic importance of context to school leadership can be presented in two prominent ways, namely, its influence on student learning and on leadership and teaching practice. These ways collectively provide a strong case for contextual intelligence.

#### *Context influences student learning*

There is a tight link between student learning and the conditions under which students learn. Schools as complex and dynamic organisations are perceived as having an influence on student learning and outcomes (Deakin Crick et al., 2013). Among dominant contextual factors with influence on students’ learning and achievements are the school climatic conditions such as *school safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and organisational structures* (Bascia, 2014). Notable examples are: a) the existence of a positive relationship between learning outcomes and the physical environment in which teaching and learning take place (Bullock, 2007); b) students’ active engagement emerging from their perceptions of a supportive school environment (Wang & Eccles, 2013); and c) the influence of scheduling of instructional time on student learning and achievement (Marcotte & Hemelt, 2008).

#### *Context influences practice (leadership and instruction)*

The school’s context informs instructional and school leadership practices (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). For example, while contextual variables tend to shape the principal’s instructional leadership in a school (Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996), performance of people like teachers is enhanced by the work environment that builds their capacity and motivation (Day et al., 2011).

### **Sustaining school improvement through contextual intelligence**

Sustainable school improvement is undeniably a challenging concept and its challenging nature can be described in two ways. First, there is no universally accepted definition of *school improvement* (Stinger, 2013). Its definition depends on context (place and time). Second, while many school leaders focus on improvement, sustaining such improvement is their main challenge (Muijs et al., 2004). A school may be seen as effective today but fail to move to the next level. This is because sustainability is a continuous process (Crowther, 2011), and not a once-off event.

These two main challenges are sufficient to make a strong case for a contextual intelligent school leadership.

### **Applying contextual intelligence to sustainable school improvement**

Applying contextual intelligence theory in schools can best be described by referring to the theory of core leadership practices (Leithwood, 2006), which presents leadership as shaped by four main practices, namely, *setting direction*, *developing people*, *redesigning the organization* and *managing the instructions (teaching and learning) program*. These cross-contextual practices have implications for sustainable improvement.

#### *Creating a sense of purpose*

One of the core functions of school leadership is *to set direction* and to motivate people to accompany (rather than follow) the leader in following the direction. A contextually intelligent school leader understands that though today's school situation might be better than yesterday, the best possible situation still lies ahead and needs to be pursued by the entire school community. Equipped with this understanding, a contextually intelligent leader ensures that there is a collective ownership of what matters to move the school forward, namely, norms, beliefs, values, goals and vision and that there is a sense of shared moral purpose. A widely shared moral purpose, particularly when entrenched within a shared commitment to what the school cherishes, has the potential to move towards sustainability (Andrews & Lewis, 2004). A contextually intelligent leader encourages people to see the brighter future and creates a sense of urgency for everyone to shift from the present situation to the new one.

#### *Developing people*

It is a basic function of school leadership to develop people working in the school. This function aligns with the contextual intelligence theory in that for the school leaders to develop their staff members successfully, they need to possess an in-depth knowledge of their past conditions (experiences), their current situation (capabilities, attitudes, concerns and motivations) and their preferred future (high expectations). Such knowledge is an essential part of the infrastructure needed for building their collective capacity for sustainable improvement. Building capacity also involves empowerment and continued support for the entire staff – releasing their hidden energy to take risks in exploring and seeking innovative ways of improving student performance and achievement. Emphasis on collective capacity building stems from the fact that focusing on building the capacity of individual teachers, as research has found (DuFour & Marzano, 2011), does not improve schools. For capacity to generate improvement its scale needs to be widened to include everyone involved in the whole business of moving the school forward. Collective capacity building is linked to teachers' motivation and the situation in which they work. To strengthen the link between motivation, capacity and the working (teaching and learning) environment, developing positive and trusting relationship with the staff.

### *Focusing on the core business of schooling*

There is now a general agreement that sustaining focus on the core business of schooling (teaching and learning) is the key function of school leadership (Robinson, 2010). Sustaining focus on this core business is enabled by the leader's sensitivity to the context in which the business is conducted. A contextually intelligent school leader studies the complex context in which the core business of schooling takes place and *acts smart*. Being smart means being sensitive to the context of change as it relates to the business and taking appropriate action. Such action involves continuously adjusting the key practices of instruction, learning and leadership to fit the situation and its dynamics.

### *Restructuring the organization*

Successful school leaders reshape the conditions under which teaching and learning takes place (Day et al., 2011). This augers with the contextual intelligence theory according to which a person achieves success through a balanced approach to their environment. Such an approach involves preparing people for adaption to new contextual developments, *selecting* the best innovations the new developments offer to improve or *shape* the current school conditions (culture and climate).

## **Conclusion**

Focusing on school improvement without sufficient consideration given to the link between leadership and context to ensure sustainability will not assist schools to succeed all the time. In this chapter a case for emphasising contextual leadership as providing the link between the school context and student learning is made. While school improvement and school context are important, connecting them in such a manner that they will ensure sustainability requires a new approach to school leadership, namely, contextual intelligent school leadership.

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