CHAPTER 12

WHAT WE LEARNED: A BROAD VIEW

KENNETH LEITHWOOD AND CHRISTOPHER DAY

INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter we revisit the main themes addressed in Chapter I synthesizing evidence about these themes reported in the intervening nine chapters. In many cases, this new evidence confirms the results of earlier research. But new insights have been uncovered by our evidence, as well. Broadly framed by Figure 1 in Chapter I these themes concerned successful principal leadership practices, factors giving rise to such practices, along with features of the principals’ environments that both mediate and moderate their effects on student learning. In addition, our research was intended to clarify similarities and differences in the beliefs and behaviors of successful school principals across national cultures, especially in response to the pervasive accountability policies in which most principals find themselves.

The Nature of the Evidence

Chapter I concluded with a discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of qualitative leadership research. To what extent, we asked, is this form of research pursued on a large scale, as in the case of our project, capable of addressing the limitations of qualitative research as it is typically pursued (i.e., on a small scale and often without much coordination across studies). We return to the five limitations of such research identified in Chapter I and consider how well the chapters in this book, as a whole, have addressed those limitations.

Is the work cumulative? Often qualitative leadership research consists of “one-off” studies guided by unique perspectives which are not revisited in subsequent studies by the original researchers or others who might follow. The chapters provide encouraging signs of progress in addressing this limitation. Such progress seems
primarily due to the development of multiple cases, over time, by each country team. This has allowed for ongoing refinement of ideas and data collection techniques, eventually resulting in the cross-case reports appearing in the book chapters. These chapters have provided some indication, as well, that researchers are beginning to build on the work of their colleagues in other countries. Reference to a similar frame for describing leadership practices in most of the chapters is an example.

Qualitative research is often justified as “grounded theory” development, thereby lessening the pressure to build on previous evidence. Indeed, such evidence sometimes is actively put aside because it is viewed as a constraint on conceptual progress. But English-language research has now produced at least some useful evidence about many key aspects of principal leadership, as well as its causes and consequences. Does the research reported in the chapters build on this evidence? We are making progress on a broken front on this matter. Several chapters primarily draw on frameworks and ideas from other fields to make sense of their data (e.g., see the use of “communicative rationality” in Chapter 7). This can have significant advantages to a field of study when more established frameworks in the field are explicitly considered, self-consciously put aside and reasons for adopting quite different frameworks and ideas are provided.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of typical forms of qualitative research is its lack of external validity. A major justification for the ambitious number of cases included in the first phase of our international project was the possibility of producing combined results strong on both internal and external validity. The number of cases developed by some of our country teams begins to approximate sample sizes not uncommon in quantitative research. This is most obvious for the English team. So we are “nibbling” at the lower edges of external validity within countries. But “representing” school leadership within even one country is not something most quantitative leadership research does very well, either. In combination with the large-scale quantitative evidence we are in the midst of collecting as this book is being completed, we will be in a better position than most other projects, to depict the general tendencies associated with successful leadership within and across the countries included in the international project. But achieving very high levels of representativeness or generalizability is likely an unrealistic goal unless we are surprised by the lack of variation in our data.

Have key variables been appropriately manipulated? We cannot claim to have broken new ground on this typical limitation of qualitative leadership studies. The number of cases that are possible, even in a large project of this sort, does not permit the degree of manipulation required to form conclusions considered “robust” by conventional quantitative standards, in any event. The chapters do, for example, identify many potential leadership antecedents and moderators, as we point out below. Indeed, the chapters even explicitly inquire about the consequences for leadership of variation in some of these factors. But systematic manipulation of variables has been very difficult to do largely because of the number of cases. It may be more productive in future qualitative leadership studies to sample leaders and schools, holding the status of key variables (such as school level) constant rather