Student-Centered Leadership

The "What" of Student-Centered Leadership

A new wave of research on educational leadership has shown that the quality of leadership can make a substantial difference to the achievement of students, and not just on low-level standardised tests (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). However, research on school leadership has historically focused on whether the school leader is successful at school management (the school is orderly), building relationships (popularity of senior management team SMT), and getting on board with the latest innovations (the SMT adopts the latest innovation). Instead, school leadership should be deemed effective if it has an impact on student learning. However, it is difficult to isolate the contribution of leadership to student outcomes.

Of the hundreds of thousands of studies on educational leadership, only a handful have empirically examined the impact of leadership on student outcomes. Based on these studies, researcher Viviane Robinson calculated the effect size for different leadership practices and organized them into the top five leadership practices that have the most impact on student outcomes. This is known as the *what* of effective educational leadership :

Five Dimensions of Student-Centered Leadership
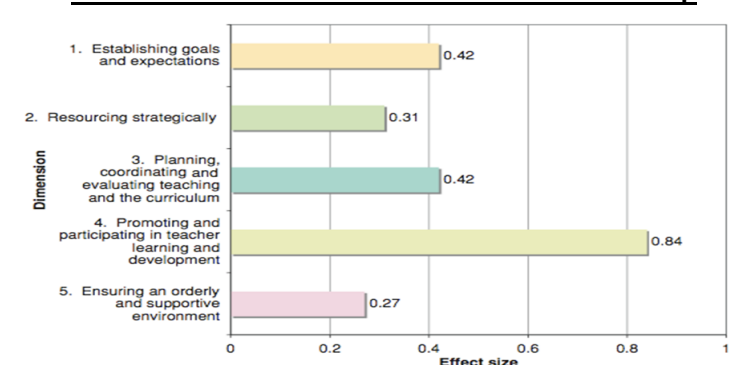
Dimension One: Establishing Goals and Expectations - This is no easy task but it is vitally important, especially given the accountability and mandates that school leaders and teachers are dealing with every year. One important goal is to create a positive and inclusive school climate, which is a challenge every year. Robinson believes that goals should effect student outcomes and creating an inclusive school climate certainly does that.

Dimension Two: Resourcing Strategically - This is not about gaining more resources but about how leaders use their existing resources in strategic ways.

Dimension Three: Ensuring Quality Teaching - Going deep enough with instruction so that we can maximize student-learning. Increasing the impact of Dimension 3 leadership is not simply a matter of mandating more classroom visits, teacher observations or more discussion of teaching and learning at staff meetings. This type 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. Everyone in a school, including teachers, are instructional leaders.

Dimension Four: Leading Teacher Learning and Development - What kind of professional learning opportunities are school leaders and districts offering? Are those opportunities about learning or conformity? Encouraging teachers to foster their own development beyond what the school offers is integral to promoting inspired and passionate teachers.

Dimension Five: Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment - To some this may seem trivial, however, Robinson says it best when she states, *"If students and staff do not feel physically and psychologically safe, if discipline codes are perceived as unfair and inconsistently enforced, then little progress is likely in the improvement of teaching and learning."*

It is important to note that these five dimensions of effective educational leadership work together as a set and have strong reciprocal effects. For example, if student learning goals are clear, then leaders will have a better idea of what teachers need to learn to improve their teaching. Also, a number of these dimensions focus on instructional leadership – a theme that recurs throughout the research on educational leadership. Finally, the focus on leadership need not only include the SMT – developing expertise in the five dimensions will help both formal and informal leaders improve their impact on student outcomes. In fact, the scope of the five dimensions is so large, and the expertise to be successful in *all* of them is too great for one person, that leadership in those five areas should be spread throughout the school.

The "How" of Student-Centered Leadership

Although the five dimensions tell leaders what to focus on to make a bigger difference to student outcomes, they say little about the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to make the dimensions work in a particular school context. Research is suggestive of the importance of three interrelated capabilities. These Three capabilities -known as the *how*- describe the knowledge and skills a school leader needs in order to successfully implement the five dimensions:

Using deep knowledge of teaching and learning (a) to, (b) solve complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students is key to effective leadership (Robinson, 2011). It is important to note that Student-centred leadership involves a skilful integration of these three capabilities into the work described by each of the five dimensions. For example, for the dimension of goal setting, leaders need to know: 1) *what* goals to set, 2) how to address the problems that arise when attempting to set goals, and 3) how to build *trust* so staff buy into the goal-setting process.

Essential to this model is that this work should be collaborative because relevant expertise is not found in the head of one person, and because systemic collaborative learning builds a professional practice that reduces the isolation of teachers and the variation in teaching quality.

It is also important to note that depending on their stage of development, different schools will need to emphasize different components of the five dimensions. Schools need to adapt the practices based on their specific contexts.

Ultimately, leaders need to feel comfortable acting with conviction to implement ideas that will improve student learning. When school leaders become deeply informed by knowledge of how to improve learning and teaching, they need to act on this knowledge and maximize their influence on the education of their students.

Further investigation (Timperley, 2011) examining research on the relationship between teacher learning and student achievement found that coherence across professional learning environments was not achieved through the completion of checklists and scripted lessons, but rather through creating learning situations that promoted inquiry habits of mind throughout the school. Therefore, by promoting distributed leadership, we are generating greater learning across the school. The ultimate lesson from student-centered leadership is that building instructional leadership into the culture of the school and building strong leadership in teachers will impact positively on students.

Recommended Reading:

Robinson, V. (2011). Student-centered leadership (Vol. 15).
Timperley, H. (2011). Realizing the power of professional learning.
Argyris, C. (1994). Education for leading-learning.
Kirtman, L. (2013). *Leadership and teams: The missing piece of the education reform puzzle.*
Robinson, V.M.J., Lloyd, C., Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the different effects of leadership type.

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other"

-John F. Kennedy