European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on Education for Environmental Sustainability

Input Paper: Leading learning for sustainability: the role of school leaders

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Leading learning for sustainability: the role of school leaders

Input Paper

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1. Introduction[1]

Supporting educators, including school leaders and leadership teams, is among the nine key areas identified in the consultations and research that informed the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development, adopted in June 2022. Participants in the consultation workshops highlighted the need for more and better training and support measures for educational leadership teams in order to meaningfully embed sustainability in education. Training and supporting school leaders matters, because leaders in turn can further support staff and generate a positive organisational culture in relation to sustainability. Leadership support plays a central role in embedding sustainability into education and training and action is therefore needed on a range of leadership-related issues to increase the 'readiness' of schools to engage with issues in ESD and climate change (UNESCO, 2016).

This input paper presents a number of key issues and findings from recent literature on school leadership on sustainability and aims to open discussion on possible policy action in this area.

For the purposes of this paper, school leaders are defined as holding a formal position of responsibility for the management of the school. School leaders are also teachers, as they are also still involved in learner development, both in and out of the classroom. 'School head' is the most senior school leadership position – the person with overall responsibility for the pedagogical and administrative management of the school or cluster of schools. This role might also be referred to as 'head teacher', 'school principal' or 'school director'. They can also be included in the broad definition of 'school leader'.

2. The Nature of School Leadership and Sustainability, its challenges and opportunities

A considerable body of literature now exists on the power and value of well-educated and well-supported school leaders and school leadership teams in terms of impact on school effectiveness and organisational capacity (Day, Sammons, & Gorgen 2020). School leaders are essential for improving school outcomes through motivating and supporting staff, influencing the school climate, culture and environment (Pont et al, 2008). As 'key intermediaries between the classroom, the individual school and the education system as a whole' school leaders link policy and practice as well as their institution to its environment (ibid.). They can foster student learning (ibid.) and drive forward whole-school or whole-institution approaches.

While there is still a considerable research gap regarding the nature and specific requirements of leading schools for sustainability (Verhelst, Vanhoof & Van Petegem 2021), it has become evident that successful leaders of sustainable schools display attributes that characterise effective school leaders in general. In addition, they make sustainability the school's central focus by embedding it in all operations within and outside of the school. It is also typical for leaders of green schools to use sustainability to advance other education agendas, such as improving literacy and numeracy (Jackson, L. et al, 2008), or introducing

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interdisciplinary learning and teaching beyond matters of sustainability (Leo and Wickenberg, 2013).

The following examples of research on school leadership from outside the European context are an invitation to compare, learn, concur or refute – in short openly discuss avenues for 'green' school leadership.

2.1 Green Leadership: a Fijian reading

In the context of Fiji taking action towards combatting climate change by addressing environmental issues at all levels in society – including schools, Ali (2019) puts forward a proposal for 'green leadership'. The study which Ali presents is on a small scale, nevertheless it raises some interesting questions about the type of step-change that school leaders will increasingly have to make as climate change and sustainability increasingly become priority areas for policy.

'Green leadership' is described as having the knowledge concerning climate and sustainability that a school leader needs to have to assist their school to engage with climate action and sustainability, and also the disposition to approach this 'in an interdisciplinary manner' (p.59) and not associate it with any specific subject or area of the school's life.

Ali suggests there is a need for school leaders to embrace a new style of leadership 'that espouses global environmental protection and considers climate change mitigation and resilience' as necessary for schools to become places capable of 'developing and disseminating teaching resources that foster student learning within personal and societal context' (p.66).

This he connects with a gap in leadership training and preparation: a lack of content in leadership programmes on climate change issues so that school leaders are confident and informed enough to tackle the raft of issues relating to 'climate change adaptation and mitigation activities' within the school – both as a 'sustainable' organisation and in terms of the curriculum it offers. Filling this gap in leadership training can help provide school leaders with the 'values needed to understand and create solutions for issues associated with changing climate' (p.66).

2.2 Green Leadership: a Namibian reading

Similarly, in another recently published study which addresses the issue of school leadership and engaging with LfS, Shaimemanya and Shihomeka (2019) make several interesting observations on green school leadership. As with Ali (2019), this is also a small-scale piece of research. It is interesting both for its pragmatic description of the challenges school leadership faces in a country which is seen as among the most vulnerable in the world in terms of climate crisis, and the fact that the work linked to top-level national policy priority - Namibia's 5th National Development Plan (cf: Republic of Namibia, 2017).

The authors argue the need for Namibian school leaders to develop the skills and vision that will allow them to 'green the schools in an effort to achieve sustainability in Namibia and build the environmental knowledge of Namibian secondary school learners' (p. 328).

Drawing from Veronese and Kensler (2013) Shaimemanya and Shihomeka argue that a green school leader needs to be capable of playing six distinct roles: inspirational/motivational/role model, supporter, collaborator, student, instructional leader, and manager/ planner of the sustainability experience provided by the school (p.333). These roles are considered separately and in relation to each other. However, at the schools participating in the study, it was mostly classroom teachers who advanced sustainability by

'coordinating green projects called Environmental Clubs' (p.335) rather than formal school leaders or leadership teams. This points to a weakness within formal school leadership training but also to the potential of delegated or shared leadership.

Based on their research and the literature that informed it, Shaimemanya and Shihomeka (2019) developed the following model of green leadership:
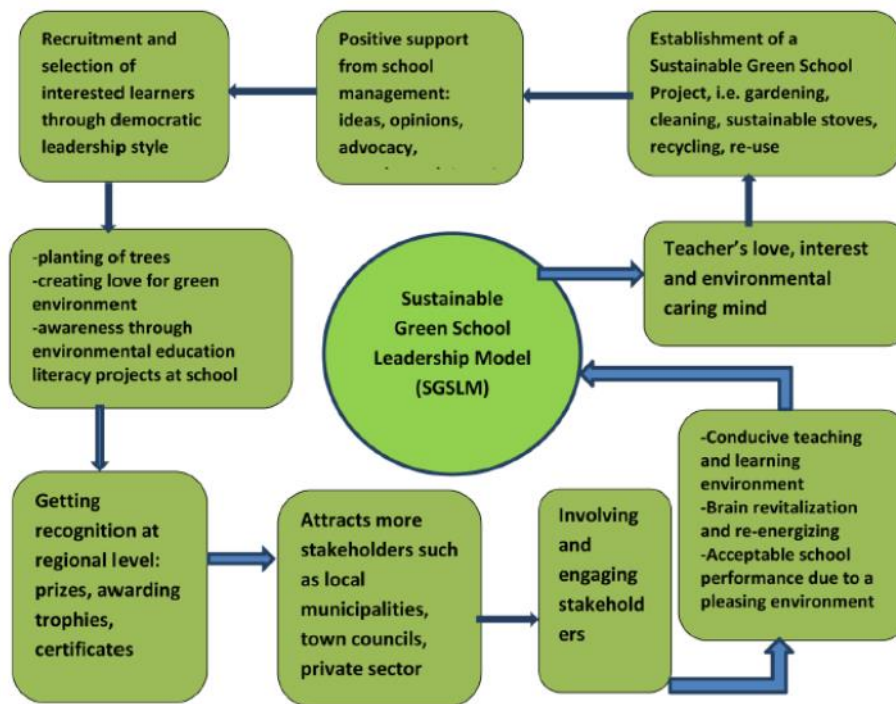
FIGURE 1: Shaimemanya and Shihomeka's model of green leadership

This model of green school leadership represents a valuable addition to the discussion on how to envision the leadership practices of school principals and the many other teachers who engage in leading for greener and more sustainable school practices. However, there are also problematic features.

Some might agree with their claim that the power behind the model rests on a vision of the teacher 'with an interest in sustainability and who possesses an environmental caring mind' (p.336) or their observation that it is not essential for a green leader to have had 'prior environmental experience or exposure to environmental management' that what is more important is 'an eagerness to contribute and create a greener atmospheric environment at school and in the community'(p.337). The notion of leading by example is also recognised elsewhere. School leaders that have, and clearly communicate, a vision for sustainability to learners and staff, implement learning for sustainability more effectively. Communication should not be limited to documents, such as school development plans but be present throughout school life, including in individual encounters such as performance appraisals with teachers (Leo and Wickenberg, 2013).

At the same time, an over-reliance on the enthusiastic teacher or leader puts a burden on single individuals which might become too big in time thereby undermining sustainability efforts by the school if that individual leaves their duties. In addition, such an individualised

and less than whole-of-school approach does not reflect the complexity inherent in sustainability and the resulting need for cooperation and collaboration to address sustainability challenges.

Shaimemanya and Shihomeka (2019) note the need for 'funding to train principals on greening schools so that they can provide the necessary support to the teachers/coordinators of green projects' (p.337). They also argue for a 'closer and healthier collaboration between various stakeholders' which would include not only schools but also bodies such as the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), local municipalities and town councils across all educational regions in Namibia, the Environmental Society and others (p.338).

2.3   Green Leadership: a restoration/ecology centred reading

Taking a different stance from the two studies discussed briefly above are a number of more well-known, conceptual treatments that position green school leadership in terms of a radical 'step-change' away from conventional understandings of 'effective' school leadership. Pre-eminent among these is the restoration/ecology centred vision of green school leadership developed in recent years by Professor Lisa Kensler and Professor Cynthia Uline (Kensler and Uline 2017, 2019; Uline and Kensler 2021). Drawing from the science of sustainability, theory and research in relation to the built learning environment, and a unique understanding of educational leadership, Kensler and Uline present and develop a comprehensive vision for the green school and how it can best be led.

A defining feature of the work is the centrality of Whole School Sustainability to the vision they put forward and the related, practical restorational steps they advocate. They argue that the purpose of school is to help society meet the needs of people and planet in facing the 21st century – at every level from the societal to the individual. This can be achieved, they suggest, by rethinking present school management practices: 'To embrace the notion of schools as living systems, comprised of living beings who are deeply interdependent and embedded in local and global socio-ecological systems, educators must learn new habits of thought and practice' (p. 10).

In Kensler and Uline's vision for the green school, ecological and democratic traditions and principles combine and strengthen each other. In addition, ideas of place, community, and partnerships bring together many of the green school values that Kensler and Uline advocate. 'People-place relationships' are central to this. These relations are explored through the roles schools play in children's development as learners and, in particular, the role school buildings can play in supporting students' learning and well-being – when they offer 'high-quality, dynamic learning environments'. Kensler and Uline make the case for why the provision of such high-quality, sustainable school facilities is in the best interest of students – both for realising their learning potential and for protecting their quality of life.

In sum: by conceptualising green schools as vital ecosystems servicing human learning and positioning schools as living systems and not factories or production units, Kensler and Uline present a compelling vision of the potential for green schools to maximise student learning while at the same time cultivating stronger, healthier local communities and reducing the school's ecological footprint.

3. Some questions for reflection

In preparation for our discussions on school leadership for sustainability, you might consider the following (non-exhaustive) list of questions:

- How does leadership on sustainability in education differ from leadership in general – if at all?

- How important is leading by example?

- How important is it for leaders to have a vision on sustainability education and/or to have and follow through an action plan?

- Is it necessary for school leaders to have good knowledge and understanding of the climate/environmental crises and/or a personal commitment to sustainability to lead the sustainability agenda?

- What role does networking play: among school leaders, within the school, with the whole school community?

- To what extent do school leaders in your context use sustainability to advance other education agendas, such as literacy and numeracy; interdisciplinary learning and teaching; well-being?

- What support, i.e. projects, training schemes or other have been especially helpful and successful in your context?

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