

# Learning and leadership

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*Learning and leadership are indispensable to each other.*  
John F. Kennedy, 1963

Thomas and Watson (2011) advise that quality has been a policy focus in Australian education for over 20 years as exemplified through a series of “Quality of Education Reviews”, Senate or Parliamentary Inquiry Committees and new national bodies for the profession, all of which “heralded the onset of an intense national policy focus on the quality of teachers and subsequently school leaders” (Thomas and Watson, 2011:192). Similarly Dinham (2013) notes that there has been a major and growing international and national focus on improving school, teacher and student performance for decades and that in Australia, there has been, on average, one major state or national inquiry into teacher education every year for the past 30 years.

Yet, according to Kaster (2010), schools have changed so that principals can no longer focus only on the organisational functions of the school but must also be instructional leaders placing student learning as the first priority. A greater focus on student learning outcomes and school performance has required educational leaders, teachers, parents, students and community leaders to re-examine traditional practices of schooling (Horn, 2009) and to discern those practices substantial to the achievement of students. However MacBeath and Dempster (2009) observe that all principals struggle to put authentic learning first.

There is a broad and universal agreement that principals’ leadership practices play a pivotal role in ensuring high learner achievements (Sim 2011; du Plessis 2013). To do so, principals need to be effective leaders and should function as instructional leaders (Sofa, *et al.*, 2012) and in doing so, endeavour to enhance the instructional practices of teachers (Fink, *et al.*, 2011).

We know that within schools, teacher effectiveness is the largest predictor of student achievement. As Danielson (2002) puts it, teacher effectiveness is the single most important school-related contributor to student achievement and that once children enter school, teachers exercise more influence on students’ academic growth than any other single factor (Ball and Rowan, 2004).

We know school leadership has a significant influence on student outcomes, second only to classroom teaching (Day and Gurr, 2014; Qian and Walker, 2011) and this is because school leaders are the biggest single influence on teacher effectiveness (Dinham, 2013; Robinson 2011).

Whilst there is a growing consensus among practitioners and researchers around the “essential components” of successful schooling that have emerged from years of research (Goldring, *et al.*, 2009; Barber, *et al.*, 2010), far less is known about the ways



in which educators develop, implement, integrate, and sustain them (Smith, *et al.*, 2012).

Schools that are effective and have the capacity to improve, have leaders who make a significant and measurable contribution to the effectiveness of their staff (Giffing, 2010). Effective school leadership therefore means creating the conditions under which teachers can perform effectively in schools (Kemmis, *et al.*, 2014).

Research by Robinson (2007) shows that the leadership of



schools where students perform above expected levels looks very different from that in otherwise similar schools, where students perform below expected levels. Dempster (2011) in the Australian Indigenous leadership context reaches the same conclusion that the difference of student outcomes is attributable to the way in which school leaders behave with teachers and the concomitant climate of the school which mitigates teacher involvement and productivity.

Therefore, an explicit theory and understanding of what

represents good instructional leadership practices is needed to enhance patterns of performance in schools so that leaders have the ability to use their leadership behaviours to enable teachers to teach more effectively (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

We know there are many researchers and theorists who have contributed to our understanding of leadership and particularly instructional leadership and that across these leadership characteristics, there is much similarity (Dempster, 2009). The most significant of these is Robinson, Hohepa and Llyod (2009) who conduct-

ed a “high quality meta-analysis of published research” (Fullan and Levin, 2009), which examined the direct or indirect links between leadership and student outcomes. This Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) distillation of Robinson, *et al.* (2009) utilised effect size to identify the specific instructional leadership practices that make the most difference for students’ learning outcomes.

The strengths of the BES lie in its potential to be used by school leaders as a formative tool. The BES focuses specifically on the kind of leadership principals can employ to most effectively facilitate student learning. With an impressive evidence base, the BES identifies the dimensions of leadership that have the most impact on student learning. These are:

- 1 Establishing Goals and Expectations: Includes the setting, communicating and monitoring of learning goals, standards and expectations, and the involvement of staff and others in the process so that there is clarity and consensus about goals.
- 2 Strategic Resourcing: Involves aligning resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals. Includes provision of appropriate expertise through staff recruitment
- 3 Planning, Coordinating and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum: Direct involvement in the support and evaluation of teaching through regular classroom visits and provision of formative and summative feedback to teachers. Direct oversight of curriculum through school-wide coordination across classes and year levels and alignment to school goals.
- 4 Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development: Leadership that not only promotes but directly participates with teachers in formal or informal professional learning
- 5 Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment: Protecting time for teaching and learning by reducing external pressures and interruptions and establishing an orderly and supportive environment both inside and outside classrooms

In the words of Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2012) who note, “We have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership”, if existing leadership practices were adapted so they aligned to the BES leadership dimensions we would realise our overall goal of instructional improvement (Robinson, 2011).

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**Ken Avenell** Dip Teach, Dip Theol, B. Ed., Grad. Dip ECE (Hons), M. Ed. Admin, FAIM, FACEL, FQIEA, MAHRI, JP (Qual) was previously a principal and senior bureaucrat in state education, and has been for several years Principal Education Officer for Brisbane Catholic Education. His main areas of work are in coordinating professional learning across Catholic Education and in individual, team and organisational leadership development.