

Practising Effective Instructional Leadership as a School Principal

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Abstract

School principals are currently looking for ways to enhance their effectiveness as leaders by improving their instructional leadership. As the duties of principals expand, they are no longer the expert on what happens in the classroom and must find new ways to help their teachers grow and improve student learning. Instructional leadership includes everything from relationship building, to supporting growth and achievement, to getting the most out of one's particular context. The importance of the principal's role as an instructional leader should not be overlooked, because it continues to have considerable influence on the success of a school.

Over the course of history, the role of a principal has seen a vast amount of change. At one point, principals were considered the top teacher in the school. They were viewed as the person with the greatest understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, but this is no longer the case (Hoerr, 2015). Today, school principals are expected to lead in new ways. They must communicate effectively in order to gain the trust of their teachers. They must lead teachers with the understanding that they do not know best, and provide opportunities for teachers to grow professionally. Principals must also determine how they can best impact student achievement through such aspects as engagement and equity. Finally, they must consider their context in order to create a climate wherein individuals perform to their true potential.

Building Trust

A pivotal part of instructional leadership is creating a welcoming environment that is centred around trust. Establishing a sense of trust, order, and support is one of the most important responsibilities of a principal in order to ensure the efficiency of a school (Huang et al., 2020). This is considered so significant because the effectiveness of a principal is often gauged by how much they are trusted as a leader (Boise & Fiset, 2019). Trust is created through open, honest communication. When leaders communicate, they must remember that people appreciate clarity and will respect honesty (Brown, 2018). It is also important to remember that communication is not just about the way one speaks or presents information but also about how one listens (Hoerr, 2015). Teachers now know more about student learning than ever before, and the job of a principal has come to include much more than modelling best practices for teachers (Hoerr, 2007). Simply because principals are no longer necessarily the experts on what happens in the classroom does not mean they cannot make an impact on teaching and learning. Leadership must be sustainable, which entails not merely accepting what has been done in the past, but striving to change in positive ways for those they serve (Sanford et al., 2019).

As the world changes, the students and families that we welcome into our schools change as well. The role of a leader, however, has remained "static, hierarchical, and linear" (Sanford et al., 2019), and needs to be viewed differently as a new wave of leaders enter the educational system. It is necessary for leaders to communicate with others in order to make the best decisions based on the needs of their people (Brown, 2018; Sanford et al., 2019). Leaders who display a clear understanding of how to encourage and foster teacher growth will be seen as more trustworthy by their staff (Boies & Fiset, 2019), and will adapt their leadership accordingly.

Facilitating Growth

As part of effective instructional leadership, it is essential for principals to provide opportunities for meaningful teacher learning in order to shape this growth among their staff. These opportunities could include professional development, professional learning communities, and teacher evaluation. Much of what government departments attempt to introduce into the education system, in terms of reform, focuses on teacher performance and accountability in response to governmental reviews (Day, 2020). This emphasis often comes with “external pressure” (Aninluoma et al., 2018, p. 76) for upgrades in policies and procedures. A focus on accountability brings into question the autonomy that continues to be crucial to the professionalism of teachers (Day, 2020). While attempts to improve education do not always eliminate autonomy, they do tend to decrease the voice of teachers when considering what strategies or programs are implemented in their classrooms (Day, 2020).

Some educators argue that teacher autonomy is not the biggest factor in improving teacher performance, and leaders should instead be striving for whole-school autonomy (Day, 2020). Teachers appreciate administrators who outline their expectations for “professional growth and setting goals” (Paufler et al., 2020, p. 5), especially during the evaluation process. Without sacrificing teacher autonomy in both professional development and classroom settings, this may be an optimal place to begin laying the foundation of a school’s collective autonomy. This exemplifies the importance for principals to consider both accountability and autonomy when designing plans for teacher learning. This balance is crucial because a “culture of collegiality, trust, commitment and professional collaboration” (Antinluoma et al., 2018, p. 84) continue to be critical pillars in establishing sound teacher learning practices among efficient instructional leaders. Principals must create learning opportunities for teachers in the same way that teachers would create learning experiences for students. Professional development needs to be relevant to teachers, must be presented in a way that engages the audience, and requires that the importance of what teachers are learning be clearly articulated (Hoerr, 2016).

How school leaders plan for and meet the needs of teacher learning can be eased by the creation of professional learning communities. In the current educational climate, quality instructional leadership involves the establishment of these learning communities that are indicative of strong organization and a positive culture (Antinluoma et al., 2018). A challenging part of instructional leadership is creating conditions that are optimal for teacher learning, because teachers may view new ideas as a threat rather than as an opportunity (Berg, 2020). This can be true even when data proves that teachers are not connecting with students academically, socially, or behaviourally. Various studies have considered learning communities to be one of the most successful approaches to improve teacher and student outcomes.

Influencing Achievement

With changes in the role of a principal over time, the connection between instructional leadership and student achievement is not as direct as it may have been in the past. Using trusting relationships and teacher learning, principals can still enhance classroom instruction, which will in turn influence student learning. However, it is now more important that principals act as catalysts for engagement and equity. Students who find what they are learning “relevant and interesting” (Hoerr, 2016, p. 86) are more likely to experience higher levels of success. Considering how one learns best is a good way to see the value of being engaged in one’s learning. Principals can use their instructional leadership to increase student engagement by assisting teachers to appreciate how this engagement can translate to student success.

Conducting instructional leadership with a mindset for equity in education can alter the effect that a principal has on student achievement. Principals can encourage teachers to enact efforts that afford each student the chance to “make connections, think analytically, solve problems” (Nadelson et al., 2020, p. 2) and make their learning relevant. Regardless of their

ability or standing, every student deserves the opportunity to create understandings that will benefit them when they leave our educational systems.

A significant barrier for students reaching their full potential during their time in school continues to be attendance. Understanding that the effects principals have on student achievement are generally indirect, attendance seems to be an aspect of the educational experience on which principals can have a considerable impact. In order to improve student attendance, schools must leverage relationships and communication with families. Principals are able to communicate directly with families, establish guidelines for teachers to contact the parents of students, and establish and enforce rules that attempt to control student absences (Bartanen, 2020). This proves that while the role principals play in affecting student outcomes is different from it once was, it is still considered very important.

Acknowledging Context

The daily routines of a principal are becoming a more impulsive balance between concentrating on the teaching and learning in classrooms and the management of the school as an organization (Huang et al., 2020). Therefore, instructional leadership does not look the same for every principal. The work context often determines how they are able to lead. Successful leaders can emerge from different situations; however, the methods that each use may vary. A primary example of differing contexts is that of schools in rural areas compared to those in urban centres. Many schools in rural areas have teaching principals who perform both the role of a teacher and the duties of an administrator. In some cases, this is due to the size of the school, but in others there is a belief that those who are “connected to teaching and learning are better able to enact instructional leadership” (Wallin et al., 2019, p. 23). Teaching principals hold a unique position as instructional leaders because of their work in classrooms; these principals draw on their first-hand experiences in order to model best practices (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Teaching principals are able to practise instructional leadership in a different way than the conventional principal. This dual role can have obstacles such as limited time to visit classrooms, scheduling difficulties, minimal resources, or having low achievement averages as a result of small populations (Wallin et al., 2019). Teaching principals see benefits to their position, as well. With smaller numbers of teachers on staff, rural principals tend to depend on teamwork and believe in the idea of working with teachers rather than teachers working for them (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rural principals also tend to be more approachable and meet with teachers in both official and casual settings to discuss aspects of classroom teaching, which teachers appreciate (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Another relationship that is very important to principals in rural areas, which assists with effective instructional leadership, is that with parents and the community. Instructional leaders can develop the environment for learning by taking advantage of their connections within the community (Wallin et al., 2019). Effective instructional leadership in rural settings “is about welcoming, listening, and responding” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 9), which can apply to staff and students, but also parents and other members of the community. This can leverage the acquisition of resources from the community that can assist in improving student achievement and well-being, such as Child and Family Services and other agencies that support students and their families (Wallin et al., 2019). It can also be said that principals, especially teaching principals, in rural schools need to be leaders in both the school and the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). This continues to display the importance for instructional leadership when it comes to elements of the community and its context.

Conclusion

As the role of principals continues to evolve, the facets of instructional leadership become more crucial. Even though the daily routines of principals can be scattered between leadership

and management duties (Huang et al., 2020), principals still play a vital role in how teachers instruct and how students learn. In fact, it has been proposed that “12% to 25% of overall student attainment” can be attributed to school leadership (Boies & Fiset, 2019, p. 226). This supports that how principals build trusting relationships, facilitate teacher learning, impact student achievement, and work within their context will continue to determine their effectiveness as instructional leaders and the consequent success of their school.

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About the Author

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