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Chapter 9: Conceptions of leadership and leading the learning

Aims

This chapter aims to:

- Define leadership and note its impact on student outcomes
- Discuss notions of learning-centred leadership and leadership for learning
- Consider leading the learning and how leaders develop people and enhance the quality of teaching and learning
- Present the case why leadership for learning matters even more in high stakes accountability systems.

Numerous research studies and reports state that leadership is a crucial factor in organizational effectiveness and the key to success and improvement. It is now widely acknowledged that high-quality leadership is one of the key requirements of successful organizations and that leaders can have a significant positive impact on organizational goals, or in the case of education, student outcomes (Day, et al., 2009, 2011; Robinson, 2011).

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the concept of leadership and its impact on educational outcomes. Next models of school leadership, in particular leadership for learning or learning-centred leadership, are considered. Such notions of leadership have continued to gain primacy over other conceptions of leadership of schools (Hallinger, 2012). The main facets of leadership for learning and how learning-centred leadership is enacted, especially in developing people and creating a learning atmosphere or culture is also considered. Considering how leaders undertake such leadership is the main subject of this chapter; however, the notion of 'learning' is problematized which is seen as particularly relevant within high stakes accountability systems.

Defining school leadership

The range of popular and academic literature on leadership is extensive; there has been substantial interest and research into what effective leadership looks like, with as many as 65 different classification systems developed to define the field (Fleishman et al., 1991) and over 300 definitions of leadership (Bush and Glover, 2003, 2014). Northouse (2009), in a comprehensive review of the leadership literature, notes the wide variety of theoretical perspectives and points to the fundamental differences between trait, behaviourist, political and humanistic approaches or theories. He points to the emerging view that leadership is a process which can be observed in the behaviours of leaders and the need for leaders and followers to be understood in relation to one another and as a collective whole.

With reference to the education sector, Earley and Weindling (2004) note the changing discourse of the relevant literature from an emphasis on management to one of leadership. A number of typologies are offered and leadership theory is categorised chronologically under five headings: trait, style, contingency, influence and personal trait

theory, the latter seeing effective leadership as superior individual performance centred on notions such as emotional intelligence. Dominant conceptions of leadership in education are seen as transformational, learning-centred and distributed and these and other notions of leadership are discussed in Bush and Glover (2014). Recent thinking sees leadership operating at all levels of an organization with leaders working to create an environment in which everyone can grow and talent is developed. In fact, a simple definition of a leader is someone who creates an environment in which everyone can flourish!

The importance of leadership has long been recognised but as a concept it is elusive and there is no clear, agreed definition of it. Definitions are both arbitrary and very subjective but the central concept is usually 'influence' rather than authority – both are dimensions of power, with the latter usually associated with a formally held and recognised position (Yukl, 2002). Northouse (2009:3) in synthesising the research offers a definition of leadership as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal'. The notion of 'influence' is neutral however and leadership is usually linked with 'values' – leaders' actions are clearly grounded in personal and professional values.

Effective school leaders have a strong sense of moral purpose and social justice. They influence others' actions in achieving desirable ends. The process of leadership is also 'intentional' in that the person seeking to exercise influence is doing so in order to achieve certain purposes. Another 'i' is inspiration - rarely is this notion not found in conceptions of leadership. Leadership is also often associated with 'vision' which provides the essential sense of direction for leaders and their organizations (Bush and Glover, 2014).

How leaders influence organisational outcomes
Day and Sammons (2013:3) in a review of successful leadership note that 'international examples of original research provide consistent evidence that demonstrates the impact of leadership on school organisation, culture and teachers' work'. Such research they state offers substantial empirical evidence that the quality of leadership can be a crucial factor in explaining variation in student outcomes between schools. Karen Seashore Louis, who has been involved in many impact studies over the years (e.g. see Louis et al., 2010), remarks that:

> Although leaders affect a variety of educational outcomes, their impact on students is largely indirect and is relatively small compared to other factors. While formal leaders interact with pupils in many circumstances, the impact of schooling on students occurs largely through more sustained relationships that occur in classrooms and peer groups'. (2015:1)

The effect of leaders is largely *indirect*; what leaders do and say, and how they demonstrate leadership, does affect pupil learning outcomes, but it is largely through the actions of others, most obviously teachers, that the effects of school leadership are mediated. Achieving results through others is therefore the essence of leadership and it is the 'avenues of leader influence' that matter most (Hallinger and Heck, 2010, 2003). For Southworth 'effective school leaders work directly on their indirect influence' (2004:102).

A major British study into the impact of school leadership found that school leaders 'improve teaching and learning and thus pupil outcomes indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, teaching practices and through developing teachers' capacities for leadership' (Day et al., 2009:2). They also refer to the importance of school culture and trust. However, they also state 'the question of the size of leadership effects and how they operate (directly or indirectly) to raise student outcomes

remains a subject of debate' (ibid.: 3). They suggest that school leadership influences student outcomes more than any other factors, bar socioeconomic background and quality of teaching. They cite the 'New Leaders for New Schools' report from the US which states that 'nearly 60% of a school's impact on student achievement is attributable to principal and teacher effectiveness with principals accounting for 25%' (ibid.: 19). However as Osborne-Lampkin et al., (2015) systematic review of the empirical studies published between 2001 and 2012 on the relationships between principal characteristics and student achievement in the United States suggests, it is not a simple matter to research and correlation does not imply causality. Although perhaps it is unwise to attempt to quantify the exact effect size, there is little doubt that the research evidence reinforces the earlier point that leadership matters. What's more it is suggested that leadership for learning or learning centred leadership matters most. It is to this model of leadership that we now turn.

Leadership for learning

Bush and Glover (2014) helpfully divide models of leadership into six types: instructional leadership; managerial; transformational; moral and authentic; distributed; teacher leadership; system leadership; and contingent leadership. It is the first model, that of instructional or pedagogic leadership, that has developed into leadership for learning. Hallinger (2012) notes how instructional leadership has been reincarnated as a global phenomenon in the form of 'leadership for learning'. Timperley (2011:145) states that leadership that is focused on promoting effective teaching and learning has had a number of terms: 'as with any idea that gains currency in education, the labels for this kind of leadership abound and have usually taken an adjectival form of instructional, pedagogical, or learning-centred leadership. Alternatively it is expressed as leadership of or for something, such as leadership for learning'. Learning-directed learning is another term used.

Timperley goes on to say that Murphy et al., (2007) summed up the essence of the ideas expressed in these multiple labels when they said 'the touchstones for this type of leadership include the ability of leaders

(a) to stay consistently focused on the right stuff—the core technology of schools, or learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment, and

(b) to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g. administration, organization, finance) work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning'. (2007, cited in Timperley, 2011:146)

In broad terms, whatever its label, it is an approach to leadership 'whereby the leader helps foster a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for students. Elements include principal leadership, clear mission, teaching expectations, and opportunities to learn' (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015:2).

This form of leadership is highly concerned with improving student outcomes, where the focus is on learning and leading teachers' professional development. For example, Southworth (2002:79) states that 'instructional leadership is strongly concerned with teaching and learning, including the professional learning of teachers as well as student growth'. Southworth has contributed significantly to the debate about learning-centred leadership and has developed a model which includes the strategies of modelling, monitoring and dialogue (Southworth, 2009; Earley, 2013). For Southworth, learning-centred leadership is about 'the simultaneous use of these strategies in ways which mutually reinforce one another. It is their combined effect which creates powerful learning

for teachers and leaders and which, in turn, inform teachers' actions in classrooms and lead to improved teaching and student learning' (ibid.:101).

Learning-centred leadership emphasises the centrality of teaching and learning and suggest that leaders' influence on student outcomes is via staff, especially teachers. MacBeath (2006:39) agrees with Southworth (2003) saying that, 'instruction is no longer our guiding star; rather it is learning. If learning is our primary goal, then we should think of leadership being "learning centred" rather than instructional'. Leadership for learning has also been conceptualised as a combination of pedagogic and transformational leadership (Day and Sammons, 2013; Robinson, 2011). If this is the case, then how can leaders lead the learning? How might this form of leadership be operationalized in schools and classrooms?

Leading the learning: making it happen

This section considers how leaders can act as learning-centred leaders, especially their role in developing people, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and having a positive impact on student outcomes, broadly defined.

As mentioned above, Southworth (2004, 2009) discussed the learning-centred leadership strategies of modelling, monitoring and dialogue to which West-Burnham later added mentoring as underpinning all three (Earley, 2013). For the OECD, leadership for learning was about focusing on supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality which included 'coordinating the curriculum and teaching program, monitoring and evaluating teaching practice, promoting teachers' professional development, and supporting collaborative work cultures' (Schleicher, 2012:18). For Levin, leaders must see leading learning as their main responsibility, 'to which they devote a considerable amount of time and attention and which takes priority over other competing pressures' (2013:6). Rhodes and Brundrett (2010:156) argue that senior leaders need to help teachers – who are leaders of teaching and learning in classrooms – 'to improve their own practices by enabling teachers to continue to learn themselves'.

In order to keep a focus on learning it is important to visit classrooms and participate in professional development, initiate and guide conversations about student learning, keep up to date and share learning with others, make pupil learning a focus for performance evaluation, establish teaching and learning as central topics for school-wide staff meetings, analyse data about student learning and use it for planning and to set goals for improvements in learning and then review progress in relation to these goals (Levin, 2013).

Southworth has made a number of suggestions of how systems and structures can support learning-centred leadership. These include planning processes – for lessons, units of work, periods of time, classes and groups of students, and individuals; target-setting – for individuals, groups, classes, years, key stages and the whole institution; communication systems – especially meetings; monitoring systems – analysing and using pupil learning data, observing classrooms and providing feedback; roles and responsibilities of leaders - including mentoring and coaching - and policies for learning, teaching and assessment and marking (2009:102).

The work of Robinson and her colleagues in New Zealand (Robinson et al., 2009; Robinson, 2011) has convincingly demonstrated how leadership related to teacher development has by far the greatest impact on student outcomes. In their meta-analysis of the five factors underpinning effective leadership 'Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development' was found to have the greatest influence on student outcomes. Such leaders ensure an intensive focus on teaching-learning relationships; promote

collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and well-being; and provide useful advice about how to solve teaching problems (Robinson et al., 2009). The central message of the research was clear: 'The more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning the greater their influence on student outcomes' (Robinson et al., 2009:201). Vignette 1 outlines this further.

Vignette 1

Leadership where it counts: making a bigger difference to your students

Robinson's book 'Student-Centred Leadership' (2011) 'provides research-based guidance on the leadership practices associated with increased learning and well-being of students. At its core is a meta-analysis of 30 research studies which have examined the links between various types of school leadership and students' academic and social outcomes. The five leadership dimensions are associated with successful leadership are:

1. Establishing goals and expectations
2. Resourcing strategically
3. Ensuring quality teaching
4. Leading teacher learning and development
5. Ensuring an orderly and safe environment.

For Robinson 'making a bigger impact requires moving beyond a "general idea" about the importance of these five dimensions, to a more precise understanding of how they work to improve the quality of teaching and learning'.

- The first dimension of student-centred leadership involves setting and communicating clear goals.

This 'requires gaining commitment of all those involved by linking goals to values which people hold dearly; ensuring that staff have or can acquire the capabilities needed to achieve the goals and using evidence about current levels of student achievement to set important and realistic targets'.

- Once these goals are established, the second dimension of effective leadership – resourcing strategically - comes into force. 'Scarce resources – money, time on the timetable, teaching materials and staff expertise - are allocated in ways that give priority to key goals. ….Strategic resourcing and strategic thinking are closely linked. Strategic thinking involves asking questions and challenging assumptions about the links between resources and the needs they are intended to meet'.

- The third dimension 'involves ensuring the quality of teaching'. In schools 'where teachers report that their leadership is heavily involved in these activities, students do better'. For Robinson this form of leadership 'requires a defensible and shared theory of effective teaching that forms the basis of a coherent teaching programme in which there is collective rather than individual teacher responsibility for student learning and well-being'.

- The fourth dimension of leadership aims to 'develop the capacity of teachers to teach what students need to learn, while being open minded about what that is and how to achieve it'. Crucial here is leaders' 'knowledge of the types of professional development that are more and less likely to make an impact on the students of the participating teachers'

165

- For Robinson although the third dimension scores the highest 'effect size' it is the fifth dimension which provides a foundation for all the rest. 'Effective leadership ensures a safe and secure environment for both staff and students. Teachers feel respected, students feel their teachers care about them and their learning, and school and classroom routines protect students' learning time. Strong ties are developed by bringing relevant cultural resources into the school and classrooms and by more direct involvement of parents in the educational work of the school'.

Robinson notes that whilst the five dimensions tell leaders where the biggest difference to student outcomes can be made, they say little about 'the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to make the dimensions work in a particular school context'. She points to the importance of three interrelated capabilities:

(a) using deep knowledge of teaching and learning to (b) solve complex school-based problems, and (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students.

For Robinson 'student-centred leadership involves a skilful integration of these three capabilities into the work described by each of the five dimensions'. However, she notes that is unrealistic (and unhelpful) to expect a single school leader to do all this and 'it may lead to unrealistic conceptions of heroic leadership and deny the reality of distributed leadership in schools' arguing that 'a more useful exercise is to involve the whole senior leadership team in a discussion of the emphasis currently given to each of these dimensions'.

However the five dimensions and the three capabilities are used, for Robinson 'the yardstick for progress should be their impact on the learning and well-being of students'.

(Source: *School Leadership Today*, 2013, Volume 5.2, 63-68)

MacBeath and Swaffield's leadership for learning (LfL) project conducted in a number of countries suggests such practice requires leadership that is shared and accountable, supportive learning environments are created and teachers are given every opportunity to grow and explore new ideas in the classroom (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2008). Their colleagues at Cambridge have gone further and more recently argued that 'principals have a key role in creating the conditions for enabling teachers to have a voice and to contribute to the development of policy and practice' (Bangs and Frost, 2016:97).

A willingness to take risks in practice and to innovate are critical to creating a learning-centred or learning enriched community that learns and reinforces continuous improvement (Bubb and Earley, 2010). Seashore (2015) sees learning-centred leaders as fostering what she calls 'professional community' and they act in very specific ways:

they observe classrooms and ask questions that provoke teachers to think; they give 'power' over curriculum priorities and school practices to teachers; they consult teachers before making most important decisions; they ensure that all students have equal opportunity to have the best teachers; they use staff meetings to talk about equity and instruction, not about procedures; and they ask all teachers to observe each other's classrooms. In other words, teachers assess the effects of their principals by pointing to specific behaviors rather than generalised personality characteristics.

For her school leaders shape the school culture 'in ways that make its members more productive as well as more satisfied' (ibid.). The social conditions that staff encounter in a school are crucial and for Seashore these are grounded in professional community, or 'the stimulating relationships that they have with other teachers that create effective

individual and collective learning environments that support change'. Her research suggests that school leaders have a major effect on whether or not supportive and challenging work environments exist. They exert influence in the following ways:

- Affect working relationships and, indirectly, student achievement (*instructional leadership*)
- When influence is shared with teachers, foster stronger teacher working relationships (*shared leadership*)
- Create a culture of support for teachers that is translated into support for student work (*academic support*). (Seashore, 2015)

Promoting a learning culture and encouraging teacher leadership is important for, as the OECD note, 'teachers who report they are provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making at a school level have higher reported levels of job satisfaction in all TALIS countries and higher feelings of self-efficacy in most countries' (OECD, 2014, cited in Bangs and Frost, 2016:99). Frost argues that 'with the right kind of support, teachers everywhere can experience a reigniting of their professionality and enhancement of their sense of moral purpose' (ibid.: 103). Such re-ignition is crucial at a time when teacher motivation may not be at its highest (Carr, 2016).

Although leadership of learning at all levels is important, headteacher leadership remains the major driving force and underpins the school's effectiveness and continued improvement. Such leadership 'serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation' (Leithwood et al., 2006 cited in Day and Sammons, 2013:34).

The research of Day et al., (2009) revealed that headteachers recognised the importance to the success of their schools of widening the participation of staff, consulting with them regularly and, in some schools, involving pupils in school-wide decision-making. As Day and Sammons note of this research study: 'there was evidence also of much effort to reshape and broaden the senior leadership team into a group which represented more strongly the "core" business of raising teaching and learning standards……organisational change and development are enhanced when leadership is broad based and where teachers have opportunities to collaborate and to actively engage in change and innovation' (2013:38).

There are some clear messages emerging from the research about learning-centred leadership or the leadership of learning, most notably that the actions of school leaders, especially headteachers, are crucial for creating that 'learning atmosphere' or organizational culture for both pupils and staff so that learning occurs. Effective leaders empower teachers and other staff to reach their potential because it is through teachers and high quality teaching that students will be helped to reach theirs. However, it begs the question of the purpose of learning and it is to this more philosophical question that we finally turn.

Leading learning for what?

This final section presents the case why learning-centred leadership matters even more in education systems which operate within a high stakes accountability culture. Within such systems there is a danger that learning becomes very narrowly defined and the overall

purpose of education lost. It is easy in a time of measurement, targets and league tables to lose sight of what the primary purpose of schools should be. The question needs to be asked: what are the core purposes of learning and education, and hence of school leadership?

The philosopher Gert Biesta has coined the term 'learnification' which he sees as the rise of a new language of learning on education – this rise is seen in what he refers to as the number of discursive shifts, for example all students and adults are referred to as learners; teachers as facilitators of learning, creators of learning opportunities, etc. (Biesta, 2016: 80). Assessment is for learning and strategies are referred to as learning and teaching strategies, leadership as learning-centred and so on. 'Learning' is certainly a term whose time has come which perhaps is a greater reason for its nature and purpose to be carefully considered. As Smythe and Wrigley remark: 'in the discourse of the new leadership, even the term "leading learning" has been reduced into monitoring attainment; the complexities of social justice are viewed very narrowly through the lens of reducing attainment gaps' (2013:156). For others the global testing culture permeates all aspects of education, 'from financing, to parental involvement, to teacher and student beliefs and practices' which has led 'to an environment where testing becomes synonymous with accountability, which becomes synonymous with education quality' (Smith, 2016:x).

For Dimmock (2012:46) discussion about learning-centred or instructional leadership is meaningless in such a culture, where 'government policy priorities are measured by league tables and inspection regimes that are nationally defined and unresponsive to local circumstances, since the principalship is increasingly defined by the extent to which these outcome measures are achieved. There is little scope for much else'. There is a view that 'the teacher is no longer viewed as a professional, but as a labourer who simply has to follow evidence-based methods in order to secure externally determined goals' (Evers and Kneyber, 2016:3) and that teaching is no longer the vocation it was once seen to be (Carr, 2016).

Andy Hargreaves argues that school autonomy is not always a good thing and can work against notions of leadership for learning as it tends to lead to 'principals turning into de-professionalised performance managers and evaluators of teachers as individuals rather than builders of professional communities amongst all their staff within and across schools' (2016:123). Education systems and schools however need reflective professionals who are able to make judgements and act upon what is considered to be 'educationally desirable'.

Leadership for learning must be leadership with a purpose. It is argued here that it must be about learning that is more than just attainment, exam and test scores and meeting central government's policy objectives. Of course attainment is important as children's life chances have little chance of being realised without knowledge of the basics, but education – and learning – must be about more than this. Glatter (see Chapter 2) raises similar concerns about the core purposes of education, and hence of educational leadership and quotes Ray Starratt (2007) who argues that practitioners and researchers alike must always ask themselves the question 'Leadership of and for what?' He suggests that without a clear answer to this then 'all the research and theory and discourse about distributed and sustainable leadership, about restructuring and reculturing, about capacity building and professional development, will not make what goes on in schools right' (ibid.:182).

Learning-centred leadership or leadership for learning must keep this question centre stage – leadership of learning for what? This it should be argued is the essence of learning-centred leadership. This is no doubt harder to keep at the core of what schools do

whilst operating in a high stakes accountability culture, but not impossible as other chapters in this volume show (see also Matthews et al., 2015 for a study of outstanding primary schools).

Implications and challenges

- A concern or challenge for learning-centred leaders will be maintaining the focus on learning – to concentrate their efforts on professional and pedagogic matters rather than administrative and financial concerns. The growing number of competing pressures and demands on school leaders' time will make this an increasingly difficult task and will call for even more distributed leadership where all leaders' focus is learning (Earley, 2013). It will be important to ensure that staff in charge of teaching and learning keep it as a high priority and know how to lead and effectively promulgate their vision of teaching and learning.

- Will the growth of a self-improving school system help or hinder the development of such leadership? What does a self-improving system mean for LCL? How will leading learning play out in a federation or chain? Will chief executives become further removed from the 'core business' of schools which will increasingly be seen as the responsibility of senior and middle leaders? Will such leaders have even less 'autonomy' than under previous arrangements? Will executive heads and chief executives of academies and chains be more likely to have a business rather than an education background?

- How will leaders ensure that focusing on learning (leadership for learning or learning-centred leadership) includes whole school discussion, including with governing bodies, about 'learning for what'? Will this help avoid schools becoming 'examination factories' (Hutchings, 2015) and discourage teaching to the test and other unsavoury practices associated with toxic organizational cultures (see Chapter 17)?

Heads and other school leaders can therefore play key roles in creating and maintaining the conditions and environment where teachers can teach (and learn) effectively and students can learn. Effective learning-centred leaders empower staff and students to reach their potential. Student outcomes can be improved and not only in relation to attainment.

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