

Leadership for Learning: A framework synthesising recent research*

Neil Dempster
Griffith University
Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

The production of a framework connecting leadership and learning is the central purpose of this article. The framework is synthesised from a selection of five recent research reports, all of which concentrate on aspects of leadership which are influential in affecting learning. The need for a framework responds to increasing concerns amongst school leaders that their work has been dominated by management matters rather than what it takes to improve student learning. The framework is being applied to literacy learning and is being piloted during 2009-10 in the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project funded by the Australian Federal Government. It articulates eight dimensions on which school leaders need to take action if they are to improve learning in their schools.

Introduction

This article pulls together the findings from a number of important meta-analytical research studies related to the connections between leadership and learning in order to produce a framework which school leaders may find helpful as they go about their work. The framework described in the article is being applied as a Blue Print for leading literacy learning by participants in the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) Pilot Project – a project funded under the Federal Government’s program, *Literacy and Numeracy Pilots in Low SES Environments*. The PALL Project is led by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) in partnership with the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services, Griffith University, Edith Cowan University and the Australian Catholic University. It involves Principals from government and non-government systems and schools in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory and aims to assist Principals to develop their capabilities as effective leaders of literacy learning.

Producing a *Leadership for Learning Framework* as a backdrop to the PALL Project was motivated, in part, by the fact that while there are ample research findings reliably connecting aspects of leadership with learning, there appear to be few translations of these findings into coherent guidance for school leaders anxious to improve student learning and performance. That anxiety has been fuelled in recent times by international test data (eg PISA), consistent anecdotal claims about increased managerial demands on school principals as well as research findings which show that the quantum of compliance work devolved to school leaders (Gronn & Rawlings–Sanaei, 2003, p181; OECD, 2008, p 2) has been drawing their attention away from the central purpose of their leadership, namely student learning and achievement. Principals’ concern about the erosion of this central purpose has worried them as their roles as managers have expanded. Indeed the outcomes of discussion on national

standards for school leaders conducted by Teaching Australia (2008) show clearly that learning and teaching are at the heart of Principals' views about their jobs. Getting leadership action back on track so that Principals are active agents in pursuing the quality of learning in their schools is a task requiring systematic work across a number of dimensions now well described in contemporary research literature. It is to a selection from that literature that I now turn to search for the kind of leadership activity which is focused squarely on learning.

In working towards my synthesis of recent research findings, I first summarise reports from the National College of School Leadership in the United Kingdom, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the New Zealand Iterative *Best Evidence Synthesis Program*, the Cambridge University *Leadership for Learning Project* and the Australian Council for Educational Research *Review of Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning* in Queensland. These reports have been selected because they deal with significant bodies of research seeking understanding about the relationship between leadership and learning. Moreover, each of the reports adopts a meta-analytical approach to research appraisal in an endeavour to identify and describe the practical ways in which leadership contributes to enhanced student learning and achievement. While the reports come from different countries, they refer to international research studies with a similar purpose – the search for leadership and learning links. The summaries of the five reports enable me to identify common messages before I use them to create a framework showing the dimensions across which leaders need to work if they are to be leaders of learning in their schools.

Before presenting the research summaries however, I discuss briefly three fundamental elements of school leadership which are intrinsic to all leadership roles – elements which figure prominently in the meta-analyses I have selected and which are included in the resultant framework.

Three Leadership Fundamentals

The three leadership fundamentals about which leadership theorists and researchers speak (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; MacBeath and Dempster, 2009) are *purpose*, *context* and *human agency*. These three fundamental elements are not only at the heart of effective organisational leadership, they lie at the centre of leadership for learning. In the case of school leaders, there is a clear moral *purpose* which should drive them; and that purpose is the improvement of students' lives through learning. To put it starkly, Principals are not there to make students' lives worse; they are there to see that their schools concentrate on improving students' learning and ultimately their achievement. Running a school financially and legally efficiently, is not enough. The school must add value to its students through learning.

Second, leadership never takes place in a vacuum. It is always located somewhere and is influenced by its *context*. This is why one of the most important sets of skills a school leader needs is the ability to 'read' the context in which he or she is working (PriceWaterHouseCoopers, 2007). That 'reading' should not result in the use of the context as an excuse, restricting or limiting what a school leader can do for students. Rather, Principals and others in leadership roles need to be able to judge how they can best harness capacity and support in the school and the wider community to assist

them in their moral quest. Research evidence about the significance of the context beyond the school in the support of learning has been consolidated over the last forty years and is now undeniable (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001; OECD, 2008).

Third, leaders cannot work alone in schools. They can only achieve the school's moral purpose through human agency. Indeed, the research literature over the last decade or so has recorded a major change in thinking about leadership, namely, the clear movement from individual to shared views of leadership and the shift from defining leadership as position to viewing it as collective activity (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2009).

I have started by describing these three leadership fundamentals because they are included consistently in the five reports which I now summarise.

Report No. 1. From the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom

The report from the National College for School Leadership was prepared by Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006). Its title, *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*, indicates that the authors were interested in including in their work only those aspects of leadership which were well supported in the research literature. That they were prepared to include but seven claims, despite multitudes of studies, is a testament to their commitment to the search for undeniably credible links between leadership and learning.

The first part of the report reinforces the evidence showing leadership as the second strongest influence on student learning after classroom teachers. Leithwood and his colleagues (2006) then turn to a series of other empirically supported claims which touch on the processes and organisational means effective leaders use, the matters to which they attend, how their influence is extended by working with others and the personal qualities which successful leaders display. A summary of this well cited report shows that leaders affect learning by building vision and setting directions; by understanding and developing teachers; designing effective organisational structures; coordinating the teaching and learning program; by attending to the conditions for learning; and sharing leadership broadly and deeply.

These claims, Leithwood and his co-researchers (2006) have explained, are strongly supported by a range of studies over ten years from the mid-nineties onwards. Their work was probably the first of a series of international meta-analytical projects designed to filter out enduring knowledge from a significant body of leadership research findings. The New Zealand version which I summarise below, is another meta-analytical project of this kind.

Report No. 2. From the New Zealand Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Program

The New Zealand Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Program was charged with the task of describing the state of contemporary knowledge from existing research findings on matters such as teaching, learning and leadership. On the latter matter, I draw from the work of Robinson (2007) who was one of the team of researchers examining international leadership studies. In her monograph which has been widely

cited internationally, she has distilled a number of strong findings about leadership. Her focus was research which examined “direct or indirect links between leadership and student outcomes” (p. 6). She has summarised the outcomes of her analysis as a set of leadership dimensions in which it can be shown that leaders affect learning when they:

- promote and participate in teacher professional development;
- plan, coordinate and evaluate teaching and the curriculum;
- establish goals and expectations;
- manage resources strategically; and
- ensure an orderly and supportive environment.

Of these five “inductively derived leadership dimensions” Robinson (2007; p. 7) argues that the most significant is a ‘hands on’ approach to professional development by school leaders, particularly Principals. Her work has been regarded as particularly important because she has been able to show the ‘effect size’ (pp 7, 8) for these dimensions and clearly, active involvement in professional learning with teachers is the most powerful influence leaders can have on the quality of teaching and therefore on the quality of student learning and achievement. Of considerable importance also, is the curriculum leadership role played by Principals. Robinson goes on to explain that this involves coordination of curriculum responsibilities, participation in monitoring teaching, student learning and performance.

The other three of Robinson’s (2007) dimensions, while less influential than professional development and curriculum coordination in their impact on teaching and learning in the school, may be high leadership priorities depending on the circumstances faced by the school. For example, if there is not a safe environment for learning, something will have to be done about it before the two dimensions which produce the greatest effects can be addressed. Robinson’s body of work has figured prominently in the report of the OECD on School Leadership to which I now turn.

Report No. 3. From the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

The first of a two volume report on school leadership prepared by Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008) is a comprehensive analysis of OECD member country reports and case studies motivated by a number of trends. In the authors’ words:

Increased school autonomy and a greater focus on schooling and school results have made it essential to reconsider the role of school leaders. There is much room for improvement to professionalise school leadership, to support current school leaders and to make school leadership an attractive career for future candidates. The ageing of current principals and the widespread shortage of qualified candidates to replace them after retirement make it imperative to take action (p 3).

The report concentrates on what research is saying about school leadership for improved school outcomes. In Chapter 2 of this first volume, attention is given to “redefining school leadership responsibilities” in the light of the criticisms about the recent dominance of management concerns noted in the introduction above. Reclaiming leadership for learning as the prime responsibility of school principals is the underlying theme of the analysis. Four fields of responsibility are recorded by Pont et al (2008) about which they say that leaders who enhance student learning: (i)

support, evaluate and develop teacher quality; (ii) define goals, measure progress and take account; (iii) manage resources strategically; and (iv) lead beyond the school borders.

For the first and last of these four areas of leadership responsibility, there is ample research evidence that there are critical actions constituting a leadership repertoire. School leaders deal with *teacher quality*, in part, by active management of the curriculum and teaching program (p 45), by monitoring and evaluating teaching (p 47), by directly supporting professional development (p 48) and by building collaborative work cultures (p 50). They demonstrate *leadership beyond the school borders* by engaging with others whose knowledge, experience and skill may be harnessed in the interests of the school. This means that a leader's responsibilities go well past local connections with the parents and the school community. They extend into associations with other schools, to professional networks, people in the wider community with expertise, systems authorities, university researchers, politicians and civic leaders. In short, connections beyond the school are seen as essential features of a redefined leadership role in the OECD report (pp 56-60).

The three analyses summarised so far contain a number of overlaps, a fact further reinforced in the list of principles which resulted from a Cambridge University led international study, a brief summary of which follows.

Report No. 4. From the Cambridge University *Leadership for Learning* Project

The Cambridge University led *Leadership for Learning* (LfL) project involved three schools in eight sites in seven countries, twenty-four schools in all. In the introduction to the book reporting on the project, MacBeath and Dempster (2009) write:

In every country to which our research has taken us, we find heads and Principals experiencing the ambivalence of leadership: problems and opportunities, momentum and direction, frustration and fulfilment. All are touched by the managerialist and performativity agendas, struggling to put authentic learning first.

With this struggle 'top of mind', the primary purpose of the LfL Project was to examine three questions for the insights that might be gathered about them from cross cultural perspectives. The three questions were:

What do we understand about learning?
What do we understand about leadership?
What do we understand about the links between the two?

Common research methods applied across the seven countries produced findings which the research team aggregated as a set of principles. These principles provide a tentative answer to the last of the three questions above and show how leadership is linked to learning by:

- maintaining a focus on learning;
- creating conditions favourable to learning;
- conducting *disciplined dialogue* about learning;
- sharing leadership; and
- sharing accountability.

The third of the principles – ‘conducting *disciplined dialogue* about learning’, stands out from the LfL study as an interesting contribution to thinking about how leaders influence learning. The other four principles, have been mentioned already, in different ways, in the three reports which preceded them in this article.

Disciplined Dialogue was the term given to the kind of focused conversations the research team had with teachers of different linguistic backgrounds, yet with a common concern about leadership and learning. In order to manage discussions in English, which for many was a second language, the researchers had to scaffold the dialogue to maintain its focus on the improvement of student learning. Scaffolding dialogue was achieved by using ‘tools’ such as processes, questions, scenarios, critical incidents, reports, test and questionnaire data and so on. In all cases, the discipline was two fold. First, conversations were disciplined in their concentration on the moral purpose of leadership (mentioned at the outset as improvement in student learning and performance). Second, conversations were disciplined because the qualitative and quantitative data opened up by the use of ‘tools’ were subject to scrutiny using three generic questions:

1. What do we see here?
2. Why are we seeing what we are seeing?
3. What should we be doing about this?

School leaders and researchers found during the LfL Project, that employing these three questions in relation to an evidence base of some kind helped keep discussions disciplined – hence the use of the term *Disciplined Dialogue*. Scaffolding professional conversations in this way ensures that:

they are not trivial, trite, piecemeal or sporadic. They are not derogatory, censoring, destructive or coercive. They are positively focused on the moral purpose of schools and they are all-embracing. Conversations are not irrationally based on stereotype or hearsay, but on reason and values, stimulated by helpful qualitative and quantitative data. In this sense they are constructive conversations carried out in ‘disciplined dialogue’ (Swaffield and Dempster, 2009, p 107).

Up to this point, apart for my digression into an explanation of *Disciplined Dialogue*, it is becoming evident that the research findings from the studies I have included travel across much of the same ground, emphasising a core set of actions, responsibilities or dimensions leaders need to embrace if they are to lead learning well in their schools. The last of the reports referred to in this article is from the Australian Council for Educational Research and it shares many of the core findings common to the previous four.

Report No. 5. From the Australian Council for Educational Research

A review commissioned by the Queensland Government of ‘available data on the performance of Queensland students’ in literacy, numeracy and science’ was conducted by Professor Geoff Masters in the early months of 2009. The outcome sought by the Government was ‘advice in the areas of curriculum, assessment and teacher quality’. Like others before him, Masters was attuned to the important role that accomplished school leaders play in student learning. One of his recommendations was directed to leadership development and in justifying it, he

referred to the following findings from international research, saying that systems and leaders ensure high quality learning by:

- building a school culture of high expectations;
- setting targets for improvement;
- employing teachers who have deep knowledge and understanding of key content areas;
- enhancing staff and leadership capacity;
- monitoring teacher practice, student learning and performance continuously; and
- allocating physical and human resources to improve learning.

The five fields of responsibility Masters (2009) discusses resonate with the summaries of each of the other four reports I have provided here. What I have set myself now is the task of producing a ‘synthesis of the syntheses’. I do so in order to crystallise the messages which have been the results of the research cited, at the same time reducing then to a manageable number from which a Leadership for Learning Framework can be developed. It is to this final task that attention is now directed.

Leadership for Learning: a synthesis of the five reports

In forming my synthesis I have ensured that the three leadership fundamentals with which I commenced this article are represented, namely, *purpose*, *context* and *human agency*. In addition I think that the findings from the LfL project on ‘disciplined dialogue’ have provided a way to conduct focused professional conversations using qualitative and quantitative data. I have acknowledged the strength of the research findings on leaders’ participation in professional learning as well as their management and coordination role in the school’s curriculum program. Finally, I have accepted the influence of emerging findings about shared leadership, and how significant the connections with parents and the wider community context are. Taken together, I offer the following eight statements as the platform from which I develop the Leadership for Learning Framework presented in Figure 1.

Leaders best affect student learning outcomes when:

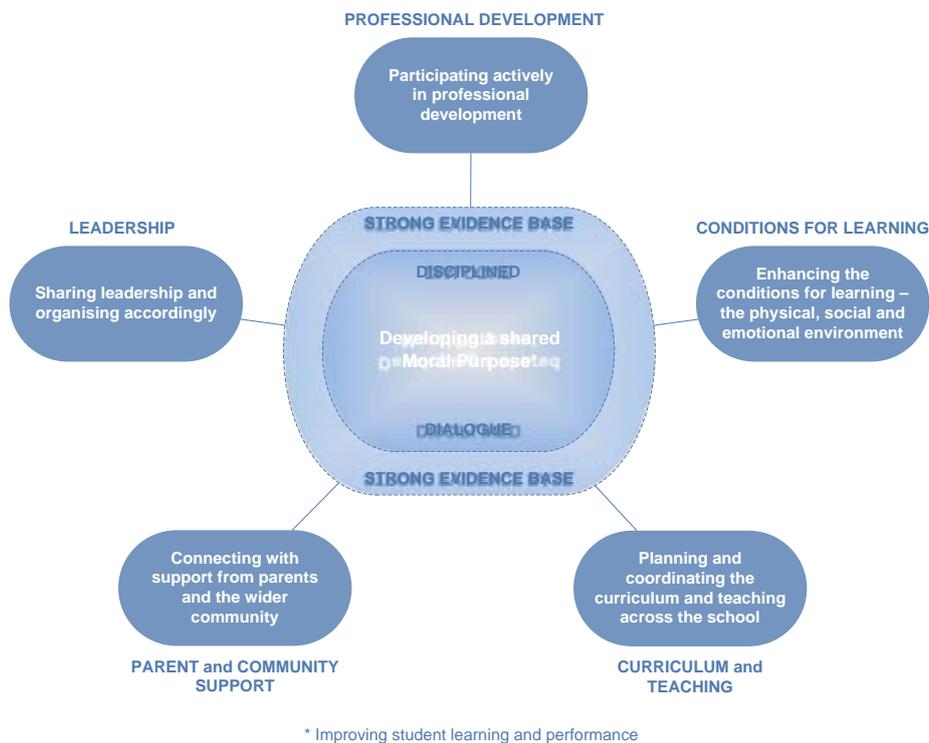
- **they have an agreed and shared moral purpose;**
- **there is ‘disciplined dialogue’ about learning in the school;**
- **they plan, monitor and take account using a strong evidence base;**
- **they are active professional learners with their teachers;**
- **they attend to enhancing the conditions for learning;**
- **they coordinate, manage and monitor the curriculum and teaching;**
- **they use distributive leadership as the norm; and**
- **they understand the context of their work and connect with parent and wider community support for learning.**

Figure 1 represents the eight dimensions in diagrammatic form. The inner circle houses the *moral purpose** - the improvement of learning and achievement - to which all leadership actions are directed. To maintain the focus on a leader’s moral purpose and what needs to be done to help improve learning and performance, a *strong evidence* base is essential. This is represented by the outer circle in the middle of the figure. The second concentric circle illustrates the enabling and filtering effects possible through *disciplined dialogue*. In short, good quality data about students’ learning and performance should be coupled with disciplined dialogue if improvement

actions are to be realistically grounded. The outer ovals in the diagram and their connection with a ‘Strong Evidence Base’ indicate that high quality evidence and professional conversations are just as necessary for these five dimensions as they are for understanding student learning and performance. Indeed the figure shows that each of these dimensions is an important aspect of the work of effective leaders of learning. Taken together they represent the terrain over which accomplished leaders must travel constantly in the pursuit of their moral purpose.

Figure 1. A framework for leadership for learning

Leading Learning – A Framework



To bring this article to a close I reiterate that its purpose has been to produce a Leadership for Learning Framework based on a synthesis of research findings reported in well cited recent studies. I suggest that it may be applied to any areas of learning which leaders and teachers believe are in need of improvement in their schools, from mathematics, to the performing arts and even to behaviour management for example. This broad use of the framework is yet to be tested. However, as I said at the outset, it is being applied in 2009-10 to literacy learning through the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) Pilot Project in schools in difficult circumstances. I am hopeful that this two year project will yield insights which help to reinstate learning and what it takes to improve it as the core responsibilities of school leaders.

References

- Crowther, F., Kaagan, S., Ferguson, M and Hann, L. (2002) *Developing Teacher Leaders*, Thousand Oaks, California, Corwin Press.
- Gronn, P. & Rawlings-Sanaei, F. (2003). Principal Recruitment in a climate of leadership disengagement. *Australian Journal of Education*, 47(2), August p 181.
- Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D. (2006) *Sustainable Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Harris, A. (2009) [Ed] *Distributed School Leadership*, Netherlands, Springer Press.
- Leithwood, K. (2005) Understanding successful school leadership: Progress on a broken front, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43 (6), pp 619-629.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2006) *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*, National College for School Leadership, Nottingham.
- Leithwood, K. and Riehl, C. (2003) *What do we already know about successful school leadership?* Philadelphia: Temple University.
- MacBeath, J. and Dempster, N. (2009) [Eds] *Connecting Leadership and Learning*, London, Routledge.
- MacBeath, J. and Mortimore, P. (2001) *Improving School Effectiveness*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Masters, G. (2009) *A Shared Challenge: Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning in Queensland Primary Schools*, Melbourne, ACER.
- Pont, B., Nusche, D. and Moorman, H. (2008) *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*, OECD Publishing.
- PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership*, Department for Education and Skills, London.
- Robinson, V. M. J. (2007) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works*. Winmalee, Australian Council for Educational Leaders.
- Spillane, J. (2006) *Distributed Leadership*, New York, Jossey-Bass.
- Teaching Australia (2008) *Standards for Accomplished Teachers and Principals*, Canberra, Teaching Australia.

Contact details:

Professor Neil Dempster is Professor of leadership in education at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. He may be contacted by email at: n.dempster@griffith.edu.au

*** Dempster, N. (2009 forthcoming) Leadership for Learning: a framework synthesising recent research, *EdVentures*, Canberra, The Australian College of Educators ©.**