



Leading the learning – yes but for what purpose?

In this article **Peter Earley** discusses notions of learning-centred leadership and leadership for learning.¹ He explains why leadership for learning matters even more in high stakes accountability systems. He sets out some fundamental questions for professional development and lays down the challenge that learning should be at the heart of leadership development programmes, especially the National Professional Qualifications (NPQs).

■■■ How leaders influence organisational outcomes

Effective school leaders have a strong sense of moral purpose and social justice. Their impact on students is largely indirect and is relatively small compared to other factors. However, what leaders do and say, and

how they demonstrate leadership, does affect pupil learning outcomes; it is largely through the actions of others, most obviously teachers, that the effects of school leadership are mediated. School leadership influences student outcomes more than any other factors, bar socio-economic background and quality of teaching.

There is little doubt that the research evidence reinforces the point that leadership matters. Furthermore, it is suggested that *leadership for learning* or *learning centred leadership* matters most. It is to this model of leadership that we first turn.

■■■ Leadership for learning

What's in a name?

What used to be referred to as instructional or pedagogic leadership has developed into leadership for learning or learning centred leadership. Hallinger (2012) notes how instructional leadership has been reincarnated as a global phenomenon in the form of 'leadership for learning'. Timperley (2011:145) states that leadership that is focused on promoting effective teaching and learning has had a number of terms: 'as with any idea that gains currency in education, the labels for this kind of leadership abound and have usually taken an adjectival form of instructional, pedagogical, or learning-centred leadership. Alternatively it is expressed as leadership of or for something, such as leadership for learning'. Learning-directed learning is another term used.

Timperley goes on to say that Murphy et al., (2007) summed up the essence of the ideas expressed in these multiple labels when they said 'the touchstones for this type of leadership include the ability of leaders:

- to stay consistently focused on the right stuff—the core technology of schools, or learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment, and
- to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g. administration, organization, finance) work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning'. (2007, cited in Timperley, 2011:146)

In broad terms, whatever its label, it is an approach to leadership 'whereby the leader helps foster a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for students. Elements include principal leadership, clear mission, teaching expectations, and opportunities to learn' (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015:2).

Focus on learning outcomes

This form of leadership is highly concerned with improving student outcomes, where the focus is on learning and leading teachers' professional development. For example, Southworth (2002:79) states that 'instructional leadership is strongly concerned with teaching and learning, including the professional learning of teachers as well as student growth'. Southworth has contributed significantly to the debate about learning-centred leadership and has developed a model which includes the strategies of modelling, monitoring and dialogue (Southworth, 2009; Earley, 2013). For Southworth, learning-centred leadership is about 'the simultaneous use of these strategies in ways which mutually reinforce one another. It is their combined effect which creates powerful learning for teachers and leaders and which, in turn, inform teachers' actions in classrooms and lead to improved teaching and student learning' (ibid.:101).

Learning-centred leadership emphasises the centrality of teaching and learning - including staff learning - and suggest that leaders' influence on student outcomes is via staff, especially teachers. Leadership for learning has also been conceptualised as a combination of pedagogic and transformational leadership (Day and Sammons, 2013; Robinson, 2011). If this is the case, then how can leaders lead the learning? How might this form of leadership be operationalized in schools and classrooms?

■■■ Leading the learning: making it happen

Promoting professional learning

When leaders act as learning-centred leaders, their role includes developing people, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and having a positive impact on student outcomes, broadly defined. As noted above, Southworth (2009) discussed the learning-centred leadership strategies of modelling, monitoring and dialogue to which West-Burnham later added mentoring as underpinning all three (Earley, 2013). For the OECD, leadership for learning was about focusing on supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality which included 'coordinating the curriculum



and teaching program, monitoring and evaluating teaching practice, promoting teachers' professional development, and supporting collaborative work cultures' (Schleicher, 2012:18). Senior leaders need to help teachers – who are leaders of teaching and learning in classrooms – to get better at what they do by enabling on-going professional development.

In order to keep a focus on learning it is important to visit classrooms and participate in professional development, initiate and guide conversations about student learning, keep up to date and share learning with others, make pupil learning a focus for performance evaluation, establish teaching and learning as central topics for school-wide staff meetings, analyse data about student learning and use it for planning and to set goals for improvements in learning and then review progress in relation to these goals (NCSL, 2013).

Systems and structures

Southworth has made a number of suggestions of how systems and structures can support learning-centred leadership. These include:

- planning processes – for lessons, units of work, periods of time, classes and groups of students, and individuals;
 - target-setting – for individuals, groups, classes, years, key stages and the whole institution; communication systems – especially meetings;
 - monitoring systems – analysing and using pupil learning data, observing classrooms and providing feedback;
 - roles and responsibilities of leaders - including mentoring and coaching and
 - policies for learning, teaching and assessment and marking.
- (Southworth, 2009:102).

The core business of teaching and learning

The work of Robinson and her colleagues in New Zealand (e.g. Robinson, 2011) has convincingly demonstrated how leadership related to teacher development has by far the greatest impact on student outcomes. In their meta-analysis of the five factors underpinning effective leadership 'Promoting and participating in

teacher learning and development’ was found to have the greatest influence on student outcomes. Such leaders ensure an intensive focus on teaching-learning relationships; promote collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and well-being; and provide useful advice about how to solve teaching problems. The central message of the research was clear: ‘The more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning the greater their influence on student outcomes’ (Robinson, 2013).

Supportive environments, communities and culture

MacBeath and Swaffield’s leadership for learning (Lfl) project conducted in a number of countries suggests such practice requires leadership that is shared and accountable, where supportive learning environments are created and teachers are given every opportunity to grow and explore new ideas in the classroom (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2008). Their colleagues at Cambridge have gone further and more recently argued that ‘principals have a key role in creating the conditions for enabling teachers to have a voice and to contribute to the development of policy and practice’ (Bangs and Frost, 2016:97).

A willingness to take risks in practice and to innovate are critical to creating a learning-centred or learning enriched community that learns and reinforces continuous improvement and professional development (Bubb and Earley, 2010; OECD, 2016). Seashore (2015) sees learning-centred leaders as fostering what she calls ‘professional community’ and they act in very specific ways:

“they observe classrooms and ask questions that provoke teachers to think; they give ‘power’ over curriculum priorities and school practices to teachers; they consult teachers before making most important decisions; they ensure that all students have equal opportunity to have the best teachers; they use staff meetings to talk about equity and instruction, not about procedures; and they ask all teachers to observe each other’s classrooms. In other words, teachers

assess the effects of their principals by pointing to specific behaviors rather than generalised personality characteristics”.

For her school leaders shape the school culture ‘in ways that make its members more productive as well as more satisfied’ (ibid.). The social conditions that staff encounter in a school are crucial and for Seashore these are grounded in professional community, or “the stimulating relationships that they have with other teachers that create effective individual and collective learning environments that support change”. Her research suggests that school leaders have a major effect on whether or not supportive and challenging work environments exist. They exert influence in the following ways:

- Affect working relationships and, indirectly, student achievement (*instructional leadership*).
 - When influence is shared with teachers, foster stronger teacher working relationships (*shared leadership*).
 - Create a culture of support for teachers that is translated into support for student work (*academic support*).
- (Seashore, 2015)

Promoting a learning culture and encouraging teacher leadership is important for, as the OECD note, ‘teachers who report they are provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making at a school level have higher reported levels of job satisfaction in all TALIS countries and higher feelings of self-efficacy in most countries’ (OECD, 2014, cited in Bangs and Frost, 2016:99). Frost argues that ‘with the right kind of support, teachers everywhere can experience a reigniting of their professionalism and enhancement of their sense of moral purpose’ (ibid.: 103). Such re-ignition is crucial at a time when teacher motivation may not be at its highest.

Headteacher leadership

Although leadership of learning at all levels is important, headteacher leadership remains the major driving force



and underpins the school's effectiveness and continued improvement. Such leadership 'serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation' (Leithwood et al., 2006 cited in Day and Sammons, 2013:34). The research of Day et al., (2009) revealed that headteachers recognised the importance to the success of their schools of widening the participation of staff, consulting with them regularly and, in some schools, involving pupils in school-wide

decision-making. They note that organisational change and development are enhanced when leadership is broad based and where teachers have opportunities to collaborate and become involved in initiatives.

■■■ **The importance of effective leadership**

There are some clear messages emerging from the research about learning-centred leadership or the leadership of learning, most notably that the actions of



school leaders, especially headteachers, are crucial for creating that ‘learning atmosphere’ or organizational culture for both pupils and staff so that learning occurs. Effective leaders empower teachers and other staff to reach their potential because it is through teachers and high quality teaching that students will be helped to reach theirs. However, it begs the question of the purpose of learning and it is to this more philosophical question that we next turn.

Leading learning for what?

Remembering core purposes

Learning-centred leadership matters even more in education systems which operate within a high stakes accountability culture. Within such systems there is a danger that learning becomes very narrowly defined and the overall purpose of education lost. It is easy in a time of measurement, targets and league tables to lose sight of what the primary purpose of schools should be. The question needs to be asked: what are the core purposes of learning and education, and hence of school leadership?

Everyone’s a learner

The philosopher Gert Biesta has coined the term ‘learnification’ which he sees as the rise of a new language of learning on education – this rise is seen in what he refers to as the number of discursive shifts, for example all students and adults are referred to as learners; teachers as facilitators of learning, creators of learning opportunities, etc. (Biesta, 2016: 80). Assessment is for learning and strategies are referred to as learning and teaching strategies, leadership as learning-centred and so on. ‘Learning’ is certainly a term whose time has come which perhaps is a greater reason for its nature and purpose to be carefully considered. As Smythe and Wrigley remark: ‘in the discourse of the new leadership, even the term “leading learning” has been reduced into monitoring attainment; the complexities of social justice are viewed very narrowly through the lens of reducing attainment gaps’ (2013:156). For others the global testing culture permeates all aspects of education, ‘from financing, to parental involvement, to teacher and student beliefs and practices’ which has led ‘to an environment where testing becomes synonymous with accountability, which becomes synonymous with education quality’ (Smith, 2016:x).

The danger of performance cultures

For Dimmock (2012:46) discussion about learning-centred or instructional leadership is meaningless in such a culture, where “government policy priorities are measured by league tables and inspection regimes



that are nationally defined and unresponsive to local circumstances, since the principalship is increasingly defined by the extent to which these outcome measures are achieved. There is little scope for much else”. There is a view that “the teacher is no longer viewed as a professional, but as a labourer who simply has to follow evidence-based methods in order to secure externally determined goals” (Evers and Kneyber, 2016:3) and that teaching is no longer the vocation it was once seen to be.

Andy Hargreaves argues that ‘school autonomy’ is not always a good thing and can work against notions of leadership for learning as it tends to lead to ‘principals turning into de-professionalised performance managers and evaluators of teachers as individuals rather than builders of professional communities amongst all their staff within and across schools’ (2016:123). Education systems and schools however need reflective professionals who are able to make judgements and act upon what is considered to be ‘educationally desirable’.

Leadership of and for what?

Leadership for learning must be leadership with a purpose. It is argued here that it must be about learning that is more than just attainment, exam and test scores and meeting central government’s policy objectives. Of course attainment is important as children’s life chances have little chance of being realised without knowledge of the basics, but education – and learning – must be about more than this. Do current leadership development programmes ask sufficient questions about the core purposes of education, and hence of educational leadership? Or is this more the role of

Master’s based awards where participants are expected to be more critical of educational policy and to reflect on current practice? Ray Starratt (2007) argues that practitioners and researchers alike must always ask themselves the question “Leadership of and for what?”. He suggests that without a clear answer to this then “all the research and theory and discourse about distributed and sustainable leadership, about restructuring and reculturing, about capacity building and professional development, will not make what goes on in schools right” (ibid.:182).

Learning-centred leadership - and any associated professional development programmes for leaders - must keep this question centre stage – leadership of learning for what? This it should be argued is the essence of learning-centred leadership. This is no doubt harder to keep at the core of what schools do whilst operating in a high stakes accountability culture, but not impossible - see for example the excellent report by RSA – *The Ideal School Exhibition* (Astle, 2017) and the DfE-funded study of outstanding primary schools (Matthews, et al, 2014).

■■■ Implications and challenges for professional development

A concern or challenge for learning-centred leaders and those involved in their training and development will be maintaining the focus on learning – to concentrate their efforts on professional and pedagogic matters rather than administrative and financial concerns. The growing number of competing pressures and demands on school leaders’ time will make this an increasingly difficult task and will call for even more distributed leadership where all leaders’ focus is learning (Earley, 2013). It will be important to ensure that staff in charge of teaching and learning keep it as a high priority and know how to lead and effectively promulgate their vision of teaching and learning. Leadership development programmes, including the new suite of NPQs, must give such factors high priority.

Will the growth of a self-improving school system help or hinder the development of such leadership?

What does a self-improving system mean for LCL? How will leading learning play out in a federation or chain? Will chief executives become further removed from the ‘core business’ of schools which will increasingly be seen as the responsibility of senior and middle leaders? Will such leaders have even less ‘autonomy’ than under previous arrangements? Will executive heads and chief executives of academies and chains be more likely to have a business rather than an education background? Will leadership development programmes, including the new NPQ for executive Leaders, give such factors the importance they deserve?

How will leaders ensure that focusing on learning (leadership for learning or learning-centred leadership) includes whole school discussion, including with governing bodies, about ‘learning for what’? Will this help avoid schools becoming ‘examination factories’

(Hutchings, 2015) and discourage teaching to the test and other unsavoury practices associated with toxic organizational cultures (Craig, 2017)? For example. “Cheating teachers up four-fold in four years” – *School Leadership Today*, December 2017. There are clear implications of the above for both school leader and school governor training.

Heads, other school leaders and governing bodies, play key roles in creating and maintaining the conditions and environment where teachers can teach (and learn) effectively and students can learn. Effective learning-centred leaders empower staff and students to reach their potential. Student outcomes can be improved and not only in relation to attainment. Finally, we need to ensure that leadership training and development opportunities reflect such research findings and current concerns about ‘the purpose of education’ and school leadership.

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End notes

1. This article is adapted from Earley, P. (2017) *Conceptions of leadership and leading the learning*, Chapter 9 in: Earley, P. and Greany, T. (eds) *School Leadership and Education System Reform*, London: Bloomsbury.