

# Research on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership: Retrospect and prospect<sup>1</sup>



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## Abstract

The past 25 years have witnessed the emergence of new conceptual models. In contrast with many earlier leadership models applied to school administration, these models focus explicitly on the manner in which leadership exercised by school administrators and teachers brings about improved educational outcomes. Two of the foremost models, as measured by the number of empirical studies, are instructional leadership and transformational leadership. This paper will synthesize findings from research on these models in an attempt to understand what we have learned about learner-centered leadership.

## Introduction

The past 25 years have witnessed the emergence of new conceptual models in the field of educational leadership. Two of the most influential models have been instructional leadership and transformational leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1999). In contrast with leadership models applied to school administration in prior eras (Boyan, 1988; e.g., situational leadership, trait theories, contingency theory), these approaches focus explicitly on *educational leadership*. They seek to explain the means by which leaders (administrators and teachers) bring about improvement in school conditions and student outcomes (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999b; Southworth, 2002).

Instructional leadership emerged in the early 1980s as an outgrowth from early research on effective schools (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Edmonds, 1979). This research identified *strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction by the principal* as a characteristic of elementary schools that

were effective at teaching children in poor, urban communities (Bossert et al., 1982; Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Although not without its critics (e.g., Cuban, 1984), this model has shaped much of the thinking about effective principal leadership disseminated internationally since the 1980s. The emerging popularity of this model became evident in its widespread adoption as the 'model of choice' by most principal leadership academies in the United States of America (Hallinger, 2003).

With the advent of school restructuring in North America during the 1990s, the notion of *transformational leadership* began to eclipse instructional leadership's popularity. Transformational leadership originated in studies of political leaders. The model focuses on the leader's role in fostering a collective vision and motivating members of an organisation to achieve extraordinary performance (Bass, 1985).

Its emergence in education not only reflected the changing reform context of schools, but also growing concerns with limitations of the instructional leadership model. Some scholars, for example, believed that instructional leadership focused too much on the principal as the center of expertise, power and authority in the school (Cuban, 1988). Others felt that the centralisation of responsibility for this role was simply too heavy a burden for any one person in the school to carry alone (Cuban, 1988; Donaldson, 2001; Lambert 1998). In the era of educational empowerment, transformational leadership soon began to dominate the landscape, as instructional leadership receded into the background.

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A decade later, at the turn of the new century, pressures from the policy environment of schools began to push the pendulum back towards instructional leadership. The global emphasis on performance standards that pervade private industry reached K–12 education (Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Shipman, 2003). Principals now find themselves at the nexus of accountability and improvement with the clear expectation that they will function as 'instructional leaders'. Given the passage of formal government standards for education through the world, principals who ignore their role in monitoring and improving school performance do so at their own risk (e.g., Jackson, 2000; Lam, 2003).

This is also becoming apparent in programs of principal preparation and development. Recent analyses have found a distinct programmatic emphasis on ensuring that principals are able to fulfill their *instructional leadership* role (Hallinger, 2003; Huber, 2003). Preparation for this role has been explicitly linked to training curricula in major government-led efforts in the United States of America (Hallinger, 2003; Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Shipman, 2003; Stricherz, 2001a, 2001b), the United Kingdom (Southworth, 2002, Singapore (Chong, Stott, & Low, 2003), Hong Kong (Lam, 2003), and Australia (Davis, 2003).

The persistence of these leadership models that focus on school improvement reflects the reform-oriented policy context that has existed in education since the early 1980s. Over the past 25 years, scholars have subjected both instructional leadership (e.g., Goldring & Pasternak, 1994; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Heck, 1992, 1993; Heck, Larson, & Marcolouides, 1990; Southworth, 2002) and transformational leadership (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000a; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1998; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Silins, 1994)

to extended empirical investigation. This articpaperle assesses the conceptual and empirical development of these two leadership models over the past 25 years. In this paper, I will contrast these two models and offer possible paths towards their integration in the practice of educational leadership.

## Resolving the tension between instructional and transformational leadership

Two leadership models have dominated the literature in educational administration over the past 25 years: instructional leadership and transformational leadership. At the turn of the millennium, global waves of educational reform have refocused the attention of policymakers and practitioners on the question: *How can I create conditions that foster the use of more powerful methods of learning and teaching in schools* (Hallinger, 2003; Jackson, 2000; Murphy & Shipman, 2003)?

Somewhat surprisingly, this focus on the improvement of learning and teaching has once again brought instructional leadership to the fore. After a period of relative decline in popularity during the 1990s, there has been a new and unprecedented *global* commitment among government agencies towards training principals to be *instructional leaders* (Hallinger, 2003; Huber, 2003; Stricherz, 2001a, 2001b). This makes understanding the boundaries of our knowledge base about these leadership models especially salient.

In this section of the paper, I reflect upon lessons learned about these leadership models. First, I will review and contrast the substantive foci of instructional and transformational leadership in order to determine if an integration of the conceptual models is possible. Second, I will examine the constraints that limit or influence all

attempts by principals to carve out a significant leadership role in the school. Finally, I will examine them from the perspective of leadership in the school context.

## Constraints on school leadership

During the 1980s when instructional leadership emerged as the *model of choice*, some scholars questioned the capacity of principals to fulfill this heroic role (e.g., Cuban, 1988). Principals who demonstrated the type of instructional leadership needed to lift school performance, were, by definition, a small minority (Barth, 1986). Skeptics asked if the majority of principals had the necessary combination of 'will and skill' to carry out this type of hands-on, directive leadership (Barth, 1986; Bossert et al., 1982; March, 1978). Other suggested that the very nature of the principalship renders instructional leadership an 'impossible dream' for most principals (e.g., Barth, 1986; Cuban, 1988; March, 1978; Southworth, 2002).

Larry Cuban, a self-described 'friendly critic' of instructional leadership, claimed that the managerial or maintenance role of the principal is 'embedded in the DNA of the principalship' (Cuban, 1988). He asserted that efforts by principals to act as instructional leaders in schools inevitably run aground on structural and normative conditions in the principal's workplace. Principals occupy a middle management position in which their authority to command is severely limited, and where the structure is quite flat. Demands on their time are unceasing, and the majority of their work activities may be unrelated to instructional leadership!

Normatively, the classroom has traditionally been the private domain of teachers in which principals may not always be welcome. Moreover, in many cases principals have less

expertise than the teachers whom they supervise (Cuban, 1988; Lambert, 1998; March, 1978). This makes instructional supervision a special challenge, particularly in secondary schools.

The factors working against principals 'getting into classrooms' are many, varied, and difficult to overcome. This is the case even when the principal possesses strong intentions to do so (e.g., Marshall, 1996). These workplace conditions have moderated attempts by policymakers to cultivate an instructional leadership role for school principals.

Nonetheless, a broad reading of the literature would suggest that there is a more discernable emphasis on instructional leadership in the profession than existed two decades ago (Hallinger, 2001, 2003; Southworth, 2002). There is little question that principals increasingly accept more responsibility for instructional leadership, regardless of whether or not they feel competent to perform it. The form that instructional leadership takes in practice tends to place the greatest emphasis on the mission and climate dimensions. It is interesting to note the absence of any empirical evidence that principals spend more time directly observing and supervising classroom instruction than they did 25 years ago (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b). This reflects the constraints discussed above (e.g., Barth, 1986; Lambert, 1998; Marshall, 1996).

## Towards an integration of leadership models

This review has identified conceptual similarities and differences between instructional and transformational leadership. Table 1 summarises these findings. Based upon this table, it seems apparent that the *substantive* similarities between the models are more significant than the differences. Both models would have the school leader focus on:

- creating a shared sense of purpose in the school;
- developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture focused on innovation and improvement of teaching and learning;
- shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect the school's mission as well as goals set for staff and students;
- organising and providing a wide range of activities aimed at intellectual stimulation and the continuous development of staff;
- being a visible presence in the school, modelling the desired values of the school's culture.

These similarities between the models provide a useful point of departure for any principal who wishes to reflect upon his/her leadership. Conceptual differences identified in this review were reflected in the:

- target of change (i.e., first-order or second-order effects)
- extent to which the principal *emphasises* a coordination and control strategy vs. an 'empowerment' strategy for change in the school.

Broadly speaking, these differences are most apparent in the emphasis given by transformational leadership to individualised support for staff and to building organisational goals from the ground up (i.e., out of the

**Table 1:** Comparison of Instructional and Transformational Leadership Models  
Adapted from Hallinger & Murphy, 1985 and Leithwood, et. al., 1998

Instructional Leadership	Transformational Leadership	Remarks on Differences and Similarities
Articulate and Communicate Clear School Goals	Clear Vision Shared School Goals	IL model emphasizes clarity and organisational nature of shared goals, set either by the principal or by and with staff and community. TL model emphasizes linkage between personal goals and shared organizational goals.
Coordinate Curriculum Supervise and Evaluate Instruction Monitor Student Program Protect Instructional Time		No equivalent elements for these coordination and control functions in the TL model. TL model assumes "others" will carry these out as a function of their roles
High Expectations	High Expectations	
Provide Incentive for Learners Provide Incentive for Teachers	Rewards	Similar focus on ensuring that rewards are aligned with mission of the school.
Providing Professional Development for Teachers	Intellectual Stimulation	IL model focuses on training and development aligned to school mission. TL model views personal and professional growth broadly. Need not be tightly linked to school goals.
High Visibility	Modeling	Essentially the same purposes. Principal maintains high visibility in order to model values and priorities.
	Culture-building	IL models also focuses on culture-building but subsumed within the school climate dimension,

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personal professional goals of staff and community members). The instructional leadership model has been interpreted as being somewhat more top-down and directive.

One of the major impediments to effective school leadership is trying to carry the burden alone. When a principal takes on the challenges of going beyond the basic demands of the job, the burden becomes even heavier (Barth, 1986; Cuban, 1988; March, 1978). Influential scholars have questioned whether it is realistic to expect a significant number of principals to meet this challenge (March, 1978).

This point was captured by Lambert (2002) who contends that, 'The days of the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators' (p. 37). Thus, several different writers, attempting to integrate these constructs, have proposed a variant some have referred to as 'shared instructional leadership' (Day et al., 2001; Jackson, 2000; Lambert, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Southworth, 2002).

While several of the scholars cited here have written eloquently about the possible forms this might take, the most ambitious attempt to study shared instructional leadership empirically was undertaken by Marks and Printy (2003). Their conclusion points the way towards one possible avenue of reconciliation for these constructs in their observation that:

This study suggests that strong transformational leadership by the principal is essential in supporting the commitment of teachers. Because teachers themselves can be barriers to the development of teacher leadership transformational principals are needed to invite teachers to share leadership functions. When teachers perceive principals' instructional leadership

behaviours to be appropriate, they grow in commitment, professional involvement, and willingness to innovate (Sheppard, 1996). Thus, instructional leadership can itself be transformational.

It is too soon to know whether the findings from the Marks and Printy research will be replicated by others. Nonetheless, two factors provide optimism optimistic. However, it may well be that the points of connection between the models are sufficient to allow development of an integrated and more sophisticated model of *educational leadership*.

A second approach to understanding the relationship between these leadership models may lie in contingency theory. At the outset of the effective schools era in 1982, Stephen Bossert and his colleagues made a cogent case for the belief that, 'certain principal behaviors have different effects in different organisational settings. Such findings confirm the contingency approach to organisational effectiveness found in current leadership theories' (1982, p. 38).

In our review of the literature on principal effects (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b), Ron Heck and I concluded that it is virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to the school context. The context of the school is a source of constraints, resources, and opportunities that the principal must understand and address in order to lead. Contextual variables of interest to principals include student background, community type, organisational structure, school culture, teacher experience and competence, fiscal resources, school size, and bureaucratic and labour features of the school organisation (Bossert et al., 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b).

In our review we further concluded that the contingent characteristic of school leadership must be explicitly

incorporated into theoretical models. Leadership must be conceptualised as a *mutual influence process*, rather than as a one-way process in which leaders influence others (Bridges, 1977; Jackson, 2000; Kliene-Kracht, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999a, 1999b). Effective leaders respond to the changing needs of their context. Indeed, in a very real sense the leader's behaviours are shaped by the school context.

Thus, one resolution of the quest for an integrative model of educational leadership would link leadership to the needs of the school context. David Jackson (2000) and Michael Fullan (2002) have observed that school improvement is a journey. The type of leadership that is suitable to a certain stage of the journey may become a limiting or even counter-productive force as the school develops. 'Schools at risk' may initially require a more forceful top-down approach focused on instructional improvement. Instructional leaders would typically set clear, time-based, academically-focused goals in order to get the organisation moving in the desired direction. They would take a more active hands-on role in organising and coordinating instruction.

The extent of appropriate staff participation in *leading* these processes (i.e., development of the school's goals, coordination of the curriculum) might vary depending upon the location of the school in its improvement journey. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that long-term, sustained improvement will ultimately depend upon the staff assuming increasing levels of ownership over proposed changes in the school. This conclusion would be consistent with other contingency models of leadership that conceptualise leadership as a *developmental process* (e.g., Graeff, 1997; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969).

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