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**Re-conceptualizing learning-centred (instructional) leadership: An obsolete
concept in need of renovation**

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Re-conceptualizing learning-centred (instructional) leadership: an obsolete concept in need of renovation

Abstract

For more than thirty years, ‘instructional leadership’ has been at the forefront of research and practice in school effectiveness and improvement.

Governments, employers, universities and professional developers, all see it as a mainstay of raising school and student performance. Wave-after-wave of educational policy reforms during this period have changed school environments, widening and deepening the (instructional) leadership roles and functions of principals and other school leaders. Terminology has changed – while Americans still use ‘instructional leadership’, others prefer ‘learning-centred’ and ‘leadership-for -learning’, disputing whether they encompass the same or different meanings. Yet curiously, the concept itself – as defined and measured by academic researchers and scholars - has changed relatively little since Hallinger and Murphy’s first seminal contribution in 1985. This paper argues the case for wholesale renovation of the concept if it is to maintain relevance going forward. The case is supported by important and powerful trends in policy and practice.

Keywords: learning-centred leadership; instructional leadership; conceptualization; performance; equity

Introduction

For three decades, the field of school leadership, and its connectivity to school effectiveness and school improvement, has been dominated by the concept of ‘instructional leadership’. This emphasis on instructional leadership was driven in part by the effective schools movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and more recently by increasing demands that school leaders be held accountable for student performance (Horn & Loeb, 2010). For all but a few years in the 1990s when focus temporarily switched to transformational leadership, government policies, academic scholars and practitioners have seen instructional leadership as the centerpiece of the drive to improve schools and student learning. In the opening to their report on ‘Capturing the Leadership Premium’, the authors (McKinsey & Co, 2010) claim of the role of school leaders, ‘the job used to be bells, buildings, budget, buses: now the pendulum has swung to instructional leadership’ (p.6). As apt as this comment may be, it is astonishing how the concept – ‘instructional leadership’ - that has been the centerpiece of school improvement and change for some two decades, has survived with so little change. It is even more surprising when, as this paper shows, governments have introduced wave-after-wave of policy initiatives, many of which have impacted on principals’ practices. Our argument in this paper is dedicated to making the case for much needed renovation of the concept.

A generally agreed definition of ‘instructional leadership’ (IL) has been difficult to secure, mainly because the concept has attracted writers and scholars from a range of countries and cultures over thirty years and because the concept itself – by any definition – is multi-dimensional. In addition, as explicated more fully below, the concept has different connotations cross-culturally, particularly between American and British terminology. While Americans see ‘instructional leadership’ embracing a

wide range of practices (Hallinger, 2009), the British regard it as restrictive in failing to capture multi-dimensionality, and as having connotations of training rather than education (Dimmock, 2000). Nonetheless, despite the equivocation of the term and difficulty in securing agreement on what it precisely includes, its place within the school leadership, school effectiveness and school improvement literature remains central and assured (Reynolds, Sammons, De Fraine, Van Damme, Townsend, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 2014). Governments and other sponsoring bodies continue to invest substantial resources in leadership learning, professional development and training, in the hope of developing instructional leadership knowledge and skills, convinced as they are of its importance.

Over the thirty years that instructional leadership has maintained its status as the prevailing leadership orthodoxy (Hallinger, 2011), the educational and school environment has undergone continuous and frequent change in policy and practice. In many school systems, these changes have included - a shift to greater school autonomy and school-based management; the introduction of government policies – neo-liberal in nature - aimed at increasing school competition and parental choice; greater evaluation and accountability internal and external to the school; changing governance, including more powerful school councils and governing bodies; a restructuring of schools to include more academies, charter schools and free schools, some of which are linked together by ‘chains’ which, as non-government agencies, sponsor them; and wholesale curriculum reforms that emphasize higher expectations of student learning outcomes, increased importance to core curriculum subjects such as mathematics, science and language, and a shift to develop so-called ‘soft skills’ to meet the requirements of the 21st century knowledge-based society (Ball, 2003; Lee, Walker, & Chui, 2012; Tan, 2013a). Additionally, in many societies a powerful policy

trend has surfaced in their education systems focusing on social justice and equity – running parallel to the existing value-system promulgating excellence and performance (Reynolds, Sammons, De Fraine, Van Damme, Townsend, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 2014). These dual value systems have heralded the catch-phrase – ‘raise the bar, while closing the gap’ – an ill-defined and ambivalent concept that is presumably meant to convey a sense that while the achievements of all students must improve, those at the less able end of the ability spectrum must improve more. In fact the use of the singular here is grossly distorting of reality, since there are many ‘bars’ and many ‘gaps’. Given the complexity of the goal, its attainment must be questionable.

Throughout this lengthy period of sustained change and reform to the school policy and practice environment, the concept of instructional leadership – as researched and measured by academics – has remained relatively unchanged (Tan, 2012). In other words, while waves of reform from the educational environment – from within, between and beyond schools – have been seemingly unrelenting, and the advocacy for instructional leadership unwavering, the concept itself, we contend, has at the same time, failed to develop and reflect these significant changes. While the tasks and responsibilities of principals and other school leaders have changed qualitatively and quantitatively over the past three decades, our understanding of the concept, and to a lesser extent practice, of instructional leadership, have not kept pace.

The purpose of this paper is thus to argue the case for regenerating the concept of instructional leadership in ways that seek to make it more reflective of the responsibilities and practices faced by contemporary school leaders within current policy contexts. We contend that this is necessary if the concept is to sustain its

centrality to high-performance leadership, and professional development for school improvement, and additionally, more equitable student outcomes, in future.

The paper is structured as follows: first, an outline history is provided of the evolution of instructional leadership research over the last thirty years, indicating the present state of knowledge; second, the paper acknowledges the need for a more critical perspective of IL, building a case for revising the concept, and reporting recent research that offers both an alternative perspective of principals as instructional leaders, and to some extent, challenges conventional findings; third, a revised, up-dated version of IL appropriate to 21st century socio-educational environments is suggested, that identifies a number of salient contemporary dimensions that are either poorly reflected in, or absent from, present notions. Finally, the paper concludes with an overview of the extent to which adding these new dimensions to a new re-generated version of IL will undoubtedly improve the validity and relevance of the concept.

An overview of instructional leadership research and the current state of knowledge

Since the 1980s, scholars have pursued the elusive and complex connections between instructional leadership and student learning - with mixed results (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Most of the leading research on instructional leadership during this time has attempted to track developments in understanding the relationships between leaders, teachers and students. While scholars have recently shown a propensity to use terms such as 'learning-centred leadership' (Dimmock, 2000) or 'leadership-for-learning' (Hallinger, 2011) in preference to the more commonly used term 'instructional leadership' (on grounds that the latter is too

restrictive to capture a role that is growing in its multi-dimensionality), in this paper we use the terms synonymously.

A seminal contribution to the knowledge base occurred in the mid-1980s when Hallinger and Murphy (1985), provoked by Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee's (1982) model, provided an early conceptual framework for instructional leadership. This model has since come to dominate the field (Hallinger, 2011). It proposed ten leadership functions organized into three broad dimensions: defining the school mission, managing the instructional programme, and promoting a positive school learning climate. Hallinger further developed what became the most widely used instrument (the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale – PIMRS) for measuring the extent to which principals exercise instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Essentially, this seminal work identified what constituted instructional leadership, and in doing so, set in train the next stage, namely, how best to understand the relationships of instructional leadership with other variables, most notably, student achievement (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Gu, & Brown, 2010). Hallinger and Heck (2011b) summarize the taxonomy of models that emanated over the following two decades as fourfold: the antecedent effects model (typically, principal demographics and size and type of school); the direct effects model, the mediated effects model, and reciprocal effects model. Substantial evidence has shown that leadership has an impact on student outcomes, primarily through indirect but identifiable means (Robinson et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 2011a). Three effects or models are noteworthy:

Direct effects model

Researchers have explored the direct impact of leadership on student outcomes, but as Hallinger and Heck (2011) have found, this model is neither supported empirically nor practically. The assumption underlying the theoretical rationale for this model is flawed since few principals (other than those in small primary schools) actually teach; and even where they do, the direct effect is limited to the small number of children in their classes. Principals may engage students directly at assemblies and in special forums such as whole school debates, but the time allocated to such meetings is usually minimal.

Mediated effects and reciprocal effects models

Therefore, Hallinger and Heck (2011a) examine two other theoretical models that conceptualize the indirect impact of leadership on student learning, namely, the mediated effects and reciprocal effects models. In both of these, the impact of leadership is channelled through three main paths: school culture, academic structures and processes, and people – thereafter affecting the outcomes of students. Leaders are able to employ strategic actions that change these paths, which may then translate to improvements in student outcomes.

Other studies have failed to find convincing evidence that alternatives to instructional leadership (such as transformational and distributed) have significant effects on student learning outcomes. Indeed, in their meta-analysis, Robinson et al. (2008) found that the impact of instructional leadership is 3 to 4 times the impact of transformational leadership. These authors attribute this to the measures of transformational leadership being more relationship-based while those of instructional leadership relate more closely to the pedagogical work of schools (hence its greater

propensity compared to the former to influence student outcomes). In addition, Robinson et al. (2008) found significant differences between the effects of leaders of high- and low-performing schools. Leaders in higher performing schools were reported by teachers to be “more focused on teaching and learning, to be stronger instructional resources for teachers, and to be more active participants in and leaders of teacher learning and development (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 657-658).” Overall, the literature on the links between leadership and student outcomes suggest that “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 et al., 2008, p.636). Hattie (2009), and Brown (2001) also agree that the effects of instructional leadership on student achievement ($d = 0.57$) are considerably greater than transformational leadership effects ($d = 0.09$).

Other studies have also found strong effects of instructional leadership through its influence on school conditions. A number of these highlight the principal’s role in shaping and communicating an educational mission for the school as being the greatest channel of effects on student achievement (Murphy & Torre, 2015; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). This is because a unified mission among teachers, students and the community builds a sense of team effort and synergy (Marks and Printy, 2003), which can be achieved through an alignment of school structures (e.g., academic standards, time allocation, and curriculum) and culture with its mission.

Integrated leadership

What are the combined effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student learning outcomes? Marks and Printy (2003) define integrated leadership as a combination of transformational and shared instructional leadership. They argue that

effective principals exercise both transformational and instructional leadership simultaneously. Their findings suggest that schools with integrated leadership have higher *pedagogical quality* and *academic achievement* compared to other schools with low levels of one or both leadership types. ‘Pedagogical quality’ also has a powerful bearing on student learning outcomes as it measures student ability to learn in class.

Moreover, Marks and Printy’s (2003) results also suggest the complementary relationship between transformational and shared (or distributed) instructional leadership in that by being transformational, principals engage the commitment of teachers and encourage them to share in leadership tasks. At the same time, when principals are perceived to be effective instructional leaders, teachers begin to “grow in commitment, professional involvement and willingness to innovate” (Sheppard, 1996, p. 393).

Overall, it appears that instructional leadership – while constituting the main mode of leadership to influence student learning – has an even greater effect on student learning when it is combined with shared or distributed leadership and transformational leadership. This broader, overall association of leadership with student learning outcomes can be observed through several channels such as: shaping and communicating an educational mission, engaging the commitment of teachers, encouraging shared leadership, teacher motivation, and building academic capacity or teacher social capital.

Nonetheless, taking stock some 30 years later and after hundreds of studies, Hallinger (2011) concludes that the relationship between leadership and school achievement outcomes remains complex and inconclusive. He argues that intricacies and limitations of methodology have not helped and would have failed to uncover

many indirect effects even if they exist. Limitations in research designs have also handicapped the search for breakthrough answers. In summary, there has been some affirmation that the leadership influence on student learning outcomes is least through direct effects and most through mediated pathways, namely, indirect and reciprocal (Hallinger & Heck, 2011b). Having acknowledged this, however, even mediated indirect effects are variable. Robinson and colleagues' (2008) meta-analysis of 27 studies corroborates such a conclusion, classifying the efficacy of leadership behaviors into three: strong (mainly indirect) effects, such as promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; moderate effects (some of which are direct, such as goal setting and planning), others that are indirect, such as coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; and weak (mainly indirect effects), such as ensuring an orderly and supportive environment, and resourcing strategically. There is still a significant element of uncertainty, disagreement and caution on the pathways by which various leadership practices and behaviors impact student learning, and on the relative effect sizes of these practices and pathways. (Hallinger, 2011). A further limitation of instructional leadership research to date is the failure in general to link leadership practice, and its efficacy, to different contexts (such as urban/rural and high SES/low SES (socio-economic status)) catchment intakes (Hallinger, 2011; Tan, 2014).

Overall, in three decades of research, progress has been made on clarifying the effects of instructional leadership on student learning and school improvement, and on developing better techniques of tracking pathways between leadership, and teaching and learning, particularly in relation to principals. However, as Hallinger himself admits, progress in general over that period has been somewhat disappointing, especially given advances in statistical techniques and our understanding of complex

organisations. Scholars have generally failed to expand their research designs in creative ways to understand instructional leadership and its effects in different contexts and cultures (although Hallinger and colleagues have published on instructional leadership in Asian cultures, see for example, Hallinger & Chen, 2015), and to expand the focus on leadership beyond that of principals, to include middle-level and teacher-leadership, and leadership teams. Thus, the prevailing instructional leadership paradigm today remains that established in the mid-1980s, and as Hallinger rightly claims, researchers are still heavily reliant on his PIMRS (rating scale). Given the status quo, it is surprising that a burgeoning plethora of alternative models and scenarios for instructional leadership have not surfaced over such a long time period. However, among those that have are the two reported in the following section.

Alternative perspectives on instructional leadership

Alternative perspectives on principal instructional leadership reported below emanate from recent research by Horng and Loeb (2010), and Rigby (2014). An outline of both accounts is justified.

Horng and Loeb's alternative model

Horng and Loeb (2010) conducted observations and interviews in hundreds of schools in California. These authors address the topic of “high-quality leadership with positive school outcomes” in relation to what truly makes educational leadership effective in a school environment. They compare traditional ideas about instructional leadership to the claimed ‘new ideas’ they are expressing in regards to organizational management.

According to traditional ideas on what makes an effective instructional leader,

the prototypical ideal of instructional leader has emerged as one who models outstanding teaching, continuously engages teachers in pedagogical conversation, provides one-on-one teacher instruction, and spends large amounts of time evaluating classroom teaching giving feedback to teachers on instructional techniques. As Horng and Loeb (2010) argue, this regime is claimed to apply to all, including large secondary schools of up to and more than 2000 pupils, and more than one hundred teachers.

In many studies completed by the authors, however, they have found the opposite to be true. Their studies show that the time leaders spend in teachers' classrooms for observation and instruction rarely, if at all, has any significant impact on student outcomes, and may well seem to have a negative impact on teacher performance. Horng and Loeb (2010) argue that the time principals have to spend in classrooms is so limited that it can only marginally affect the quality of teaching, even assuming the principals have the necessary subject as well as pedagogic expertise.

Rather, these authors argue that, "School leaders primarily affect student learning by influencing teachers' motivations and working conditions" (2010, p.67). Horng and Loeb (2010) define their (new) concept of effective leaders using organizational management as those managers that "are effective in hiring and supporting staff, allocating budgets and resources, and maintaining positive working and learning environments (pp. 67-68)." In those schools with effective organizational managers, a great deal more academic improvement is seen and teachers feel more supported, trusted, and motivated to be successful in their classrooms. Consequently, Horng and Loeb (2010) show that strong educational leaders are those using organizational management to "support classroom instruction without providing that support directly to individual teachers. Instead, they develop a working environment

in which teachers have access to the support they need (p. 69).”

There is little doubt that Horng and Loeb’s argument (based on empirical data) has justification. If a school is a well-structured organization, it is probably going to improve its organizational performance. Building a positive pedagogical-learning culture where teachers feel involved and motivated, where there are high levels of collaboration and team support, and where all staff feel and are valued, is highly likely to improve performance of teachers and students. In Horng and Loeb’s terms, this approach is ‘organizational management’, rather than instructional leadership.

However, this may only be a distinction in semantics. Horng and Loeb’s (2010) ‘new thinking’ clearly rests on their distinction between traditional instructional leadership by which they mean ‘direct effects’ leader practices and organizational management, which seems to embrace many of the so-called ‘indirect effects’ instructional leader practices. Hence their argument seems to rest on a flimsy definitional base. The ambivalence of the term ‘instructional leadership’ is acknowledged, but most scholars nowadays adopt a broader perspective of the construct, seeing it as multi-dimensional, incorporating both direct and indirect, as well as reciprocal influences. Hence it seems that Horng and Loeb’s so called ‘new thinking’ may just be another way of elaborating ‘indirect instructional leadership’.

Rigby’s logics model

A more substantive departure from a traditional approach to instructional leadership, however, is that taken by Rigby (2014). This author eschews the conventional approach to instructional leadership, namely, a focus on the specific tasks and roles undertaken by principals to enhance student learning - and the connections and pathways between principal leadership and student outcomes - for a broader

perspective, one that locates instructional leadership within its environmental and institutional context. Rigby argues that what happens outside the school affects what happens inside. Principals are exposed to multiple and often conflicting demands from the environment, often in the form of tacit understandings of and beliefs about what it means to be an instructional leader. Moreover, she argues that currently there is no characterization in either the practice of instructional leadership or research leadership literature that outlines the ways in which instructional leadership is presented in the institutional environment. Her study (Rigby, 2014) thus delineates the contours and overlaps between the various conceptions of instructional leadership. To achieve her goal, Rigby uses the notion of ‘logics’, defining the concept as ‘belief systems and associated practices that predominate in an organizational field’ (2014, p. 611). Moreover, logics are defined and differentiated by Rigby according to three dimensions or sets of criteria: *goals* (the desired results for instructional leadership) – goals serve as the symbol towards which all instructional leadership actions are explicable and likely to lead; *the role of data* – how leaders make sense of and engage with data, especially in times of accountability; and *the role of teachers*, who have the most direct effect on student learning, and on whom the principal’s instructional leadership actions are rightly focused – and so, how principals as instructional leaders conceptualize the role of teacher is likely to influence their instructional leadership. The ‘logics’ or bundles of ideas come together to encourage actions that are in line with what is acceptable at any given time and place, and vice versa. Principals are thus connected and exposed to particular logics that enable and constrain particular beliefs and actions. According to Rigby’s (USA) data (2014, p. 618), three main logics are presently identifiable. The first is termed *Prevailing logic*, which is the now ubiquitous set of beliefs that the role of the principal is to be both an instructional

leader and manager of the school site. There is no single goal or direction in this logic; it is broad and flexible and able to be implemented across a wide variety of school settings. The second is *Entrepreneurial logic*: here, the focus of instructional leadership is to maximize student test scores and thereby reduce inequitable outcomes through innovation and mechanisms from the private sector. In fact, reliance on market solutions often seemingly increases inequity. It rejects the traditional training of education schools and a model that includes multiple and flexible approaches; rather, it emphasizes specific actionable practices that, when implemented, lead to increases in student achievement as measured by standardized test scores. The third is *Social justice logic*, where the leader's focus is on the experiences and inequitable outcomes of marginalized groups; this logic challenges the current "neutral" systems that engender the reproduction of inequality in our society, and portrays the role of instructional leader as a change agent of beliefs and teachers' professional development for greater equity. It puts forth a set of instructional leadership practices for raising the academic achievement of all students, preparing students as critical citizens, and ensuring heterogeneous, inclusive classrooms (Furman, 2012).

According to Rigby's data, typically, principals' instructional leadership is characterized by elements of all three, while one dimension is often predominant or prevailing. While typically academics and policy makers have more recently begun to espouse the third logic (social justice), the overwhelming majority of principals base their instructional leadership on the prevailing logic, with increasing numbers adopting more of the entrepreneurial logic to reflect government policy.

In summary, Rigby's three logics provide a helpful common language by which to identify a typology of instructional leaders, thereby helping to bring more

definition and description to what is an ambivalent term. Such a classification may be of use not only to principals per se, but also to leadership professional developers and principals' appointments committees in terms of identifying and nurturing the type (or combination of types) of instructional leader they wish to promote.

While these two alternative perspectives mark attempts to approach instructional leadership afresh, neither substantively addresses the need for the concept to reflect contemporary school leadership realities and policy contexts, with their associated expectations of, and demands on, principals and other school leaders. It is to this agenda that our argument now turns.

Updating the concept of instructional leadership

Essentially, our claim is that the instructional leadership literature has failed to keep pace with, and to reflect, contemporary demands and expectations placed on school leaders, and especially principals, by fast changing policy contexts. Adherence to a concept that has changed relatively little in terms of its content, formulation and assessment over the past three decades results in a disconnection between the reality of today's leadership practices and the concept itself. While policy makers and employers signal significant and substantial role expansion of principals' instructional leadership responsibilities and accordingly hold them to account, there appears to be little if any concomitant evolution of the concept and its measurement in the academic literature.

Consequently, our task in this section is to sketch the main ways in which we believe the concept of instructional (learning-centred) leadership needs re-engineering for valid representation of today's school leadership contexts. In total, we claim at least eleven change forces to be re-shaping the nature and profile of instructional

leadership. In turn, these eleven may be conveniently grouped into six main fields of change:

- Changes in the composition (content validity) of the concept itself;
- New leadership practices and *within*-school change;
- New leadership practices and *between*-school change;
- New leadership practices and *beyond* school change;
- Leadership for greater equity and social justice; and
- Leadership, school autonomy and accountability.

In the following section we trace the implications of each of the six clusters.

1. Changes in the conceptual composition of ‘instructional leadership’

Our main contention here is that instructional leadership is a multi-dimensional concept. This multi-dimensionality is present in Hallinger’s (2011) Principals’ Instructional Rating Scale measurement instrument of the 1980s by its identification of three main leadership configurations - school mission, instructional management, and positive school learning climate. However, our contention is that over the past two decades, the number of dimensions comprising IL has significantly increased. These additional dimensions are discussed in following section of this paper. Three propositions follow: first, that as a multi-dimensional concept, not all dimensions are necessarily equally efficacious in regard to improving teaching and learning; second, there is need to challenge and re-examine at least some of the conventional wisdom in regard to efficacious practices; and third, with increasing awareness of globalization and internationalization, the concept has ceased to be the preserve of Anglo-American school systems, assuming instead, an international comparative relevance.

Instructional leadership as a multi-dimensional concept with different dimensional efficacies

Later parts of this section demonstrate the extent to which new dimensions need to be embraced as part of the concept of IL if it is to remain relevant as a guiding leadership mantra for achieving two main outcomes - improving both student learning and school performance. However, as more dimensions are included, the likelihood is that not all of them will have the same positive effects on the two outcomes above. Indeed, it is possible that one or more dimensions, depending on context, may even have a detrimental or negative effect, thus raising the prospect that not all IL practices are necessarily always virtuous or beneficial.

Recent research confirms this supposition. Lee, Walker & Chui (2012) examined the effects of different dimensions of instructional leadership on student learning in Hong Kong secondary schools, whose broader institutional contexts are critically characterized by high accountability policy environments. Their study was driven by the following research question: how do two different dimensions of principal leadership practices (i.e., instructional management and direct supervision of instruction) impact student achievement? Teachers in 42 secondary schools were asked for their perceptions of two dimensions of instructional leadership practices that influence student learning (both are conceptually interdependent but distinctive), namely, instructional management and direct supervision of instruction. The central notion to this study was that student attachment to school is a potentially powerful factor in student enjoyment of school, and their commitment and motivation to do well at their studies. Findings clearly showed that leadership practices that focused

on instructional management (such as encouraging teachers to consider new ways of teaching, holding high expectations of students and teachers) enhanced student learning by boosting the positive effect of students' attachment to their school relating to academic achievement. In contrast, leadership practices related to direct supervision of instruction (inspecting student homework, regularly observing classroom activities, and working with teachers to improve their teaching) were found to undermine student learning by weakening the positive effect of student perceptions of school attachment on academic performance when other school- and student-level characteristics were held constant. It appears that teachers (and students) respond positively to formative feedback, and teacher professional development opportunities, and negatively to summative feedback, and pressures for external accountability that lead to principals entering classrooms for inspection purposes. The key is whether teachers *perceive* principals' instructional practices as positive to their professional development and practice, which if so, seems in turn, to feed through to impact student attachment to school. However, direct involvement of the principal in teacher and student work is likely to have an antithetical effect. As Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2012) conclude, principals have the greatest impact on student learning in schools focused on instruction—including teacher knowledge, skills, motivation—and on ensuring supportive working conditions (such as time for collaboration). Putting it succinctly, “leadership affects student learning when it is targeted at working relationships, improving instruction and, indirectly, student achievement” (p. 234).

Need to challenge so-called established truths about effective practices

Similarly, for a decade or more from the mid-1990s, it was held that the most effective instructional leaders spend as much time as possible in the classroom

observing teachers - some even suggesting as much as 50 percent of their time in school. However, as Horng, Klasik and Loeb's (2009) study shows, most principals spend as little as 10 percent or less involved in instructional activity. And given the findings of recent research on the negative impact of time spent in classrooms, even this may be too much. What appears far more important than *quantity* of time spent, is the *quality* of feedback to teachers; and the even greater impact of leaders influencing the indirect factors of school culture, working conditions, supporting teachers and their development, and ensuring resources are available.

Instructional leadership as a cross-cultural, comparative concept

As Hallinger & Ko (2015) claim, until the late 1990s, many Asian nations ranked improvement in student learning outcomes as less important than cultural transmission and attitudes contributing to political stability in the hierarchy of national education goals (Walker & Hallinger, 2015). In systems such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan, the switch to school improvement goals has represented a particularly powerful 'change force' (Hallinger & Lee, 2011; Walker & Hallinger, 2015). And in Vietnam, the government is now pursuing both school improvement and leadership for political stability as twin goals (Dimmock, 2016a). Top-performing Asian systems in PISA have recently begun to pursue 'accountability and quality assurance' aiming to ensure that school-level practices conform to this new goal orientation. Consequently, as Hallinger and Ko (2015) state, 'the knowledge base underlying our understanding of successful school leadership must incorporate the diversity of contexts in which leadership is enacted' (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013; Walker & Hallinger, 2015). We need a better understanding of how school leaders lead learning within this evolving context, as well as how different sets of

practices impact the school's capacity for improvement. These increasing examples of Asian systems adopting school improvement and instructional leadership practices are testimony to the growing cross-cultural relevance of the concept.

2. New leadership practices and *within-school* change

A second cluster of leadership practices that more recently has assumed prominence but which is not reflected in present conceptions of IL, is aptly termed *within-school* change. These include four activities: strategic re-designing of schools as innovative learning environments; re-balancing curriculum; re-configuring patterns of leadership; and promoting evidence-based practice across the school.

Strategic re-design of schools as innovative learning environments

Policy makers around the world are restructuring their education systems for competitive advantage in the global economy. In many systems, schools are seen to have lagged behind the faster pace of socio-economic change. The OECD study – Innovative Learning Environments - (see OECD, 2013) has championed an international campaign to re-design 'fit-for-purpose' 21st century schools that constitute 'innovative learning environments'. The *school design* model applied by Dimmock, Kwek, and Toh in Singapore, is indicative of the type of transformation the OECD (2013) deems is required by schools – where leaders recognize the connectivity of all parts of a school, purposefully start with learning outcomes, and backward map through curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, technology, and supporting structures, to teacher professional development and leadership itself – in implementing a school transformation process (OECD, 2013, pp. 107-134). A core

part of an instructional leader's role is nowadays to strategize school transformation that is sustainable and scaled up, with an underpinning methodology to achieve it.

Re-balancing curriculum

A further requirement of instructional leaders in many systems latterly is the need to ensure that curriculum and pedagogy across the school reflect an adequate balance between achieving traditional goals of high-stakes testing (requiring mostly teacher-centred methods for effectiveness), and development of so-called 'soft skills' needed by the workforce and citizenry in the KBE (mostly student-centred methods for effectiveness) (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Powell & Snellman, 2004). Teacher resistance to re-balance their pedagogical practice with more (or less) student-centred methods is often predicated on the fear that they will dilute student performance on high-stakes tests. Yet these twin goals are increasingly viewed by stakeholders as equally important – individually and collectively – and school leaders have a vital role in ensuring both are given due weight in their school curriculum and in teachers' pedagogy.

Re-configuring the school's patterns of leadership

A third major change is in the sharing of leadership across the hierarchy of the school – whether it be distributed or empowered in kind. With the growing complexity of schools and their challenges, leadership patterns and configurations have responded by being less concentrated and more dispersed (Spillane, and Diamond, 2015). Several studies have found distributed or shared leadership to be effective in improving student outcomes (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Certain attributes of shared leadership for school success include its collaborative and facilitative aspects, a focus on student

learning and improvement, motivation of teachers and students, and cultivation of reform-minded staff (McKenzie et al., 2007). Additionally, Day et al. (2010) found that “the school processes directly connected with head teachers’ leadership strategies are the ones that also connect most closely with improvements in aspects of teaching and learning and staff involvement in leadership; these in turn help to predict improvement in school conditions, and hence, improvement in pupil outcomes” (p.10). In relation to distributed leadership, it has also been demonstrated empirically that leaders’ trust in teachers, plays an important role in increasing their willingness to collaborate (Day et al., 2010). Evidence also suggests that teachers learn best and are more likely to change their teaching practices through collaborative engagement with peers. Part of this leadership responsibility involves nurturing and developing leaders. Inescapably, an integral part of contemporary instructional leadership involves fostering and overseeing an expansive, shared configuration of leadership across the school.

Promoting evidence-based and research-engaged practice across the school

With the focus on student learning outcomes, and the notion of a self-improving school system, has come the demand for evidence-based, and research-engaged practice (Dimmock, 2012, 2016b; Godfrey, 2016; Tan, 2012). Although the meanings of these terms are not clear, both are distinctly different. The former emphasizes the need for teachers to refer to evidence (whether it be school data, academic papers, other teachers’ experiences) of what works, and what has been shown to be effective; the latter, however, is about teachers being researchers of their own and colleagues’ practices. Both offer teachers a more solid base (than opinion or personal experience) on which to take decisions about, and develop their professional skills and techniques

to inform, their choice of teaching-learning strategies to suit particular students in specific contexts. The trend toward this new basis of practice is not without its challenges and opponents. Teachers, for example, may believe it threatens to turn teaching into a mere application of technical principles rather than the exercise of professional discretion they covet. None of this is inevitable, and much will depend on leadership and how the research culture of the school is built and maintained (Dimmock, 2016b; Godfrey, 2016). At the heart of the new Instructional leadership has to be the organization and cultivation of a culture that fosters knowledge mobilization, and endorses teachers as researchers, and a mantra of research-into-practice. Central to these ideas is the school as a professional learning community (Dimmock, 2012, 2016b).

3. New leadership practices and *between*-school change

One of the most salient changes in the role of school leaders and in leadership per se in the last decade has been the emergence of system leadership in leading education systems, including Finland, Canada, Victoria (Australia), and England. Principals and other school leaders in their system leader roles care about and work for the success of other schools and their students – in addition to their own (OECD, 2008). They have a shared sense of mission and responsibility to improve the larger system of which they are part, and realize that to do so, they have to engage with it in a meaningful way (Hopkins, 2009). The success of system leadership should be measured by the degree to which improved student learning and achievement outcomes result across clusters of schools and the system as a whole, the aim being to make every school a great school. A spectrum of roles exists for system leaders, ranging in sphere and extent of influence from mentoring another principal, to

working as a local leader of education (with low performing schools), to leading school improvement partnerships, to executive and consultant principals, to national leaders whose schools have attained sustained outstanding performance (NCTL, 2015). Not only do system leaders spread outstanding leadership – which is invariably at a premium - across more schools, they afford opportunities for their own school staff to assume leadership responsibility during their absence, and help attain a more uniformly high implementation of policy, and achievement of national standards, across entire systems. Above all, system leaders focus on raising the quality of leadership in order to improve the quality of curriculum, teaching and learning in schools beyond their own, taking advantage of current trends towards school collaborations and networks. Current notions of instructional leadership therefore must incorporate the roles and responsibilities embraced by system leadership.

4. New leadership practices and *beyond-school change*

With growing realisation that ‘schools cannot compensate for society’ (Bernstein, 1970), and after years of research on what constitutes effective leadership and teaching to maximise student learning in school, it is seemingly harder year-by-year to secure incremental gains to outcomes from relying solely on improvement to within- and between-school factors. In economic terms, each increment of input may yield less additional output, which is the law of diminishing returns. Accordingly, there is a revival of interest in how schools – through good leadership – can connect with, and harness the potential of, families and parents. A contemporary conceptualization of IL must necessarily recognize the importance of promoting student learning and social mobility, and address inequities, through school links with families and homes (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Goodhall & Vorhaus, 2010;

National College, 2010). According to Rabash, Leckie, Pillinger, and Jenkins (2010), by far the largest influences on a child's academic performance are genetic and socio-economic. These researchers indicate that in general only 20% of the variance in a pupil's achievement is attributable to school quality and the rest is down to pupil-level factors (family influence, neighbourhood and genetics). Hence, approximately 80% of the variance is attributed to social factors, such as parenting, home and peer group - all of which are beyond-school factors. These figures may vary according to different societies and cultures. Given this level of variance, it is astonishing how researchers have continued to ignore the need to include school-family/home bonding in their definitions and measurement of IL. It is equally surprising that governments and principals continue to under-value the potential to be gained from promulgating and adopting leadership practices to build closer bonds between home and school – typically instead focusing attention on in-school issues rather than home-school links. Principals can do much in their schools to compensate by offering briefing session to parents on homework and school policies, by providing after-school classes and by promoting teacher visits to homes. Attaching social workers to schools for the purpose of liaising with parents is also increasingly adopted.

5. Leadership for greater equity and social justice

Among the strongest recent policy shifts impacting the instructional leadership role of principals and other school leaders is the expectation that schools achieve greater equity at the same time as excellence (Schleicher, 2009). Greater equity manifests itself in closing the achievement gaps between students arising from different socio-economic backgrounds (working class/middle class), ethnicities, geographical locations (urban/rural), religions, and gender. Numerous ways of tackling greater

equity are espoused, including compensatory curricula and resourcing (tutoring) for low achievers, working with disadvantaged homes and families, and more individualized pedagogy that addresses the specific needs of students (Theoharis, 2007). Crucial to instructional leadership is the notion that school leaders ensure that teachers are engaging all students by taking into account the characteristics of each student that affect their learning – their age, ability, previous learning history, home circumstances, gender, culture and ethnicity (Tan 2013b, 2015). While it is a basic pedagogical principle for teachers to take account of the learner's characteristics, with a view to adjusting their teaching methods to suit individual learners' needs, the implications for principals and other school leaders to promote and oversee that teachers are in fact fulfilling this requirement of quality teaching practice, has to date been absent from the IL concept. Including this responsibility in principals' instructional leadership practice in this way holds out better prospects for achieving greater equity.

6. Leadership, school autonomy and accountability

Finally, since the early models of instructional leadership were constructed in the 1980s, the trend towards school autonomy or school-based management, and latterly self-improving schools, has become more ubiquitous, even in hitherto centralised systems. Concomitantly, checks and balances on schools in the form of accountabilities to stakeholders have grown equally strong (NCSL, 2012). Measures of school performance – particularly assessments such as high stakes test results, absenteeism and truancy, and behavioural statistics, are constantly used to compare year-on-year change. Many of these school characteristics and their measures are central to the roles and responsibilities of principals, other school leaders and teachers

as instructional leaders (Lee, Walker & Chui, 2012). They include leading the process towards school autonomy and self-improvement, as well as accounting for school performance in high stakes tests (Hargreaves, 2010). As such, the roles and responsibilities principals and other school leaders have assumed should be reflected in a contemporary model of IL.

Conclusion

In our opening remarks to this paper, we expressed the view that it is remarkable how a concept that has come to be regarded as central to the field of leadership and school improvement - in theory and practice - should have survived relatively unchanged for so long, while the relevant policy and practice environments have been anything but static. In this paper we have outlined progress made in the knowledge base on instructional leadership, and critically reflected that in general, advances have been disappointing in terms of understanding the linkages between principal leadership, teacher practices, and student learning outcomes, especially in different contextual and cultural settings. As Hallinger (2011) has opined, research designs have often lacked imagination and rigour.

More importantly, however, our major concern has been to draw attention to the failure of scholars and researchers to develop the concept of instructional leadership in tandem with the evolving policy and practice environments affecting school leadership, teaching and learning, curriculum, assessment, professional development and school autonomy and accountability. This is a formidable list, of course, encompassing almost every aspect of educational policy and practice, but the fact remains that instructional leadership continues to be regarded as central, precisely because it is relevant to all of these key issues. Indeed, the very salience of

instructional leadership (or its synonyms, learning-centred leadership, and leadership for learning) plays to our argument that there is urgent need to ‘renovate’ the concept in order for it to adequately reflect the realities of both the policy and school environments. As it remains, instructional leadership is an outdated concept that does little credit to the academic-research community, and is of limited value to policy makers, professional developers or school leader practitioners alike.

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