

Title

Developing Equity-Focused Leaders in Support of Educational Excellence in Secondary Schools: A Multiple Qualitative Case Study in Estonia, Ontario, and Taiwan

Research Overview

This qualitative multiple case study examines how Estonia, Ontario, and Taiwan, three high-performing yet structurally distinct systems, prepare secondary school leaders to operationalise equity policies. By analysing governance designs and professional development pathways, this study identifies the systemic conditions that bridge the persistent gap between equity-oriented policy rhetoric and school-level enactment.

Purpose of Study

In the era of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), education systems worldwide are converging on a dual mandate of excellence and equity (OECD, 2023b; UNESCO, 2020). Despite this global prioritisation, educational inequities remain persistently unresolved (United Nations, 2023), and a primary cause is the implementation gap between high-level policy rhetoric and school-level practice (Schleicher, 2018a). Because secondary school leaders are the primary agents navigating the tension between policy and practice, their competencies and developmental trajectories are pivotal to closing the divide (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Leithwood, 2018).

Estonia, Ontario, and Taiwan are recognised as high-performing systems (NCEE, 2023; OECD, 2021a, 2024; Schleicher, 2018b), yet each confronts persistent inequities tied to socio-economic disadvantage and shifting demographics. The three cases are purposefully selected because they differ substantially in governance structures, policy trajectories, and socio-cultural contexts, providing analytic leverage to examine how distinct institutional arrangements cultivate equity-focused leadership.

The research addresses three questions: (1) What jurisdiction-wide visions and policy frameworks shape the recruitment and development of secondary school leaders across the three cases? (2) How are professional development requirements designed and delivered to foster equitable schooling? (3) What systemic supports and obstacles do leaders encounter when promoting educational equity in practice? By directly engaging the conference theme of bridging cultures and co-creating knowledge, the study aims to generate actionable, cross-jurisdictional insights to nurture leaders capable of sustaining equitable educational practices.

Research Methods

Situated within an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this multiple-case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Yin, 2018) integrates two complementary frameworks: the Systemic Factors Influencing School Equity Model (European Commission, 2020), which maps the structural conditions of equitable schooling, and the Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020), which specifies the leadership practices that translate those conditions into school-level outcomes. Their combination enables systemic factors and leadership competencies to be analysed as a coupled system rather than parallel concerns.

The design proceeds through three interconnected phases. **Phase 1** constructs a systematic corpus of national policy mandates enacted between 2000 and 2025, then applies qualitative content analysis (Cohen et al., 2017) using sensitising concepts (Edge et al., 2017) to examine conceptual framing, policy objectives, mechanisms and responsibilities, and qualification and professionalisation (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Longitudinal triangulation with international surveys and reports surfaces implementation gaps and refines the lines of inquiry for subsequent fieldwork. **Phase 2** conducts concurrent semi-structured interviews in each jurisdiction with two policy leaders, two district officials, and three secondary school principals, capturing the micro-political realities of enactment and validating policy intent against practitioner experience. **Phase 3** employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for an integrated cross-case synthesis, with iterative coding examining how distinct regulatory environments mediate global reform pressures and shape equity-focused leadership.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary findings from the completed policy document analysis reveal a profound conceptual shift across all three jurisdictions: equity has been reframed from universal access toward adaptive, inclusive excellence, and the expected role of school leaders has correspondingly intensified from bureaucratic management to proactive instructional and moral agency. Longitudinal triangulation with international datasets, however, exposes two critical implementation gaps: an outcome gap in persistent student learning disparities and a professionalisation gap among leaders themselves. High-stakes mandates such as digital stewardship and inclusive governance are frequently imposed without commensurate support structures, producing a systemic tension in which strategic policy ambitions outpace the operational capacity of the leadership workforce.

Emerging data from the ongoing interview phase further surface institutional obstacles rooted in the friction between rigorous accountability regimes and systemic capacity deficits, illuminating the micro-political strategies leaders employ to navigate practical challenges while exposing structural barriers that exceed school-level authority. The study will translate these findings into evidence-based recommendations for policymakers seeking to recalibrate leadership development frameworks, and into targeted learning cases for frontline practitioners working to close the gap between equity-oriented policy and school-level enactment.

Keywords

- Educational Equity • Secondary School Leadership • Leadership Professional Development
- Cross-jurisdictional Policy Analysis • Policy Enactment