Instructional leadership and school improvement

David Hopkins, Faculty of Education, University of Nottingham

Contemporary educational reform places a great premium on the effective leadership and management of schools. The logic of this position is that an orderly school environment, that is efficient and well managed, provides the preconditions for enhanced student learning. Empirical backing for a relationship between leadership and higher levels of student outcomes is often claimed, and the school effects research is usually cited in support. At one level this contention is self-evidently true. However, the correlational nature of the research evidence that is often cited in support inevitably masks the exact relationship between leadership and enhanced student learning. Consequently, policy initiatives that focus solely on leadership and management have difficulty in achieving more than a generalised impact on student learning. The purpose of this paper is to sketch out more precisely the relationship between leadership and learning.

This will be done in three ways:

- The styles of leadership most closely related to enhanced student learning will be identified.

- The focus on what needs to be done to raise levels of student learning will be clarified.

- The argument will be made for an approach to educational reform that links instructional leadership and school improvement.

It is now more than 20 years since leadership was identified as one of the key components of "good schools" by HMI, who stated that, without exception, the most important single factor in the success of these schools is the quality of the leadership of the head (DES, 1977:36). Since that time the changes imposed upon the UK education system, and indeed on most other "developed" educational systems, have radically altered the role and responsibilities of the headteacher or principal. In particular, the devolution of responsibility for local management of schools in many systems has resulted in the headteacher or principal becoming a manager of systems and budgets as well as a leader of colleagues. Also, the increasingly competitive environment in which schools operate has placed a much greater emphasis upon the need to raise standards and to improve the outcomes of schooling.

During the past decade, the debate over educational leadership has been dominated by a contrast between the (so-called) transactional and transformational approaches. As we have noted elsewhere, there seems to be a presumption with transactional models in systems where strong central control has been retained, while in those systems where de-centralisation has been most evident considerable interest in transformational models has emerged (West et al 2000). It has been widely argued that complex and dynamic changes, such as the "cultural" changes that are required for sustained school improvement, are more likely to occur as a result of transformational leadership (Burns 1978, Caldwell 1999, Leithwood and Jantzi 1990). This

style of leadership focuses on the people involved and their relationships, and requires an approach that seeks to transform feelings, attitudes and beliefs. Transformational leaders not only manage structure, but they purposefully seek to impact upon the culture of the school in order to change it.

Unfortunately there is a problem when reviewing the literature on educational leadership. It is that most commentators, certainly those writing during the past ten or twenty years, tend to conflate their own views about what leadership should be with their descriptions of what leadership actually is, and fail to discipline either position by reference to empirical research. This can lead us towards a somewhat mythical view of leadership that is often embellished by rhetoric. Consequently, transformational leadership is, as with many concepts in education, a somewhat plastic term. For the purposes of this paper I have selected, from our more comprehensive review, a few sources that capture the range of conventional wisdom on transformational leadership and that have adequate empirical support (Hopkins 2000).

So for example:

- On the issue of change, Cheng (1997) claims that transformational leadership is critical to meeting educational challenges in a changing environment, and Turan and Sny (1996) argue that strategic planning, like transformational leadership, is vision-driven planning for the future.

- Innovation, inclusion and conflict management have all been linked to transformational leadership behaviours. Berg and Sleegers (1996) found that transformational school leadership plays a "particularly crucial" role in the development of the innovative capacities of schools.

- According to research by Leithwood (1997), principal leadership exercised its strongest independent influence on planning, structure and organisation, as well as on school mission and school culture.

These studies support the contention that the main outcome of transformational leadership is the "increased capacity of an organisation to continuously improve" (Leithwood et al 1999, p 17). It is for this reason that I consider the approach a necessary but not sufficient condition for school improvement, for the simple reason that it lacks a specific orientation towards student learning. In line with many other educational reforms, transformational leadership simply focuses on the wrong variables.

There is now an increasingly strong research base that suggests that initiatives such as local management of schools, external inspection, organisation development or teacher appraisal only indirectly effect student performance. These "distal variables", as Wang and her colleagues (1993) point out, are too far removed from the daily learning experiences of most students. The three key "proximal variables" that, according to their meta-analysis, do correlate with higher levels of student achievement are psychological, instructional and home environments. The clear implications for policy are that any strategy to promote student learning needs to give attention to engaging students and parents as active participants, and expanding the teaching and learning repertoires of teachers and students respectively.

Yet a sole focus on teaching and learning is also not a sufficient condition for school improvement. A leading American commentator on school reform explains it this way (Elmore 1995, p 366):

> Principles of [best] practice [related to teaching and learning]…have difficulty taking root in schools for essentially two reasons: (a) they require content knowledge and

pedagogical skill that few teachers presently have, and (b) they challenge certain basic patterns in the organisation of schooling. Neither problem can be solved independently of the other, nor is teaching practice likely to change in the absence of solutions that operate simultaneously on both fronts.

What Elmore is arguing for is an approach to educational change that at the same time focuses on the organisational conditions of the school, in particular the approach taken to staff development and planning, as well as on the way teaching and learning is conducted. For these reasons I am attracted to the construct of instructional leadership. Leithwood and his colleagues (1999, p 8) define it as an approach to leadership that emphasises "the behaviours of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students".

Once again the term is subject to conceptual pluralism by the many commentators who are attracted to the notion (see for example Sheppard 1996, Geltner and Shelton 1991, and Duke 1987). However, the most fully tested approach to instructional leadership is that of Hallinger and his colleagues (see for example Hallinger and Murphy 1985). They propose a model of instructional leadership that consists of 20 specific functions within three broad categories:

- defining the school mission

- managing the instructional programme

- promoting school climate

There is considerable empirical support for this model, particularly as it relates to student outcomes (Hallinger 1992, Sheppard 1996).

Our own work in supporting a variety of school improvement initiatives suggests that the focus of instructional leadership needs to be on two key skill clusters (see for example Hopkins et al 1996, 1998). These are

- strategies for effective teaching and learning

- the conditions that support implementation, in particular staff development and planning

As contemporary policy and practice exhibits a lack of precision in operationalising these domains I need to clarify, albeit briefly, our use of the terms.

The research evidence on effective patterns of teaching that result in higher levels of student learning is burgeoning (eg Creemers 1994, Brophy and Good 1986, Joyce and Weil 1996, Joyce et al 1997). One can summarise the evidence from the research on teaching and curriculum, and their impact on student learning, as follows:

- There are a number of well-developed models of teaching and curriculum that generate substantially higher levels of student learning than does normative practice.

- The most effective curricular and teaching patterns induce students to construct knowledge – to inquire into subject areas intensively. The result is to increase student capacity to learn and work smarter.

- Models of teaching are really models of learning. As students acquire information, ideas, skills, values, ways of thinking, and means of expressing themselves, they are also learning how to learn.

- To ensure maximum impact on learning, any specific teaching strategy needs to be fully integrated within a curriculum. Too often thinking skills or study strategies are presented in isolation, with the consequence a) that it is left to the student to transfer the strategy to real settings, and b) that teachers have no curriculum vehicle in which to share good practice.

This analysis supports the view that teaching is more than just presenting material, it is about infusing curriculum content with appropriate instructional strategies that are selected in order to achieve the learning goals the teacher has for his or her students. Successful teachers are not simply charismatic, persuasive and expert presenters; rather, they create powerful cognitive and social tasks to their students, and teach the students how to make productive use of them. The purpose of instructional leadership is to facilitate and support this approach to teaching and learning.

The other side of the coin is, of course, staff development. This is for the obvious reason that many of the curricular and teaching patterns alluded to above are new for most teachers. They represent additions to their repertoire that require substantial study and hard work if implementation in the classroom is to take place. The approach to staff development that we employ is specifically directed at assisting teachers to expand their range of teaching strategies. This approach is based on the research of Joyce and Showers (1995), who identify a number of key training components that need to be used in combination. The major components of training are:

- presentation of theory or description of skill or strategy

- modelling or demonstration of skills or models of teaching

- practice in simulated and classroom settings

- structured and open-ended feedback (provision of information about performance)

- coaching for application (hands-on, in-classroom assistance with the transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom)

Joyce (1992) has also distinguished between where these various forms of staff development are best located – either in the workshop or the workplace. The workshop, which is equivalent to the best practice on the traditional INSET course, is where teachers gain understanding, see demonstrations of the teaching strategy, and have the opportunity to practise in a non-threatening environment. If, however, we wish to transfer those skills back into the workplace – the classroom and school – then merely attending the workshop is insufficient. The research evidence is very clear that skill acquisition and the ability to transfer vertically to a range of situations requires on-the-job support. This implies changes to the way in which staff development is organised in schools (Joyce and Showers 1995). In particular, this means providing the opportunity for immediate and sustained practice, collaboration and peer coaching, and studying development and implementation. Instructional leaders realise that one cannot 'ad hoc' staff development – time has to be found for it.

It is in the confluence between expanding the teaching and learning repertoires of teachers and staff development that school improvement defines itself. In the sense that I have been using the term in this paper, school improvement is a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. School improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the

teaching-learning process and the conditions that support it. It is about strategies for improving the school's capacity for providing quality education in times of change (see Hopkins et al, 1994, Chapter 1).

This definition is consistent with the research on effective school improvement initiatives. Those strategies that enhance student outcomes tend (Joyce et al, 1993) to:

- focus on specific outcomes which can be related to student learning, rather than succumbing to external pressure to identify non-specific goals such as "improve exam results"

- when formulating strategies, draw on theory and on research into practice and the teachers' own experiences, so that the rationale for the required changes is established in the minds of those expected to bring them about

- recognise the importance of staff development, since it is unlikely that developments in student learning will occur without developments in teachers' practice

- provide for monitoring the impact of policy and strategy on teacher practice and student learning early and regularly, rather than rely on post hoc evaluations

Our experience of facilitating leadership within the IQEA school improvement project suggests that instructional leaders display the following characteristics (Hopkins et al 1997, 2000):

- an ability to articulate values and vision around student learning and achievement, and to make the connections to principles and behaviours and the necessary structures to promote and sustain them

- an understanding of a range of pedagogic structures and their ability to impact on student achievement and learning

- an ability to distinguish between development and maintenance structures, activities and cultures

- a strategic orientation, the ability to plan at least into the medium term, and an entrepreneurial bent that facilitates the exploitation of external change

- an understanding of the nature of organisational capacity, its role in sustaining change, and how to enhance it

- a commitment to promoting enquiry, particularly into the 'how' rather than the 'what'

- a similar commitment to continuing professional development and the managing of the teacher's life cycle

- an ability to engender trust and provide positive reinforcement

In this short paper I have argued for a style of leadership that is consistent with raising levels of student achievement. From this perspective, instructional leaders are able to create synergy between a focus on teaching and learning on the one hand, and capacity building on the other. In developing the theme of this paper I critiqued transformational leadership styles as being necessary rather than sufficient for the purposes of school improvement. If we are serious about

raising the levels of student achievement and learning in our schools, then we need to research and develop, more than ever before, styles of leadership that promote, celebrate and enhance the importance of teaching and learning and staff development.

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