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# Connecting research and knowledge on educational leadership in the West and Asia: Adopting a cross-cultural comparative perspective

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## Abstract

Researchers have suggested that the field of educational leadership has yet to develop a coherent knowledge base that reflects the global diversity of policies and practices. This disconnect – for example between Asian and Western research, presents a major challenge, curtailing authentic knowledge production and transfer. Accordingly, the creation of a cross-culturally valid knowledge base with global relevance must become a major future objective for the field. This conceptual paper addresses the phenomenon of global knowledge construction in educational leadership and the problems and challenges of achieving coherence and connectivity between bodies of research emanating from diverse politico-socio-cultural settings. In achieving greater connectivity between Asian and Western educational leadership research, the paper promotes a cross-cultural comparative approach. It does so primarily for two contrasting reasons: first, to create a universal/global knowledge base, and second, to reveal the ethno-centric nature of the dominant anglo-western centric paradigm. It is argued that, paradoxically, the likelihood of achieving a global knowledge base is enhanced the more research overcomes its tendency to display narrow ethnocentrism. That is, a major feature of a comparatively informed universal knowledge base is the awareness of the socio-cultural embeddedness of educational leadership. While acknowledging the benefits and challenges of such an approach, the paper advocates four types of cultural and cross-cultural comparative studies, namely, *meta studies* based on large data sets, *socio-educational studies* placing leadership in a social milieu context; *system reform and renovation studies* based on government initiatives to improve

education systems; and *indigenous studies* of educational leadership reflecting the uniqueness of societal cultures. Finally, the paper suggests more robust research methods for achieving authentic cross-cultural connectivity across knowledge bases to secure greater knowledge production and transfer.

**Key words:** educational leadership, Asian and Western educational leadership research, cross-cultural, comparative education, knowledge production and transfer

In concluding an exhaustive bibliometric review of educational administration (EA) using science mapping, Hallinger and Kovacevic (2019, 25-26) state, “...the field has yet to develop a knowledge base that reflects the global diversity of EA practices.....in the view of the authors, the single greatest challenge facing our field in the coming decades lies in producing a cross-culturally valid knowledge base with global relevance”. Behind this significant conclusion, an expanding body of Asian research in educational leadership is emerging alongside a substantial body of Western (largely Anglo-American) research (Hallinger 2011; Hallinger and Bryant 2013). Consequently, a key future objective for the field lies in the creation of a cross-culturally valid knowledge base with global relevance. This conceptual paper addresses the phenomenon of global knowledge construction in educational leadership and the problems and challenges of achieving coherence and connectivity between bodies of research emanating from diverse politico-socio-cultural settings. In achieving greater connectivity between Asian and Western educational leadership research, the paper argues for a cross-cultural comparative approach.

While the prospect of expanding research and hence knowledge in educational leadership and management – a field acknowledged to be of growing importance to the global focus on school improvement and system reform - may at first seem laudable, serious challenges are presented in connecting Western and Asian research and their respective knowledge bases (Dimmock 2012, 2015, 2017). Cross-cultural connectivity of research in Western and Asian regions is a generic issue affecting other expanding fields and disciplines in education. As research develops in many parts of the world, including Asia, scholars are faced with challenges of how to connect research agendas, methods, and findings. Henceforth in this paper, ‘research’ is used to embrace both research and the knowledge base created by research.

Challenges of connectivity go beyond language issues; they include the accuracy and authenticity of comparative judgements, different cultural-based interpretations of the same policies and practices, as well as more recognised problems of cultural borrowing and transfer. Previous articles in *Comparative Education* have reflected these analogous themes – in particular, difficulties of cross-cultural borrowing and transfer focused on reforms to policy and practice. Cowen (2014), for example, argues that the epistemology of the field is always grounded in the politics of domestic educational reform and international politics, which negate claims that comparative education has achieved a ‘science of transfer.’ Cowen’s point is well illustrated by Elliott (2014), who found that student-centred pedagogies exported from the west to Asia, and teacher-dominated practices imported from East Asia to the West, have largely proven

ineffective. Likewise, You (2017) argues that transfer of school accountability practices between East and West have been mostly unsuccessful because of different socio-political priorities. The misuse and abuse of evidence and data are highlighted by Grey and Morris (2018) who describe how the OECD, politicians, and the media – all tend to distort research-based evidence to legitimise their own purposes and objectives. Both Tan (2014) and You (2018) found that many of the western imitated reforms in China's New Curriculum Reform fail to be adopted in authentic ways, and are at best superficial. Tan (2014) further argues that it is the persistence of deep, enduring cultural values, based on Confucianism, that still attribute good teaching to teacher-dominant rather than student-centred, approaches. This substantive body of work, however, focuses on the application (ie. transfer) and interpretation of comparative research evidence once it has been generated. The main focus of the present paper, however, is on knowledge production and connectivity between the West and Asia, rather than on the application of such knowledge by governments and politicians pursuing their respective socio-political agendas.

Surprisingly little attention has been accorded the challenge of connecting diverse educational leadership knowledge bases in coherent and systematic ways that advance global understandings in pursuit of promoting theory, research, policy and practice (Dimmock and Walker 2005). It is presumptuous to assume that research conducted in diverse world regions will somehow automatically resonate and connect to form a coherent and unified global whole.

A number of clarifications and justifications are important at the outset. First, the paper weaves an argument straddling the amorphous boundaries of two fields, namely, educational leadership and comparative education (for a full discussion, see Dimmock & Walker 1998b). Broadly, educational leadership relates to the processes and practices adopted by leaders (formal and informal) to influence and motivate others to pursue preferred and desired goals in coordinated ways to achieve improvement in individual, organisational and system performance (Dimmock 2012). In the present context, the term refers to school-level leadership (not higher or vocational education) and mainly to principal and senior school leadership, although more dispersed forms of teacher leadership are changing the dynamics of school-level leadership and its study (Wenner and Campbell 2017).

While comparative education has a long and illustrious history dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014), its main aim has always been to make authentic comparisons within and between education systems, for purposes leading to greater understanding and mutual benefit. Substantively, comparative education embraces almost any disciplines and themes relevant to education – eg. education policy, curriculum, pedagogy, professional development, school structures – the main objective or purpose of which is comparison within and between systems (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014). Among the important benefits of authentic and rigorous comparison are - an understanding of the similarities and differences between education systems in terms of problems faced and policies and practices adopted to mitigate or counter them; a better understanding of one's own system; an explanation of

why some systems (or parts thereof) may be more or less effective than others in regard to educational performance; and the appropriateness of policies and practices for borrowing and/or adapting by others to address similar problems. Comparative education is characterised by many approaches and methodologies, each merited according to the purpose of study.

Arguably, educational leadership has been slow to develop a strong research-based comparative dimension (excluding the international agencies and OECD). Hence from the late 1990s, a number of scholars (eg. Dimmock and Walker 1998a, 1999b; Hallinger and Leithwood 1998) began building the case for authentic comparison of educational leadership across different societal education systems, largely using cultural and cross-cultural dimensions borrowed from adjacent fields, such as international business management (eg. Hofstede 1991). In terms of boundaries between the two fields – whether a particular study is conceived as educational leadership with a comparative dimension, or comparative education with an educational leadership focus, is probably best decided by the relative weighting given to each in terms of purpose and aim, method, key concepts, and application to specified aspects of policy and practice.

A second clarification is the use of the term ‘Western’ to refer principally to North America, Europe and Australasia (and is used interchangeably with Anglo-American), while ‘Asian’ refers to East and South East Asia. It is acknowledged, however, that these collective regional descriptors are terms of convenience and mask significant differences within and between them.

Essentially, this paper addresses the phenomenon of global knowledge construction and the problems and challenges of achieving coherence and connectivity between bodies of research emanating from diverse politico-socio-cultural settings. It does so by focusing in particular on the field of educational leadership, and the expanding Asian research in the field that has rapidly grown over the past decade to accompany a large corpus of empirical research that has accumulated in Anglo-American settings over more than 40 years. It is primarily a conceptual paper, aiming to steer the field of educational leadership in a comparative direction, with an emphasis on cross-cultural comparative analysis, in particular. In outline, it argues that in an increasingly interconnected global environment, research and scholarship in Western and Asian educational leadership needs to reflect greater coherence, interrelationship and connectivity. The benefits of such would enable greater understanding of similarities and differences of educational policies and practices pertaining to leadership, while at the same time, refining and recognising the influence of cultural and contextual conditions. Arguably, the *status quo*, to the extent that disconnect exists – hinders the formation of a global, interconnected field of knowledge, thereby impoverishing knowledge production and transfer. The paper goes on to advocate various substantive and methodological strategies to overcome the *status quo*, contributing brief guides to, and examples of, the types of study and methodology that would meet the present dilemmas.

The paper is structured in six parts. The first describes the *status quo* in relation to educational leadership research in the two regions. The second



acknowledges the problematic nature of connecting the two, but recognises the benefits from so doing, while the third argues that the benefits are conditional on how connectivity is engineered between the two, and elaborates further on the substantive nature of the benefits. The fourth part advocates and justifies how connectivity might be articulated through a cultural and cross-cultural approach. In order to achieve this end, the fifth part goes further to elucidate proactive ways of bringing articulation to reality through advocating four types of cultural and cross-cultural comparative study. Finally, the sixth suggests more robust research methods for achieving authentic cross-cultural connectivity between research in the two regions.

### **Anglo-American and Asian research in educational leadership – the *status quo***

A significant growth in educational leadership research in Asia is now juxtaposed alongside a substantial Western counterpart – largely, but not exclusively, of Anglo-American origin (Dimmock and Walker 2005; Hallinger and Walker 2011). There appear to be important differences as well as similarities between the characteristics of educational leadership, and the research that generates this knowledge, in these two world regions (Walker, Hu and Qian 2012). For example, among the similarities, themes such as transformational and instructional leadership appear in mainland Chinese literature (China has by far the largest corpus of research in Asian educational leadership), while among the important differences are the tendency to political prescription and the need to reinforce the importance of the political Party and associated ideology to principal leadership.

Reviews of Asian educational leadership research have been mostly undertaken by Westerners using the main English language journals in the field (see for example, Hallinger 2014; Hallinger and Walker 2015 ). Consequently, these reviews have limitations – for example, publications in English language journals not in the search list are ignored, as is work published in the official or indigenous language if it is not English. A notable exception is Walker, Hu and Qian’s (2012) review of educational leadership research in mainland China – which included both Chinese and English publications. From a Western perspective, little is known about educational leadership research published in the indigenous and/or the official languages of Asian countries such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, and likewise in Vietnam and China, Korea and Japan. In these countries, where English is less prominent, published work tends to be in the official language, consequently it is rarely accessed by Westerners. In parts of Asia formerly colonised by Britain, where English is still widely spoken (eg Hong Kong and Singapore), there is a developing corpus of research – mostly in English (thus more accessible to Westerners (Hallinger 2014 ; Hallinger and Bryant 2013). This paper draws on examples of educational leadership research from East- and South-East Asia. Specifically, for East Asia it primarily cites examples from mainland China rather than Japan, therein reflecting the availability of literature reviews of educational leadership research available in English in the two countries.

In reviewing Chinese literature in the field, Walker, Hu and Qian (2012, 370) state – “Given the global primacy of written and spoken English in the field,

work in English is more widely read internationally.....this widespread international dissemination of English language literature may give it a disproportionate influence across societies.....thus restricting the breadth and shape of the knowledge available”. A fair and balanced assessment of the contribution of Asian research in educational leadership to the global whole is appropriately achieved only by including published work both in the native and/or official language, as well as English. China being the largest Asian country with a fast expanding higher education sector, it is a fitting example to take.

Reviews of the relevant literature in China by Walker, Hu and Qian (2012) and Walker and Qian (2014) are illuminating in at least two respects: first, they summarise the state of the art in terms of the corpus of educational leadership research on mainland China, and second, they indicate the major Chinese scholars in the field. Summarising the Chinese literature by reviewing Chinese and English language data bases, they (2012, 375) conclude, “Although considerable progress was made during the intervening decades (ie. *the last 40 years* - my italics), a lack of rigorous empirical study remains a feature of educational leadership research in China,” including studies in Chinese. They conclude that although there is evidence of change, relevant literature published in China still tends to be dominated by two forms of non-empirical work, namely, prescriptions (telling principals what they should do regarding reform) and commentaries (focusing on challenges and problems confronting principals). As Walker, Hu and Qian (2012) state, there may well be wisdom in non-empirical work, particularly the commentaries. These authors are also critical of the empirical work – claiming it to be too heavily reliant on imported methods and

concepts from the West – whether it be theories and instrumentation in the case of quantitative empirical work, or concepts in the case of more qualitative and indigenous studies.

It is clear that a cadre of Chinese scholars in the mainland and Hong Kong – eg. Guo and Lu 2018; Qian, Walker and Li 2017, and still others overseas (eg. in USA – Cravens 2014; in UK – Gu, Sammons and Chen 2015; in Australia – Wang 2008) – are actively taking the field forward. Westerners have also made substantial contributions to Asian research – often in collaboration with Asian colleagues. Hallinger and Walker (see for example, Hallinger and Walker 2015, and Walker and Hallinger 2015 - a special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* devoted to reviews on principal leadership in East Asia) are conspicuous for their output covering numerous Asian systems, including Thailand, Hong Kong and Vietnam. Other noteworthy contributions to the emergent Asian educational leadership literature are those by Walker and colleagues in researching Hong Kong and China (see Walker and Qian 2015), Liu and colleagues on China (Liu and Hallinger 2018), Szeto and colleagues in Hong Kong (2015), Chen and colleagues (2014) and Pan and colleagues in Taiwan (Pan, Nyeu, and Chen 2015), Thang, Hallinger, and others in Vietnam (see Thang and Hallinger 2017; Thang, Hallinger and Sanga 2017), Ng and colleagues in Singapore (2015), and Dimmock and Tan also in Singapore (see Dimmock and Tan 2013; Tan and Dimmock 2014). This list is illustrative of impactful work on Asian educational leadership that is widely cited. Other authors have written on different aspects of educational leadership in China, such as Wang (2008) who

uses a cross-cultural comparative approach to compare instructional leadership in China with Western notions of the concept.

Powerful concepts of Asian school leadership that are apparent from the body of work cited above suggest that future efforts to connect the two knowledge bases would reap dividends. Among the most exciting indigenous concepts to emerge to date from this corpus of Asian leadership research are the following: the salience of harmony and conflict avoidance in relations between leaders and teachers (Walker and Dimmock 2002), a prevailing deference for hierarchical leadership (Dimmock and Tan 2013), the existence of a social compact between leaders and teachers whereby teachers agree to comply with principals as a *sine qua non* for the principal's beneficence (Dimmock and Tan 2013), and in some Asian cultures, such as Vietnam, a political-ideological dimension to school leadership, where principals serve two masters – the political class and bureaucrats (Hallinger and Truong 2014).

It is clear, as Hallinger and Walker (2015) point out, that Asian educational leadership research emanating from English-speaking Asian systems – especially Hong Kong and to a lesser extent Singapore – is more acknowledged outside Asia than research from non-English speaking Asian systems (eg. mainland China). Language and publication opportunities are significant issues as articulated later in this paper – in connecting research between the West and Asia. The English language, and the dominant media and publications outlets based on it, is undeniably a crucial factor. The field is dominated by publishing houses and journals anchored in the USA, UK and Europe. Hence it is globally

acknowledged that the loci of high quality journals, with peer refereeing, are North America, the UK, Western Europe, and Australasia. It is a measure of the supremacy of these English language publishing outlets that university academics in many Asian countries, including those primarily non-English speaking such as Vietnam, are increasingly expected (and sometimes financially incentivised) to publish articles in SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journals.

While Anglo-American research in educational leadership may be considered established and even burgeoning, it is less than robust (Hallinger and Walker 2015). Many critics have targeted its contradictory findings, its less than rigorous methodology, the tendency to assume generalisability from limited samples and cases, and the frequent failure to apply contextual boundaries to its findings and conclusions (Heck and Hallinger 2005). Dimmock and Walker (2005) for example, have commented on the extreme degree of ethnocentrism that pervades the educational leadership literature. Academics representing 7 percent of the world's population often purport to speak for the remaining 93 percent. Given this imbalance, it is crucial that researchers in educational leadership – whether in Asian or Western settings – bound their work by fully recognising the geo-political-cultural boundaries that frame their studies.

Nonetheless, there is a powerful and compelling force that bodes well for connecting educational leadership research in the West and Asia. This is the growing reciprocal interest among Asian and Western educators in each other's policies and practices, and their respective effectiveness (Zhao 2017). Western policy makers aspire to emulate the performance of Asian systems on

international achievement tests such as PISA and TIMSS, while some Asian systems, such as Hong Kong and Vietnam, are keen to re-balance their pedagogical practices by pursuing more student-centred methods adopted in Europe and North America (Dimmock 2016; Forestier and Crossley 2015; Zhao 2015). A global convergence, especially at the policy level, is thus detectable among education systems, where Asian systems re-calibrate their hitherto over-reliance on teacher-centred methods by introducing more student-centred teaching, as in Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Vietnam, and Anglo-American systems re-balance their past emphasis on student-centred methods with the adoption of more whole class teaching and testing, as in England (Dimmock 2012).

Notwithstanding this apparent convergence, caution is needed. Policy convergence at system policy level may become divergence at subsystem level once the policy is transformed, 'indigenised' and implemented. The following three examples comparing Western and Asian systems suitably illustrate this. In 2010, the Singapore government adopted a policy that all schools should become professional learning communities (PLCs) (Hairon and Dimmock 2012). At the time, Western scholars were somewhat surprised by the prospect of a strongly centralised system adopting a reform policy that emanated from the 1990s teacher empowerment movement in the USA. However, the Singapore government adapted the principles of PLCs to their school improvement agenda, and in so doing, transformed the PLC concept into a tightly regulated, principal- and senior leadership team-led process, largely confining teachers' responsibilities to action research on their own teaching methods (Hairon and

Dimmock 2012). A second example of divergent practice within convergent policy – is distributed leadership. While the concept of distributed leadership originated in Anglo-American school systems, becoming fashionable from the late 1990s and early 2000s as part of school-based management, and as a counter to principal-dominated leadership, it subsequently appeared in the policy scripts and rhetoric of developed Asian systems, such as Hong Kong. However, whereas in the West the concept manifested itself in flatter leadership structures and patterns, in Hong Kong, as Dimmock and Walker (2005) found, it conformed to hierarchical tiers. Thus principals tended to share some of their leadership, but only with the tier below them (eg. vice principals); vice principals tended to share with the tier below them (eg. department heads), and so on. A third example is from Vietnam, whose government adopted a reform policy in 2012 to introduce more student-centred pedagogy – in step with Western trends – as a way of developing higher level ‘soft skills’ among students, to cater to Vietnam’s future labour market. While evidence shows that Vietnamese teachers have begun introducing more group work among students, it is still within a prevailing teacher-centred pedagogy, and the philosophy underpinning student-centredness has not been embraced (Pham 2013). These three examples support the present argument – that more robust and concerted scholarship is required to understand subtle connections between educational leadership research in the West and Asia.

### **Obstacles and benefits to connecting Asian and Western educational leadership research**



While convergence of policy provides optimism about the value of forging connections, the essential problematic nature of achieving this pragmatically is a cause for pessimism. The fact remains that connecting research and knowledge geo-culturally-politically is problematic for a number of reasons. The first is that much of the existing Western body of work in educational leadership, as stated earlier, is justly criticised for its lack of rigour and robustness, lack of confirmatory findings, over-generalised claims, failure to aggregate and accumulate findings in order to synthesise, lack of baseline studies, domination of small scale case studies, and unimaginative methodologies and ethnocentricity (Hallinger 2014).

If the same patterns of research design and less than robust procedures are repeated in Asian research – especially using Western concepts and methods – then the problems are simply compounded. It is difficult to prevent predominantly Western thinking, assumptions, theories and models from infiltrating and mediating Asian educational leadership research (Dimmock and Walker 2005). Asian researchers and students often willingly adopt Western concepts, theories, methods and instruments. Western scholars promulgate their paradigms and methods through lectures, publications, data collection instruments, and supervision. For their part, in the absence of a strong indigenous research tradition, Asian scholars may feel they need to emulate their Western counterparts. Adopting methods and instruments trialed and validated in the West can save time and resources, with the added advantage of enabling comparisons between Asian and Western data. In the worst cases of cultural

borrowing, Western leadership concepts may not even be relevant, applicable or meaningful to a particular Asian context. For example, Dimmock has found that notions of school-based management in Vietnam are not only alien to established practice, they are barely understood (Dimmock 2016). Contrariwise, some strongly dispute the decision of policy makers in England to re-introduce whole class teaching and testing – a move influenced by the desire to emulate the high performing Asian education systems on international tests (Reynolds and Farrell 1996; Robinson 1999; Oates 2010).

For the foregoing reasons, Asian educational leadership research may well possess the same lack of robustness as the Western. An important development for research in both regions to gain robustness is greater recognition to leadership being a socially bound process; it is inseparable from the organisational structures and processes in which it functions, and from its local and societal cultural environment (Dimmock and Walker 2005). Hence, a gestalt view that connects leadership to its socio-cultural milieu is needed, as elaborated later.

Whether it is worthwhile and justifiable to connect Asian and Western educational leadership research surely depends on what are seen as the potential benefits of so doing. However, while the benefits appear compelling, they come with qualifying conditions, as set out below. First, and most apparent, is the potential creation of a coherent global research agenda and strategy in educational leadership, where Asian and western bodies of knowledge cohere to promote knowledge production. The alternative is a number of discrete,

fragmented and likely unconnected knowledge bases. Second, a connected research strategy in educational leadership in the West and Asia is necessary to enable and validate comparisons and contrasts for knowledge transfer to be authentic. Otherwise, research across the two world regions is likely to remain relatively unconnected, with each failing to speak to the other. A third justification is reinforcement that leadership is exercised within cultural and contextual frameworks (Dimmock and Walker 2005). In this regard, a more sophisticated and refined understanding is likely to emerge of how the political-ideological, socio-cultural, and economic – all interact with the educational – to influence leadership and schooling. Finally, authentic comparisons enable differences between regions and systems to be better understood, and that paradoxically, leadership differences are sometimes greater within regions than between (Hallinger and Bryant 2013). As a region, Asia illustrates these within-regional differences of school leadership perhaps better than any other.

### **Benefits of connecting educational leadership research in the two regions are conditional**

Reaping the benefits, and avoiding the pitfalls of connecting Asian and Western educational leadership research, depends on how and in what form the articulation takes place. Scholars whose work feeds research in either or both regions need to be proactive in shaping the future educational leadership agenda. It is to this second part of the paper – advocacy of a research agenda, that the paper now turns.

### ***Promising future directions for a comparative leadership research agenda***

Clearly, the goal of connecting Asian and Western research in meaningful ways requires a future research agenda for both that has complementarity in both substantive and methodological ways, as elaborated below.

In substantive terms, an educational leadership research agenda is needed that plays to the most important educational problems and challenges in each system and society as perceived by their stakeholders – policy makers, practitioners and researchers. While this may be a more difficult challenge than expected (getting agreement between, let alone within, stakeholder groups may prove challenging), there are, nonetheless, some powerful forces generating convergence. The most influential of these is the globalisation of education policy promulgated increasingly by organisations such as OECD with its international testing regimes, such as PISA, and the IEA’s TIMSS (Auld, Rappleye and Morris, 2019; Elliott, Stankov, Lee and Beckmann, 2019).

Additionally, a future leadership research agenda should be shaped by what are seen as the more pressing problems faced by education systems. Three in particular are important to highlight: first, improving the quality and relevance of schooling for individual and societal benefit; second, creating more equitable opportunities for all children; and third, attending to the mental health and welfare of students (OECD 2012). These are generic challenges and problems facing all systems of education – the solution to which inevitably involves leadership at all levels – from system to organisational.

With these priorities in mind, it seems logical to focus a future educational leadership research agenda – one that would in turn promote connectivity - on the following substantive themes:

- Policy making and system reform/renovation, incorporating school effectiveness and school improvement, and more specifically, including changes to curricula and pedagogy, assessment, professional development, and school autonomy and school-based leadership; with leadership as a key element of all the foregoing and its relevance from national to school and local levels.
- A broad contextual approach linking whole school, family and socio-politico-economic environment; leadership as a salient instrument to connect these institutions to form an effective, joined-up approach to confront many of societies', and young people's, major problems.
- An approach to the study of educational leadership and leaders *per se* that specifically adopts authentic, indigenous, culturally-grounded understandings; such studies are both substantive and methodological, and ideally would assume a *tabula rasa* in generating leadership knowledge rather than borrowing concepts and theories from other cultures.

Equally important in advocating a future educational leadership research agenda for connectivity are the following methodological considerations:

- A range of approaches, all of which need to be rigorous – whether they be mixed method, quantitative or qualitative; promotion of anthropological-

based studies, such as grounded theory, with clearly delineated geo-cultural-politico boundaries and contexts.

- A more strategic approach whereby larger scale baseline studies of national systems/regions are undertaken to establish the *status quo* at system level, with subsequent smaller scale subregional and local studies revealing the extent to which variance occurs across systems (Dimmock 2011).
- A specific type of small scale study should be championed in the form of interventions – delivering research-into-practice - using R-D-D (Research-Design-Development) to trial new practices, producing variant models according to different local cultures and contexts (Bryk and Gomez 2008).
- Finally, to facilitate the connectedness of educational research across the West and Asia, there is a need for rigorous comparative and international studies that seek the similarities and differences between systems, and which help us understand our own system better and why we adopt the policies and practices we do (Dimmock and Walker 2005).

### **Justification for a cultural and cross-cultural comparative approach**

Methodological debates and disagreements in comparative education have characterised the field for decades. As Garrido (1987) argues, Brian Holmes's thought-provoking and inspiring problem-approach (1965, 1981), did much to raise the profile of the need for greater rigour and robustness in the field. Although Holmes inspired many, including this author, and defended his approach with vigour, he was not against a variety of methods being employed in comparative education.

An eclecticism of approaches and methods has grown to characterise comparative education. For example, Bray, Adamson and Mason (2014) adopt a comprehensive coverage when, in their edited book, they include separate chapters on each of the following – comparing systems, places, times, cultures, values, policies, curricula, achievements, ways of learning, and pedagogical innovations. To an important extent, selection of the most appropriate approach depends on one's purpose and aim. Culturalist approaches can be traced back to W.D. Halls (1973), and early work specifically in cross-cultural comparative educational leadership between Asia and the West to Dimmock and Walker (1998a, 1999b).

Elsewhere, Dimmock and Walker (1998a, 1998b) have elaborated on the merits and demerits of a cross-cultural approach to educational leadership. These authors base the case for a cultural and cross-cultural comparative approach to educational leadership on three grounds: first, the suitability of the concept 'culture'; second, the limitations of existing frameworks, such as structural-functionalist models, often used in comparative education; and third, the pitfalls of ignoring the significance of culture in the adoption of educational research, theory, policy and practice. Furthermore, they see the following strengths of a cultural and cross-cultural approach – the ubiquity of culture (every organisation and social group has a distinctive and different culture); the pervasive influence of culture on the behaviour of individuals and social groups and the multi-dimensional nature of culture being identifiable and observable, hence appropriate for authentic comparison. On the other hand, among the

drawbacks (see for example, Trice and Beyer 1993) are– the challenge of defining and scaling an amorphous, multi-dimensional concept and its substantive boundaries (for example, it is not the same as religion, philosophy, and economics, yet it is influenced by, and in turn influences, all of these- hence capturing the multiple dimensions is challenging); differentiating between temporary and enduring characteristics, and between culture as structure and agency (is it a property possessed and taken, or is it a malleable ‘tool’ that leaders and others can use to change a social group or an organisation?).

A key part of the case for comparative research based on the concept of culture and cross-cultural comparison - with the potential to connect Asian and Western research – rests on definitions of key terms such as ‘culture’ and its affiliation with leadership. ‘Culture’ is defined as the values, beliefs, traditions and norms, and the expected and accepted forms of behaviour that distinguish one group of people, and how they communicate and interact, from another (Hofstede 1991). It is expressed through language, thought, and action at all levels of society, from the privacy of the family to public organisations, such as schools (Dimmock and Walker 2005). While some argue the amorphous nature of culture renders it devoid of explanatory power, culturalists recognise its importance by referencing particular ascribed thoughts and behaviours that typify individuals and groups in their agentic actions (eg, avoiding face to face conflicts in professional relations in Asian schools), or in societal structures that represent prevailing norms (exemplified by hierarchical leadership in Asian schools). Moreover, as recognised earlier, culture is ubiquitous, it is central to every group or society. It is both enduring (eg. traditions) which give a static



quality, but also capable of change, hence dynamic (Dimmock and Walker 2005). Cultures enjoys a reciprocal influence with politics, each is capable of changing the other. Politics may promote globalisation and convergence, but it may also mediate nationally for divergence (Bottery, Wong, Ngai 2018). Walker's (2014) cautionary note - that culture does not explain everything in educational leadership that is similar or different across societies – is worth heeding. However, it is still a powerful explanatory factor that researchers have at their disposal.

None of this disguises the fact that the overwhelming appeal of culture is that the norms, values and behaviours that form it are indicative of those that also shape leadership, given its social boundedness. Despite the relationship between culture and leadership being multi-dimensional, cultural influences on leadership are often difficult to discern, subtle and easy to overlook – to the point that it is often downplayed or ignored by many (Hallinger and Leithwood 1998). This fact alone raises the need for more developed culturally derived models and theories to inform and facilitate educational leadership research, theorising and practice (Dimmock and Walker 2005).

A final issue of ambiguity and confusion is that 'culture' and 'context' are different. In educational leadership, for example, 'context' might refer to the size and sector of the school or school system in question, the location of the school or system, or the socio-economic characteristics of the school or education system(s) (Leithwood and Riehl 2005). This is quite different from the values-based concept of culture.

## **Connecting educational leadership research culturally and cross-culturally**

Among the compelling benefits from adopting a culturally-based comparative approach are understandings of how education systems function – and a better understanding and justification of our own practices and taken-for-granted assumptions. In another way, understanding how other systems of education are organised, and to what effect, may spark new or creative ideas for our own system, the feasibility of which may be judged through cultural filters posing questions such as – could such policies and practices work effectively in our culture? If not, what would need to be changed in order to make them work? If the dangers of cultural borrowing (eg. Forestier et al. 2016) are avoided, the appeal to governments is apparent. For example, the policy formulation stage can be shortened, so that governments and policy makers may focus more speedily on implementation. Contrariwise, ill-considered policy formation that excludes stakeholder involvement/consultation may impede implementation. For system policy makers, formulating and adopting policies that have global or international popularity, may give them some reassurance that they are in line with global trends, especially if exporting systems are seen as world leading, such as Finland or Singapore (Alexander 2012). Nonetheless, the main argument here is that a comparative approach, especially a cross-cultural and contextual perspective, is likely to refine educational leadership as a field of research and practice – given that the bulk of western scholarship in the field has tended to underplay it in the past.

In sum, the key conditions for connecting educational leadership research in the West and Asia are that studies need to be –

- authentic, using cultural and cross-cultural approaches.
- holistic, in taking into account both cross-cultural similarities and differences, and setting leadership within its social milieu.
- valid, methodologically rigorous, and holistic in comparing policies and practices across school systems.

Before elaborating on these conditions, a range of different types or forms of culturally grounded studies appear feasible and desirable to advocate.

### ***Types of cross-cultural studies advocated***

While it is argued that cultural- and particularly cross-cultural-based studies have good potential for comparative purposes, a range of approaches exists to create a coherent and joined-up global research approach in educational leadership? They are sketched in the following section.

### ***Cross-cultural leadership studies for connecting knowledge bases***

Four main types of cross-cultural leadership study are advocated. Together they cover a broad range of contributions and offer scholars considerable scope to reflect not just their personal interests, expertise and skills in regard to educational leadership, but also key trends that are ubiquitous and at the forefront of recent developments in the field. The four types of cross-cultural comparative studies are listed below and subsequently elaborated:-

- *Type 1: Meta studies* based on large data sets, such as PISA, that include a wide range of data – with some relationship to leadership – and which enable exploration of generic questions and complex problems across more than one education system.
- *Type 2: Socio-educational studies* that explore leadership in connection with their social milieu, including families and social welfare organisations; these studies emphasise the contextual and social environment within which leadership takes place and with which it interacts, and by which it is influenced. They address many of the key issues confronting school leadership going forward, such as the equity and attainment gaps between students and families, and embrace globally trending issues such as the growing mental health and welfare of students.
- *Type 3: System reform and renovation studies* that are based on present initiatives being taken by governments to improve their education systems in an economically competitive world – initiatives aimed at reforming multiple aspects of schooling, including the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and professional development, and securing greater equity; significantly, devolution, more school autonomy and school-level leadership are often viewed by such reform initiatives as key instruments for implementing these multiple changes at school level. Examples include a wide range of governmental reform policies such as those presently in systems as diverse as Scotland, Vietnam and China.
- *Type 4: Indigenous studies* of educational leadership – emanating from within each social community and societal culture – that start from a

*tabula rasa* (that is, uninfluenced by existing Western research on leadership) – and generate their own emergent concepts and theories that authentically reflect their leaders' and leadership practices *en situ*. Such studies tend to be anthropologically-based in nature and methodology.

Each of the four types has its relative merits as recognised below.

Type 1 Meta studies involve the analysis of educational leadership as part of large scale data generated by, for example, international achievement tests, such as OECD's PISA. There are few if any such large data bases exclusively devoted to educational leadership, hence these large data sets can provide rich veins to mine even though they are principally aimed at other objectives, such as comparing student test results internationally. Caution is necessary, however, when primary data sets are mined for secondary data that was not primarily collected for that purpose (Smith 2008). Dangers of naïve empiricism and reductionism need to be avoided (Dimmock and Tan 2015). Furthermore, international achievement test data, its analysis and interpretation, are not without their critics, including those concerning the methodology used (Stewart 2016). Nonetheless, PISA type data, if analysed rigorously and critically can generate large scale empirical evidence (see Dimmock and Tan 2015). A further attraction is that the data sets themselves enable investigation of 'hot topics' and salient problems of huge appeal to politicians, policy makers, bureaucrats and researchers. These include such researchable questions as – Is there a generic pathway to success for all systems, or must each system follow its own high performance trajectory? What part does leadership and school autonomy play in

system and school performance in different countries? Is it possible to secure both quality and equity in high performing school systems?

These meta studies would undoubtedly help fill an important gap in the educational leadership literature – namely, large empirical, evidence-based studies linking leadership to system performance and student achievement. Articulation and connection of Western and Asian research is self evident as the PISA data includes a good spread of more than 65 member countries many of which are located in one of these two regions.

Type 2 studies are characterised by leadership joined-up with, and part of, the social milieu. They view leadership as part of a holistic perspective where school organisation, schooling processes and structures, family, home, parenting, and social life, mores and values outside the school, are integrated. They offer a gestalt or comprehensive perspective on school leadership, one that views leadership as part of an eco-system of context and culture interconnected with other within-and-without-school variables and factors. A noteworthy example of this type is the Stevenson and Stigler (1992) detailed comparative, cross-cultural study – *Why our schools are failing and what we can learn from Japanese and Chinese education*. Besides meeting many of the criteria espoused in this paper for more cross-cultural studies, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) set leadership within the larger context of school, home, parenting and social life in China, Taiwan, Japan and America. This is a brilliant type 2 study, which not only involves collaborative cross-cultural research teams, but also champions interdisciplinarity. Future educational leadership research must exploit

interdisciplinarity more if it is successfully to investigate and mitigate societies' problems, such as achievement gaps between children from middle and lower income families. Such complex problems cannot be effectively tackled unless educators, social workers, health professionals and others work collaboratively.

Type 3 studies view leadership as part of national system and global reform – particularly focused on policy implementation. In response to globalisation and intensification of international economic competition, and the emergence of 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based economies, national governments see educational system reform as the answer to global competitiveness through creating highly-skilled workforces with transversal, soft skills. Typically, as in present Vietnam, governments introduce fundamental and comprehensive reforms to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, professional development and school leadership – in order to transform educational learning experiences of young people. New curricula emphasising applied skills, student-centred teaching methods, formative assessment, more school-based teacher professional development, and school level leadership – characterise this drive to create schools as 21<sup>st</sup> century innovative learning communities. These comprehensive reform programmes, however, place a heavy onus on schools to implement multiple changes often with few additional resources provided. Typically – as in Vietnam (Dimmock 2016) – these reform agendas emphasise more devolution, more school autonomy and increased responsibility for school leaders and managers. Yet, in systems like Vietnam, there is little or no prior conception, understanding or tradition of school-based leadership, instructional leadership, and transformational leadership (Hallinger et al. 2017). These predominantly

Western theories and models of leadership practice, when exported to Asia, take on a more global resonance (Hallinger et al. 2017). However, as Dimmock and Tan (2013) argue, prevailing notions of leadership are generally driven by indigenous value systems (eg. Confucianism) and/or political ideology (eg. socialism/communism) that are often anathema to Western practices.

A key issue for policy makers and practitioners is how to reconcile these deeply entrenched indigenous values with new notions of leadership for school improvement and effectiveness (Hallinger et al. 2017). Studies are needed of whether and how such system-wide reforms that seem to be alien to existing cultural traditions, can be adapted or replaced by more sympathetic and sensitive models of practice that are more implementable.

Type 4 studies involve the proliferation of indigenous leadership studies; they start from a *tabula rasa*, that is, with no, or minimal, reference to preconceptions or conceptualisations of educational leadership from other systems (Bajuind 1996). They are, in effect, case studies of leaders and leadership *en situ*. Proponents of this type regard them as authentic and genuine, since they would be based on indigenous cultural settings in Asia. Advocates of this approach reject *a priori* assumptions derived from Western theoretical and conceptual leadership models in arguing for a 'clean slate'. Because they do not rely on leadership theories grounded in other cultures, one of their salient aims is to derive new concepts and build contextualised theory, rather than test it.



The epistemological derivation of Type 4 studies is anthropological – grounded theory methodology being a good example – where it is held that authentic understanding of policies, leadership and leaders’ practices and behaviours can only be truly accomplished when studied in their natural settings (Dimmock and Lam 2012). Narratives of indigenous perspectives of leadership require co-construction between the leaders themselves and researchers, whose skills are needed to tease out subtleties of authentic meanings and concepts (Charmaz 2006).

Clearly, Type 4 studies are heavily reliant on qualitative methods such as observation, interviews and documentary sources. They are potentially exciting, since if executed rigorously, they promise new, original and creative concepts and ways of viewing leadership. Conversely, they demand qualitative skills on the part of researchers in order to expose creative insights and original concepts that capture indigenous practice. A fitting example of such is provided by Rao (2016), who studied distributed leadership in a sample of mainland Chinese schools, and exposed a web of complex forms of formal and informal distributed leadership roles – ‘soul leaders’, ‘backbone teachers’, ‘master teachers’ and ‘master-disciple relationships’ – to capture fundamental differences from Western concepts.

Overall, the assumption made for Type 4 studies is that their development and adoption represent entirely original and refreshing indigenous approaches to leadership, which advance the field by offering potential to develop more indigenous Asian concepts of educational leadership. The resulting heterogeneity

and diversity would help create a richly diverse global leadership knowledge base. In this respect, connecting Western and Asian educational leadership and knowledge is not aimed at more homogeneity in concepts between the two regions – rather, it is predicated on more authentic, refined and differentiated concepts emerging from studying leadership within diverse cultural settings. It is also dependent on the adoption across both regions of research methods that are rigorous, as argued below.

### **Research methods in promoting cross-cultural connections between Asian and Western educational leadership**

Enhanced connectivity between leadership research in the West and Asia aimed at promoting knowledge production and transfer is predicated on researchers and practitioners greater sensitivity to how each uses language/terminology, and on rigorous methodology. In terms of language of communication, English dominates the educational leadership field, as it does most other disciplines and subjects. Asian research on educational leadership published in English connects more easily to Western research. However, there is a considerable Chinese language literature on educational leadership, about which little is known in the West. Conversely, the reverse is also the case. Closer research connectivity depends on investing in translation services - Chinese research into English, and vice versa. The major publishing houses need to accept more responsibility for achieving this, but also universities, too, with language experts available.

Besides the importance of overcoming language as a barrier to communication, it is fundamentally important to ensure that research on educational leadership – in both Asian and Western contexts – is conducted rigorously and robustly, adhering to similar standards, processes and procedures. In this regard, the following issues are important:

- Wherever feasible, researchers in Asian and Western educational leadership contexts should agree on similar research agendas and problems, aims, goals and research questions; in other words, connectivity is promoted by agreeing generic research agendas.
- A greater awareness of the benefits that can flow from cross-cultural research is needed to provide stronger justification for pursuing such studies in overcoming prevailing ethnocentrism.
- More judicious use of theories, concepts and definitions of key terms (including 'culture' itself) is needed – especially the application of cross-cultural dimensions (such as Hofstede's 1991 well cited work) that are useful in enabling cross-cultural comparisons; and lastly, sensitivity to differences of meaning attributed by different societies to the same concept, such as 'distributed leadership' and 'school-based leadership'.
- More robust literature reviews are needed that embrace studies from both Asian and Western contexts that focus on the same generic research questions, adopt more evaluative, critical standpoints, and are more contextually and culturally sensitive than at present.
- More rigorous methodologies with a wide range of approaches, quantitative and mixed method, case studies, and grounded theory

projects, with more valid and reliable instruments of data collection and analysis.

- More insightful, nuanced interpretations of findings and discussions of implications would also highlight the value and outcomes of cross-cultural comparative research; this includes, for example, emphasising the culture- and context-specific aspects, and drawing out the cross-cultural similarities and differences between and within Asian and Western systems.
- Finally, as indicated earlier, a research strategy is needed, starting with large baseline studies, subsequently moving to case studies and interventions.

## **Conclusion**

A cross-cultural comparative approach has been promoted in this paper as a means of achieving greater connectivity between Asian and Western educational leadership research. It has advocated such an approach primarily for two contrasting reasons: first, to create a universal/global knowledge base, and second, to reveal the ethno-centric nature of the dominant anglo-western centric paradigm. It is argued that, paradoxically, the likelihood of achieving a global knowledge base is enhanced the more research overcomes its tendency to display narrow ethnocentrism. That is, a major feature of a comparatively informed universal knowledge base is the awareness of the socio-cultural embeddedness of educational leadership. Realisation of the research agenda being advocated would undoubtedly transform and refine the field of educational leadership, and especially its comparative dimension. Not only

would it bring researchers from the West and Asia closer together as professional cadres, it would hopefully promote collaboration and closer understanding. Furthermore, in raising awareness of the inaccuracies that sometimes originate in the narrow ethnocentrism of the dominant Anglo-western paradigm of educational leadership research, it would help convince researchers of the potential benefits and beneficiaries of cross-cultural comparative research, as well as the methodological and practical dangers of mis-interpretation of results and findings that can sometimes result. Above all, it would contribute significantly to achieving Hallinger and Kovacevic's (2019, 25-26) aim of "securing a knowledge base that reflects the global diversity of educational administration practices.....and producing a cross-culturally valid knowledge base with global relevance".

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