The effective instructional leader

4 authors:

Peter Campbell
NSW Department of Education and Communities
1 PUBLICATION   **1** CITATION

SEE PROFILE

Marilyn Chaseling
Southern Cross University
25 PUBLICATIONS   **40** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

William E Boyd
University of Barcelona
215 PUBLICATIONS   **1,684** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Brad Shipway
Southern Cross University
26 PUBLICATIONS   **66** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Quaternary geological studies View project

Phytolith on prehistoric living areas View project
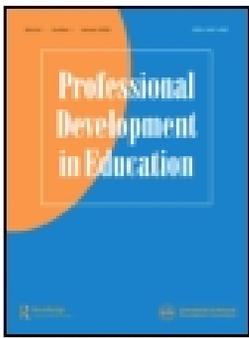
The effective instructional leader

Peter Campbell, Marilyn Chaseling, William Boyd & Bradley Shipway

Published online: 04 Jul 2018.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

The effective instructional leader

Peter Campbell[a] , Marilyn Chaseling[b] , William Boyd[c] and Bradley Shipway[b]

[a]New South Wales Department of Education, Lismore, Australia; [b]School of Education, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia; [c]School of Environment, Science & Engineering, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study examines school principals' insights into effective instructional leadership. It follows the implementation by the New South Wales Department of Education, Australia, of a state-wide strategy that featured Instructional Leaders. Over 200 were appointed to selected schools as completely new positions. However, the initial implementation contained no published role description or guidelines. In a context relatively devoid of supporting information, school principals found it necessary to construct the concept and role of 'instructional leader' themselves – including the appointment level within the school staffing profile. Using qualitative research based on in-depth interviews, the study explores the insights of six school principals who had an Instructional Leader appointed to their school. The data were analysed to explore the principals' perceptions of effective instructional leadership, and ascertain whether it had an impact upon the depth of professional learning in their schools. The study found that: (i) principals did not view themselves as instructional leaders, but as facilitators of the concept; (ii) understanding of instructional leadership was weak and diffuse, and depended on prior experience; and (iii) instructional leadership could be considered effective in improving student outcomes by improving teacher practice, developing purposeful professional learning, and building strong relationships across the school.

Introduction

Widespread concern over Australia's relative standing in global rankings of education systems has generated many Australian Federal and State initiatives (Shaddock 2014; Baker *et al*. in press). One such Federal initiative is NAPLAN,[1] the National Assessment Programme [for] Literacy and Numeracy, which was introduced in 2008 after agreement from all Australia's Ministers for Education – Federal, State and Territory (Adams c.2013).

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, the Government's 10-year *NSW 2021 Plan* sets out six targets to improve education and learning outcomes for all the state's students (NSW Government 2011a). One target aims to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy – specifically increasing the proportion of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9[2] who are (i) above the national minimum standard in NAPLAN for reading and numeracy, and (ii) in the top two NAPLAN performance bands.

CONTACT Marilyn Chaseling ✉ marilyn.chaseling@scu.edu.au

With these targets in mind, the NSW Government developed a *Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan* 2012–2016 to better support the State's low-achieving primary school students who were 'known to exist from the earliest years of schooling in NSW schools serving low socio-economic status (SES) communities' (Erebus 2017, p. 27). The *Action Plan's* goal was to improve school culture through high quality teaching, effective instructional leadership, evidence-based action, collaboration and commitment from all staff (NSW Government 2012). Over a five-year period (2012–2016), the NSW Government progressively allocated AU$261 million for its *Action Plan* to be implemented in 448 targeted low-achieving primary schools which serve 41,392 Kindergarten to Year 2 students. The chosen schools represented 20% of NSW schools (Erebus International 2017).

Early Action for Success programme to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills

NSW's three school sectors – Public, Catholic and Independent – each developed a context-specific approach for the implementation of the NSW Government's *Action Plan* (Wyatt 2017). In 2012, the NSW Department of Education introduced its *Early Action for Success* (EAFS) strategy for Kindergarten to Year 2 students in selected schools that fell below NAPLAN minimum benchmarks (NSW Government 2012). The schools involved in EAFS were appointed to the programme as a result of being identified through an analysis of a range of school characteristics, including school performance data, NAPLAN scores, and an assessment of school suitability and readiness to participate (Erebus International 2017).

From the outset, a critical component of the EAFS initiative was the role of the 'instructional leader'. The 'instructional leader' position was linked to the NSW Minister for Education's Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan Advisory Group, which advised that 'an approach of focusing on personalised learning, diagnostic assessment and teacher professional development in the classroom under the direction of an instructional leader is the way forward to improving all students' performance in literacy and numeracy' (NSW Government 2011b, p. 24).

Despite the research and scholarly literature on instructional leadership (for example Blasé and Blasé 2000; Hattie 2009; Rigby 2014), there has been little reference to, or usage of, the term 'instructional leader' or 'instructional leadership' in the NSW educational reform literature, or in the NSW Department of Education's communications and documents. The title 'Instructional Leader' was new to the NSW Department and its schools at the time of the roll-out of *EAFS* in 2012. The use of this title immediately brought the concept of instructional leadership to the forefront for NSW government school principals, who at the time had themselves been moving from 'transformational leadership' to principal 'instructional leadership' (Fullan 2002; Leithwood et. al. 2004; Lakomski *et al.* 2017). The NSW Department's decision that the Instructional Leader position would be attached directly to particular schools, or small clusters of schools, on a continuing basis contrasted with previous loosely equivalent roles in Department schools, such as local advisors, advisory teachers, or specialist consultants.

In the first roll out, the EAFS programme was introduced without the position of Instructional Leader being clearly defined or explained. There was no statement from the Department of the specific role, skills or experience required to be an Instructional Leader. The following general statement provided the only guidelines:

> Instructional Leaders … are teachers of teachers and have a strong understanding of effective classroom practice and strategies to improve student learning through teacher professional learning. Instructional Leaders … develop teacher capacity through the collaborative evaluation of teaching and its effect on student learning. They develop shared expectations and targets for student learning and align strategies and resources for the achievement of these outcomes.
>
> (NSW Government 2012, p. 9)

It was not until mid-2014 that the Instructional Leader role was defined as acting in collaboration with the school's executive to monitor the professional learning of Kindergarten to Year 2 teachers, while these teachers addressed the literacy and numeracy needs of their students (NSW Department

of Education & Communities 2014). Therefore, for almost three years, there was an absence in the shared understanding of what the position should entail.

As a NSW Department of Education School Education Director, the senior author of this paper was responsible in 2012 for the initial rollout of one of five Instructional Leader positions in NSW government schools. In the following year, a further three schools for which this Director was responsible, also had an Instructional Leader added to their staff.

With no written role description at the time, school principals who had an Instructional Leader appointed to their school needed to develop their understanding of the role at the same time as they implemented the EAFS itself. The confluence of these events, meant that the Instructional Leader position was linked to what was happening in a specific school environment, rather than drawing upon the current leadership literature. The absence of a centralised role statement provided the opportunity for a localised version to be developed by each EAFS team, comprised of the School Education Director, Principal and Instructional Leader. This study examines how school principals understood this emerging position. The central organising questions were:

  (i) *What do principals of EAFS schools perceive as effective instructional leadership?* and
  (ii) *What role does the principal in an EAFS school have in instructional leadership?*

Instructional leadership

For more than 30 years, instructional leadership has been seen as a vital component of the professional toolset of a school principal (Hallinger and Murphy 1982; De Beviose 1984; Hallinger 2005; Beauchamp and Parsons 2012; Gulcan 2012; Neumerski 2012). It is one of the two major forms of school leadership, the other being transformational leadership (Hattie 2012; Shatzer *et al*. 2014). In his meta-analysis of educational research interventions, Hattie (2012, 2015) demonstrated above-average influence on student learning outcomes for leaders who:

  (i) believe their major role is to evaluate their impact;
  (ii) encourage everyone in the school to work together to understand and evaluate their impact;
  (iii) learn in an environment that privileges high-impact teaching and learning;
  (iv) are explicit with teachers and students about what success looks like; and
  (v) set appropriate levels of challenge and never retreat to a position of 'just do one's best'.

Hattie further concluded that high-impact instructional leaders seek their colleagues' agreement about what constitutes convincing evidence of above-average impacts on student learning. Instructional leadership is considered to be crucial to school effectiveness (Hallinger and Murphy 1982; De Beviose 1984; Beauchamp and Parsons 2012; Gulcan 2012; Chaseling et.al. 2017).

The definition of instructional leadership is evolving and can vary according to the context (Horng and Loeb 2010; Neumerski 2012). Since the mid 1990s, it has been recognised that the principal need not be the only instructional leader in the school (Daresh and Plyko 1995; Neumerski 2012), and that more effective schools tend to use instructional leadership more often than less effective schools (Murphy *et al*. 2016). In her attempt to map the scholastic understanding of instructional leadership, Neumerski found three distinct species of literature: (i) instructional leadership centred primarily on the principal, (ii) teacher instructional leadership and (iii) coach instructional leadership. Neumerski observed that the behaviours needed for principals to engage in instructional leadership are more defined in the literature than those for teachers or coaches which tend to focus on descriptive or prescriptive characteristics. It was recommended that the three 'literatures' need to be integrated 'to develop a more nuanced understanding of the "how" of instructional leadership' (Neumerski 2012, p. 335).

Regardless of whether the instructional leader in a school is the principal or another school leader, a fundamental part of an instructional leader's skill set is to assist teachers to continually improve their practice (Glick 2011, p. 14).
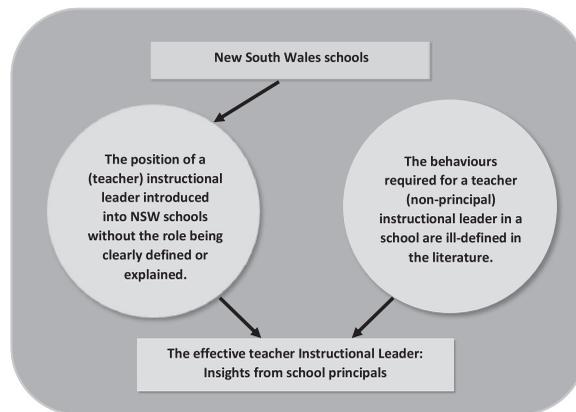
Figure 1. The study's conceptual framework. (Left circle) – An absence of a clear definition of the new position of Instructional Leader in NSW schools. (Right circle) – An absence of well-defined Instructional Leader behaviours and characteristics. (Bottom Rectangle) – The current study – The effective Instructional Leader: Insights from school principals.

> Teachers are willing to change very deeply held beliefs about what works in their classrooms when instructional initiatives make sense to them, when they see organisational commitment (e.g. time, materials, space, and expertise) to a new pedagogy, and when the instructional environment trusts their best efforts. (Jones 2012, p. 130)

Over the last three decades, there has been a movement from the principal as administrator or manager (Tyack and Hansot 1982; De Bevoise 1984) towards a principal focussing more on teacher practice and strong central leadership (Fullan 2013, p. 11). Horng and Loeb (2010) acknowledge that a leadership prototype has arisen which is characterised by outstanding teachers having the added role of being a mentoring leader. Their view of instructional leadership emphasises 'organisational management for instructional improvement rather than day-to-day teaching and learning' (Horng and Loeb 2010, pp. 66–67). This view is broadly consistent with many others who have examined the emerging nature of the contemporary view of instructional leadership, and have noted the interrelationship of managing institutional frameworks in a collegial way to achieve the imperative of high-impact teaching (Blasé and Blasé 2000, p. 130; Hattie 2012, p. 154; Jones 2012, p. 129; Murphy *et al.* 2016, p. 459).

Methods

Research assumptions

Two assumptions guided the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1). First, the fact that the Instructional Leader position was introduced into NSW government schools without the role being clearly defined indicated that the system either made an omission in the implementation process, or that it was assumed that Departmental staff already knew what an Instructional Leader was. Taking the zeitgeist into account, we thought the former was a more plausible explanation. Second, the characteristic behaviours for an instructional leader are ill-defined in the literature (Neumerski 2012). This study sought to address a gap in the literature by understanding how principals constructed a working definition of instructional leadership in their school as the EAFS programme was implemented.

Qualitative research was chosen as a methodological approach to explore this social and human problem as through this the researcher 'builds a complex, holistic picture; analyses words; reports detailed views of the participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting' (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 326). The decision to use interviews as the data gathering method was closely linked to the qualitative nature of this study. Interviews enable in-depth insights to be gained on a single phenomenon (Denscombe 2017), on this occasion instructional leadership in a K-2 school setting. In-depth

interviews are also an effective tool to use when investigating the perceptions people hold in their heads, and the perceptions people have of other people's perceptions.

As the highest authority in a school and the person charged with defining the leadership and management direction of their school, it is the principal who has overall responsibility for the EAFS strategy, and who is most likely the supervisor of the programme's Instructional Leader. As such, the principal, as the most senior educator in the school, was simultaneously developing his/her (i) understanding and interpretation of the new instructional leader role, and (ii) own leadership and management of the new role. The decision to interview principals, as opposed to others (such as the Instructional Leaders themselves, teachers, students or parents/caregivers) was made in an effort to focus early attention on how the leadership of the schools was navigating the new set of professional roles and relationships that had emerged with the implementation of the EAFS programme.

Interviewing principals placed the phenomena of the emerging new Instructional Leader role in its natural setting, and allowed an observation of the phenomena itself, along with the meanings people were ascribing to the phenomena (Creswell and Poth 2018). This hermeneutical approach acknowledges both the ontological realism of a given educational policy initiative, and the epistemological relativism of how that initiative is perceived by different people. Through the interviews, each principal had the opportunity to bring his/her personal, subjective and unique perspective of the type of instructional leadership that is effective in his/her school context (Cohen *et al.* 2011). This approach is aligned with Creswell and Poth's understanding of when it is appropriate to employ qualitative methods: 'We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study' (Cresswell and Poth 2018, p. 45).

Choosing participants

Sample size strategy did not play a significant role in the selection of participants for this study, as the specific object of knowledge under investigation was the set of perceptions principals had of instructional leadership. As such, purposive sampling was employed to generate a sample with specific characteristics, namely, that all participants needed to be a school principal in a NSW government school which was implementing the *EAFS* strategy.

The second tier of the sampling strategy was convenience sampling. The sample was based on the population of principals from *EAFS* schools who were in geographical proximity with the researchers – that is, in the two adjoining regional NSW government school networks of Lismore and Clarence, which comprise 72 schools in total. At the time of the fieldwork in 2015, only 15 schools and principals across the Lismore and Clarence networks were involved in *EAFS*. Of the 15 principals, eight were engaged in *EAFS* in the Lismore area. Of these, two principals were excluded from the sample due to direct supervisory relationship with one of the researchers.

A recruitment package and invitation letter were sent to the remaining six principals inviting their participation. All six volunteered to participate. The group of participants exhibited a diverse range of experience across factors such as length of time in the teaching service, school size, gender and years of experience as a principal. Four schools had been engaged with the *EAFS* programme since its inception, while two were relative latecomers to the programme (Table 1). To de-indentify participants and for convenience of data reporting, the principal-participants were labelled P1 to P6.

Interviews commenced in August 2015 and concluded in mid September 2015, in the third year of implementation of *EAFS,* but before the role statement for the Instructional Leader position was issued. Structured interviews provided guided exploration of the topic, with each interview lasting for approximately 45 minutes and taking place in the participant's office or at a location chosen by the participant. Interviews were audio recorded. The questions included demographic questions to establish the participants' history of school leadership and the school's engagement with the EAFS programme. Subsequent questions then explored the participants' understanding of key terms and concepts around effective instructional leadership, their engagement with instructional leadership and

Table 1. The schools and principals involved in this study.

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
Early Action for Success start date	May 2012	May 2012	May 2012	May 2014	May 2014	February 2015
Principal pseudonym	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
No. of students in the school	260	550	60	250	236	380
No. of classes in the school	6	12	2	6	6	7
No. of Instructional Leaders in the school	1[a]	1	1[4]	1	1	1
Principal gender	male	male	female	male	male	female
Years as a principal	5	25	5	6	8	11
No. of principal positions held	1	3	2	1	2	1
No. of years as principal of current school	5	5	1.5	6	3	11

[a]The first Instructional Leader in the school gained a promotion position which moved her out of the role, and a second person took on the Instructional Leader position. Subsequently there was a reorganisation of personal between schools 1 and 3, resulting in the Instructional Leader from School 1 moving to take the position in School 3 and vice versa.

the new position of instructional leader in the New South Wales schools' context, and the process by which their understanding had emerged. Towards the end of the interview, the participants were also asked about their own role in instructional leadership, and to what extent their leadership for improved teacher practice had been influenced by their involvement in this Instructional Leader initiative.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using a constant comparative method where new data was continually juxtaposed with existing data, concepts and categories (Flick *et al*. 2014; Bryman 2016). This afforded a 'constant interplay among the researcher, the data, the categories and the emerging theory' (Johnson and Christensen 2017, p. 460). A three-step data analysis process was adopted:

(i) the interview data was read and re-read thoroughly to compile data segments that were coded;

(ii) further analysis occurred to create categories/themes by combining relevant codes together;

(iii) the most relevant themes and example responses were integrated into the text of the findings.

Throughout the process, the researchers endeavoured to maintain 'theoretical sensitivity' by continually asking questions of the data to ensure a progressively deeper understanding of what the data might indicate (Bryman 2016; Johnson and Christensen 2017). The final text report integrates the themes identified in the responses (Table 2).

The interviews

The principals' role in instructional leadership under the Early Action for Success Strategy

The principals' perceptions indicated that they did not see themselves playing a direct role in instructional leadership in the *EAFS* programme, but rather they supported others to deliver instructional leadership. As one principal commented:

> The principal's role is to be supportive but to be constantly having those conversations about where we are and where we want to go. It's about being involved in that and being supportive to staff but not jumping in and solving the problem. You've built capacity amongst your own executive for there to be that collaborative relationship with the executive and the principal around how they work shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers in the school. It's about sustainability and empowering your own executive to do that. (P3)

Others described the role thus: 'I think you've got to go out and put yourself on the line and show you're interested in improving pedagogy yourself' (P1); 'Being a pedagogical leader number one … I cannot see a principal divorcing themselves from being a pedagogical leader to becoming [just] an administrator' (P2); and 'I'm fully aware that [being an instructional leader] is one of our major roles.

Table 2. Emergent themes about the EAFS instructional leader position from principal interviews.

Theme
1. The role of the Instructional Leader is to work with Kindergarten to Year 2 teachers
2. Principals do not have a direct role in instructional leadership, but rather provide system and time support for the Instructional Leader appointed to their school
3. The effective Instructional Leader:
a. is able to use student assessment data to monitor student achievement to guide/improve teacher practice to improve student outcomes;
b. analyses teacher practice;
c. has a sound understanding of current research;
d. supports the professional learning of teachers;
e. establishes and maintains respectful relationships with the teacher;
f. can assist the disengaged teacher by building positive relationships;
g. is a positive addition to a school.
4. Principals formed their perceptions of the Instructional Leader and instructional leadership through:
a. their involvement in *EAFS* strategy;
b. professional development training associated with *EAFS;*
c. reading the *EAFS* teacher handbook.
5. Challenges to instructional leadership include:
a. how to maintain the instructional leader concept once the *EAFS* strategy ceases;
b. lack of differentiation by principals between the Instructional Leader position, and the concept of instructional leadership.

It's about allowing and allocating time' (P4). The reflections of P5 and P6 below expand further on these themes:

> …. I think really [my role is] … making sure that the systems are aligned and working. By that I'm talking communication and all those really basic things that can cripple a school if they are not sorted. It's about communication, discipline, welfare, professional learning plans … so it's getting the mechanics ready first. It's also making sure the vision is there. The vision reflects the school community, so I'm talking to the staff, the community and the kids, and also that the planning around it [instructional leadership] is a genuine way to reach that vision so that the plan is real. … the main role is to clear the path for learning. (P5)

> My role in instructional leadership would be to target the discussions around the analysis of [student] data and around [teacher] professional practice and to pick areas in the school which obviously need improvement. To make sure the professional learning, discussion and analysis of data would all be pointed towards improving. Pointing the discussion toward reflection on what we are doing in the school and how we are going, and actual change to improve the learning outcomes in any area. (P6)

The necessity of providing systems and time to support instructional leadership was also a recurring theme: 'It's empowering … to provide the time and facilitate the learning within the school' (P4); 'I'm a conduit … It's utilising the skills I have in organisation and management to support individuals and groups in the school to achieve what we're doing' (P2); 'It's making time for instructional leadership and valuing instructional leadership and putting it on the executive agenda and on the staff agenda every week. Putting resources aside so people can genuinely talk about the data in our school' (P5). 'I think it's given me a much better idea of how to focus in many areas' (P6).

All principals expressed a view of how positive the *EAFS* programme had been for their schools and their leadership. One principal (P6) noted that '*EAFS* has given me a real insight into how you can purposefully make a difference to teacher practice and teacher personal reflection. It gives teachers a higher capacity to effect change'. Three principals expressed a desire for *EAFS* to spread across the state. P2 commented that he would

> like to see our Department or individual schools really take on the notion of instructional leadership and research it. What are the benefits of it? How can schools utilise it in the context of their own schools or networks of schools?

The principals' understanding of instructional leadership

Principals provided various definitions for the term 'instructional leadership'. Within these definitions, two themes were common: (i) developing the quality of teaching practice by systematically examining what can be improved; and (ii) using evidence to guide the direction of best practice (even though none

of the principals expanded on what might constitute 'data or evidence'). Common to all definitions was the capability of the Instructional Leader to work with staff. P6 noted that, 'instructional leadership is about building best practice across a school environment to create the optimum environment for student learning and also for professional development for the people in that school environment', while P2 commented that, 'instructional leadership is about pedagogy … developing the quality of teaching practice with groups and individual teachers. It's very much based on evidence, the evidence of student learning, the evidence on teacher feedback'.

When it came time for the principals to reflect on what would characterise 'effective' instructional leadership, all the respondents mentioned some form of impetus towards change. Whether it was in student learning, staff development, or school culture, the overarching theme was one of a logical, incremental progression toward higher quality outcomes. A typical response here was: 'The achievement of outcomes, social, emotional and academic for students. So, if a programme is effective then the end result will show improvement in the achievement or the outcomes for students' (P2).

Further exploration of principals' understanding of instructional leadership yielded four themes: (i) improving student outcomes; (ii) collaboration; (ii) professional learning; and (iv) the use of student data. The common theme across all responses was the expectation that effective instructional leadership would change teacher practice to be more responsive to student learning needs. A characteristic response was: '… support of the people you are leading and common understandings to be based on [student] data [then look] at effective ways to lead the practitioner to change their practice in response to the needs of the student' (P5). All the principals identified 'collaboration' and 'working together' as essential components of instructional leadership. Closely linked to these terms are phrases such as 'supporting teachers', 'working, or walking, side-by-side with teachers' and 'shoulder-to-shoulder'. Likewise, all the principals identified instructional leadership as using and implementing professional learning for teachers. This includes research related to improving teacher practice. As P1 elaborated, 'instructional leadership is bringing in research … into what we can do, apply that, and do little action research projects'. The ability of the instructional leader to use student data to inform practice was identified by all but one principal as an essential trait for instructional leaders. P6 explained:

> instructional leadership helps people to develop sound reflective practices and honest, no blame, analysis of [student] data so that teachers can discuss it [student data] honestly without excuses and have high expectations of the students and of themselves for the delivery of quality education for the students.

The principals' understanding of the Instructional Leader position

With regard to the principals' understanding of the Instructional Leader position itself, three key roles were identified: working with teachers; the analysis of teacher practice, and; a resource role. Four of the principals affirmed that the Instructional Leader provided feedback on teacher practice, providing the 'where-to-next' imperative for teachers and students. Two quotes from the interviews illustrate this point. P3 noted that, 'Instructional Leaders have to use the student data and talk about what that means, know where the students are and where they've got to go next, and what teachers have to do to get them there'. P6's focus was on the support the Instructional Leader provides for teachers: '… helping teachers to build the students' capacity to have a greater understanding of their own learning and take responsibility for that'. Closely related to these roles is the resource role. All but one principal mentioned the importance of the Instructional Leader having a sound understanding of current research, and of being able to use the data to improve teacher practice and student outcomes:

> It is a position focused on the data, Kindergarten to Year 2, which guides teachers, supports staff and the principal in looking, and analysing, the data and [… asking,] 'Where can we improve the effect we have on student outcomes and … assist the students with their capacity to understand where they are in the learning cycle? What it is that they [students] do well and … [what students] need to develop in order to move forward in their own learning and to develop ownership in that learning? (P6).

Individual responses identified the Instructional Leader as a 'unique position' and 'different to other positions in the school' (P2). One principal was adamant that 'they're not an Executive Teacher though they're paid as that' (P3).

How did principals form their perceptions of instructional leadership?

Perhaps due to the initial lack of direction in the *EAFS* documentation, all the principals described their understanding of instructional leadership developing alongside the rollout of the EAFS programme. Five of the six principals indicated that they first heard about instructional leadership through their involvement in *EAFS* – that is, on the job. The remaining principal identified a TED Talk as the first time she had heard about instructional leadership, although this took place as part of the school's EAFS orientation package provided by the NSW Department of Education. In terms of developing their understanding more deeply, the principals indicated that they drew on their own professional experiences, observing the education system, and engaging in informal and formal learning and professional development; in other words, being engaged in the system.

All the principals could identify several ways that their perceptions and understandings of instructional leadership had developed. The themes of 'personal experience' and 'developing understanding' related to a topic through 'conversation or professional dialogue' featured in some way in most of the responses. For instance, P4 commented on the importance of 'people sitting back and observing what's happening… and seeing what's being implemented and what's being communicated around a particular program or an issue'. Other principals noted the importance of professional development for learning about instructional leadership. For example, one principal remarked that 'perceptions are developed through professional learning and that can be done as an individual, in small groups or large groups' (P2).

Professional development and learning as a way to develop perceptions about instructional leadership was discussed widely. Indeed, all principals claimed that their understanding of the Instructional Leader concept was gained through their involvement in professional learning activities via the *EAFS* implementation group and Departmental guidelines. One respondent (P2) described the importance of 'going to area meetings with people like X and Y from other *Early Action for Success* schools'. Another (P5) reinforced the importance of this training: 'The biggest move was the training in Sydney with X, Y and Z around knowing and showing what was the real need first, and then going into the mechanics of what instructional leadership could look like'. For one other (P3), reading around the topic was important: 'There's a principals' handbook for instructional leadership. I spent a lot of time reading anything I was given on effective instructional leadership, particularly the relationship between the principal and the Instructional Leader'.

All the principals talked about the extent of the influence of their involvement in the instructional leadership initiative. A range of responses provided extensive elaboration of examples of how their leadership of professional learning has been influenced by the *EAFS* programme. Two main themes emerged here, namely enhanced discussion and professional learning. Half of the principals noted that discussions and conversations with their staff had become more academic in nature, and increasingly focused on students, teacher progress and learning. 'It's focused me on teacher learning,' said P5, 'Because it's been since 2012, it's hard to remember what it was like before then'. P4 noted that it has 'taken the pressure off me for professional learning … it's divided it more comfortably for me into the idea of leading and managing'. The contrast with professional learning prior to *EAFS* was highlighted by P6:

> Prior to *EAFS,* professional learning was a bit hit and miss because we didn't have targets about what we wanted to come out of the learning. We didn't have the ongoing professional learning which hones teachers' professional skills or learning in a certain area … that allows them to practice, and continue to have those professional discussions with colleagues around their learning. That's important.

The principals were all enthusiastic about the effects of *EAFS* instructional leadership: 'Very influenced … it guided my thoughts on effective instructional leadership' (P3); 'Unbelievably high value' (P2). Principals also commented more fully on the extent of influence. '… it's focused on what it is we are trying to improve and why … To have a clear understanding of the area and why we are trying to improve that practice' (P6). For P4, professional learning had become 'more directed as such … it's a lot clearer', while for P2, it has been an 'evolving process'. Importantly, beyond just acknowledging the quantum of influence, all the principals were able to offer explanations of the ways their own leadership

had been influenced. Three areas were commonly referenced in the principals' responses: the use of student data; a greater focus on professional learning, and more practice-related conversations. The following illustrate the range of principal responses to this question.

> I now have regular meetings twice a week with the Instructional Leader, and meetings set down twice a term with the executive. At that stage, the Instructional Leader and I look at the student data and discuss teachers and how they are performing … and what help they might need. We have those regular meetings, but we also look at the *EAFS* data and analyse it quite regularly. We look at the SMART[3] data as well…. We talk about ways we can change pedagogy to get improvement in the classes. (P1)

> So, I've really been able to work with the Instructional Leader, to dig down [into the student data] and … get a better understanding of the kids. [Before] I was a bit of a data resister and saw it was someone else's job. But now, from working with the Instructional Leader, I recognise the power of data. It depends on how the data is presented. I've worked really hard with the Instructional Leader and now I present the data so it speaks to [the teaching staff]. (P3)

> Having the difficult conversations, initially that was confronting for some. Some people were against the Instructional Leader model and didn't want someone telling them what to do. … people have matured in that area and matured in the understanding that having professional conversations with other professionals can really assist with the growth of your teaching and learning. (P6)

One principal explained that having *EAFS* in the school had made his principal role more focused. It allowed him to leave the professional learning to the Instructional Leader, leaving the principal to deal with the management of the school. Principal P4 explained:

> The Instructional Leader role in the school provides more explicit direction so you know what you're going to do and how you're going to get there. So for me that's how you get some staff on board. It's not always that easy, because you get people who are agitators and think it's a load of bunkum. So it's been good. … having the Instructional Leader whose sole responsibility is to work with staff, and who doesn't have to worry about the other stuff, is supportive of the principal. … They're not worrying about the welfare of the students and not worrying about the taps leaking [etc.]… Unfortunately, as a principal in a school that's one of many things you do.

The effective instructional leader

When principals were asked about their perceptions of effective teacher instructional leadership, overall three themes emerged: (i) improved student outcomes, (ii) improved staff relationships, and (iii) increased direction and purpose. All six principals agreed that two key characteristics of effective instructional leadership are (i) improved teacher practice, and ii) improved student and student learning outcomes. Two principals explained, first, that, '… *EAFS* is about really concise modifications of the curriculum to try to move kids along more quickly, and moving them along authentically not just quicker. … not [having students] staying in the one spot' (P1), and that, 'effective instructional leadership is the reason why we're there … we engage every single student and give them the opportunity through explicit focused teaching to achieve their potential at, or above, age-grade expectations' (P2).

It was evident from responses that establishing and maintaining respectful relationships between the Instructional Leader and the teacher are essential for effective instructional leadership. P6 noted that, 'effective instructional leadership is something that allows people to feel safe in changing their practice, in asking difficult questions, in confronting the [student] data and analysing this data'. In practical terms, P5 drew on the pragmatics of working with the disengaged teacher:

> Most importantly is an Instructional Leader who can build positive working relationships with a range of staff so then they can work effectively with the disengaged teacher as with the go-getter. … Relationships, that's what education is about, and that's why relationships are so important.

Underlying these indicators of effectiveness is clarity of direction and purpose. All principals identified establishing direction, purpose and knowledge as an essential characteristic of instructional leadership. Many comments captured this sentiment: '… as part of the instructional leadership program, people will know what they are doing, why they are doing it and where they are going' (P3); 'firstly the needs in the school, and all schools have them, then getting people in the school to see the need' (P4); and

effective instructional leadership … would be where everyone discussed honestly and analytically their own practice and the effect it has on students and student data or the culture of the school … it doesn't have to be the academic data. (P6)

Challenges to effective instructional leadership

Towards the end of the interviews, principals were asked to consider the challenges to effective instructional leadership. A recurring theme related to how to maintain the instructional leadership concept once the EAFS programme had ended. All principals referred to the Instructional Leader position in *EAFS*, and did not differentiate between this position and the concept of 'instructional leadership'. Four principals talked of this in terms of the sustainability of instructional leadership after the conclusion of *EAFS*. P3 noted that, 'the challenges are in sustainability around constant improvement and getting that without that constant person there all the time'. P1 elaborated on the importance of sustainability:

Sustainability is number one. At the moment we are living in a lucky world. It's going back to the principals being the drivers of bringing theory, bringing research in through staff meetings. … The challenge for you as an executive or principal is to check that there are opportunities for people to learn what we've been learning the last five years [in this program] doesn't just dwindle away. It is going to be a challenge because you want to have that extra person doing it. So sustainability does become a challenge.

The practical implications of sustainability expressed itself as concerns and aspirations, especially around building on the positive outcomes already established through involvement in *EAFS*. P3 advocated for 'building on the gains you've made', while P6 commented that meeting the challenge requires:

starting with what is it doing for us as a school and reflecting on that and making sure that everyone reflects on how far we've come … that it is a positive direction and not allowing the nay sayers.

The principals asserted that maintaining or sustaining the ethos of *EAFS* required a systems approach. P2 saw the challenge as 'looking at the structure and management and organisation of the school, and what aspects of the school culture or operation present barriers to that continuous improvement'. P4 recognised the need to step back from the individual: 'Perception …. I mean people's perceptions of what an Instructional Leader is … it's about teaching practice it's not about you'. P4 expanded this idea thus:

I talked about the need for change to start with teacher attitudes, student attitudes or perceived student attitudes and student behaviour. We can sometimes look away from the learning, you need effective systems in place to manage the school.

Effective systems were viewed as important, since the competing demands of the principal were also seen as a significant challenge: '… time, competing demands from a community level, from a system that's evolving levels with lots of bits coming in that can cloud the water a little bit…' (P5). P4 emphasised the importance of systematically setting aside the requisite time:

Time is one of the big things around instructional leadership. The time needed for it to be effective. You have to allocate a time resource for staff to engage in instructional leadership.

Conclusion

The principals involved in the *EAFS* strategy did not see instructional leadership as the role of the principal, but rather as the role of the teacher Instructional Leader who had been appointed to their school. This aligns with De Bevoise's (1984) interpretation that the principal could take actions either as an instructional leader or delegate these actions across the school. The principals took the lead in defining the leadership and management directions in their school, and consequently, their perception of their responsibility tended to be more logistical and administrative, as opposed to being the leader of learning in the school. Despite this view, all the principals valued highly the teacher Instructional Leader position in their school. They all identified the positive relationship between the teacher Instructional Leader, analysis of student data, professional learning and improvements in student outcomes.

The process of having a teacher Instructional Leader position had also developed an evidence-based decision-making process in all schools. The use of data, research-based professional learning, and explicit milestones and targets had provided a clear direction for teaching practice to move school, and student outcomes, forward. Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis supports this approach by the principals, an approach that also aligns with the objectives of the NSW *Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan*.

This study indicates that the depth and reflexivity of principals' perceptions of effective instructional leadership varied in relation to the length of their experience in the *EAFS* programme. The principals' reflexivity also varied in relation to the length of their tenure as a principal. It appears that principals who had spent longer in a leadership position, or who had been involved longer involved in the *EAFS,* had an understanding of the instructional leadership concept that was more closely aligned with the concepts encountered in the research literature.

Regardless of length of experience, there was an overall general lack of clarity about whose role instructional leadership actually is in the school. The principals' beliefs regarding who has the role of instructional leader in the school varied, and few consistent responses emerged from the interviews. It was clear the role was highly valued, and it was certainly understood that it is a role of a school executive, but it was not necessarily clear that it was intrinsically linked to the role of the principal. Horng and Loeb (2010) came to a similar finding some time ago. However, despite this uncertainty, and considering the five-year life of the *EAFS* strategy, the principals were aware of the need for sustainability of the instructional leader role in the school setting, and were developing models that supported all teachers as instructional leaders.

There was also diversity of opinion in relation to the inclusion of the teacher Instructional Leader as part of the school executive team. The NSW Department of Education's *EAFS* guidelines established the teacher Instructional Leader position and salary at an executive position, generally at deputy principal level. However, not all principals in the study included the teacher Instructional Leader as a part of their school's executive team, as would be the case for an appointed deputy principal.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the degree of general uncertainty about what might constitute effective instructional leadership in the school context. The principals all agreed that Instructional Leaders are effective in three ways. They (i) improve teacher practice; (ii) develop purposeful professional learning; and (iii) build strong relationships across the school. Beyond this, however, the detail of how the position is construed depends on the individual principal's background and understanding of instructional leadership. Commentary in the interviews shifted between the concept of the effectiveness of the Instructional Leader position and the effectiveness of instructional leadership *per se*. These two articulations of instructional leadership – the instructional leader as a role, and instructional leadership as a concept – were often used interchangeably by the principals in the interviews. Writers in this field (Hallinger and Murphy 1982; De Beviose 1984; Beauchamp and Parsons 2012; Gulcan 2012; Hattie 2012, 2015) clearly differentiate between instructional leadership as a process and the requisite qualities of instructional leadership. However, the concept of the effectiveness of instructional leader in the school context is not widely considered, either in the published research or the principals' responses in this study.

The principals' perceptions of effective instructional leadership appear to be linked to improving teacher practice, and to improved student outcomes through the implementation of highly effective professional learning practices. The processes by which instructional leadership is seen to be effective by these principals revolve around three themes: (i) purposeful professional learning; (ii) trust-based relationships; and (iii) analysis of teacher practices.

The interviews with these six principals would seem to indicate that effective instructional leadership requires the establishment and maintenance of respectful relationships between leader and teacher. It requires the establishment of direction and purpose for the professional learning and the teacher practice analysis. Through the implementation of purposeful professional learning conversations by Instructional Leaders, the quality of reflection on teacher practice was raised. This impact is directly related to the professional learning directions that address the areas of greatest need for student improvement. These enhanced discussions were the catalyst for greater reflective practice analysis

conversations, purposeful evidence-based decision-making related to the directions for professional learning and targeted learning interventions that improve student outcomes.

Limitations of the study

The main limitations of the study were its small sample size and the fact that the study only took place in two school clusters in one part of the state of NSW. No doubt a larger sample size, especially one that included schools from dramatically different socio-economic contexts, would have provided a greater range of responses. A further potential limitation may have been the limited time – from 1.25 to 3.3 years – that principals had to be exposed to the teacher Instructional Leader position in their school and hence their ability, over this relatively short time period, to fully understand the position. Given that the study necessarily focused on the beginning phases of the use of Instructional Leaders in NSW government schools, expanding the sample and demographics of interview participants would be a logical next step in deepening our understanding of how school principals construct their understanding of instructional leadership. Despite the absence of a clear role statement at the time of implementation, it is clear that the position of Instructional Leader, and the process of instructional leadership had significant impact on deepening the professional reflexivity of the staff. This reflexivity, and the resultant increased collegiality and focus on higher quality student outcomes, had the effect of energising all the schools that participated in the EAFS programme. Perhaps it is appropriate to leave the final word to P2: 'Instructional Leaders have unleashed success across our school, in a school that was struggling for success'.

Notes

1. NAPLAN is a national assessment of Australian school students' basic skills. It is administered annually for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
2. The average age of students in New South Wales schools who are in: Kindergarten is 5 years, Year 2 is 7 years old, Year 3 students is 8 years old, Year 5 is 10 years, Year 7 is 12 years, and Year 9 is 13 years.
3. The School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit (SMART) provides feedback and data analysis for the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), Higher School Certificate (HSC) and Validation of Assessment for Learning and Individual Development (VALID) – to NSW participating schools and their communities.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Peter Campbell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9461-3312
Marilyn Chaseling http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2507-1505
William Boyd http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8466-4669
Bradley Shipway http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1018-0140

References

Adams, P., c. 2013. *NAPLAN: something for everyone.* Available from: https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/NAPLAN_something_for_everyone__Peter_Adams.pdf.

Baker, J., et al., in press. Teachers' response to a new mandatory professional development process: does it make a difference. *Professional Development in Education.* doi:10.1080/19415257.2017.1378706.

Beauchamp, L. and Parsons, J., 2012. Instructional leadership in Alberta: research insights from five highly effective schools. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 8 (4), 41–48.

Blase, J. and Blase, J., 2000. Effective instructional leadership: teachers' perspectives on how principals promote teaching and learning in schools. *Journal of Educational Achievement*, 38 (2), 130–141.

Bryman, A., 2016. *Social research methods.* 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chaseling, M., et al., 2017. Uplifting leadership for real school improvement: The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement: an Australian telling of a Canadian story. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 63 (2), 160–174.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K., 2011. *Research methods in education.* 7th ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N., 2018. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches.* 4th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Daresh, J. and Playko, M., 1995. *Supervision as a proactive process: concepts and cases.* 2nd ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

De Bevoise, W., 1984. Synthesis of research on the principal as instructional leader. *Educational Leadership*, 41 (5), 14–20.

Denscombe, M., 2017. *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects.* 6th ed. London: Open University Press.

Erebus International, 2017. *Report of the evaluation of the NSW literacy and numeracy action plan 2012 – 2016: executive summary.* Available from: https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/report-of-the-evaluation-of-the-nsw-literacy-and-numeracy-action-plan-2012-2016.

Flick, U., Metzier, K. and Scott, W., 2014. *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative data analysis.* Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Fullan, M., 2002. Principals as leaders in a culture of change. *Educational Leadership*, 59 (8), 16–21. Available from http://www.michaelfullan.ca/Articles_02/03_02.htm.

Fullan, M., 2013. *Great to excellent: Launching the next stage of Ontario's education agenda.* Available from http://www.michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/13_Fullan_Great-to-Excellent.pdf

Glick, M., 2011. *The instructional leader and the brain: using neuroscience to inform practice.* Thousand Oakes, CA: Corwin.

Gulcan, M., 2012. Research on instructional leadership competencies of school principals. *Education*, 132 (3), 625–635.

Hallinger, P., 2005. Instructional leadership and the school principal: a passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4 (3), 221–239.

Hallinger, P. and Murphy, J., 1982. The superintendent's role in promoting instructional leadership. *Administrator's Notebook*, 30 (6), 1–4.

Hattie, J., 2009. *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement.* Oxon: Routledge.

Hattie, J., 2012. *Visible learning for teachers. Maximising impact on Learning.* Oxon: Routledge.

Hattie, J., 2015. Improving schools: What works? *Educational Leadership*, 72 (5), 36–40.

Horng, E. and Loeb, S., 2010. New thinking about instructional leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92 (3), 66–69.

Johnson, R. and Christensen, L., 2017. *Educational research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches.* 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Jones, A.C., 2012. *Becoming a strong instructional leader: saying no to business as usual.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lakomski, G., Eacott, S. and Evers, C., eds., 2017. *Questioning leadership: new directions for educational organisations.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Leithwood, K., et al., 2004. *How leadership influences student learning.* Toronto, Ontario: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Murphy, J., et al., 2016. Bottling fog? The quest for instructional management. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46 (4), 455–471. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2015.1064096.

Neumerski, C., 2012. Rethinking instructional leadership, a review: what do we know about principal, teacher, and coach instructional leadership and where should we go from here? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49 (2), 310–347. doi:10.1177/0013161X12456700.

NSW Government, 2011a. *NSW 2021 plan: a plan to make NSW number one.* Available from http://www.ipc.nsw.gov.au/nsw-2021-plan-make-nsw-number-one-pdf.

NSW Government, 2011b. *Report on the outcomes of consultation: Literacy and numeracy action plan – INITIAL Framework Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy.* Available from https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/yr2012/mag-literacy-numeracy.pdf.

NSW Government, 2012. *Early action for success: implementing the NSW literacy and numeracy action plan.* Available from https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/yr2012/early-action-for-success-strategy.pdf.

NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014.*Early action for success instructional leaders handbook: implementing the NSW literacy and numeracy action plan.* Sydney: NSW Government. Available from http://currentreforms.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/9/9/26999857/instructional_leader_handbook.pdf.

Rigby, J., 2014. Three logics of instructional leadership. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 50 (4), 610–644. doi:10.1177/0013161X13509379.

Shaddock, A., 2014. *Using data to improve learning: a practical guide for busy teachers.* Camberwell: ACER Press.

Shatzer, R., et al., 2014. Comparing the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement: implications for practice. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42 (4), 445–459. doi:10.1177/1741143213502192.

Tyack, D. and Hansot, E., 1982. *Managers of virtue: public school leadership in America, 1820–1980.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Wyatt, T., 2017. *Enhancing instructional leadership: lessons from the NSW literacy and numeracy action plan.* Available from http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1308&context=research_conference.