

Review

# Successful School Leadership in New Zealand: A Scoping Review

Michalis Constantinides 

School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK; michalis.constantinides@glasgow.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This article examines the available evidence on what it means to be a successful school leader within the current educational landscape in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It provides a nuanced understanding of common success factors and the contribution of the school principal's leadership to that success in context. A set of factors that shaped their behaviour and actions is presented that draws attention to cultural relationships and contextual awareness, emphasising not only students' academic success, but also students' cultures as vehicles for learning and social change. Findings from this article provide insights into how successful school leaders consider their entire school as a complex system with interconnected parts and build social infrastructures that nurture partnerships with multiple stakeholders.

**Keywords:** successful school leadership; New Zealand; ISSPP

## 1. Introduction

As the professional and organisational challenges facing school leaders become increasingly complex, their role features higher levels of ambiguity and uncertainty in achieving desired outcomes for all. This is because the societal and institutional forces impacting the environment in which they work can shape the development and interpretation of their policies and reforms. Yet, how leaders navigate complex and ambiguous environmental expectations (e.g., regulations from government bodies, stakeholder needs, professional or societal norms), depends on how they make sense of their role and how they construct, make meaning, and negotiate tensions and contradictions to respond to dilemmas that arise in their environment. In the context of New Zealand, also known by its Māori name as Aotearoa, the 'Land of the Long White Cloud', schools enjoy high levels of autonomy, elements of which involve increased decision-making about school improvement processes by the principals. The bicultural nature of the New Zealand education system requires school leaders to be relationally and culturally responsive to diversity and social justice by recognising their commitment to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), the founding document of the country written and signed in 1840 as a means of partnership between the Māori and the government (represented by the Crown) of New Zealand, in their practices. Yet, disparities between the achievement levels of indigenous Māori students and Pākehā students (Aotearoa New Zealand citizens of European ancestry) continue to be of concern. Students' performance in the OECD/PISA rankings has been steadily declining, and while still above the OECD average, Māori and Pasifika students score lower than the average OECD level of achievement (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018).

The New Zealand education system is undergoing major systemic reforms, with new initiatives aimed at addressing inequities and challenges in academic achievement. These new initiatives are intended to provide support and guidance for educators, school governors, and parents and allow schools to be more responsive to the communities they serve [1]. Central to their design is the improvement of educational outcomes for Māori and Pacific students and young people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. The role of



**Citation:** Constantinides, M. Successful School Leadership in New Zealand: A Scoping Review. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 1189. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13121189>

Academic Editors: Jingping Sun and Christopher Day

Received: 15 June 2023

Revised: 25 October 2023

Accepted: 22 November 2023

Published: 26 November 2023



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educational leadership and, more specifically, that of the principal, has been critical in challenging and addressing inequitable discourses, acting as advocate for those whose voices are not always represented and providing equal opportunities for all. In 2018, a new leadership capability framework was published by the Education Council | Mātautu Aotearoa, providing guidelines for leadership development through a set of core capabilities [2]. This document was supplemented with the Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession of Aotearoa New Zealand (2018) to include, “the growth and development of leadership capability for all registered teachers across English medium and Māori medium settings in New Zealand—in both positional and non-positional leadership roles” [3] (p. 4). Its key principles are centred on capacity building and a culture of collaboration and relational trust where leaders are expected to become successful agents of change and meet the needs of their students. Despite these aspirational targets, details of practical applications of these leadership strategies, considering contextual factors as well as opportunities for leadership preparation are rather limited. Multi-perspective research conducted in New Zealand under the auspices of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) has documented personal qualities, characteristics, and practical approaches as common features of successful school leadership. The present paper maps the empirical literature on successful school principalship in New Zealand as part of the ISSPP and reports on common features of a principal’s successful leadership and their capacity to maintain that success.

In the following section, the review methodology adopted here is described. Then, the findings section presents descriptive summaries of the available evidence from the New Zealand contribution to the ISSPP project and the main patterns of interaction in successful leadership. The paper concludes by discussing how these findings are connected to the realities of leading and sustaining change in complex educational organisations such as schools and offers implications for future steps of research on successful school principalship.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopted a scoping review approach. Although universal definitions of this type of review are few and far between, the broad purpose for conducting scoping reviews is to identify and map the available evidence [4]. Given this study’s aim to understand how much empirical research on successful school leadership has been completed in the context of New Zealand as part of the ISSPP, and to gain a broad understanding of that research, a scoping review was the most appropriate approach. The steps followed in the review included identifying the research question, searching for studies in relevant databases, selecting them, extracting information, summarising, and reporting the results.

The review was guided by the following question: “What is known from the existing literature about successful school leadership undertaken as part of the ISSPP in New Zealand?”.

This review employed a systematic search of three scholarly databases (i.e., Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest) to capture all the relevant studies using the following keywords: “Successful”, “School Leadership”, “Educational Leadership”, “New Zealand”, and “ISSPP”. The search was conducted between March and May 2023. Google Scholar was also searched using the same keywords to identify potentially relevant studies not indexed in the above databases, and therefore omitted from the initial search.

In addition to the database search, a targeted search was conducted to ensure that relevant research had not been missed. This included manual searches in relevant journals known to the author as those that publish studies from the New Zealand context, and consultations with the reference lists of studies obtained from the initial database search to identify additional relevant studies. A set of inclusion criteria was employed to screen the publications found in the search. Specifically, studies were only included if published after 2009, which was the date of the first reported synthesis of ISSPP case study findings in New Zealand. To keep the search inclusive, different types of outputs were considered (e.g., journal articles, book chapters, nooks, conference proceedings, theses).

The publications analysed included articles, books, book chapters, and conference proceedings that considered the findings of the New Zealand ISSPP research. All articles identified in the search were qualitative in nature, following a multi-perspective research methodology approach developed by the ISSPP. Table 1 details the categories in which the acquired documents are grouped.

**Table 1.** Types of studies in the review.

Authors	Year	Publication Type	Number of Case Studies <sup>1</sup>	School Phases Included	Target Population	Data Collection
Notman and Henry	2009	Journal article	6	Primary and secondary	Principals, teachers, students, parents, and community members	Interviews, questionnaire
Notman and Henry	2011	Journal article	6	Primary and secondary	Principals	Interviews, observations
Notman	2011	Book	10	Specialist, early childhood, intermediate, primary, and secondary	Principals	Interviews, observations
Notman	2012	Journal article	10	Specialist, early childhood, intermediate, primary, and secondary	Principals	Interviews, observations
Notman	2014	Book chapter	1	Secondary	Principals	Interviews
Notman	2017	Journal article	2	Secondary	Principals, teachers, and significant others (e.g., the Board of Trustees)	Interviews
Notman and Jacobson	2018	Book chapter	3	ECE	leaders, teachers, and parents	Interviews
Jacobson and Notman	2018	Journal article	3	ECE	Parents	Interviews
Notman	2020	Journal article	1	Secondary	Co-principals, senior leader, and significant others (e.g., the Board of Trustees)	Interviews

<sup>1</sup> Number of case studies is not mutually exclusive.

### 3. Results

The search yielded nine publications as part of the ISSPP, largely from Ross Notman. These studies have been conducted in early childhood centres and primary and secondary schools, most of which presented multiple cases and have been published in a ten-case edited book by Notman [5]. The findings from the New Zealand ISSPP research are organised in relation to three common features that have been critical to principals' successful leadership and the sustainability of success in their schools. These are: (a) pedagogical leadership, (b) personal leadership qualities, and (c) culturally relevant and situational leadership practices and actions. Taken together, these features demonstrate the ways in which principals contributed to their school's success and how personal factors linked to their professional identity have shaped their behaviours or practices.

Importantly, the findings attest to the notion of success as requiring a strong focus on teaching and learning that aims to increase the levels of student participation and achievement. It is further defined as creating and sustaining positive relationships in school communities and fostering a sense of belonging. Within these success factors, successful principals were found to be adaptive and reflective, and were able to learn from their practice and experience to ensure school success. This has become evident through a wide range of accounts from principals, other senior leaders, school governors, and parents.

### 3.1. Pedagogical Leadership

The core focus of successful principalship was partly described through the term “pedagogical leadership” [5]. This included a vision and values grounded in specific teaching and learning objectives aimed at enhancing student outcomes and improving the performance of schools. Principals were important in their schools and contributed to their schools’ success by highlighting that it was not simply about adopting a school-wide vision, but it was also about the clarity and regularity of messaging and communication systems that were based on joint achievements of shared objectives. For example, in a case study of a co-principalship in a secondary school in the southern region of New Zealand, both principals provided clear and consistent messages to their staff and students about the ways they understood the wider purpose of what they do [6]. These communication mechanisms provided principals with much-needed clarity regarding their adaptation of a distinctive vision and set of values. In brief, when principals entrusted each other and the school staff with discretion regarding the implementation of the vision, they were found to adopt an interactive, collaborative, communication-rich, and trust-building approach.

A sense of direction regarding improvements in the school and high expectations for student achievement, especially for indigenous Māori and other minority students, was also clearly set and communicated by successful principals in their schools and communities. By adding an early childhood education (ECE) component to their studies of the ISSPP, Notman and Jacobson explored leadership practices that enriched parental involvement and student success in three ECE centres serving diverse, high-need communities in New Zealand [7]. These centres were situated in deprived areas of the country and were under challenging circumstances, including high proportions of disadvantaged students and low-achieving students in literacy and numeracy. Based on Leithwood and Riehl’s review of the literature on school leadership, the study focused on the work of ECE leaders in relation to three core practices: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organisation [8]. In particular, the leaders in their study demonstrated their core practice of ‘setting direction’ by fostering an environment for learning where the child was at the centre of their work. The schools’ vision and mission were focused on improving educational outcomes for all and this was achieved by deconstructing deficit thinking about diverse students’ academic failure. Successful school principals in their study also worked hard at ‘redesigning the organisation’ by spending time to build and facilitate a collaborative culture based on elements of trust in order to address students’ learning needs.

Finally, findings from their study revealed the ways in which leaders were working towards ‘developing people’ by establishing strong partnerships with parents and their wider community to create a positive learning environment that supported students’ learning and development. Such outreach efforts that facilitated communication and engagement were resource and labour intensive. The ‘social’ investment in these initiatives stretched the attention of the school leaders across a wider, more diffuse array of purposes, which helped them to re-orientate resources in encountering social and educational challenges in the wider environment of their schools. These beyond-school approaches were motivated by the complexity and enormity of the equity issues facing families and communities in these case study schools, such as economic realities, underlying socioeconomic factors, and national policymaking. It is interesting to note that in early childhood and primary settings, building school–parent partnerships to support the children’s learning often focused on the development of the child’s main teachers—their parents. Parents appreciated the commitment to mission realisation by teachers and principals, especially as the principals helped to develop the parents’ understanding of teaching and learning. In this sense, pedagogical leadership was understood as an integrated conceptualisation of the relationship between teaching and learning that actively engages and empowers parents as teachers of children as well [5,7].

### 3.2. Personal Leadership Qualities

A number of personal leadership qualities that school leaders drew on and which shaped their behaviours or practices were found to make a significant contribution to their success as school principals over time [5,6,9,10]. These qualities include empathy, honesty, a commitment to the school and community, and a strong ethic of care with the students' and staff's best interests at heart. Such qualities as displayed in findings across the New Zealand case studies suggest that are people-oriented in nature [6,10,11]. Successful principals communicated with people clearly and built relationships based on trust, respect, and integrity. They were committed to their profession as well as to the people they served.

Closely related to the personal leadership qualities is an understanding of how such qualities influence the ways in which successful principals lead their schools. In a case study of ten schools spread across geographical locations throughout the north and south islands of New Zealand, Notman identified a number of intrapersonal factors that contributed to the sustained success of these school principals over time [10]. These factors focused on their physical and mental wellbeing; intellectual wellbeing; personal resilience; and critical self-reflection. More specifically, principals saw the need to take care of their own physical and mental wellbeing as a self-management factor in sustaining their success. This was achieved through strong connections with family, personal interests, and a need for exercise in order to reduce levels of stress related to their workload. Similarly, the intellectual wellbeing of the principals was enhanced by them pursuing professional development opportunities through professional qualifications and mentoring early-career principals. Finally, critical self-reflection and resilience were significant factors contributing to sustaining success. Examples of this included self-evaluation of leadership performance and evaluating the staff and students' attitudes to learning and academic achievement.

Successful leaders also demonstrated high levels of interpersonal qualities and skills that involved and acknowledged their interactions with others. Evidence from six primary and secondary school principals reinforced this interpersonal aspect of successful leaders' role [11]. A relational connectedness between the principal, the school, and its community underpins all the successful leadership case studies. These findings suggest that successful principals were able to understand the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of people, including themselves, in interpersonal situations and to act appropriately on that understanding. Their high level of interaction with others within their schools and the wider community led to greater levels of trust, which was maintained through positive, caring relationships. As a result of developing strong relationships of trust, successful principals were deeply informed of the school's increasingly diverse cultural and social context and had at the heart of their work strong educational values of care for the creation of a positive culture and more socially just learning contexts.

### 3.3. Culturally Relevant and Situational Leadership Practices and Actions

While the first two success factor areas consider how personal qualities influence the nature of successful leaders' behaviours or practices, attention has also been drawn to the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand and the importance of culturally relevant and situational leadership strategies outlining how successful practices are enacted in a context with cultural responsiveness. In combination with the situational and cultural demands related to their contextual circumstances, some findings show that successful principals acknowledged the need to strengthen culturally responsive and relational pedagogies, advance an inclusive school culture and a culture of success for all, especially for indigenous Māori students, and reframe the curriculum to address local needs [10,12]. One primary case of a principal in a Māori girls' college highlighted the need for new principals to re-assess the existing school context before implementing any changes. The principal was Māori herself and acknowledged the importance of the principle of *whakapapa* (genealogy), which allowed her to position, contextualise, and nurture the relationships between people in the school and wider community [5]. These adaptive communication patterns



depended upon her responsiveness towards and awareness of the cultural needs of her school and students.

Similarly, Notman and Henry comment on the ability of successful principals to create holistic development with equal attention to students' academic, social, and cultural development through clearly articulated expectations for the curriculum and teaching and learning [11]. A focus on leading learning was seen as a social and situated practice that was often co-enacted by principals, teachers, students, and the wider community using cultural, intellectual, and material resources found in their classrooms, schools, and community contexts. In this way, the case study principals built on the diverse cultural repertoires of students and their families and embraced culturally responsive approaches that not only recognised but actively engaged students' cultural resources in teaching and learning, allowing them to develop an identity and sense of ownership and belonging.

Guided by the adaptive leadership concepts proposed by Heifetz [13], Notman examined the ways in which two principals, from an urban primary and a semi-rural secondary school, respectively, navigated the management of change during their second principalship [6]. The findings demonstrated that both principals embraced an adaptive leadership stance in their practices that were linked to contingent forms of school leadership, and therefore changed their leadership approaches according to their context and audience.

In addition, several case studies underline the importance of empowering staff to model and drive collective learning to enable continuous improvement to take hold. Successful principals in these cases embraced shared decision-making and leadership approaches that offered greater opportunities for capacity building through distributed leadership roles and succession planning. For example, Notman reports on a case study of two secondary co-principals that identified adaptive strategies and success factors in a joint leadership role [12]. Despite the challenges in a joint senior leadership position, both co-principals had been successful at the school because the clarity of their vision and values informed their day-to-day practices and behaviours and were considered as some of the core success factors. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that opportunities to distribute leadership practices are reduced in smaller or more isolated schools. Collectively, the findings presented here highlight how context matters in studies on developing professional identities to successfully respond to school-wide changes over time.

#### 4. Discussion

Findings from this review of the New Zealand contribution to the ISSPP show how personal and professional qualities of principals were crucial to the enactment of successful leadership and the sustainability of success in schools. The combination of these qualities with what these principals were actively doing to reflect the contexts, culture, and needs of their schools proved to be powerful explanations for their success.

Successful school leaders used a range of common leadership strategies that included building a strong senior leadership team through delegation and shared decision making and developing the individual capacity of each member of staff through professional development and use of distributed leadership practices. The development of a shared vision supplemented by a deep moral purpose embedded in leadership practices also became evident in these New Zealand case studies. It became a foundational building block for a culture of continuous improvement that encouraged the development of school norms that support an openness to change in the direction of the purpose or vision of the school. The content and clarity of a principal's vision has been linked to educational reform efforts as well as student outcomes and is consistent with an array of relevant and well-established works in the literature on successful school leadership, including studies of the ISSPP [14–16].

At each of the case study sites, school leaders purposefully worked to create and sustain their school communities on elements of trust and community relationships that could in turn provide short- and long-term positive outcomes. The continuity of their success was reflected in the principals' capacity to build a sense of care into their practice

and foster relational trust. They made sure that their schools became safe and nurturing environments for students, staff, and the wider community and negotiated culturally specific leadership practices that enabled them to respond effectively to the particular local cultural context. The existing literature on culturally responsive leadership often explains the ways in which educational leaders ‘*understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate the entirety of the children they serve*’ [17] (pp. 6–7). These approaches are reflected in the findings of the review, where successful principals took into consideration the context surrounding the school, they had been charged to lead by displaying critical self-reflection, resilience, and an intrapersonal understanding of their personal value system.

A small but critical set of personal and professional qualities was common among the successful leaders identified in the cases reviewed. These qualities guided these leaders’ ability to understand the emotions, views, and behaviours of others, including their own, in interpersonal situations and enabled them to influence and act appropriately on that understanding. Key contextual differences had a strong influence on their leadership approaches, which shaped the patterns in their leadership practices. McNae, Morrison, and Notman argue that “leadership is not a place where we sit. It is about being, and it is about doing” [18] (p. 11), suggesting that leadership is subject to change, adaptation, and modification over time. The evidence within this review suggests that successful leadership can adaptively respond to context and not be subservient to it. This is in line with the literature on educational leadership, including studies of the ISSPP, that suggests (successful) leaders enact practices in ways that are sensitive to the contexts in which they work, the people with whom they work, and are subject to changes over time [19–21].

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This scoping review leads to a number of suggestions for informing future research and reporting of successful school leadership, as well as to make evidence more available and useful for adaption by others. Several of these success factor areas are largely justified by the nature of the links between empirical evidence in the context of New Zealand and other ISSPP studies elsewhere. Perhaps, most importantly, success seems to depend on a collective and value-oriented culture shaped by principals in their particular local contexts combined with widespread collaborative efforts with staff, students, and the community surrounding their schools.

Devoting attention to equity-related challenges appears to be most effective as an impetus for systemic and cultural change when carried out as part of a process led by principals involving many stakeholders, who each perceive that they are equally responsible for the school’s progress towards change and who prioritise this process over other institutional targets. Although Māori students in New Zealand schools are the second-largest ethnic group after Pākehā/European students, there are precious few principals and senior leaders within New Zealand schools who are Māori. This may be one of the factors to date that limits community engagement, cultural responsiveness, and commitment to Māori academic achievement. Therefore, the importance of building intercommunity relationships may be seen as a key enabler of culturally responsive pedagogies [22–24]. Initiating and sustaining pedagogical approaches in ways that are just and responsive to the needs of Māori would essentially validate local Māori knowledge systems and sites of cultural significance as being rich learning contexts [25]. This expectation requires continuous professional development activities and constant consultation with local communities.

The common features of successful school principals may also be compatible with or indeed be inspired by theoretical frameworks. In the short and medium term, new complexity and systems informed ISSPP research has the potential to shed light on new aspects of successful school leadership prompted by variations in the nature of principals’ work in uncertain and dynamic school environments.

The present article provides a snapshot of where the state of ISSPP research stands in its continuing journey towards an increasingly international perspective. It reports on examples derived from New Zealand and illustrates potential future challenges and

how these may be addressed as we continue to explore the complexity of leadership work moving school leaders beyond the traditional boundaries of their school to include a wider range of knowledge, values, and assumptions in order to meet the social, economic, and political realities of their school's environment.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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