

## **How different are we? Globalisation and the perceptions of leadership challenges in England and Hong Kong.**

**Mike Bottery**

University of Hull

Corresponding author: [m.p.bottery@hull.ac.uk](mailto:m.p.bottery@hull.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

*This article argues that one of the effects of a globalisation of difference forces is upon the conceptualisation and functioning of education. One of the ways of examining such transformations is to ask educational leaders if they feel that the challenges they are having to deal with are changing, and in what ways. This article then does four things. First, it provides definitions of leadership and culture before describing a number of globalising forces which are having significant effects upon educational systems. Second, it reviews empirical research being conducted in England and Hong Kong on the challenges that School Principals believe affect them at the present time and argues that this globalising background provides part of the reason for these Principals' perceptions of their challenges. Third, it provides conceptual and practical links between these globalising tendencies and Principals' practice. Finally it argues that these forces may well be having a 'flattening' tendency, leading to a reduced influence of cultural factors on leadership challenges.*

### **Introduction**

It has become commonplace to say that we live in a globalised age: western involvement in middle eastern countries, the re-location of jobs to parts of the world where labour is cheaper, government ministers embarking on fact-finding missions to see how they do things in other countries: these are all examples of the fact that we live in a more accessible, more visible, and more interconnected world than previously. Yet whilst some of the larger effects of this are recognised, some of the more subtle ones may be missed. This article will argue that one of these is the conceptualisation and functioning of education. This is important because if our educational systems are being transformed and we are unaware of the direction of this transformation, we may end up, educationally and societally, going down roads we did not ask to go down, and arrive at destinations we do not wish to reach. One of the ways of examining such transformation is to ask educational leaders if they feel that the challenges they are having to deal with are changing, and in what ways.

This article then will do four things. First, it will provide some reasonably brief definitions of leadership and culture, before describing a number of globalising forces which are having significant effects upon educational systems. Second, it will review some empirical research being conducted in England and Hong Kong on the challenges that school Principals believe affect them at the present time, and argue that this globalising background provides part of the reason for these Principals' perceptions of their challenges. This article will then attempt to provide conceptual and practical links between these globalising tendencies and Principals' practice. Finally it will argue that these forces may well be having a 'flattening' tendency, leading to a reduced influence of cultural factors on leadership challenges.

To begin with, then, some preliminary definitions of terms used in this article are required. Three will be discussed: those of 'leadership', 'culture', and 'globalisation'

### **Leadership**

There is now a massive literature on leadership in the educational field. Conceptually, it may well have outstripped the business field from which much of it derives, in the sense that whilst both moved from an advocacy of an individualistic transactional conception of leadership to a similarly individualistic one of transformational leadership, educational writers have in the last few years argued for a more 'distributed' element to the practice of leadership in schools (see Spillane et al., 2000; Gronn, 2003 and Harris, 2003). This appeal seems to stem from both idealistic and pragmatic motives. The idealistic suggests that this is a better way of realising democracy and citizenship in schools. The pragmatic recognises that with the massive amount of work now devolved to schools, it becomes increasingly bad management for a headteacher to keep such decision making to him- or herself. It makes more short-term sense to devolve some of these responsibilities to others in the official hierarchy, whilst making longer-term sense in that it helps develop the leadership potential of others.

There is much then to be said for a distributed theory of leadership. However, for the purposes of this article, 'leadership perceptions' will be confined to those of School Principals. This is for three reasons. The first is the focussed nature of the research: it is aimed at understanding the perceptions of those people legally appointed to be the Principal of a school. The second follows from the first: despite calls for more distributed leadership, headteachers/principals still have the legal responsibility of leadership in the school: if things go wrong, it is their neck on the block. In such situations, as confirmed in these interviews, many in this position are wary of going too far, and retain much leadership power which in a more ideal world might be devolved further. The final reason stems from both this research and personal experience: that many headteachers believe they were appointed to the post because they were the best person for the job; if a junior member of staff were as good or better, they would have been awarded the position. Given this, the degree of distributed leadership is dependent on Principals' views of whether particular staff are capable of handling such responsibility, and whether they can keep track of and rescue a situation should such devolution go wrong. The continued central importance of these individuals to the well-being of their schools, and their perceptions of the challenges that they and their schools face, then remain critical issues, because these perceptions will in many cases be core to how a particular school is actually managed.

### **Culture**

'Culture' is no less a problematic term. In its broadest sense, it refers to a shared and common understanding of a particular way of life. However, there are at least four problems of definition: those of level, content, dimension, and homogeneity. A first then is that of *level*: is, for instance, a way of life to be identified as that shared by a small group of people (a football club); an organisation (a school); or a society (England, Hong Kong)? These levels not exhaustive: Hofstede (1994, p.10) proposed six levels: national, regional, gender, generation, social class, and employment socialisation, but adds that 'additions to this level are easy to make.' This article will concentrate on three levels: (i) the global level, the major elements of which will be dealt with shortly; (ii) the societal level of culture – and particularly those of England and Hong Kong; and (iii) the cultures of the particular schools of the

Principals interviewed. It will be argued that because of the increased influence of a global economic culture, and because of the resilience of individual school cultures, the societal culture as a generator of particular problems is probably being reduced in its influence.

Yet, whilst the cultural level is central to this article, there are also other elements to the term. There is, for example, the issue of *dimension*. Hofstede(1994: 13-14), basing his work on that of Inkeles and Levinson(1969) suggested that there were five basic dimensions of societal culture:

- *social inequality, including the relationship with authority;*
- *the relationship between the individual and the group;*
- *concepts of masculinity and femininity;*
- *ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions;*
- *a long-term orientation in life to a short-term orientation.*

Dimmock and Walker (2005: 29-31) have developed Hofstede's and Trompenaar and Hampden-Turner's(1997) ideas, and now suggest that at this level, there are actually six dimensions:

- *power-distributed/power concentrated;*
- *group oriented/self oriented;*
- *consideration/aggression;*
- *proactivism/fatalism;*
- *generative/replicative;*
- *limited relationship/holistic relationship.*

A third area of contention is that of *content*: what areas should be included in describing the make-up of a culture? Dimmock and Walker (2005: 7-8), argue that such content at the societal level needs to include:

*...how they dress, what and how they eat, marriage customs and family life, their patterns of work, religious ceremonies, leisure pursuits and works of art.*

However, this list could also be expanded to include such things as political structures, historical beliefs, and linguistic assumptions. There probably can be no definitive list.

Such questions about content lead to a fourth problem: that of *homogeneity*: is there ever a society or organisation in which all can agree on the major characteristics of a common 'culture? When does a value, dimension, idea, or practice cease to be dominant characteristic? This is one of the problems with differentiating cultures along simplistic dyadic lines: does it really make sense to classify a culture as 'group' or 'individual oriented'? If instead one places two such concepts on a continuum, and locate cultures along this continuum, it may still be asked where on it a value, dimension, idea or practice ceases to be significant. It might well be then that 'cultures' are so complex, so changeable, that it is simply not possible to capture in words the richness of this critical human reality.

So questions of level, dimension, content, and homogeneity, all problematise this concept. In the circumstances, and given that this article intends to avoid the potential danger of definitional paralysis, it will adopt a Popperian approach and argue that there is shared

understanding that ways of life are sufficiently different from one another to allow talk of societal and organisational cultures; and that whilst this article will use the concept of three different levels, further refinement will proceed on the basis of further information about particular societies and the particular organisational cultural contexts within which the subjects of this research work.

### **Globalisation**

Finally, then, what of 'globalisation'? In its broadest sense, the term suggests that there are certain forces which together exert an influence which transcends any particular nation state, leading to the adoption of practices and values within organisations and between people, which are increasingly homogenising. Ritzer's (2004:160) definition of the term then captures this pretty well, as he suggests that globalisation is:

*The world wide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organisation of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a shared global consciousness.*

Such 'shared global consciousness' might well be another way of talking of a 'global culture'. However, it is important to go beyond this, and ask, with respect to educational organisations, what are the specific global forces leading to such homogenisation? In other work (Bottery, 2005), I have suggested there may be up to nine different forces comprising an increasingly shared global consciousness. However, this article will argue that there are four in particular which have particular pertinence. These are:

- technological globalisation;
- economic globalisation;
- demographic globalisation;
- political globalisation.

A few words about each are necessary.

### **Technological Globalisation**

Globalisation is not a new phenomenon. MacGillivray (2006) for instance argues that examples of it have been seen for hundreds, even thousands of years. Perhaps, however, the critical aspects of its current nature are the massive influence that technology currently has globally. This has three particular elements. One is the massive increase in the *ability* and the *speed* at which people around the world can now communicate and access information globally. Ability and speed have different effects: ability means that if knowledge generates power, then a much greater number of people have power than they did previously, for now they have a greater grasp of not only the local but the global situation. However, it is possible to have an ability, but for this to be accessed slowly: speed means that many more people can access, make decisions and take action more quickly than ever before. The two together therefore produce mixed blessings, for whilst this democratises access to information, it also increases the rate of change, and can add all kinds of pressures in the race to keep up with others in competitive situations. Indeed, this access to information can actually create competition where it did not exist before: after all, if you have access only to the local, then you may well be top of the local pile. If that comparison is expanded, however, you may suddenly find that you are really not doing as well as you – or your bosses – thought you were.

As the cost of technology hardware plummets, so a further democratising tendency takes place: the poor begin to be able to compete on more level terms with the rich. Friedman (2005) suggests that this now means that the level of competition has moved from one between nations, to one between individuals. So whilst it may have been the case that the Asian 'tiger' economies caught up with the West, Friedman argues, and jobs began to slip away to these countries who could do the same quality job for less; it now means that even at the highest technical level, there is now competition between individuals in rich and poor countries. Bangalore in India, and Dalian in China, for example, now have individuals and small IT firms which can compete with the best in the West, and who critically do not have to travel to Silicone Valley or any other high-tech western location: they can now stay at home in India or China and compete just as well. The result is even greater competition and greater pressures: and western governments, to keep their workforces ahead of this game, see the re-engineering of their educational systems to meet these demands as the best solution.

Finally, as access and speed increases, as competition increases, so do international comparisons. Michael Barber (2000), a key British government adviser, talked of education in Great Britain as needing to be a 'world class education service', one which 'matches the best anywhere on the planet'. The result of such visioning is that where once a national government would judge its educational system by the comparative performance of its various parts, now it uses international comparison. The result is that policy and practice is increasingly seen as international rather than national in nature, and in the process, national and local standards are expected to adapt to these benchmarks. As they do so, national and local policies and practices are increasingly viewed as parochial, outdated, inferior, needing to be replaced by more international conceptions, which, as we shall, see, are driven by private, free market, and business considerations.

### **Economic Globalisation**

Economic globalisation is probably the most quoted form of globalisation in modern literature; indeed, it may well be seen as what globalisation actually *means*. Whilst this article does not favour such a narrow interpretation, it nevertheless believes that it is an immensely powerful force which impacts on all of the others. It probably consists of the following five elements.

First is the virtually global acceptance of the adoption of free market approaches to economic activity as the best means of generating wealth; a belief which then migrates into the public sector. One might think that when a 'socialist' Prime Minister like Tony Blair, talks of the choice between private and public provision of a service as being a purely pragmatic decision: 'what matters is what works' (quoted in Ainley, 2004, p.507), that this is a purely national/cultural/personal issue. However, when the former Chinese Premier, Deng Xiaoping, argued that when it came to a choice of communist or free market economics in developing China's economic base, it didn't matter if the cat was black or white, as long as it caught mice, then one knows that free market economics is the overwhelmingly dominant global economic standard.

Yet such adoption is increasingly no longer a nation-state option. A second element of economic globalisation then is that by entering the World Trade Organisation, through recognising the influence of the International Monetary Fund, and the power of the World Bank, nation states, rich and poor, enter into international agreements which increasingly

strip them of the ability to 'firewall' their economies against global financial movements. They then become increasingly vulnerable to global financial market trends, which are exacerbated by a third trend, the speed of such financial transactions – and here technological and economic globalisation are intimately connected. Nation states, however, are also weakened by a fourth force, - their increasing dependency upon the investments of multinational corporations, who search out the 'best' national sites for their operations, but can move these on when these become less profitable (see Korten, 2001).

These four elements – the acceptance of the free market paradigm globally, the global nature of financial transactions, national vulnerability to international financial transactions, and the actions of multinational corporations – are a large part of the reason for a final development, what Bobbitt(2003) describes as the transmutation of the nation state into the 'market state'. According to him, the nation-state, no longer able to provide the degree of protection and welfare to its citizens that it has historically done for the last one hundred and fifty years, now has begun to gear its central function much more closely to neo-liberal economic policies, its role then being to provide the opportunities for its citizens to generate individual wealth, through the provision of an increasingly privatised range of different educational mechanisms. As the ETUI (quoted in Ainley, 2004, p.501) suggests:

*The welfare state is no longer regarded as having a protective function; it becomes instead, the body for monitoring and controlling 'good behaviour' on the part of its citizens. Its role is to distribute not wealth so much as opportunities; it becomes the 'enabling' or 'empowering' state which rewards the most dynamic.*

This, Bobbitt argues, is most strongly seen in the regimes of Bush in the US and Blair in the UK, and likely underpins the policies moves in England over the last few years towards greater choice by 'consumers', through the creation of specialist, academies, and most recently 'trust' schools. In such a way then do current economic globalisation forces change the nature of educational activity.

### **Demographic Globalisation**

Yet there are other significant forces at work which further weaken the nation state. A hugely important one is that of demography. Throughout the world, there is a general increase in the age of populations, at the same time as a decrease in fertility (Business week, 2005). The overall result is three fold. One is a decline in the proportion of younger children in a population, and therefore a decline in the number of schools and teachers required. A second is in the proportion of a population who work, and therefore contribute taxes, which has resulted in policies aimed at raising the age of retirement in a number of countries as their governments come to recognise the enormous financial implications that lower tax revenue, a greater proportion of national income spent on pensions, and on the treatment of the chronic diseases consequent upon more people living into old age, portends for that country. It also, of course, has enormous implications for education. Not only will there be less pupils, less schools, less teachers required, but as tax revenues decline, there will also be less money for what remains, all of which is underpinned by an increasing acceptance by politicians of all major political parties that policies of higher taxation are vote losers.

In such a situation, governments are understandably very careful with the money that they do have, and want more control and direction of it, as well as greater value for money spent. The effect on professional work has been apparent for a couple of decades at least: paradoxically, in an age of supposedly more neo-liberal economic policies, this has led to

more control and direction of professional work, greater accountability of what they do, leading to a situation, as Pollitt (1992) phrased it, of professionals increasingly being 'on tap' to managerial requirements, rather than being 'on top', not only in terms of who defines what counts as a problem, but also in terms of what is the best way of solving such problems. In the process, notions of professional autonomy are radically eroded.

### **Political Globalisation**

It will be clear from the above that even if Bobbitt (2003) is wrong with his suggestion of the emergence of the 'market state', the nation state as presently constituted is seriously challenged, for its power (and therefore its perceived legitimacy by its citizens) is leaking from it in a variety of directions. Such power leaks upwards to larger international bodies. These may be international bodies like the IMF, the WTO, the World Bank, or the United Nations; they may also be bodies like NAFTA or the EC, to whom economic and political power is ceded in the pursuit of the opportunities afforded by being a player in a larger internal market. Power also leaks downwards as individuals come to value the local and personal, almost in reaction against such large organisations. Politically, the result is greater devolution, greater autonomy to regions. Finally, as multinational companies increasingly figure in the economies of nation states, and as these companies play off one country against another, so power leaks sideways to them as well. Indeed, the financial power of the larger multinationals now dwarfs that of the medium sized nation state – and they are able to move assets around the globe to their advantage in a manner impossible to the geographically bound nation state, as well as being accountable to a small, rich group of investors, rather than to a large population, and on a much smaller number of issues.

For all these reasons, most national governments face a decline in their power in many areas. Yet in part because of this, many attempt to exert an increasing power and control over the professionals in their public services, through policies and strategies largely based upon the kinds of business models of management which cohere well with ideological and structural moves towards the creation of the 'market state'. The result for educational professionals is then a paradoxical combination of both greater control, but also of greater fragmentation, as privatisation and the disciplines of the market, is seen as the best ways of increasing 'consumer' choice and facilitating economic imperatives, of generating the kinds of educational provision necessary for equipping a workforce capable of competing in this globalised world.

### **The English and Hong Kong Contexts**

Whilst this article argues that similar global forces are affecting most nation states at the present time, they do not impact on a *tabula rasa*; each country has its own distinctive cultural, history, and educational system, and so it is important to understand these national differences.

In terms of English education, it seems fair to describe the background as more than two decades of almost constant legislative change. Whilst there has been much centralisation in terms of things like the National Curriculum, the National Numeracy and Literacy strategies, and the conforming effects of OFSTED inspections, there has also been a somewhat paradoxical decentralising and marketising element to the reforms, through the increased degree of Local Financial Management, through the publication of results and league tables, and through the increased differentiation and gradual privatisation of schools, most recently under New Labour, with the encouragement of the development of specialist schools at the

secondary level, of city academies, and of legislation currently going through the English Parliament for the creation of trust schools, which largely pass over the management and curriculum of the school to a sponsoring body. The result has been, for professionals, both a greater sense of central direction and control, with an increased need for entrepreneurialism and competition.

Hong Kong is a very different creature in many respects. A British colony until 1998, its education system was, suggests Morris (2004), specifically designed to deflect a population away from issues of legitimacy and protest by focussing on examination-oriented curricula, which dovetailed rather well with Hong Kong's Confucian inheritance. In addition, however, the British government distanced itself from education by encouraging charitable and religious bodies to set up and run schools in the colony. The result historically has been a patchwork of schools with very different aims, methods, and values. After Hong Kong's handover to China, many people believed there would be rapid integration into the mainland economic, cultural and political system – and that education would be a leading part of this. Nearly a decade down the line, the picture is not so easy to unpick. Whilst undoubtedly there are cultural moves for greater convergence – such as with the encouragement of Mandarin Chinese as the second school language in place of English – yet events on the mainland are changing the cultural and economic life there so rapidly that it may be that the mainland is moving closer to the Hong Kong model than Hong Kong is moving towards a traditional mainland one. Certainly, the embrace of the market in the quest for sustained economic growth has led to much greater competition between educational institutions in both China and Hong Kong. Moreover, as China attempts to compete globally, it has increasingly subscribed to the mantra that this involves a rapid development of primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. As it has done so, it has adopted a policy of user-pays, and of the encouragement of a differentiated system in keeping with greater consumer choice, if not with greater political liberalisation. This matches the other side of changes in Hong Kong – the development of marketising and parental choice instruments, most recently through the development of direct subsidy schools (DSS). Interestingly, these bear a remarkable resemblance to the Trust schools that New Labour is trying to introduce in England. Finally, just as in those areas of England where the student population is declining, producing fears over staff numbers and even school viability, the situation in Hong Kong is quite as acute, and questions of demography, of pupil numbers, and of recruitment, are a key part of most school management agendas. As in England, education in Hong Kong has then had both centralising and decentralising/marketising trends. To what extent these similarities are because of historical connection, chance, or globalising trends, will then be the subject of the rest of this article.

### **The Empirical Research**

With such a global background, educational leaders face new challenges, new pressures and stresses, and raised in a welfare state culture with public-good ethics normally a strong personal commitment, may find it difficult to deal with these changes. How are educational leaders facing such challenges?

Despite much centralising and controlling legislation, and evidence that there is considerable burnout, early retirements, and individuals *not* coming forward for the principalship across the western world (e.g. Gronn, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003; Fullan, 2003), some research in the UK suggests that principals still manage to maintain a personal vision and follow a personal ethic when dealing with external policies, and in managing the day-to-day life of the school (see Day et al., 2000; Moore et al., 2002; and Gold et al., 2003).

However, there are limitations to this research: that by Day et al. was based upon others' perceptions of what constitutes good leadership, whilst Gold et al.'s was of Principals who were judged by OFSTED to be good leaders. These Principals, then, were already seen as special. This being the case, it remains possible that the majority of Principals still feel so constrained that they uncritically implement policy, rather than engage in its critical mediation, as writers like Wright (2001) have suggested. My reading of the literature suggested that there was a set of key questions to investigate what kind of leadership, over a large spectrum of personality and context, was actually being practiced. These questions were:

- Who did they feel decided the educational goals of the school?
- What were their priorities?
- What evidence was there of defiance to external demands?
- How much did they feel external pressure determined day-to-day practice?
- How far did they feel creative thinking was encouraged?
- How much did they locate their issues at the macro-, as well as the meso- and micro levels?

The research carried out in both the UK and Hong Kong was with primary school Principals. In the UK, these interviews were spread over three different Local Authorities; in Hong Kong they covered a much smaller geographical area. The research was conducted by means of contacting the Principal and posting or emailing the questions before a semi-structured interview. In England, these interviews were conducted by myself alone; in Hong Kong, because of potential issues of language difficulty, I was accompanied by at least one Cantonese speaking researcher, and where necessary, replies were made in Cantonese and translated back into English. This worked surprisingly well. Perhaps in part because of the considerable experience of the interviewing team, the sessions were relaxed, informative, and as revealing as any of the English interviews.

All the interviews were taped, and were transcribed by a research assistant who spoke English and Cantonese. All transcriptions were then checked against the recordings for accuracy. A key element of the process then took place, for these transcriptions were then used to construct individual *portraits* of these principals, rather than an analysis of the interviews simply in terms of key categories. What was then developed in each case was a complex description, based upon the interview transcript, of how each individual headteacher saw their job and the challenges that they faced. When this was completed, the portrait was sent to another member of the team, who checked that everything claimed in the portrait was based upon the transcription, and was not extrapolated from it, and that the portrait reflected the balance of the transcription. When this was done, any amendments to the portrait were made before the portrait was sent to the principal concerned for their comments and feedback. A final draft was then drawn up. At the present time (July, 2006), all twelve of the English portraits, and one half of the Hong Kong portraits, have gone through this process, and in both cases, amendments have been very minor: all the principals who have seen their portraits have affirmed that their portrait was an accurate depiction of them, their challenges, and the way they faced them.

## The English Results

A more detailed description of the interviews and results is provided in Bottery (2007). This article, however, will present the overall conclusions of the English research before contrasting the findings with those in Hong Kong. In essence, the English conclusions can be summarised as follows:

First, there were some commonalities across the English Principals interviewed. One was that, for all of them, governmental legislation, directives and 'advice' formed the 'architecture' within which their thinking took place. This is perhaps not that surprising: over two decades of working within a culture of central direction and of punitive inspections meant that these principals understood the consequences of *not* appreciating and responding to this architecture. One way in which this was very apparent was that all recognised the need to demonstrate evidence and support for any actions they took. For all of them, even those (or perhaps, particularly those) who thought they knew how to handle OFSTED inspections, this rested on the ability to provide a highly detailed and catalogued evidence base to justify their actions.

Yet whilst this was the case, these were individuals who had come into the profession because they wanted to make a difference to children's lives, and worked at the school level to make this happen. So if one commonality was an appreciation of legislative architecture and evidence, another was an overwhelming focus on the local context, and of a priority on achieving the best for the children in their care. The result, unsurprising for individuals doing a sixty to seventy hour week making something work in a local context, was the priority of the micro and the meso contexts. Thus, personal relationships, and the management of their institution were their major concerns, and macro-issues (legislation, policy movements, and global forces) tended to be interpreted, if they were mentioned or given space, only when these impacted on these micro- and meso-issues. Some of the more apparent of these were not just the centralising things like national curricula, national numeracy and literacy approaches, and OFSTED; inspection also had a marketising effect, as these Principals were aware of how such measurements and their publication could affect parents' perceptions, and therefore parental choice of school. This meant that whilst they normally tried very hard not to enter into competitive situations with other schools, they nevertheless recognised that they were in a competitive market situation, and that successive governments had, through both pronouncements and policy, ensured that marketisation and competition were critical elements of their consciousness – which recent educational policies on the introduction of 'Trust' schools were only likely to increase.

So there were five major commonalities – the architecture, the evidence, the children, the prioritisation of the local, the increased emphasis on choice and competition. Yet there were also large variations in the pattern of Principal working and response, because each one had a very different personality and temperament, and therefore approached similar issues in different ways. Yet much of what they faced was *not* similar: each school and its catchment area was very different, and posed different problems, and when one factored into this the very different personalities of these Principals, similar external challenges were then mediated in very different ways, and with different degrees of success. This meant that in terms of the perceived strength of their role in deciding the school's goals, in deciding on how to manage the school, and in the critiquing and mediation of policy to make it workable within their own situation, they varied considerably in terms of influence. Thus, at one end of an impact continuum was a principal who talked almost as if he was a chess player, taking an overview of the school, and moving the pieces (including people like OFSTED inspectors)

around to suit his purposes. At the other end of this continuum was a principal, new to the job, who felt restricted by his lack of knowledge, by constricting numbers (and hence a constricting staff), and was sensitive to the effects this had on staff morale, and was finding the pressure hard to take.

There was also considerable variation in the degree to which these Principals were prepared to go down new roads. The British government had encouraged schools to engage in greater creativity, and some Principals felt this harmonised with their own predispositions. One principal, then, had such confidence in her ability that she sought out challenges and produced policy responses to them which other principals would not have contemplated, her confidence extending to the belief that she could and would produce evidence to support her radical moves. Yet others were not so sure: they remained aware of the punitive consequences to their schools if their SATs results dropped; and were therefore hesitant of engaging in innovatory practice. Thus at the other end of an innovation continuum was one Principal who talked of great pressure and being driven by the demands of the local authority, such that he did not have the time nor influence to really affect the school's direction.

On both continua, however, the majority lay somewhere between these two extremes, with at all times, personality and context producing a different picture, a different portrait. In other words, there was no simple pattern of Principal response to the issues raised, suggesting the need for a much more finely grained picture than much previous research has produced.

### **The Hong Kong Results**

If the English Principals shared commonalities of the architecture, the need for evidence, the development of their pupils, the prioritisation of the local, and increased emphasis on choice and competition, whilst varying on personality and context, how did this compare with the perceptions of the Hong Kong Principal?

There were some differences. Whilst the English Principals tended to take a fairly critical view of their governments educational record with respect to legislation and accountability procedures, the Hong Kong Principals were rather less so. Despite the fact that early 2006 had seen public demonstrations by teachers in Hong Kong on the amount of legislative change, and its impact on workload issues and stress, these Principals seemed to be reasonably content with the direction of legislative change; they also tended to see inspectorial processes as more helpful than threatening. Moreover, they did not see creativity as particularly threatened or undermined by government approaches. In sum, they generally felt that Governmental approaches were not unduly directive or intrusive, which is partly explained by the historically different organisation of schools from England: the historical emphasis on sponsorship of schools had led to an independence from government which in part was supported by mediating school governing bodies.

Yet such differences were outweighed by the number of similarities. These included the way in which legislation, directives and advice formed the 'architecture' within which thinking took place, the overriding priority they gave to achieving the best for the children in their care, and the way that the local was the major focus of their attention. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this article, there was the same societal pattern of pressures. One was the effects of demography, and reduced pupil numbers, and therefore on the need to find ways of attracting pupils; and whilst 'marketing' the school was still a difficult concept for these Principals to accept, nearly all recognised the need for engaging with it. A second pressure,

which in part stemmed from such demography, but in part was due to government sponsorship, was the increased emphasis being placed upon competition and the use of market mechanisms, which for some meant yet more attention being taken away from their 'educational' mission to a more management, business-oriented approach. Finally, there was the same sponsorship by government of parental rights and choice, in part through the increased use of such terms in official pronouncements, in part through the specific development of policies to provide a greater variety of schools, in particular the DSS.

England and Hong Kong principals then seemed to be facing similar kinds of challenges, yet with both there was no simple pattern of Principal response, due to the same complex interaction between personality and individual school context. Further, and again like the English situation, the strength of Principal influence upon this context, and upon the mediation of legislation, varied considerably along both impact and innovatory continua.

### **Explaining the similarities**

The overall impression from these interviews then was that whilst there were some differences, there were many more similarities in the opinions and practices of these principals. Why was this the case? There seem to be three or four possible explanations for this rather surprising finding.

A first is simply that this Western researcher got it wrong when it came to Chinese Principals; that because of his limited vision, he missed the nuances, the cultural differences which would have made the portraits of the two cohorts very different. This, however, was a problem for which a number of measures had been taken. A first was that, prior to the interviews, the interview schedule had been carefully piloted with Cantonese principals, and was subject to scrutiny by Cantonese academics; yet whilst some small changes were made to the questions originally asked of English principals, these original questions very largely remained intact. A second was that, during the interviews, the Cantonese researcher(s) had every opportunity to ask questions in addition to those asked by the English interviewer, but rarely felt the need to. Third, at the end of the interview, the Principal was always asked whether there was anything that they wished to add, change, or delete, and whether there were things about their practice that they had expected to be asked, and hadn't. There were however no occasions when additions reflected a lack of understanding of Chinese issues by a Western interviewer. Finally, the portraits were validated by both a Cantonese researcher, and by the Principal interviewed. Had these not been valid and accurate, there was then ample opportunity for this to be pointed out. Yet on no occasion did this occur. The conclusion has to be drawn that the similarities were not down to a lack of cultural awareness in the questions, interviewing, or portrait writing.

A second explanation is that because of the intertwined history of the two places, there are many fewer cultural differences than other countries so geographically separate. Thus, the argument would go, because Britain ran Hong Kong for 150 years, and imposed its values, structures and practices upon the place and people, this has seeped down into the consciousness of its inhabitants so much that they now, almost unwittingly, replicate aspects of British culture. Finally, Hong Kong Chinese themselves talk of a contrast with the mainland which stems from the perceived relative lack of corruption, greater safety, and rule of law in Hong Kong than on the mainland – all which are attributed to the British influence. Yet against such an explanation, one must point out that against 150 years of British culture is 3000 years of Chinese culture; that there was in fact no fully developed educational sector until the middle of the twentieth century; that many of Hong Kong's inhabitants were

refugees, or the children of refugees from Mainland China after 1949, and so brought mainland Chinese culture with them; and that safety, the rule of law, and lack of corruption are hardly national characteristics. Finally, any visitor to Hong Kong who strays beyond Hong Kong Island and Kowloon will quickly find that English characteristics are soon left behind, and that this is a very Chinese culture, with Chinese schools, Chinese speaking children and Chinese speaking teachers. It is therefore difficult to see in what ways there is strong British/Hong Kong similarity.

A third possible explanation is a modification of the second: that the cultural differences that do exist are irrelevant to the issues at hand. Now certainly, there *are* cultural differences between Hong Kong and elsewhere. For instance, a belief in the importance of the day on which you are born has led to a very high rate of caesarean operations in Hong Kong as parents try, in their eyes, to give the very best of starts to their offspring. Again, any Westerner going into a genuine Chinese restaurant in Hong Kong will conclude that the Chinese believe in eating most things that move, and in eating most parts of most things as well, and fail to understand the apparent Western fastidiousness in this respect. Even if these differences can be understood and appreciated, they can make for initial mutual incomprehension. Yet it is difficult to see what cultural differences, important to these portraits, were missed out; after all, the Cantonese colleagues had all spent some time in the West and knew of its differences (and of its blind spots to Chinese culture); and the Principals all had the opportunity to point out where misunderstandings took place. Only in one situation, did a real cultural difference take place; and this was with respect to the merging of two schools due to declining numbers in both. One of the schools was a Christian school, headed by a Principal who saw the induction of pupils into Christian message as *the* overriding priority. Yet the other school was secular, and its principal reported that neither she, nor the parents, nor the governors, were particularly bothered about their school becoming a religious school, reflecting a traditional Chinese syncretist attitude to religion which would surprise many Western observers.

Yet this was the only example which was seen in any of the interviews, and therefore I am led to the conclusion that a fourth hypothesis is the most likely – what could be called a ‘cultural flattening’ hypothesis. This phrase is in part borrowed from Thomas Friedman’s book *The World is Flat* (2005), in which he argues that the massive expansion in technology globally has led to many more people being exposed to other cultures and other ideas, and particularly in the economic arena, has led to the adoption of standards and practices which can be called truly global in nature. The result, educationally, would seem to be that when countries are insulated, national/ethnic differences play a much larger part in determining educational contexts, and individual responses to those contexts, than when these same countries are opened up to global forces. When this happens, these global drivers play a larger role in determining educational contexts and responses. These drivers were described at the beginning of this article: the greater comparison between the performance of national educational systems, the effects of demography, the increased emphasis upon competition, the greater use of market mechanisms, the use of private sector practices (and organisations) in the delivery of public sector ‘goods’, and the increased emphasis of a move from the nation state to the market state, as it sees its role less as providing and more as enabling.

## Conclusion

It should be clear that this article is *not* arguing that globalising forces have reduced the English and Hong Kong educational systems to being pale imitations of one another. But it is

being argued that state policies are being driven in the same direction, and that the empirical research of this article supports this argument. Firstly, technological globalisation is creating a climate of greater information access, and therefore of greater international comparisons of national educational achievement. In the process it is making these international comparisons the benchmarks of national and institutional success. Secondly, global economic forces are strengthening the move to the adoption of market-based solutions to demographic problems, as well as leading to a movement to the market state and its fundamental role of consumer enablement rather than citizen supporter. Finally, the individual dissimilarities between Principals' personalities and the local contexts within which they work, seems to be combining with these global forces to reduce the effect of national cultural differences in the perceptions that Principals have of the challenges that face them. This, then, is what the phenomenon of political globalisation points to – that the nation state is being 'hollowed out', and as its own influence becomes weaker, so the global and the local become stronger. If this analysis is correct, then this research in England and Hong Kong is a strong example of how global – and mostly market – forces are changing the nature of educational activity, and of the challenges with which Principals have to deal. Nevertheless, it is also clear that each school, each context, each Principal, will demonstrate a different mediation to these challenges. In conclusion, then, it might well be that if leadership challenges are becoming more similar, it may also be the case that the responses to them will be much less so.

## References

- Ainley, P. (2004) 'The new 'market-state' and education'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(4), 497-514.
- Barber, M. (2000) '*High expectations and standards for all – no matter what*'. Edited version of a speech delivered to the Smith Richardson Foundation in Washington. Available at: [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk).
- Bobbitt, P. (2003) *The shield of achilles*. London: Penguin.
- Bottery, M. (2004) *The challenges of educational leadership*. London: Sage
- Bottery, M. (2005) 'Education and globalisation: redefining the role of the educational professional'. *Educational Review*, 58(1), 95-114.
- Bottery, M. (2007) Reports from the front line-English headteachers' work in an era of practice centralisation. *Educational Management and Administration*, 35(1), 89-110.
- Business week (2005) '*Global ageing*'. 8<sup>th</sup> February.
- Day, C., Harris A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H., and Beresford J. (2000) *Leading schools in times of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Dimmock, C. and Walker, A. (2005) *Educational leadership: culture and diversity*. London: Sage.
- Friedman, T. (2005) *The world is flat*. London: Penguin
- Fullan, M. (2003) *The moral imperative of school leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gold, A., Evans, J., Earley, P., Halpin, D. and Collarbone, P. (2003) 'Principled principals? Values-driven leadership: evidence from ten case studies of 'outstanding' school leadership'. *Educational Management and Administration*, 31(2), 127-38.

- Gronn, P. (2003) *The new work of educational leaders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, A. (2003) *Teaching in the knowledge society*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Hofstede, G. (1994) *Cultures and organisations*. London: Sage.
- Korten, D. (2001) *When corporations rule the world*. Bloomfield, Conn: Kumarian Press.
- MacGillivray, A. (2005) *A brief history of globalization*. London: Robinson.
- Pollitt, C. (1993) *Managerialism and the public services*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Ritzer, G. (2004) *The globalization of nothing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Wright, N. (2001) 'Leadership, 'bastard leadership' and managerialism: confronting two paradoxes in the Blair education project'. *Educational Management and Administration*, 29(3), 275-90.