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Instructional Leadership: Dimensions of complexity, assumptions and arenas for action

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ABSTRACT: For over 30 years the concept of Instructional Leadership (IL) has been discussed as an important construct in researching and developing educational leadership. During that period the definition of IL has evolved, moving from originally being seen as an important leadership concept in its own right to being seen as convergent with or a subset of other, broader educational trends. In more recent times, in Australia and internationally, consideration of the significance of IL has re-emerged within the global focus on improving student achievement. This article highlights the historical factors that have contributed to and shaped these transitions and finishes by establishing a list of six areas of complexity, aimed at supporting the understanding of current leaders when considering and developing their own IL practices.

Introduction

Defining school leadership has always been contentious. The increasing rate of educational reform over the last 30 years has made defining the aims and purposes of education, and therefore the best way to conceptualise leadership, management and administration of schools, more challenging (Cranston & Ehrich, 2006). Complex performance pressures placed on principals now occur within a large scale global setting (Bredeson, 2013) bringing with them globalised measurements, which create the capacity to compare educational effectiveness on a much broader scale than previously. This growth in international comparisons of educational results has seen schooling in many countries becoming a market commodity, based on the assumption that competition and information are the primary drivers of educational and economic improvement (Sahlberg, 2012). Across countries politicians are under pressure to come up with answers to the universal aspirations to improve quality in education (Harris & Muijs, 2007) and many nations' governments are requiring schools to bring about significant, systematic, and sustained reform in order to improve student outcomes. The principal, as the key educational leader in schools, has logically emerged as the lead actor in policy implementation and change leadership. This article aims to support those lead actors by providing some insights into the re-emergence of Instructional Leadership (IL) as the preferred leadership approach in Australian educational policy through both conceptual and historical perspectives.

In Australia, both federal and state governments have translated expectations for sustained improvement into educational policy aimed at ensuring schools are providing quality education

and running effectively (Caldwell & Lewis, 2005). The primacy of the principal's role in implementing mandated improvement agendas is acknowledged and chronicled in educational leadership research such as the 2010 *McKinsey and Company report* (Barber, Whelan & Clark, 2010). In the project facilitating this report, school principals, policymakers and system leaders were interviewed across eight countries, including Australia, aimed at identifying the emerging role of the principal within this global context. The outcome confirmed the expectation on all levels that the principal role was crucial in implementing systemic reform. Unfortunately, research (Hargreaves, 2003) has also shown that these principal focused reform processes do not necessarily translate into a better understanding of the work principals do or in creating a consistent understanding of the systemic expectations by principals and other systemic leaders, meaning there can be a gap between policy intent and practice.

Within this context there has also been a global re-emergence in education policy emphasising Instructional Leadership as a way to support bringing about improvement in student achievement. However, the policy platforms for many of the initiatives aimed at reform are not built on a well-defined understanding of how IL is implemented (Angel, Reitzug & West, 2008). While IL is mentioned in policy documents, understanding about what this means for school leaders is often not made explicit. Recent studies have found that there is little consensus about what IL actually looks like when put into action (Horng & Loeb, 2010). This lack of consensus emerges within the historical reviews of IL as well. Although the ultimate goal of IL since the late 1970s has been to improve student achievement, the literature reveals mixed messages about the practices of IL and about the assumed connection between IL and improving student outcomes (Robinson & Seashore Louis, 2011). Without a clear understanding about the exact nature of IL, it continues to be difficult for school leaders to consistently translate IL research and/or policy into practice (Robinson, 2010). Despite this, there is increasing political pressure on school principals to be instructional leaders who can be held accountable for improving student performance in areas such as international benchmarking tests (Caldwell & Loader, 2010). Holding principals accountable for being instructional leaders, while not being able to fully define IL practices, creates a significant implementation problem.

Looking across the development of IL, from the 1970s to current times, provides a clearer understanding about the belief in the importance of IL being linked to improvement. At the same time it also becomes clear that the practice of IL has proved difficult to articulate or link to specific outcomes. The following exploration of the development of IL models and review of research literature aims to provide insight into the complexities surrounding this problematic co-existence of policy and definition contrasted with effective implementation of IL across its more than 30-year history. This historical viewpoint is presented through reviewing three broad stages of development:

1. the original IL models emerging from the effective schooling movement;

2. later, transitioned models that embed and subsume IL into growing educational leadership trends; and

3. more recent search for a new form of IL that approaches the development of IL practices from a new viewpoint.

The Emergence of Instructional Leadership

The origin of IL can be traced to the US in the 1970s and public demand for school systems to raise standards and improve students' academic performance (Zigarelli, 1996). This demand for improvement created a search for a model for schools, eventually evolving into the effective schooling movement (Harris, Jamieson & Russ, 1996). Out of this search for the definitive model for making schools more effective emerged a discourse about the actions of the effective leader. Effective school models began to focus on the characteristics of the effective school leader, eventually giving rise to describing them as instructional leaders (Bossert et al., 1982). The concept of IL became an integral part of the identified characteristics contributing to the 'school effect' (Harris, Jamieson & Russ 1996, p. 8) in making a difference to student achievement. Since that time IL can be seen to be part of educational leadership research and as a significant factor in educational policy aimed at describing the actions of principals as educational leaders (Webb, 2005).

The first IL models began by articulating the instructional facets of the principals in schools deemed to be effective (Webb, 2005) and moved on to establish a set of characteristics, including a leadership focus aiming to improve student results (Bossert et al., 1982) that could make all schools 'effective'. These studies (Heck & Marcoulides, 1990) consistently reported that successful schools had the following characteristics:
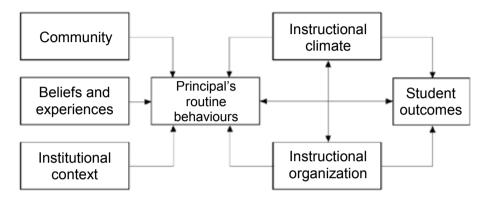
- school climate conducive to learning
- school-wide emphasis on basic skills instructions
- expectation among teachers that all students can achieve
- systems of clear instructional objectives embedded through strong instructional leaders.

In these early descriptions of the instructional leader, actions concentrated on the management of instructional programs, seeing this role as separate from the other leadership roles for principals (Sheppard, 1996). These models leaned towards managerial constructs and were proponents of what Sheppard (1996) refers to as a 'narrow view' (p. 37) of IL. It also represented a shift away from leadership models that were situational or contingency based on school context and aimed to identify commonalities for leaders across all schools (Martin & Jenkins, 2008). In this view, IL was defined as those actions that are directly related to observable behaviours of teachers and led to direct intervention strategies such as classroom observations. Many of these early models concentrated on identification of the characteristics of leaders where leadership was 'involved in the core function of the school – teaching and learning' (p. 35). This meant the principal focused on direct interaction with teachers in classrooms, assuming the key to school effectiveness was the willingness and ability of principals to be the 'protector of instruction' (Weber, 1997, p. 587).

Even at the beginning IL was found to be problematic due to lack of specificity in terms of actual principal practices. Some authors (Bossert et al., 1982) found that the early models did not describe how management or leadership concepts actually translated into concrete activities. In an effort to clarify the purpose of IL, *The Bossert Model* (Bossert et al., 1982) aimed to articulate more clearly the components of IL. In this model (shown in Figure 1) IL was depicted as having three components, where instructional leaders:

- defined the school mission;
- managed the instructional program; and
- promoted school climate. (p. 40)

FIGURE 1: THE BOSSERT MODEL OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Source: Bossert et al., 1982, p. 40

As depicted in this model, much of the focus was on student outcomes. This is consistent with other IL models, which from the beginning were being equated with improved student outcomes and meant that any future models for IL were bound to this focus (Townsend et al., 2013). However, this focus on improved student outcomes was difficult to establish through a direct connection between the instructional leader and student improvement. Although principal IL was shown to be correlated with school effectiveness in a small number of studies during the 1980s (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982), many educational theorists and researchers were still not sure whether the association between instructional leaders and valued aspects of school improvement, including improved student achievement, reflected a cause-effect type relationship (Heck & Marcoulides, 1990).

This supposed link between IL and improved student outcomes continued to be a constant feature of the historical models of IL within and after this early period, but remained difficult to clearly establish. Fullan (2010) found that over time IL has not been without its critics, most of which dispute the nature of the link between leadership and learning. Fullan believed systemic expectations tied to this belief placed unrealistic demands on principals by expecting them to embrace competitive management practices as well as be visible and in classrooms in order to achieve improvement in student learning. Bush and Glover (2003) found the concept of IL became problematic because of both an 'inability to document the processes by which leaders helped their schools to become instructionally effective' and an abundance of principals 'without the needed IL capacities to bring about meaningful school improvement' (p. 31). One of the reasons for the concerns about the validity of the link between IL and improved student outcomes was due to the research modes that were accepted and valued during IL's early period. Attempts in the 1970s and 1980s to define how IL was connected to improved student outcomes were collected through case

studies, being seen as not conducive to quantitative data collection, the accepted mode for analysis at the time. There were other issues about the early models that were questioned, especially related to what was seen as their development in a management genre rather than a leadership one. Leithwood, Jantzi and McElhorn-Hopkins (2006) found that models were not developed with processes that nurtured learning within a conceptual framework but rather managed the structures and monitoring processes surrounding what happened in classrooms. This created an ongoing situation where there continued to be lack of clarity regarding what it meant to be an instructional leader.

An outcome of the development of the Bossert model was that it brought about moves to systemic implementation, but this also meant that grappling with the tenuous connection between IL and improved student outcomes became even more complex. Exemplifying this, Hallinger and Murphy (1987), when reviewing the development of systemic implementation in US school districts, found five barriers to IL implementation. The first four barriers were found to be:
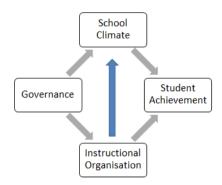
- *Knowledge of curriculum and instruction* (p. 55): This described how assumptions were made about the capacity of principals to analyse others' teaching and implementing curriculum based on the fact that principals had once been teachers themselves.

- *Professional norms* (p. 56): This was based on findings that principals often thought the education decision making was the teacher's domain and this also could 'mitigate against strong IL'.

- *District expectations* (p. 56): The study found that districts placed a higher priority on maintaining managerial efficiency and political stability than on IL.

- *Role diversity* (p. 57): In observing and analysing the principal's role, they found that a principal's workday was fragmented into a multiplicity of small blocks of relatively low level managerial activities and was constantly interrupted, making it difficult to allocate time for IL.

Hallinger and Murphy also describe a fifth barrier related to the lack of clarity and understanding around the definition of IL. They found that the first four barriers to instructional leadership were 'further complicated by this fifth obstacle: the lack of a clear definition of the role. It is difficult to assess principals on role behaviours if these behaviours have not been defined' (p. 58). Implementation in this broader context, combined with research creating closer scrutiny of IL practices, led to the development of more diverse approaches. For example, one study (Heck & Marcoulides, 1990) added to Bossert's model, and developed an accompanying methodology aimed at proving a link between a principal's IL and student improvement through data collection. This model (Figure 2) demonstrated an attempt to address the lack of acceptance of previous research through purely qualitative methods through use of a quantitative process.

To establish a more broadly accepted body of research, Heck and Marcoulides looked to create research that allowed for specification of a 'causal relationship' (p. 2). What had been found difficult in accepting previous qualitative studies was the reconciliation of the comparison of different schools with different sized groups and sectorial focus (i.e. secondary versus primary sectors). In order to overcome this, they proposed a theoretical perspective, including an additional component to the model which they called 'governance' (p. 252). This model, seen in Figure 2, aimed to create the capacity for quantitative analysis enabling prediction of principal effectiveness

by establishing and applying variance factors. These factors addressed the impact on the capacity of the principal to implement effective IL, and aimed to establish the influence of the factors in a particular school.

FIGURE 2:   INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PREDICTIVE MODEL – VARIABLES INFLUENCING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Source: Heck and Marcoulides, 1990, p. 252

The study brought further systemic recognition of IL in the US and also led to recognition of IL outside the US. This was especially true in the United Kingdom, but included other countries such as Australia (Friedkin & Slater, 1994). However, while the Heck and Marcoulides (1990) research was able to predict within the study that some principals would be more 'effective' in promoting improved student results, researchers criticised the model for being too school specific and not being transferable for systemic use. Together, the Heck and Marcoulides research and the Bossert model did lead to new thinking about IL and by the mid-1980s shifted the emphasis to a 'new orthodoxy' IL (Bush & Glover, 2003), where 'the instructional leader was acknowledged as the primary source of knowledge for development of the school's educational programme' (p. 37). While this still clearly depicted the instructional leader as focusing on student outcomes, this was not necessarily by directly engaging in classroom instructional supervision, and precipitated the transition of IL into broader educational trends that were emerging in the 1990s.

Transitions to Broader Models of Educational Leadership

In the mid-1990s an evolving 'broad view' (Shepherd, 1996, p. 38) of IL entailed all leadership activities seen as affecting student learning. During this time school systems, addressing growing globally competitive imperatives, began to create expectations that leaders would broaden their instructional leadership practices by engaging with teachers and other curriculum leaders to make instructional decisions rather than operating in isolation. This aligned to embedding accountability measures aimed at delivering mandated curriculum and standardised testing (Friedkin & Slater, 1994). This move to accountability measures represented a significant shift in the focus of leaders and in terms of IL, created a split in the development of the concept. Some models continued to focus on managerial, pedagogical and curricular leadership of the principal but other models saw

IL transitioning or being subsumed as part of broader, more visionary models and frameworks of educational leadership. Hallinger (2005) observed that despite ongoing interest in instructional leadership, during the mid-1990s, policy and educational leadership research attention shifted, either displacing IL or incorporating IL into concepts such as 'school restructuring and transformational leadership' (p. 228). With the advent of school restructuring in the US during the 1990s, scholars and practitioners began to popularise terms such as shared leadership, teacher leadership, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership. The emergence of these leadership models 'indicated a broader dissatisfaction with the instructional leadership model' (p. 330), seen as focusing too much on the principal as the centre of expertise, power and authority.

In the 1990s the work of principals, and models of educational leadership, began to be increasingly influenced by management principles and leadership research from the corporate sector (Dinham, 2007). This too supported the changing conceptualisation of IL models, moving it away from the discreet IL concepts depicted in the earlier versions. In many cases the concept of an instructional leader began to be subsumed into models of educational leadership that mirrored the business world, emphasising measurable outcomes and competition which was translated into expectations about student performance across schools rather than within specific schools (Dinham, 2011). Neumerski (2012) describes this as moving from the early focus on leadership traits that were part of the effective schools movement to that of 'more general behaviours, and in these models, incorporating instruments to assess standards for administrative practice' (p. 317).

Increasingly, this led to IL becoming absorbed by or embedded in a range of divergent models and educational trends, such as the concept of professional learning communities (Hord, 1988) and parallel leadership (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). One form of educational leadership supporting a significant shift in the role of the principal in leading instruction was through the concept of learner-centred education. In this, the larger goal was in transforming the culture of the school and if this was successful, then the principal would lead collaborative teachers who would organise and conduct learning (Barends, 2004). The principal was seen as the collaborative leader, leading through others, and demonstrating:

- well motivated behaviour
- good communication structures
- leadership
- delegation which shows he/she trusts his/her people. (p. 2)

By the beginning of the 2000s the instructional leader concept had moved to two different sets of models, dependent on the focus of either direct or indirect instruction (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012). Blase and Blase (1999), in their review of the historical development of IL, traced the studies that analysed these two emerging streams, classing them as using either direct or indirect intervention strategies by principals where direct refers to principals in classrooms observing lessons and indirect focusing on the use of all the curriculum leaders in the school. As the discourse about educational leadership became increasingly more complex and elaborate, debate in the research emerged over which instructional leadership approach was the most effective. Both Hallinger (2003) and Stewart (2006) found that two conceptual models, instructional leadership and transformational leadership, dominated these discussions and that this led to comparisons as being connected to either stand-alone instructional models or

transformational leadership incorporating some instructional perspectives. Rather than focusing specifically on direct coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction, transformational leadership sought to build the organisation's capacity by selecting a leadership focus aimed at cultural change. Supporting the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning came by distributing leadership through developing a shared vision and shared commitment to school change (e.g. Bass, 1997; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Silins & Mulford, 2002). This meant that this new generation of IL models where they became one aspect of a larger, more comprehensive concept of educational leadership (Stewart, 2006) gained momentum. Indirect IL practices by principals became the accepted mode.

This shift was also reflected in new forms of government policy and system principal professional learning programs (Dinham, 2007). This changed the popular perception of IL from a school management base to a form associated with processes supporting more indirect approaches. Concepts such as the notion of developing learning leaders building school capacity through curriculum reform in the context of more general organisational reform (Martoo, 2006) led to reconsideration of IL. A Marks and Printy (2003) study exemplified this reconceptualisation, finding that when enacted in schools, IL was not based on a procedural notion but a concept of shared IL they refer to as *integrated leadership*. In this indirect model, the principal becomes the leader of other instructional leaders, not the person who is solely responsible for IL initiatives.

This indirect form of IL meant the principal was more distant from the classroom and supported the suggestion that the principal could not be the only leader in a complex organisation like a school (Crowther et al., 2012; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). This was also described as *distributed leadership* (Gronn, 2002, p. 653). Hrabowski (2012) discusses the leader as a global manager supporting teachers through visionary and structural mechanisms. Rather than principals as the knowledgeable instructional leader, there were growing expectations that principals would manifest instructional change through the performance management of those they supervised. As IL continued to transition, in many cases, labelling of the IL role disappeared as it was either subsumed or ignored (Watson, 2009). However, these broader indirect forms of leadership continued to assume a correlation between improved school performance and the form of leadership practiced by principals.

Developing a New Form of Instructional Leadership

In contrast to these broadly focused indirect leadership approaches, internationally and in Australia, a few versions of IL continued to build on direct principal practices. For example, *The Art and Science of Teaching* (Marzano, 2003) describes a series of steps to be followed by leaders, focusing on principals as the leaders of a school specific pedagogical approach. In Queensland, where the state education system is divided into regions, regional leaders have advocated and even mandated use of Marzano's model in order to implement strategic policy expectations for 'Instructional Leadership, with an unrelenting focus on improvement' (Queensland Government, 2011, p. 1). This aligns to growing international trends as the technologies of international measurement and comparison of student learning has grown to dominate educational policy direction (Lingard, 2011; Luke, 2011). Some systems have supported a return to a more specific

IL focus by principals as they seek predictable and system-wide leadership solutions for improving student outcomes.

This renewed consideration of IL as a specific leadership skill continues to be problematic in terms of developing clarity in both the definition of IL in its re-emerged form and in the strategies used for implementation. While not contesting the importance of the re-emergence, studies (Robinson & Seashore Louis, 2011) suggest that to be effective what is needed is a much more tailored version of IL catering for individual principals and individual schools. In contrast to broadly encompassing educational leadership models, Fullan (2010), in his work with four school districts across the US and Canada, found that for principals 'the only route to success is to be more specific about the instructional practices that are most effective' (p. 1). At the same time a range of studies have questioned the acceptance and effectiveness of the popular broad generation of educational leadership forms that rose to prominence in the 2000s (Robinson, 2010). Instead, it is suggested that a new version of IL is needed, that reflects a more knowledgeable principal role where the principal is able to engage teachers in discourse about the core teaching and learning in their school (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012). This appears to move the principal away from the indirect IL role into a more direct and teaching expert role.

Tension between the accountability aspects of the principal role and their personal knowledge about teaching and instruction arises in the discourse about the need for a new model. In their investigation and review of IL models at the beginning of this re-ermergence, Angel, Reitzug and West (2008) focused on principals' perception of the relationship between their daily work and the improvement of instruction. They found principals were implementing differing IL approaches, but that within this context of variety there still existed consistent issues in terms of both how IL was conceptualised and how its implementation became problematic. When given the choice, the principals' concept of IL was shifting away from using indirect strategies where the principal was the 'inspector of teacher competence' and returning to more direct strategies with the principal as 'facilitator of teacher growth' (p. 2). Further studies have found that while principals are returning to consider IL, they are also attempting to incorporate a wide range of other components into their leadership actions. This is symptomatic of the principal's expected leadership role becoming increasingly complex. For example, consider Figure 3.

This model, developed internationally but incorporating research across three states in Australia, aims to individualise IL. The model depicts the leader through expected systemic categories and within these, areas for choice and consideration by individual leaders. The individualised approach is developed through identifying principal actions as operating at different levels of impact on the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes. However, in comparison to the Bossert model (1982) in Figure 1, Figure 3 suggests that leadership in schools, including being an instructional leader, is extraordinarily complex.

This search for a way to both depict the nature of the modern principal's role and to find a way to focus on IL, while proving difficult, also demonstrates attempts to return to more direct intervention (Timperley, 2011). Underpinning this search is still the desire to link principal leadership and improved student achievement and to identify the characteristics of the leader who is able to accomplish this improvement. In the most recent studies focused on IL, research (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012) is showing that principal choice is a significant factor in the types of strategies employed and that many effective principals are using both direct and indirect strategies. However, their research also shows that although this combination of strategies

can be effective, 'principals in schools that were improving in performance … were displaying more frequent direct leadership behaviours than principals from the other schools' (p. 1). They go on to point out that in the current context of educational leadership, this may reflect the need for effective principals to respond appropriately to the conditions at their specific school.
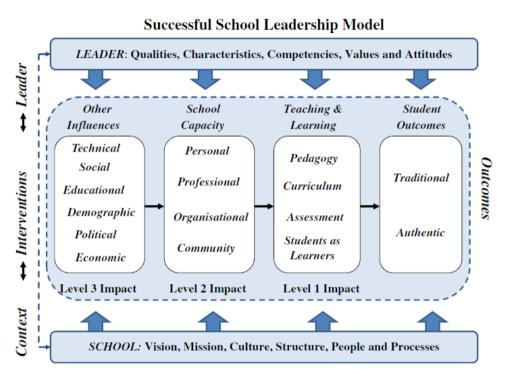
FIGURE 3: THE SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MODEL

Source: Drysdale and Gurr, 2011, p. 357

Understanding the Issues and Supporting Principal Choices

Despite the progressive changes in IL historically (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), understanding for how instructional leaders can improve teaching and learning remains limited (Robinson & Seashore Louis, 2011). While the most recent research identifies some strategies and behaviours necessary to improve instruction, much less is known about how leaders enact these practices on a daily basis. From the body of literature analysing the progressive models associated with IL (Angel, Reitzug & West, 2008; Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Stewart, 2006; Townsend et al., 2013), some consistent reasons for this lack of specifics about the role of instructional leaders appear. If, as the move to a new form of IL in recent times indicates, principals need to make informed choices

about the IL strategies they enact in their school, then understanding the consistent issues underpinning IL implementation is crucial.

The following six factors provide a synthesis of the big issues that create further complexity for implementation that have emerged through tracing IL chronological development. Consideration of these six areas by principals may support building their understanding more fully and guide the choices they make as an instructional leader. These are:

1. globalisation of education;

2. increased complexity of principal roles;

3. IL as change leadership;

4. understanding instructional leadership practices;

5. principal leadership skills; and

6. links between principal leadership and improved student outcomes.

Globalisation of education

IL has been popularised and made complex through the pressures of globalisation. Education has become increasingly influenced by globalisation and economic competitiveness, with 'educators around the world living in a period of almost unprecedented policy activism' (Robinson & Seashore Louis, 2011, p. 630). Politicians and the public attribute great importance to school leaders, and hold them increasingly accountable for the effectiveness of schools and the learning and achievement of students (Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008). In England (Whitty, 2010) since the 1980s, education has become increasingly politicised, reflecting the international trend towards introduction of policies with more state control and prescription in education through strategies such as national curriculums and assessment, while at the same time introducing 'market elements to the system' (p. 29). This means that across countries politicians are under pressure to come up with answers to the universal aspirations to improve quality in education (Harris & Muijs, 2007) and many nations' governments are developing policy requiring schools to bring about significant, systematic, and sustained reform in order to improve student outcomes. Principals, school systems and national programs are increasingly looking at professional learning programs, accreditation standards and other structures or frameworks for leaders, with the ultimate aim of improving levels of student achievement.

These issues were considered by Horng and Loeb (2010) in their study of policy and system expectations for school leadership. They examined existing policies and conducted principal interviews across a broad range of schools, finding a clear re-emergence of an IL construct in recent US state policies. The report found that some schools had improved student outcomes while others had not, and that while there were different models of IL being used, there was no correlation between the models and the improvements. These US findings align with Dimmock and Goh's (2011) Singapore research, where interviews and surveys with cross sector principals established that there had been increased and often unrealistic demands on their role. While research supports the supposition that there is a re-emergence of a focus on IL, and that the impetus for this is aimed at addressing the globally competitive education market, there is a range of tensions for principals that underlie this role re-birth. As Fullan (2010) found, this is due to a

range of exterior imperatives that continue to grow demands and expectations placed on principals.

Increased complexity of principal roles

The greater demands being placed on principals within this global context create a tension between their role as managers of the mandated political agendas and enacting a considered approach to instructional leadership practices suitable for their context. Many school leaders have become managers of systemic accountability mechanisms rather than focusing on the quality of teaching practice in their schools (Caldwell & Lewis, 2005). Kelley and Peterson (2007) assert that the roles of principals have been changed qualitatively by curriculum standards reforms, high-stakes testing and accountability for student learning. They found principals were required to be responsible for improved student learning but were also asked to design and implement the resultant management processes associated with data collection of student results, 'creating an atmosphere of complexity for principals where they try to balance management and compliance to systems in an ever increasing distance from what is happening in the classroom' (p. 358). Yet, the interpretation and delivery of new curriculum content and skills is the responsibility of schools. Without a leader who understands and actually leads this development, the old practices will remain. For principals, this means that they are operating in an era of significant change, where their role is becoming more complex and much more politically directed. This can prove problematic as they try to balance their mandated expectations with both the daily contingencies that are part and parcel of every principal's role, and develop effective personal skills to match these expectations, especially in terms of their role as an instructional leader.

IL as change leadership

Change is an integral component in schools that develop or maintain a focus on improving student achievement (Evans, Thornton & Usinger, 2012). A firm grounding in change theory is essential in providing educational leaders with the opportunities they need if they are going to be able to orchestrate meaningful improvements, including improved student outcomes, yet this perspective has not always been part of the conversation about IL.

   Although the impetus for change may originate from political and governmental influence, it is the principals who are expected to implement the changes. Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) contend that initiatives often fail because those implementing change have incomplete knowledge or skills with regard to the underlying purpose of the change. In addition, many principals lack an understanding of the theoretical structures associated with successful change. Understanding how to analyse and harness the many factors contributing to student learning within the complexity of implementing change is a significant task. Principals are not always equipped with change leadership skills, and, as well, schools evolve and different change leadership behaviour is likely to be required at different stages of development (Hallinger & Murphy, 1987). Change leadership is not always a conversation associated with IL, yet there is clearly a correlation.

Understanding IL

The lack of a clear definition for IL has been highlighted in many reviews of IL research (Harris, Jamieson & Russ, 1996; Kelley & Peterson, 2007). As the analysis of models and frameworks

over time shows, the concept of IL has been formed by changing assumptions and different conceptual components of educational leadership trends. In part, the lack of consistency about what it means to be an instructional leader could be due to this ongoing development of educational leadership. The complexity in the development and implementation of different IL 'styles' has meant that while policy documents may assume a common understanding of IL, actual practice reveals quite diverse definitions across countries, states, educational sectors, school communities, teachers, principals and hierarchies of system leadership. Without professional learning that contextualises and clearly identifies IL practices, it will be challenging for principals to move on from the situation that Hallinger and Heck (1996) noted 20 years ago. They found that 'a weak knowledge base in curriculum and instruction, fragmented district expectations, territorial treaties negotiated with teachers, with the diverse roles played by the principal keep many site administrators from carrying out this role effectively' (p. 57).

Finding a cohesive definition for IL is problematic as evident from the examples identified in wide-ranging collective research studies (Horng & Loeb, 2010). The most recent research, such as that by Robinson (2010), defines IL as sets of leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, coordination, and improvement of teaching and learning. This is very different from the original models described by Bossert et al. (1982) or Hallinger and Heck (1996), which focused on components aimed at more specific structural actions. Drysdale and Gurr's (2012) Australian studies also identified the lack of a common definition as problematic and discussed what they saw as the widespread acknowledgement that the complexity of contemporary schools may require different forms of leadership to address the needs of teachers and students. This is in addition to grappling with imposed political imperatives such as national testing. Lack of a discreet definition creates mixed messages for principals which can lead to a misalignment of goals across systems and ineffective attempts by principals to enact their instructional practices.

Principal skills

Hallinger (2003) found, while there is an underpinning assumption that principals have the skills to be an instructional leader, this is not always the case. Clarke and Wildy (2011) paint a picture of a complex state of play in terms of the skills needed by principals in the current Australian context. Principals need the ability to 'focus on leading learning and, on the other hand, the ability to manage the multiple accountability demands determined by the policy environment' (p. 676). They consider this a significant challenge in the quest to prepare and support school leaders more effectively. Principals need skills in identifying the issues for student improvement, the analysis of what is needed at their own site and in recognising strategies that will be effective to move towards improvement. To address this challenge, in Australia, states such as Victoria and Queensland have developed their own leadership frameworks. In contrast to this approach, there are others, such as Elmore (2007), who support a shift away from developing common systemic IL frameworks to a more site-based form of leadership. In his review of the Victorian state approach, Elmore argues that we need 'first to trust in the people we have asked to do the job' (p. 2) by nurturing individual professional learning.

In Australia there is currently no mandatory certification to become a principal, although there is a growing momentum in state education systems and a national set of standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) that recognises the need to support and encourage leadership development through providing common programs (Anderson et al., 2008).

However, these are not necessarily aligned to the needs of individual principals or are not clear about implementation processes. Given the general criticism of the inadequacy of preparation and development programs overseas (Horng & Loeb, 2010), one of the foremost challenges for educational systems is to provide programs that meet the demands for leadership within the current and future complex educational environment. Embedded in that challenge is the need for further clarification and definition of the specific skills associated with effective IL in order to establish the expected relationship between IL and improving student outcomes.

IL principal practice linked to student outcomes
Robinson (2010) found little evidence of links between IL and student outcomes, but also found that no matter how small the body of evidence about these links, the assumption that they are connected has 'been noticed and embraced by policymakers' (p. 2). This is seen by many researchers as the impetus for the resurgence of interest in forms of leadership that are 'purported to directly or indirectly affect the learning outcomes of students' (Cardno, 2010, p. 40). In a recent study of IL, Townsend et al. (2013) found that across schools sampled over five years there was an expectation from district and supervisory personnel that principals would be practising IL, accompanied by the assumption that this would automatically lead to improved student outcomes. The study found that this was without a clear knowledge base by both principals and their system supervisors for what being an instructional leader actually meant. In addition, after four years of the implementation process, in most cases, improved student outcomes were not realised. The recent findings of Dufour and Mattos (2013) continue to stress this perspective, stating that 'principals are being asked to improve student learning by implementing mandated reforms that have consistently proven ineffective in raising student achievement' (p. 34).

There are some exceptions. In their five year study on the connection between leadership and learning, Anderson et al. (2010) found that leadership was second only to classroom instruction in relation to 'the factors contributing to what students learn' (p. 6). Different understandings about what is meant by learning and instruction and the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy point to why it has been difficult to develop research proving the link between IL and improved student outcomes. Ongoing research (Horng & Loeb, 2010) confirms that the lack of clarity and understanding about the nature and construct of IL makes it difficult to judge the extent to which links exist. While it is believed that the more focused the school's leadership is on instruction the more effective the school will be in adding value to student outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), there is very little empirical data supporting this assumption. The correlational nature of the research evidence that is often cited in support inevitably masks the exact relationship between leadership and enhanced student learning. Consequently, policy initiatives that focus solely on leadership and management have difficulty in achieving more than a generalised impact on student learning.

As well, in large systems the capacity to collect data that enables nuanced judgements about the connection between student achievement and IL is still developing. One of the challenges in enabling this comparison is that there is no collection of identified IL practices, or suggestions for how IL practices can be enacted, or in what situations they are the most effective. The formulation of initiatives, reforms and policies are often not built around the structures that enable collection of significant data to make judgements about the connection between student achievement and leadership. Instead the data focus on the outcomes reflecting student results which are insufficient

to draw correlational conclusions. For example, a review of the implementation of the NCLB (No Child Left Behind ACT, 2001, cited in Townsend et al., 2013) found that the focus was on student outcomes, not on supporting development of IL leadership, so there was no data collection related to principal practices. Robinson (2010) found that schools were provided with specification of the achievement targets to be met but that 'the federal legislation is silent about the role of leadership in achieving them' (p. 3). Robinson goes on to say that there are significant 'methodological challenges involved in trying to identify and specify relevant capabilities' (p. 3) because the data evidence base which provides evidence about the links between leadership capabilities, IL, and student outcomes is too small to warrant a more definitive claim. If more about IL is to be understood, leaders need to embrace practices monitoring student achievement data, building collective teacher capability to address those needs (Robinson & Seashore Louis, 2011) and identifying the connected effective IL practices.

The Way Forward

Exploring the history of IL development and the consistent concerns about implementation provides deeper understandings about what principals need to consider conceptually as instructional leaders, and also highlights that there needs to be further guidance for systems and principals in terms of their actual IL practices. While many principals and other school leaders would argue that their prime focus has always been teaching and learning as the core business of schools, there remains a gap between the prevalent rhetoric of IL and what is seen by some as the minimal practice of it by principals (Angel, Reitzug & West, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Stewart, 2006). As Timperley (2011) states, 'given the relatively consistent portrayal of important leadership attributes, questions remain about why school leaders have not embraced these ideas as wholeheartedly as the research indicates they could, and so better serve those groups of student not achieving well' (p. 146). Some educational theorists (Robinson, 2006) lay the blame for this on the logic used in studies looking to create links between leadership and improving student achievement, seeing them as being based on proving specific IL theories as the starting point and travelling from there to the learning of students. Instead, several suggest (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012; Crowther et al., 2012) that development of IL practices should be based on theories of teaching and learning applied in their school context as the starting point and then traced back to leadership in order to develop site specific models rather than starting with a model.

Drysdale and Gurr (2012) acknowledge the complexity of this, specifically in the Australian context, and support a fuller diagnosis identifying contextual influences on IL practices by principals. To develop IL skills, principals will need to understand issues related to their school culture and the need for direct and/or indirect strategies practices in their school. Eacott (2010) suggests that leadership practice cannot be captured in a static framework or separated from the context in which it occurs. He continues to argue that leadership also 'cannot be reduced to the "seven simple steps to reforming education" and/or snappy acronyms or mnemonic devices to sell the latest fad or "adjectival" leadership' (p. 221). When considered from this perspective, the historical issues giving rise to the six areas of complexity may support principals and leaders to take the first steps in gaining understanding about what is problematic about the concept of IL before making choices about IL practices.

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