Effective Leadership for School Improvement

Alma Harris, Christopher Day,
Mark Hadfield, David Hopkins,
Andy Hargreaves and
Christopher Chapman

School Leadership Series

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In a complex and multi-layered world, the conventional idea of great leadership being the result of the efforts of a single individual is rapidly becoming redundant. This book takes up the challenge of finding an alternative method of leadership in educational contexts, and looks at how this can help achieve sustained improvement in schools.

The authors acknowledge that there are no simple solutions to school improvement. They argue that the effective leaders of the future will be those who are able to share responsibility, build positive relationships and offer stakeholders – teachers, parents and students – an opportunity to work together to improve their schools.

The book is based around four key areas of concern: the changing context of leadership; leadership and school improvement; building leadership capacity; and future direction and implications. In each Part, the authors discuss current theories and issues, and put forward alternative ideas and perspectives.

This book will make valuable reading for headteachers, principals, deputies and other senior teachers, particularly those undertaking leadership qualifications and training. It will also interest postgraduate students and school governors.

Alma Harris is Professor of School Leadership and Director of the Leadership, Policy and Improvement Unit at the Institute of Education, University of Warwick. **Christopher Day** is Professor of Education and Co-Director of the Centre for Teacher and School Development at the School of Education, University of Nottingham. **Mark Hadfield** is a Senior Lecturer in Professional Development and School Improvement at the School of Education, University of Nottingham. **David Hopkins** is Director of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the Department for Education and Skills. **Andy Hargreaves** is Professor of Educational Leadership and Change at the University of Nottingham, and Professor in the International Centre for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. **Christopher Chapman** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Education, University of Warwick.

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Contents

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David Jackson was a highly successful headteacher and is currently Director of Research and School Improvement at the National College for School Leadership, based at the Jubilee Campus of the University of Nottingham. The Group is committed to inquiry-based models of leadership and has established Research and Development Programmes in five key areas: Successful Leadership in Urban and Challenging Contexts; Networked Learning Communities; Building Capacity for School Development; New Visions for Early Headship; and Learning from Best Practice Worldwide.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Alma Harris

It remains that the superhero images of leadership will not work. In tomorrow's schools success will depend upon the ability of leaders to harness the capacity of locals, to enhance sense and meaning and to build a community of responsibility.

(Sergiovanni, 2001: 55)

I would like to put forward the revolutionary idea that all teachers can lead. If schools are going to become places where all children and adults are learning in worthy ways, all teachers *must* lead.

(Barth, 2001: 85)

There is a growing recognition in the increasingly complex contexts of educational change and accountability that deep and sustained school improvement will depend upon the leadership of the many rather than the few. There is a groundswell towards leadership as empowerment, transformation and community-building and away from the 'great man' theory of leadership. As Heifetz (1994) suggests 'instead of looking for saviours we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions – problems that require us to learn new ways' (21). Similarly, Fullan (2001: 2) proposes that 'charismatic leaders inadvertently do more harm than good because, at best, they provide episodic improvement followed by frustrated or despondent dependency'. Consequently, there is a powerful argument for looking at alternative ways of leading, looking for competing theories of leadership and challenging the orthodoxy that equates leadership with the efforts of one person.

This book aims to present alternative perspectives and views about leadership and school improvement. It is not a book that subscribes to conventional, rational leadership theory or a book that endorses leadership traits and tricks. Instead, it aims to present some of the real challenges, contradictions and complexities that surround leadership and school

improvement. It argues that effective leaders in schools will be those who are able to build collaborative cultures through generating positive relationships. It endorses the view that effective leaders are those who build the capacity for improvement through working collaboratively and through building professional learning communities within and between schools. It suggests that effective leaders have a shared vision for their school and that this can only be realised if teachers work together as a learning community.

Building a learning community or a 'community of practice' is increasingly accepted as being the critical element in school improvement. Sergiovanni (2001) contends that 'developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school'. A wealth of research evidence reinforces this position and highlights that successful schools build communities that are inclusive and value, above all, individual development and achievement. Building the capacity for school improvement therefore necessitates paying careful attention to how relationships in schools are fostered and developed (Harris and Chapman, 2001). It also suggests a form of leadership that is, as Sergiovanni (2001) suggests, 'ideas-based', where locating the source of authority for leadership is in the quality of ideas rather than position or role. As ideas and common commitments are shared in the school, so is leadership, and teachers, parents and students share the responsibility for school development and change.

One of the most congruent findings from recent studies of effective leadership is that authority to lead need not be located in the person of the leader but can be dispersed within the school in between and among people (MacBeath, 1988; Day *et al.*, 2000; Harris, 2002). In this sense leadership is separated from person, role and status and is primarily concerned with the relationships and the connections among individuals within a school. This form of leadership is one where individuals 'feel confident in their own capacity, in the capacity of their colleagues and in the capacity of the school to promote professional development' (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000: 78). It also implies that 'teachers are participants in decision-making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work' (Lambert, 1998: 11).

This alternative image of leadership is one of empowering people to understand, rather than solve, the problems that they face. It is, as Sergiovanni (2001) proposes, largely concerned with the 'lifeworld' of the school rather than the 'systemworld', where attention is focused upon developing social, intellectual and other forms of human capital rather than concentrating upon achievement of narrow, instrumental ends. It is a form of leadership premised upon the leadership capability of the many rather than the few and is centrally concerned with building the capacity for organisational growth and change. Inevitably this mode of leadership

challenges the conventional orthodoxy of the single, individualistic leader suggesting instead a form of leadership that is distributed, instructionally focused and ultimately teacher-owned (Harris *et al.*, 2001).

The main purpose of this book is to explore, elucidate and reflect upon the relationship between leadership and school improvement. The central argument of the book is that new and alternative approaches to leadership are required if schools are to improve and change. The book suggests that deep and sustained educational reform can only be achieved if leadership in schools becomes principally concerned with maximising social and academic capital. It also proposes that school improvement is more likely to occur where leaders build the capacity for change and development, where they invest in teachers and teaching and where they empower others to lead (Harris, 2002). Schools that are improving are 'learning communities' that cultivate a deep culture of teaching and learning. Effective leadership for school improvement, therefore, should be principally concerned with building the capacity and creating the conditions to generate improvement and, most importantly, to sustain improvement over time.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into four parts each reflecting a different dimension of the relationship between effective leadership and school improvement. Part I considers the current context of school leadership and provides an overview of the main theoretical positions within the contemporary leadership field. The first chapter offers an analysis and interpretation of dominant leadership theory and highlights the limitations of these various traditions and positions to adequately represent or describe current leadership practices. Chapter 2 charts the implications for leadership development for heads in relation to the different theoretical positions and highlights some of the limitations of the current modes of professional development. The chapter reinforces the importance of reflection in leadership practices that promote school improvement. It concludes by raising some questions and posing some challenges about the future professional development of school leaders.

Part II considers alternative contemporary views of leadership, particularly those that are directly associated with school and classroom improvement. Chapter 3 considers instructional leadership and argues that leadership should focus upon learning and that leaders should be primarily concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning. By taking an instructional focus, leadership in this chapter is viewed as primarily concerned with creating the optimum conditions for teaching, learning and classroom improvement. It proposes a style of leadership that is consistent with raising levels of student achievement and leaders that are able to focus on teaching

and learning and building professional learning communities. Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement. It suggests that when teachers are empowered to lead there is greater potential for collaboration and mutual learning. This theme is reinforced in Chapter 5 in the broader discussion of capacity-building. Here distributed leadership to teachers, parents and students is viewed as a key to school improvement. The chapter argues that building social capital and fostering distributed leadership are central to building the capacity for school improvement.

Part III moves away from theory generation to theory-testing by utilising the findings from recent empirical work focused upon effective leadership for school improvement. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on the potential of the idea of 'capacity' to support school leaders in critically reflecting upon the nature of school leadership and improvement. Both chapters focus upon the practical aspects and implications of 'capacity-building'. They draw heavily upon practitioners' views about capacity-building and offer insights into how well this idea resonates with schools and what messages are emerging about this particular view of school improvement. Chapter 8 offers a case study of school improvement in difficult and challenging circumstances. Drawing upon empirical evidence from a study commissioned by the National College for School Leadership, the chapter highlights the processes and practicalities of school improvement. The stages of improvement are outlined and the particular approach to leadership adopted is illuminated. The chapter suggests that building the capacity for school improvement will necessitate investing in teacher leadership and distributing decision-making responsibilities throughout the school.

Part IV is concerned with the future directions and implications for leadership in schools of the future. Chapter 9 focuses upon successful leadership in the twenty-first century and offers some challenges and possibilities for school leadership in changing and complex times. Chapter 10 reflects upon the future of schooling in the knowledge society. The chapter suggests that an emphasis upon performance and standards is unlikely to produce the kinds of teaching and learning required for a rapidly changing world. It concludes by arguing that creating professional learning communities promises a way of securing longer-term, sustainable school improvement but that this will only be achieved through empowering teachers to lead school development and change.

Commentary

As schools face continuous pressure to raise standards and to improve performance there will be increased demands for approaches to school improvement that work most effectively. This will inevitably mean focusing upon the leadership practices that foster sustained improvement and

positive change in schools. The central message of this book is that effective leadership for school improvement will require quite radical changes in structures to allow people to collaborate both within and across schools. It will necessitate relinquishing belief in the 'superhuman' leader and replacing it with an image of a school where all teachers and students have leadership potential and capability. It will require a range of leadership approaches at different times. Schools are likely to cope with change in turbulent times more readily by generating leadership capacity of the many rather than the few. In short, it means a fundamental reconceptualisation of leadership as a form of social capital which, if distributed or shared, has the greatest potential to contribute to sustained school development and improvement.

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The changing context of leadership

Chapter 1

The changing context of leadership
Research, theory and practice

Alma Harris

Introduction

Leadership is currently in vogue. Across many Western countries, there has been a renewed emphasis upon improving leadership capacity and capability in the drive towards higher standards. Governments around the world are involved in the business of educational reform. Improving the micro-efficiency of the school has been viewed as a means of addressing some of the macro-problems of the state and society (Macbeath, 1988: 47). The pressure upon schools to raise achievement has resulted in reduced teacher autonomy and increased demands for higher performance. Even though there are few certainties about the ability of educational policy to secure higher performance from the educational system, the arguments for investment in education remain powerful and compelling.

While the education challenges are considerable and the route to reform is complex, the potential of leadership to influence pupil and school performance remains unequivocal. It has been consistently argued that the quality of headship matters in determining the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching which takes place in the classroom (Eraut, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998; Day *et al.*, 1998). Researchers of school effectiveness and school improvement have long argued the importance of leadership in schools:

> Leadership helps to establish a clear and consistent vision for the school, which emphasises the prime purposes of the school as teaching and learning and is highly visible to both staff and students.
>
> (Sammons *et al.*, 1997: 199)

The importance of leadership in securing sustainable school improvement has been demonstrated in both research and practice (Harris and Bennett, 2001). Similarly, leadership is highlighted as a key constituent in school and departmental effectiveness (Sammons *et al.*, 1997; Harris, 1999). Consequently, from a policy maker's perspective, school leaders are viewed

as holding the key to resolving a number of the problems currently facing schools. This has led to a major investment in the preparation and development of school leaders across many countries and has proved a main impetus for the establishment of the National College for School Leadership in England.[1]

Yet the belief in leadership as a panacea for raising standards is not without its critics. Anti-leadership proponents emerge sporadically. Most recently, anti-leadership arguments have begun to emerge most forcefully in the work of Lakomski (1998, 1999) who claims that there is no natural entity or essence that can be labelled 'leadership'. It is Lakomski's (1999) view that leadership research has yielded a mass of largely inconclusive results and has demonstrated that leadership means different things to different people in different contexts. In response to Lakomski's position, Gronn (2000) has suggested that the fact that researchers have provided inconclusive results is not a sufficient argument for jettisoning the concept of 'leadership' altogether. He argues that leadership is still needed but that a fundamental reconceptualisation of the nature of leadership within organisations is overdue (Gronn, 2000).

If we accept that leadership is a meaningful and useful construct, the question remains: what does effective leadership look like? There are a number of conceptual understandings about leadership which offer some relevant insights into effective practice. Riley (2000: 47) suggests that:

- there is no one package for school leadership, no one model to be learned and applied regardless of culture or context, though leadership can be developed and nurtured;
- school leadership is more than the effort of a single individual;
- school leadership is not static;
- school leaders do not learn how to do leadership: they are often rule breakers and are willing to change in response to new sets of circumstances.

The view of school leadership outlined above encompasses both mobility and fragility. It is based on the assumption that schools are constantly changing and that the challenge for school leaders is to respond to the school's inner life as well as to the external context. The evidence from the international literature demonstrates that effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of pupils. It shows that effective school leaders exercise both professional and political leadership and are able to draw on their past experience to respond to new situations.

Hallinger and Heck (1996) found that there were four areas in particular in which the leadership of the headteacher influenced the school. The first was through establishing and conveying the purposes and goals of the

school. A second area of leadership influence was through the interplay between the school's organisation and its social network. A third was through influence over people and the fourth was in relation to organisational culture. While their review of the literature highlighted the centrality of the leader in terms of organisational change and development, it also revealed the complex and sometimes contradictory messages within the leadership field.

One such contradictory message concerns the way in which leadership is simultaneously romanticised and de-romanticised. If one subscribes to trait theories of success, then leadership is largely concerned with personal characteristics, much more than effort or skill. The notion of the 'superhead' is caught up in an interpretation of leadership as an inherent set of qualities, as someone with charisma and personal power.

As Fullan (2001: 1) notes:

> Charismatic leaders inadvertently often do more harm than good because at best they provide episodic improvement followed by frustration or despondent dependency. Superhuman leaders also do us another disservice: they are role models who can never be emulated by large numbers.

In sharp contrast, the literature is also replete with guidance about 'how to lead', suggesting that there is a generic set of leadership skills and a common body of knowledge that any potential leader can access. This inevitably leads to different interpretations and understandings of the term 'leadership' and to competing leadership theories.

Whatever the limitations of the existing research base, in the last decade or so there has been renewed interest in the leadership field and a resurgence of research activity in this area. The need to take account of successful leadership in action has been recognised and there are more studies emerging that embrace the moral, professional and emotional dimensions of leadership. This chapter encompasses the contemporary views of leadership and outlines a range of theoretical perspectives concerning leadership. Its main purpose is to provide an overview of the current research findings concerning school leadership and to provide a theoretical context and reference point for the chapters that follow.

The changing context of leadership

The current focus on leadership stems from the need to cope with discontinuous and accelerating change. Educational development over the last decade has been framed by a socio-political context characterised by growing consumerism, a developing knowledge revolution, increased globalised and intensified competition, increasing global turbulence and the growing