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Organizational Cohesiveness for International School Leadership Teams: Implications and Considerations

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Abstract

The effectiveness of a leadership team is central to the overall effectiveness of the school. Leadership teams that collectively attend to actualizing instructional goals, building relationships and developing the culture of the school often find success in their efforts (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, some leadership teams struggle to develop this concerted level of organizational cohesiveness. This study investigated how teacher leaders' organizational cohesiveness supports the instructional goals of the school. Findings highlight how the team's struggles were rooted in school leadership dynamics, unresolved priority differences and ambiguity in roles and responsibilities.

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The work of the school leader is complex and ever changing. However, one aspect of a leader's work continually centers on ensuring the viability of quality education programs within their building. Some of this work centers on aligning and developing cohesive curricula, tracking data to monitor students' academic progress and well-being, and developing the instructional practices of their teachers (Bennett et al., 2017). However, this work is not typically done in isolation and is not the responsibility of one person (Fullan, 2014); it is a collective effort often requiring internal and external expertise to actualize the intended outcomes.

Leadership teams, often consisting of principals, curriculum experts, the school director and sometimes instructional specialists or counsellors, are frequently created to drive the work of the school; collectively, the success of this team is rooted in the effective practices, behaviors, and beliefs of the individual leaders (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, within an international context, the diversity, cultural perspectives and beliefs, along with past experiences as a teacher and teacher leader also have an influence on the overall work of this team (Pearce, 2013). Likewise, the effectiveness of this team also relies on cultural understandings, shared leadership approaches, mutual respect, and supportive and clear guidance from the senior leadership on the effectiveness of their work (Wang et al., 2014). That is, effective leadership teams purposefully reflect on their own work and the school director is central to providing this feedback (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). It is this collective, organizational cohesiveness (Salas et al., 2015) that creates a strong leadership team that can then actualize the goals they set for themselves as a team and for the school as a whole.

However, this organizational cohesiveness is not a given even when each member of the team, despite their individual expertise and past international education experiences,

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approaches the work independently or in a disjointed manner. That is, the professional culture of the leadership team, the way in which they work as a unified team with common goals, clear expectations, and a mutual sense of respect and responsibility matters greatly (Hawkins, 2021). Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand how teacher leaders' organizational cohesiveness supported the instructional goals of the school.

Literature Review

International schools

International schools have a long history of serving families and communities across the world to provide a global perspective to students. But with the increasing number of international schools opening, 42% of hired teachers by 2030 will come from newly created positions (UNESCO, 2024), there is also a growing need for different kinds of teacher leaders, such as principals, curriculum coordinators and school directors to fill these key leadership positions.

Globally, the rate at which these schools are growing is directly related to the increase in the number of students who attend international schools, which currently is near five million students; projections indicate this number could be in excess of eight million students within less than five years (Bunnell et al., 2016). In some regions of the world the growth at which new schools are built is tremendous. For example, within the United Arab Emirates, the growth in the number of students attending private international schools in the last decade increased by nearly 4% each year since 2015; from 2010 to 2014 it was closer to 9% (Knowledge & Human Development Authority, 2021). This increase in schools creates a demand to hire school leaders, many of whom become part of a larger team of school leaders with their own unique, cultural experiences and perspectives on school improvement (Bunnell, 2018).

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The philosophical beliefs, curricular structures, and instructional approaches of international schools can be as diverse as the students in the schools and the backgrounds of the school leadership (Bunnell et al., 2016). International schools often adopt a philosophy based on a particular nation's curricula, such as Australia, Great Britain, India, or America. That curriculum then centers on nuanced instructional techniques and beliefs about how to support teaching and learning. And just because a school has adopted a particular curricular structure and standards, such as an American approach with American educational standards, the challenges the leaders and teachers face are still different than schools based in America (Halicioglu, 2015).

The cultural diversity and varied professional backgrounds of school leaders means that they are likely part of a leadership team that may not have aligned beliefs with regard to teaching, learning, and leading within the school. When the individual leaders have varied educational beliefs, cultural approaches to education, and instructional approaches to improving educational outcomes, the sociocultural ways in which these leaders approach school improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of their efforts can be impacted (Bunnell, 2018; Pearce, 2013). In essence, the international and cultural context has a substantial impact on school leaders and the ways in which they function as a collaborative and effective team.

Effective leadership teams

The effectiveness of a leadership team is not based on any one set of variables or criteria; many different things can make for high functioning and highly effective teams. However, the research base continues to highlight the importance of the collective professional culture of the team and its influence on the overall culture of the school (Leithwood et al., 2020) and the ways in which the individual's expertise can be leveraged

in a more shared leadership approach (Wang et al., 2014). Essentially, each of these areas represents a key structural element that is needed for the team, and thus the school, to reach its goals.

Leadership Team Culture

The culture of an organization is one of the most important aspects, if not the most important (MacNeil et al., 2009), to the overall success and functionality of the organization. In fact, as Leithwood et al. highlight (2004), it is the first thing a leader should understand, as it will impact the work of the different teams and thus the efforts of the leaders to create change within such a dynamic system. Schools, as complex dynamic systems, are no different. In fact, Turan and Bektas (2013) support this claim and extend it to others within the school; culture depends on cohesive and well aligned beliefs between leadership and the teachers. This also means attending to the culture of the various teams that support the mission and vision of the school, which includes the leadership team itself. Attention to the culture of the leadership team is paramount. The leadership team needs to be consistent in its purpose, be committed to supporting the efforts of all individuals so there is individual and collective success, communicate clearly within and beyond the team, and emotionally support the team to increase morale and thus their overall effectiveness leading school improvement initiatives (Hawkins, 2021). Essentially, the cohesiveness of the leadership team and the way in which they develop their own organizational culture sets the tone for the other teacher and teacher leadership teams within the school.

The overall culture of a school, as an extension of the culture of the leadership team, is also one of the key factors that influences teachers' and administrators' professional satisfaction and well-being (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015). Again, the culture of the leadership team and the consistency in their work, especially given the often-high rates of turnover within international schools (Stout, 2015), is imperative as they can provide

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consistency with programs and initiatives. Without the leadership team's longitudinal commitments to the school, including the historical knowledge and personnel insights, sustaining school improvement initiatives can be challenging at best as, to many in the school, it can feel like starting over every few years (Rosenberg et al., 2015). This means that keeping a philosophically unified, pedagogically progressive, and cohesive leadership team is necessary for establishing the larger school culture.

Shared leadership

There are many different definitions of leadership and many different philosophical and practical ways in which people and teams can lead (Wang et al., 2014). However, some of these approaches are far less effective and no longer fit current practices, constructs, or situations in today's schools (Fullan, 2014). Essentially, the demands on principals have increased over the years and it is not practical for principals to lead all aspects of the work in schools; there simply is not time nor individual expertise for one person to take on. Additionally, this level of micro-management from a school director is not healthy for the collective culture of the school (Lewis et al., 2016). Collectively, it is the efforts of all school leaders within the leadership team to contribute to the well-being and success of the school and help develop a positive and healthy school culture. This speaks to the importance of a shared leadership approach within and beyond leadership teams.

Shared leadership, understood to be the belief that individuals within a team distribute the leadership tasks to meet the collective goals of the organization, represents a fundamental shift from a traditional top-down and authoritarian leadership style (Dresher et al., 2014). Shared leadership assumes that it is not likely one person will possess all of the desired knowledge, skills, and needed behaviours to effectively lead a team and the school, but rather it is built on the premise that various leaders, due to their inherent strengths collectively contribute to the school's growth and improvement. This does not

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mean there is no central leader, but that a team can be developed to influence the work of the larger organization as a whole (Bergman et al., 2012) from a more collective, inclusive, and ground-up approach.

However, creating a team and stating that it will have a shared leadership approach is not enough. If an authoritarian leadership style persists, with top-down structures that functionally leaves the ultimate power and decision making in the hands of one person, the toxicity of this team can increase and lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, collaboration, collegiality, and team effectiveness (Alanezi, 2022). When this happens, the overall cohesion and effectiveness of the team is in jeopardy.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to better understand how teacher leaders' organizational cohesiveness supported the instructional goals of the school. This study used a grounded theoretical approach (McMillan, 2015) as significant emphasis was placed on the interpretations and meaning that school leaders had towards improving the instructional programs and practices as situated within an international school context. As such, multiple data sets were collected over a four-year period, drawing from semi-structured interviews, reflections from school leaders, as well as field notes and observations from the research team.

Limitations

While this study is limited in its scope and context with one school and its international context, Hallinger (2018) indicates attention to context is a key element in understanding leadership and school change. Furthermore, with AIS being a new school when initial data sources were being collected, there was much in terms of policies and

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procedures that had not been well established. This, too, may have influenced the organizational cohesiveness of the team in ways that may not be apparent in the data. Likewise, all participants on the leadership team had the same nationality and most had little to no prior experience working within international schools. Again, the cultural implications, as highlighted by Halicioglu (2015) may have led to conditions and perspectives that influenced the effectiveness of the leadership team. As such, these limitations greatly reduce the interpretations that can be made and the relevance to other international school contexts.

Context and Participant

This study took place at a private American curriculum school, within a small country located in the Middle East, which will be called the American International School (AIS). The school is relatively new, being open for approximately ten years and serving students from preschool through high school. At the primary level, there are about three classrooms per grade with about 1,000 students enrolled across all primary and secondary grades. Even though the school is considered an American curriculum school that focuses on curriculum and standards from the United States, there are over 40 different nationalities represented in the student body and approximately half of these students are English language learners, meaning English is not their first language.

At the time of this study, the leadership team at AIS consisted of one principal and one assistant principal per building which were structured by primary, middle, and secondary grades, as well as the director of curriculum and the school director. At times, other teacher leaders, such as instructional specialists and/or external consultants, attended these leadership meetings to provide input on specific projects but they were not part of the core team. All members of this leadership team were from the United States and had administrative credentials from the United States with substantial experience working in the United States as principals, district superintendents, and/or curriculum directors. The only exception to this

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was the primary principal, who was a United States citizen and was educated in the United States and obtained leadership certification while in there, but who had only worked internationally. Some of the leadership team had been at AIS for only two years whereas others had worked at AIS for as many as seven years, with only the director having been at AIS since it opened. Lastly, all members of the leadership team began their careers as teachers and thus had some understanding of the instructional work of teachers from a practical and lived perspective.

Data and Data Analysis

Over the course of the four years, the research team, who worked with the school as consultants due to their expertise in mathematics education and science education, worked with the leadership team to support their efforts to improve learning in mathematics and science. The research team collected data through observations, conversations with the leadership team and other teacher leaders, documents such as school-developed curricular maps and pacing guides, professional learning interactions, and semi-structured interviews. The researchers visited the school three to four times a year, with each visit lasting an entire school week. Weekly schedules varied for each researcher and for each visit but generally included several hours working with leadership teams, supporting other teacher leaders such as instructional coaches, conducting observations to gauge various teams' growth in meeting their respective goals, and providing tailored professional learning workshops for different groups. After each day, and throughout each week-long visit, the research team would meet to compare and discus field notes. These notes were shared between the research team to consider common themes that arose during each week-long visit to align efforts and support challenges.

Additionally, and immediately after each week-long visit, an independent summary of findings was written by each researcher to accurately record successes in meeting the

leaderships' goals; on-going challenges faced by the leadership team, teacher leaders, and teacher teams; and recommended actions to build upon the strengths or further support the challenges. All summaries, from all visits, were shared with the AIS leadership team to ensure accuracy. At the completion of the study these extensive written summaries were independently coded by each researcher to better understand common themes related to the decision making process used by the leadership team and the actions taken to support instructional change in the classroom. The researchers then met to come to consensus on the themes, which were then used to develop questions for the follow-up semi-structured interviews.

For the semi-structured interviews, they were recorded, transcribed and again openly coded by each member of the research team. Upon completion of the open coding, the research team met again to discuss common themes and address any variations or discrepancies in our findings. Once the research team agreed upon the themes, a second analysis of the interview data was conducted, but this time using Leithwood and colleague's (2020) effective leadership practices framework. This framework focuses on four key areas of effective leadership practices: 1) Setting the direction of the school, 2) building relationships and developing people, 3) developing the culture and practices of the school, and 4) improving the instructional program. This framework provided another perspective around which to consider the data given the grounded theoretical approach. Given the focus of this study which centered on improving the teaching and learning of mathematics and science, only the fourth area was considered as it provided additional clarity and context to the data and the research teams' interpretations (Deggs, & Hernandez, 2018).

Findings

For the purpose of this paper, findings focus only on how the organizational cohesiveness at AIS impacted the work of the leadership and the teacher leaders within the

school to support the instructional programs of the school. Throughout the interviews, and well documented in the researchers' field notes, the findings were consistent in highlighting the overall ineffectiveness of this team because of three primary issues, despite their shared wish to improve instruction. These three emergent themes centered on the influence of the school director on the leadership team, despite not having an explicit role in curriculum development or instructional support for teachers. The second theme centered on the philosophical misalignment of priorities among the leadership team; there were substantial variation in where they believed they should focus their instructional improvement efforts. Lastly, there was much confusion around the leadership teams' respective roles and responsibilities with supporting and developing the academic programs. Collectively, and despite the past experiences of the individual members of the leadership team, the team often struggled to operate in an efficient and collective manner to accomplish many of the instructional or programmatic goals they established.

Director's Influence

Throughout the interviews there, and well documented in the researchers' field notes, was a consistent message about the overall ineffectiveness of this team because of authoritarian practices from the most senior leadership, which resulted in a lack of influence for most other people on this team, a misalignment of philosophies, and unclear understandings of the various roles and responsibilities of members on this team. Collectively, and despite the past experiences of the individual members of the leadership team, they were not able to operate in an efficient and collective manner to accomplish many of the goals the school set.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of this dysfunction came from the director of the school, who was often inconsistent in communicating her vision and yet simultaneously harshly critical of others' ideas and highly demeaning to the other school leaders. One

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principal stated "I've never seen a leadership style like this where she likes total control. She's a micromanager and she lacks trust in her leadership team." Other principals and school leaders commented that there was always tension between the director and the principals because the principals were unsure how the director would react or respond to feedback and ideas. "It's almost dealing with somebody that was psychotic at the top, and everybody dancing around them. But it didn't matter, because she held all the power." The leadership team was frequently reminded that what they were doing was not good enough and that their ideas did not matter; "it was like 'I just told you to do it because I said it and I know best, and I don't want to hear what you think,'" reflected one principal on how the director often approached decisions during these leadership meetings. During one two-year period, a major focus for this team was to develop a better teacher evaluation system, as they functionally had no reliable means of helping teachers understand their instructional effectiveness. Eventually, they created a walkthrough protocol and heuristic to help guide this evaluation process, only to have the director verbally tear apart the plan and make the team feel incompetent. "We made those decisions, together, principals and assistant principals [but] ultimately, what would happen is, we would take that plan [to the director], and it would just get completely annihilated." When asked if the director valued supporting that leadership team and helping them grow as leaders, the response from the leadership team members was a resounding "no."

From a curriculum and instruction standpoint, the authoritarian approach from the director also caused confusion and frustrations for the curriculum department. One example of this comes from the school's choice of mathematics textbooks. The curriculum director wanted to move to a more problem-solving approach and center students' learning on reasoning and sense making, but the director wanted a very traditional textbook that focused on learning discrete skills and memorization of facts; aspects of mathematics that matter, but

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matter far less than the central and essential skills of critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving when learning mathematics. Despite the research on teaching and learning mathematics, interim data on mathematics achievement, and feedback from external consultants, the director did not approve the textbook adoption proposal; "I mean, she tried to rip it apart three ways from Wednesday, but I wouldn't expect anything less from her. That's just her personality." And while the curriculum department was trying to create more streamlined instructional units and resources for teachers, and being told to "do more with less and do it better," it was often difficult to make headway on any initiative because "there's always agendas that come down." Over the course of this study, this was a common and recurring theme, "everything just flows down. From an instructional standpoint, that's not a good thing."

Furthermore, the teachers also felt the gravity of this authoritarian leadership style in their work. As early as the first day of the teachers' contract, wherein they attended an all-staff meeting, the director wanted to "put the fear of God in everyone." One teacher leader reflected, with frustration in their voice, "yes, everybody knows that you run [AIS], but it doesn't have to be with a heavy hand. Because, when you stand up in front of all of your faculty and staff and say, 'Y'all can leave. If you want to, I don't need you;'" it sets a bad tone for the year to come. And given the frequent change in priorities, teachers were often presented with new initiatives, such as tracking different data or providing new support systems and intervention classes to various groups of students, and new teaching practices or resources that were to be implemented immediately. One teacher leader commented "You would walk in on Monday and it was like, 'We're doing this today.' And then on Thursday it was totally different. It was like, 'Whoa, wait a minute. I know we do things differently here, but there's no connection here. Can you explain?' And there's not an explanation given." Such actions were observed on several occasions and one teacher leader shared their

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frustration because there were no opportunities for collaboration on these practices, initiatives, or decisions, and they knew their job was at stake if they could not get their teachers to implement these new agendas; "get on board or move on" they were told.

Eventually, this "heavy handed" non-shared leadership approach led several of the school leaders to reconsider staying at AIS. One principal indicated "despite all the stress, and it's probably the hardest job I've had, and I've cried the most, and the only thing that gets me through some days is just envisioning that I'm leaving this place someday." The depth and complexity of this statement, about enduring a highly unprofessional, unsupportive, and emotionally stressful work environment, captures the personal difficulties the leadership team faced; it is difficult to think about making meaningful instructional change if one is focused on leaving. Another held similar thoughts and knew that this style of leadership would only make the process of school improvement and team building across positions difficult. "Everything that was above me was top down. And it doesn't work. And I knew it didn't work. And so, the reason why I knew I couldn't stay was because what was being peddled was not something that I believed in."

Aligned Priorities

There were also differences between the other members of the leadership team specifically as it related to aligned priorities for school improvement and supporting their respective teachers. For example, some of the principals wanted the leadership team to have common goals for themselves and to develop their shared leadership practices; practices that can help build a collective sense of culture, professional respect, and student achievement across grades but others did not see a need for this as they wanted to only focus on their own agendas. "I don't believe that as a leader, I should be building my capacity on what's just going to make me a better leader" stated one principal, which was also in direct contrast to their own belief that they should have aligned goals and efforts, "I really don't think we're

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moving anywhere together or we have a real solid plan of how we can move together. It's kind of every man to himself, what interests you."

At times, the leadership team would want to move in a particular direction to improve teaching and learning, and sometimes they would even agree with the broader project, like revising their teaching evaluation system, but would hold vastly different beliefs on how this should be done. For example, and with respect to the evaluation system, one principal wanted a more holistic approach that would incorporate various kinds of data, whereas others wanted a simple digital form with check boxes that could be completed quickly and easily. Yet, there were often major misunderstandings with what "good teaching" even looked like, as was discovered when the entire leadership team observed the same mathematics classrooms. Some commented on how well the students were sitting quietly in their seats, some identified how well the teacher was explaining things, others indicated that only a small few students were being asked to participate, and others indicated that the entire teacher-centric approach provided no evidence of effective teaching. Essentially, their desire to create a common system for evaluation was destined to collapse because the team lacked a clear common vision of good teaching. It was more about checking off their own boxes without understanding the effectiveness or reliability of what they were trying to accomplish; "we don't have a very clear system or habit of looking back on something and saying to ourselves, 'what went well, what didn't and how can we improve?'"

This lack of consistent practices and beliefs was also evident in how the leadership team organized their support and continued professional learning for their teachers. The curriculum department would often schedule professional learning days months to years in advance and create detailed schedules for teachers and the external consultants only to have these schedules changed the day of the professional development workshops because of "things that just come up." Yet, some of these things would be impromptu assemblies,

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"mandatory" attendance at optional student events (i.e. speech and debate tournament), or unscheduled grade-level interim testing; all of which were added to the school calendar after the professional learning days had been established. Given how infrequently these professional learning days could be made available throughout the school year, one principal's decision to do something different created a ripple effect for the collective work for the team. Over time, the inability of the leadership team to act as a cohesive unit in supporting teaching and learning created rifts. One principal indicated "our leadership philosophies are so different, that it's compromising my integrity to be here."

Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

Along with differences in leadership priorities, the specific roles and responsibilities were often unclear, which further exacerbated the effectiveness of the team as a whole. One principal highlighted this as a primary area of confusion and frustration in their work to support teachers; "I think we would be a lot stronger as a team if everybody had their specific lists of tasks and responsibilities; there's just a lot of greyness." Another from the leadership team commented "that's so often what happens here is we're given little jobs to do without clear understanding of what that entails" which then led to some of the principals feeling "it ends up just being a confusing mess sometimes." Essentially, without clear understanding of who was working on what projects, who would be responsible for leading the work, and then clearly understanding what the outcomes of this work would look like, oftentimes multiple people would be trying to do the same thing but in different ways and with different directions for the teachers.

This was often the case between the curriculum department, who was actually tasked with leading curricular and instructional goals across all grades and buildings in order to create a cohesive academic program and common instructional practices (i.e. inquiry-based and project-based learning), and some of the principals. Frequently, some principals would

work on a project that was tasked to the curriculum department but without letting the curriculum department know what they were doing; "our leaders have conflicting personal agendas" stated one principal and "creating [this work] in isolation what they think should happen, was like a big competing force."

In another case, the curriculum department unilaterally launched a new science curriculum without sufficiently engaging the elementary and middle school principals or the teachers. This lack of communication resulted in a missed opportunity to build a shared foundation of understanding of the new program and leading the principals to assume that the implementation work was the responsibility of the curriculum department and did not require their leadership. Following some initial missteps, the principals were brought onboard, and their responsibilities clearly identified. This miscommunication resulted in some delays and setbacks in implementing the new curriculum.

The lack of role clarity resulted in the two groups creating "their own agenda, their own needs assessments separate from what's happening [in the buildings] without seeking feedback from each other." In time, and when each group learned of the other groups' efforts, and oftentimes creating work and directives for teachers that were not aligned, it created tremendous frustration and a sense of resentment. "I wish that people in leadership roles, specifically principals, the people that sit at the leadership table once a week, knew how to stay in their lane" stated one principal because it "created an environment where we can't actually do anything."

Additionally, some on the leadership team did not believe their colleagues were capable of doing some of the things that were tasked with them, meaning others on the team often took over or did the work behind the scenes, which in turn led to greater frustrations and thus impacted the effectiveness of the team, once again. One principal talked about how they were privately tasked with doing something that was actually part of another principal's

duties but being unsure if everyone understood who was now responsible. "I had to keep asking and asking and asking, begging for confirmation, and trying to get someone to just identify what the boundaries were for that position versus what [the other principal] thought her job was." Such ambiguous direction delayed the work that was to be done and thus delayed achieving their goals for the academic year.

Discussion & Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand how teacher leaders' organizational cohesiveness supported the instructional goals of the school. As evidenced in the findings, the leadership teams' ability to move the school's instructional programs forward in meaningful and cohesive ways was greatly inhibited. Specifically, the study identified the influence of the school director, instructional misalignment of priorities amongst the leadership team, and clarity of roles and responsibilities were key components in limiting the team's overall effectiveness.

The role of a school leader in setting the overall working environment has previously been shown to be critical to the success of schools (Bunnell, 2018). The creation of a healthy work relationship amongst the leadership team at AIS was important so that all could effectively and efficiently carry out their responsibilities and feel that the work they do was of value. However, the authoritarian approach taken by the director led to the fracturing of the team. Whether or not the director directly intended this outcome is not known, but as Butler (2020) points out, the perception a staff has of their school leader is an important factor in overall leadership effectiveness. Likewise, Alanezi (2022) indicated this style of leadership can create toxic work environments that further lead to a team's long-term ineffectiveness in meeting individual and collective leadership goals. Without the foundation of a trusting climate at AIS, the ability of the school to achieve its school improvement goals

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was substantially reduced, much of which could have been mitigated with different approaches to leadership.

In addition to the dynamics with the school director, there were also some unresolved priority differences among the members of the leadership team. To be effective, school leaders need to focus their leadership interactions so that they promote a productive school climate, which includes focusing on high performing learning communities and instructional best practices (Grissom et al., 2021). Without a set of understood and shared priorities, and without a shared set of strategic goals the leaders periodically found themselves moving in directions that were counterproductive; similar to Bennett and colleague's findings (2017).

These differences were most pronounced when discussions took place around effective instructional practices and what they looked like when enacted. In some cases, the emphasis was being placed on student engagement, the definition of which was not commonly agreed upon, while in other cases the focus was placed on seeking abundant evidence of instructional alignment to the appropriate standards. Insufficient resources, a mismanagement of their time, and ignored learning opportunities allowed for the priorities to go unaddressed. In turn, the mixed messages sent by the leadership team resulted in a lack of consensus on how to proceed. Again, this speaks to the importance of a strong school director in shaping the conversations and guiding the direction of the work (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018; Manaseh, 2016). While some of this dysfunction may be traced back to the lack of trust ensuing from the interactions with the director, it was still a contributing component to the team being less effective than it might otherwise have been.

Lastly, the importance of clarity about leadership roles and responsibilities goes together with the clearly shared priorities and philosophies. Role clarity centers on having sufficient information regarding the expectations associated within the organization for each of the members in the team. Panaccio and Vandenberghe (2011), claim role clarity is

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important for creating organizational commitment and helps reduce turnover within the organization; both of which matter, given the known dynamics and turnover within international schools (Bunnell, 2018; Stout, 2015). In this study, it was clear that the leadership team, including the director, curriculum director and principals, often lacked the information they needed from each other to function as a highly effective team.

For future research related to school-wide instructional improvements, considerations should be made with respect to the current culture of the leadership team. While much research has focused on the importance of a strong school culture in improving various aspects of the overall functioning of the school, such as professional satisfaction (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015) improving student learning outcomes (Lee & Louis, 2019), and strengthening teachers' collective efficacy (Prelli, 2018), further research in understanding the effectiveness of teams in an international context could be helpful. Given the cultural complexities and interplay between leaders' personal or home culture, the cultural mindsets they bring from past experiences in educational contexts, and the local culture of the international school, understanding the cultural cohesiveness of international school leadership teams could help position school leaders to be more successful in their goals and efforts.

Conclusion

A leadership team's effectiveness is based on a complex set of variables and actions, many of which are of equal importance. However, the role and influence the director of the school has on the overall effectiveness of the leadership team, and the school as a whole, cannot be understated. The ways in which the director impacts the culture of the leadership team, the degree to which strong collaborative initiatives take hold and grow, and

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in the degree to which the individual members believe they share a role and responsibility for the successes and setbacks within their shared work, is greatly set by the school director. International schools are vibrant communities; communities of learners and their families, communities of professional educators, and communities of educational leaders all interacting with the local culture. Given the culturally rich complexity of these communities and the influence they have on the institutional effectiveness, it is paramount that school leaders work to develop a respectful and mutually supportive shared leadership environment wherein the director empowers the leadership team to achieve their intended outcomes. Without such structures in place, even the best schools, with the best teachers, and the best resources and learning opportunities, will struggle to be the better place the leadership envisions.

Biographical Notes

Cory A. Bennett is a Professor of Education in the Teaching and Educational Studies Department at Idaho State University. He is interested in international teacher and administrator instructional development, instructional coaching, STEM learning, and comprehensive school improvement.

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Disclosure and Ethics Approval

Approval for this study involving human subjects was granted by the Idaho State University Institutional Review Board, Approval number IRB-FY2016-165. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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