Leadership in Schools: A Component of Student Learning

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Summary

In this essay I ask the question: can leadership influence student learning?, and I look at the research evidence which shows that indeed leadership can have a direct impact on learning.

The research suggests that the building of capacity, that is an investment in students and teachers especially though the creation of a shared vision is an idea which is especially important. The building of capacity, which aims to develop student potential requires an investment in the development of teachers by giving them the tools and resources they need to work as educators. It has been suggested that this entails professional instructional development and collective participation in the decision making process, especially a decision making process which focuses exclusively on the students. This results in the influence of student learning in positive manner. Whether or not any or all of these practices aimed at improving student learning are suitable for a particular educational institution is something which needs to be determined by that institution as a consequence of a commitment to achieving educational efficiency.

Introduction

There has been a considerable amount of research into the nature of school leadership and its effects on student learning and as educational practitioners, we can benefit from this knowledge. Much of the research is a consequence of changes in national educational policies which demand that schools become highly accountable and demonstrate the effectiveness of their educational practices and procedures both inside and outside of the classroom. As a consequence, schools have sought to understand how their leadership can improve the learning of their students (see for example Harris, 2008). This essay examines some of the ways in which school leadership has demonstrated a beneficial influence on student learning. Leadership can make a difference to student learning and heads of schools and of departments can make a difference to performance in their subject areas, and can contribute to the overall performance of a school (Harris et al. 2013). It has been noted that in general there are certain common features or characteristics which effective

departments consistently use, and that an effective department places student learning at the very centre of their organisational structure (e.g. Krovetz and Arriaza, 2006) and it 'appears that the ability to provide leadership that is suited to a particular school context carries over to effects on students' (Hallinger & Heck, 1999, page 4). While there may be no single model for achieving success successful headteachers have been shown to use the same basic repertoire of leadership practices and Day et al. (2010) provide a list of eight key dimensions of successful leadership, all of which centre on student learning, wellbeing and achievement and which have been summarized as follows:

Successful leaders:

1. Define their values and vision to raise expectations, set direction and build trust
2. Reshape the conditions for teaching and learning
3. Restructure parts of the organisation and redesign leadership roles and responsibilities
4. Enrich the curriculum
5. Enhance teacher quality
6. Enhance the quality of teaching and learning
7. Build collaboration internally
8. Build strong relationships outside the school community.

(Day et al., 2010)

From a departmental perspective a summary of what effective school departments actually do has been summarized as follows: (from Harris et al., 2013)

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1. Effective departments enjoy a collegiate management style and share a strong vision of their subject.
2. Effective departments of well organised terms of assessment, record-keeping, homework, etc. and resource management.
3. Effective departments have efficient systems for monitoring and evaluating student progress that lead to structured and regular student feedback.
4. Effective departments operate very clear routines and practices and lessons and there is an emphasis upon consistency and high quality practice.
5. Effective departments have a strong student-centred ethos that systematically rewards students and provide every opportunity for autonomous student learning. In short, effective departments are centrally concerned with effective teaching and learning

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The rationale underlying these claims and in this essay are that (a) the central task for any leadership is to help improve employee performance and (b) such performance is a function of employees' beliefs, values, motivations, skills and knowledge and the conditions in which they work. Successful school leadership therefore will include practices helpful in addressing each of these dimensions of performance, particularly in relation to the teachers who are central to what pupils learn. In short, effective leaders need to create an environment for learning, and effective departments can be identified by their efforts to achieve this kind of environment and by a "clear and shared sense of vision" (Harris et al. 2013).

School Leadership and the Importance of Vision

This notion of a departmental vision is explored in the seminal work of Hallinger & Heck (1999) who identify a clear vision as one of three important avenues of leader influence (along with 'structure and social networks' and 'people'). Hallinger and Heck draw on a meta-analysis of the literature on organisational leadership and note that there is a continual emphasises the notion of "vision" as an important leadership function, and "the research suggests that mission-building is the strongest and most consistent avenue of influence school leaders use influence school achievement" (1999, page 1). They mention however that terms 'vision', 'mission', and 'goals' are often used interchangeably, and the idea of a 'departmental vision' may refer to either a personal vision articulated by a school leader in order to motivate and inspire followers, or alternatively to an organisational mission whereby the personal visions of a majority of people are amalgamated into a common sense of purpose within an educational community. In addition to a vision or mission, the term goal is also used in the sense of a functional target. Educational goals can be set and measures taken of for example; the achievement of a school at the end of the year in relation to school learning, attendance, graduation rates or even to measure the 'school climate'. Notwithstanding the ambiguity around how leaders define and shape the conditions of a vision for student learning, the authors assert that 'we are confident that this avenue is important' and that a vison or mission statement should be the starting point for improving the effectiveness of leadership and learning in an educational institution. An overall vison carries the bulk of the effort to motivate leaders' colleagues, and it is about the establishment of a shared purpose as a basic stimulant for one's work (Hallinger and Heck, page 2).

School Leadership and the School Environment

A further avenue of leadership influence is the interaction between school leaders and the organisational structures and social networks in, and around their schools. A school principal can interact with the psychology of the teachers by influencing their perceptions of the school, their commitment to change, and their capacity for professional development. In particular there is evidence to show that the care and individualised concern shown by leaders to teachers motivates teachers more than the aspirational or motivational aspects produced by a school vision (Barnett, 2003). The type of interaction between leaders and teachers results in a so called people effect, (Hallinger & Heck, 1999) and is an element of the transformational leadership model in which leadership which is seen to be supportive and encouraging; the effects of which are achieved through the fostering of group goals, the modelling of desired behaviour, providing intellectual stimulation, and individualised support, for example towards personal and staff development (Yukl, 2013). Leadership influences teachers' perceptions, and has a significant effect on the affective or psychological dimension of the teachers, and consequently as a result influences the behavioural dimension of students' engagement with their school (Leithwood & Doris, 1999).

Good Leaders are Good Teachers

Another aspect of leadership effectiveness and student outcomes is the instructional leadership model. This model outlines the fact that school leaders need to be involved in the curricular and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement (U.S. Education Department, 2005) and teachers in higher producing primary and secondary schools for example spent more time having direct classroom supervision from their school principals (in addition to the support of other teachers). School principals also gave greater attention to working with teachers 'to coordinate the schools instructional program, solving instructional programs collaboratively, helping teachers secure resources, and creating opportunities for in-service and staff development' (Hallinger & Heck, 1999, Page 4).

The Needs of Students and School Leadership

It has been noted that there is no one particular model of leadership which is effective for any particular school and that consequently schools and universities must create their own leadership models. In doing so those in formal leadership positions will hopefully draw upon the conclusions of research which attempts to define what makes

successful school leadership, and ultimately better students. School leaders will also need to consider the particular needs of their students as well. School leaders operate in different social contexts and these contexts can themselves define leadership behaviour (Day et al., 2010).The external school context has been shown for example to influence leadership and student learning in schools which operate in areas with low income students. For such schools there is a tendency for school principals to define their leadership roles more narrowly in terms of curriculum control and curriculum coordination and in the case of reading and maths outcomes, it was observed that the socio-economic focus of a school and the community can influence a principal's leadership and its impact on school effectiveness, by factoring the maths and reading needs of the students into the design of the curriculum (Andrews and Soder, cited in Hallinger and Heck, 1999). The implication here is that it is useful for anyone in a position of leadership, (primary, secondary or tertiary) to ask and then answer questions such as, 'What is unique about our students?' and 'How can we reflect these needs in the curriculum design of our institution?'. An optimal classroom learning environment has also been seen as an important factor of learning, when considering in terms of student motivation. Classroom learning arises from a reciprocal interaction between learners and the learning environment (Shernoff et al., 2014), and the physical environment of the classroom is an aspect of learning. A recent study has shown that differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms (in the primary sector), namely that they are aesthetically pleasing and comfortable can explain as much as a 16% the variation in progress of students over the course of a year (Barrett et al., 2015).

In general terms the importance of an educational vision, the interaction of leaders with teachers, the provision of instructional leadership, and understanding of the social context in which leadership and learning takes place are all essential elements of the learning environment. Incorporating these areas into leadership decision-making processes and provide a comfortable view school leadership as a people which involves working with, and through people in order to improve the learning of the students.

From Complexity to Simplicity: Towards a Student Centred Approach

There is the internal context of human dynamics which needs to be managed in a school and in becoming aware of the significance of this leadership can acknowledge its impact on student learning. The critical view of academic leadership is that it takes place within a complex environment made up of different groups each with their own characteristics, interests, needs and lifestyles, and which compete with each other for a limited set of resources. On this view, academic leaders function as advocates and negotiators in a

world of 'Who gets what?' and academic organisations are better understood therefore not as rational entities with unitary goals set at top, but rather as coalitions composed of individuals and subgroups making decisions which arise from a process of bargaining among coalition members (Bollman & Gallos, 2011). In a perfect world these different groups would work harmoniously in the service of the institutions of which they are a part, however that ideal is not readily achieved, and different participants have different views on what the educational mission should be and different ideas about how resources should be allocated.　The consequence of this competition of values is that　"Power then becomes the key resource"　(Bolman & Gallos, 2011, page 73), and while a highly complex political environment is the reality, there is always the option to consider using that power to achieve the best educational experience for the students. Such leadership effectiveness is particularly achievable through a student-centred focus which unifies the processes of leadership and prioritises the learning of students above all else.

A Student-Centred Approach

Five Dimensions of Student-Centred Leadership
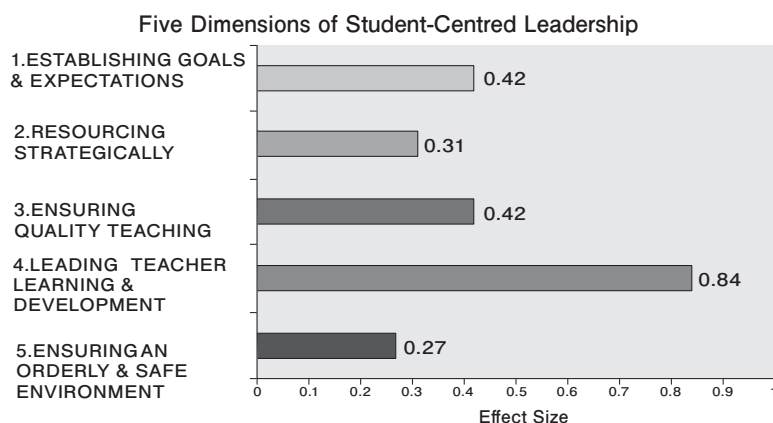
Robinson (2011)　reminds us that most school leaders are motivated by the desire to make a difference to their students and that 'they want to lift the students' achievement, increase their confidence, and give them opportunities they would never find elsewhere". A meta-analysis of surveys (Robinson, 2011) correlated the effects of leadership on student learning and identified five leadership categories (with a maximum effect of 1.00) as follows:

1. Establishing goals and expectations (average impact (0.42)

2. Resourcing strategically (0.31)

3. Ensuring quality teaching (0.42)

4. Leading teacher learning and development (0.84)

5. Ensuring an orderly and safe environment (0.27)

(Robinson, 2011).

Category 4, leading teacher learning and development (that is instructional leadership) with an overall effect of 0.84 stands out as the most important element of student learning although the other categories while they may be considered as moderate in terms of their effectiveness (0.2, 0.4 and 0.6) present a positive story about the contribution leaders can make to the achievement and well-being of students. The categories 1-4 together contribute to category 5, a school environment which is orderly, safe and where the students are happy and satisfied. Robinson concludes that these five dimensions taken together go beyond an instructional leadership practice, and suggests that they are specific practices which when combined together create a student-centred leadership approach. A student-centred leadership approach sets clear goals, provides resources for all and works closely with teachers to plan, coordinate, and monitor how these goals are achieved. Such leadership demands that an increase in 'teacher capacity' is necessary and that leaders should have close involvement in building this capacity in such a way that they as leaders have a clear understanding of the conditions these teachers work in, and what is needed for them to learn to be more effective teachers.

What is Student Centred Leadership?

A student-centred approach encourages leaders to think primarily about the frequency and quality of the leadership practices in a school and to demonstrate how these practices make a difference to the learning of the students. An evaluation of these practices can be achieved by asking simple questions such as, "Do the decisions and actions of the school leadership improve teaching in ways that are reflected in better student learning, or 'Is the focus of our policy making so far removed from the classroom that leadership adds little value to student learning?" Robinson noted that typically judgements about leadership effectiveness stopped short of asking about their effectiveness on student learning. The use of reflective questions to analyse the effectiveness of leadership is a way for leaders to attempt to maximize student potential, and build staff capacity. There are indeed materials available which provide tasks and activities designed to improve departmental effectiveness

and which invite departments to collectively arrive at empirical conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the leadership, and its connection to student learning (see for example Harris, Allsop & Sparks, 2002, McBeth, 2008). Fundamentally though the 'big message' from research on how leaders make an educational difference can be summarised as:

> 'the more leaders focus their relationships, work,
> and the learning on the core business of teaching and learning,
> the greater will be their influence on student outcomes'.
> (Robinson, 2011, page 15).

Increasing Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership which focuses on primarily on the achievement of students is a valuable component of education. In reality of course designated leaders are not engaged in the daily job of promoting the development the school, and school leaders do not usually spend all day reminding teachers of the departmental school vision or what is best for the school or university. An effective way in which to disseminate the essential components of school leadership is by shifting the focus of centralized leadership to a broader, more decentralised i.e. 'distributed' style of leadership. Several important studies have determined that greater involvement from stakeholders in the decision-making process is a characteristic of higher producing schools (see for example Leithwood et al., 2006, & Day et al., 2010). This approach which increases teacher involvement is premised on the belief that a school is a *learning organisation* and that a principle or president's role in a learning organisation is to create structures that facilitate communication, collaboration and learning among staff around the school.

The notion of a distributed leadership approach does not exclude a top-down approach (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2009) but is more about a flattening-out of the leadership hierarchy to achieve maximal educational efficiency. A distributed leadership acknowledges that schools which excel typically have 'capacity-building' i.e. inclusive development through the devolving of leadership and this approach understands that sharing leadership, teaching and learning can improve the quality of student learning. A distributed leadership approach has been defined as follows;

- It means finding the best path by tapping the expertise, ideas, and effort of everyone involved.
- It encourages idea sharing and demands this.
- Not everyone is a decision-maker, but everyone has expertise.

- It is about cooperation and trust. We all share the same mission even though we contribute in different ways.
- It empowers people to make their job more efficient, and effective.
- According to distributed leadership, everyone matters.

(Adapted from Krovetz and Arriaza, 2006).

The idea of everyone becoming involved means those in positions of formal authority, the students, the teachers, and it would include as well, those who work as part-time teachers.

> 'What districts needed is a new kind of leadership, principles who are willing to commit to leading for student accomplishment, organisational health, professional learning, and from long range and deep improvements.'
> (Krovetz and Arriaza, 2006, page 2)

Enlightened Leaders, a Caring and Productive Campus.

The culture of a school, college or university and a revolving door approach to leadership often means that it is difficult to make changes in the leadership culture. It has been suggested that change is necessary which brings an ethic of 'care' and the skills to respond 'compassionately' to the human side of organisational life and that, "Enlightened leaders believe in the potential for human development, and they focus on creating a supportive and liberating work environment that fosters learning and growth. Their confidence in human capacity to adapt to change no matter how daunting, fuels hope and progress" (Bolman and Gallos, 2011, page 92). Leaders who see people as human resources are able to respond to the needs of staff by building a working environment with characteristics similar to those of a caring and supportive extended family. In this manner, good leaders need to serve, inspire and develop people and effective leaders build trust by openness and transparency, and empower people by giving them the resources and space to maximise and use their energy and by unifying staff around a theme of 'the students'. For this approach to be realised open communication is an important since a lack of information creates anxiety and mistrust and fuels rumour and speculation, based on fear and fantasy. Caring academic leaders need to find ways to increase people's abilities and allow them to make informed and important choices about how they work. Research suggests that empowered employees to do a better job and feel better about their work and organisations. Enlightened leaders are not those who adopt a 'leader-first' approach, and seek leadership for power or possessions, they are 'servant-first' leaders 'who begin with care and a desire to support'

(Bolman and Gallos, 2011).

Conclusions

There is clear evidence to demonstrate that the learning of students is a consequence of educational leadership and effective educational leadership which concentrates on the students can be achieved by adopting effective leadership practices, in particular the establishment of an educational vision and the design of a curriculum which incorporates the needs of the students. A reflection on the impact of curriculum and policy decisions is also important in order to achieve effective leadership, as is the inclusion of leaders into the classroom teaching, and the teachers into the decision making process. This efficiency of leadership can be enhanced by developing policies and practices which specifically aim to meet the contextual needs of students. A caring and supportive leadership approach is also important, and the building of staff capacity is not achieved through loose management systems and practices that view employees as people who are narrow minded or as people who are likely to fail. Instead it is about providing specific guidelines, support and equality organized around a theme of influencing the learning of students. The idea of changing a school culture from an 'I culture' to a 'we culture' with shared values and goals has been discussed by Krovetz and Arriaza, (2006) as one of the most important elements for school improvement as the relationships amongst adults in schools are the precondition that energises and sustains school improvement.

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