

Instructional leadership and why it matters



School resources

This resource is about what instructional leadership means, why it is important, and how leaders and other teachers can engage in effective instructional leadership.

What is instructional leadership?

Instructional leadership is **leadership that supports the development of teaching and learning**. It is referred to using different names including pedagogical leadership, learning-centred leadership, leadership for learning, and student-centred leadership. These terms can be considered under the broad umbrella of instructional leadership and represent the specific and focused practices in which school leaders engage to intentionally support the development of effective teaching and learning in schools.

What is unique about instructional leadership is that, first and foremost, it is tightly connected to **the work of improving learning for students**. Leadership is complex work and can have a range of purposes. For example, some leadership tasks may be primarily managerial and not directed towards improving learning and teaching. The motivation for instructional leadership is the improvement of instruction. For decades, researchers have sought to understand what instructional leadership is, and there is general consensus that it includes:

- A strong focus on learning
- Developing teaching and learning objectives
- Holding high expectations of students
- Creating and supporting student learning goals
- Monitoring learner progress
- Protecting instructional time
- Coordinating curriculum
- Providing instructional support
- Supporting teacher learning

Instructional leadership can be conceptualised as leadership practice that supports effective teaching and learning and provides guidance and direction for instructional improvement¹.

International research meta-analyses reveal that instructional leadership has a positive influence on student achievement. Understanding how instructional leadership impacts on student achievement is the key challenge because leadership typically has an indirect effect on student achievement. Student learning mainly happens in classrooms where teachers have the biggest effect on their learning, but leadership has the second largest effect. Principal instructional leadership **impacts on student achievement through strategies that affect what happens in classroom**.

Many researchers refer to the impact of instructional leadership as being indirect because it is focused on teaching and learning but is not enacted directly with students in the way classroom pedagogy is. Rather, it impacts on what is possible in classroom pedagogy. The effect of instructional leadership

comes from **the establishment of processes, tools, and a learning culture in which the work of effective teaching can happen**. It is in close proximity to the work of teaching and learning: in other words, it is 'close-to-the-classroom' leadership practice. For example, buffering teachers from distraction, providing material resources and psychological support, and promoting professional learning are all examples of close-to-the-classroom instructional leadership practices.

Who is responsible for instructional leadership?

Originally instructional leadership was assumed just to be the role of the school principal, and early research focused only on what principals did. In these early days, an overly 'heroic' view of the role of school principals meant that researchers did not recognise the distributed nature of leadership in schools. However, as researchers began to explore leadership practices at other levels in schools, it became clear that instructional leadership can be enacted by others in addition to the principal and senior leaders.

Instructional leadership is **distributed through networks of influence in and across schools**. While the principal and senior leadership team have an important and central role in instructional leadership, it is also clear that middle leaders and other teachers who have responsibility for teaching and learning beyond their own classroom play a key role in instructional leadership in schools. Distributed or shared leadership are terms used to describe the network of both formal and informal sources of influence within a school. Distributed leadership doesn't mean that anyone and everyone is a leader, but that leadership is situated through a web of influence in a school based on expertise and influence. For example, if you were to walk into a school and ask teachers who they go to for advice on curriculum issues, it is likely that a few key names would emerge. Those named may be people who don't hold 'positional' leadership roles such as principal or deputy principal, but who exercise influence and contribute to instructional leadership within the school due to their specific expertise and the willingness of others to seek out their advice.

When we consider what instructional and distributed leadership means, the concept of teacher leadership comes readily to mind. Teacher leaders are ideally situated to provide instructional leadership within a distributed network of influence within and even across schools and networks of schools. Recognising that **many people in a school can contribute to instructional leadership** enables one of its key features, which is leading collective work to improve instruction.

Why is instructional leadership important?

Instructional leadership is **the most effective type of leadership practice for improving student learning outcomes**. Syntheses of international research on educational leadership concur that instructional leadership has demonstrated the strongest impact on student learning. A number of large international studies have shown that, even after controlling for other variables such as school context and student demographics, principal instructional leadership accounts for a significant amount of variance in student achievement. In addition, these meta-analyses that compare different leadership practices indicate instructional leadership to be the most effective in improving student achievement across a range of school contexts and levels.

One study that is central to these was undertaken by [Viviane Robinson](#)² from New Zealand who asked 'What type of leadership produces the greatest effects on student learning?' After comparing data from a number of studies from both New Zealand and overseas, she found that instructional leadership (or student-centred leadership, as she calls it) had the greatest effect. The substantial and in-depth body of research that has been undertaken over many years by a range of scholars and researchers provides

convincing evidence that instructional leadership has **a consistent positive effect on learning outcomes for students across diverse contexts and changing contexts.**

Simply put, the instructional leadership practices of leaders and teachers in schools increases student achievement by improving teaching and learning in the school. Unpacking the layers of what this means reveals other important findings. For example, the presence of instructional leadership in a school:

- Is correlated with higher teacher efficacy
- Contributes to creating a strong learning culture
- Creates coherence
- Reduces teacher isolation
- Increases teacher collaboration
- Creates a shared focus on student learning goals
- Provides structures to support collaborative inquiry

What does this mean for schools?

Instructional leadership is an important concept for our schools because it provides a framework that can be used to evaluate current approaches and practices of leadership. It can also be used to inform possible changes in direction so that leadership practices may be introduced or further developed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Many hours are spent on leadership tasks on a daily basis in our schools, and those with leadership responsibility have multiple and sometimes conflicting demands on their time. Schools are very busy places and it can be easy to get caught in 'activity traps' where people are working extremely hard in their daily leadership tasks but valued student learning outcomes are not actually improving. By understanding some of the strategies of instructional leadership, the focus of these tasks can be better aligned with research-informed practices that promote improvement. Increasing the extent to which current school leadership aligns with these practices and strategies is an important way of developing effective leadership in our schools.

Effective instructional leaders direct their attention and actions towards ensuring all components within the educational system support the learning of students. There are several 'close to the classroom' practical strategies that enable this.

Practical strategies and approaches

Instructional leadership research findings can inform how to prioritise leadership time and tasks to improve teaching and learning in your school. Researchers have identified a range of different ways to represent the strategies and approaches of instructional leadership. As you read these strategies, bear in mind that current research demonstrates that it is more than just the instructional leadership of the principal that matters - the instructional leadership of others in the school is also very important.

The following key strategies and approaches are from research. Some of these strategies are more relevant to the principal, while others are more relevant to senior leadership, middle leadership and other teachers in the school who provide leadership beyond the classroom. Where these sit will depend on the context and structure of the school.

Establishing and supporting the achievement of goals

Schools sometimes have too many goals and this can get in the way of staff gaining sufficient focus and momentum to create improvement for students. Instructional leaders **prioritise a few key goals and create focus, resources and support** so that these can be achieved. In addition to creating coherence across goals, instructional leaders buffer their staff from distractions. They also avoid tasks themselves that distract from the main purpose of their work and the achievement of these goals. Instructional leaders have an important role in holding high expectations of students and staff, and in listening to them and responding to their needs to enable the achievement of valued goals. Creating coherence is an important part of planning as schools that try to do too much without a coherent focus can struggle to be effective.

Monitoring and responding to student progress

Monitoring student progress is central to effective instructional leadership. This will look different across contexts and levels: for example, the way that data or information are collected and used with a class of five-year olds will look quite different to a Year 13 class. However, the purpose remains the same, which is to create data systems and support teachers in interpreting and using data to make decisions that support the learning and development of students. By **creating systems, using data to track student achievement, and supporting teachers to interpret and use data**, instructional leaders support teachers to make informed decisions about how to meet the needs of their students.

Supporting teacher and leader learning

Promoting professional learning and development is a central strategy of instructional leadership.

Effective instructional leadership provides professional learning for teachers and leaders that is focused on what they need to know and do in order to support student learning. Rather than simply engaging with the latest and most popular (or affordable) professional development programme on offer, **professional learning needs to be intentionally designed** to create coherence and address the learning needs of teachers in relation to their specific students and context. Effective instructional leaders participate in the professional learning of their teachers and also in professional learning to support their own leadership. Holding an inquiry stance and promoting collaborative inquiry amongst staff are both very important in supporting teacher and leader learning.

Evaluating curriculum and pedagogy

The role of the principal and other key leaders is central in improving teaching through practices such as observing in classrooms and engaging in conversations and feedback with teachers. This assumes that the leader will have in-depth knowledge about curricular content and pedagogy. In some schools this is possible, although in larger schools or secondary schools it poses more of a challenge. Secondary principals cannot be expected to provide substantive in-depth feedback on curriculum and pedagogy across multiple disciplines, so the focus must be how senior leaders can **create systems that enable middle leaders and others with expertise to engage in observations and feedback**.

Ensuring a supportive learning environment

Strong instructional leadership creates a supportive learning environment for students, teachers, and leaders. Creating a safe and orderly learning environment for students includes **creating systems so that students feel safe, providing a caring environment and ensuring high expectations for social behaviour**. Creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment for teachers and leaders is important as evidence shows that [teacher collaboration](#) can have a positive effect on student achievement³.

Encouraging teachers to collaborate can create collective responsibility in the school which means teachers and leaders work together and have a shared sense of responsibility for students beyond those in their own class. Ensuring a supportive learning environment for students and staff can enable a learning culture where ongoing learning is central for everyone in the school⁴.

Strategic resourcing is an important aspect of all of these strategies. Providing the conditions and resources needed for effective learning and teaching is central to the role of instructional leadership. These strategies are all intended to ensure high quality teaching. However, a list like this can raise questions.

What is the role of teachers?

Teachers are central to this work, and the effective recruitment and selection of staff is a key task of instructional leadership. This involves recruiting, supporting and retaining teachers who have an unshakable belief in the potential of all young people to learn.

What does it mean to develop a supportive learning culture for students and staff?

Instructional leaders have been described as 'culture architects' who work to intentionally create a culture that supports learning for everyone in the school, including leaders. We might begin by identifying the learning needs of students and then ask what our teachers need to understand and be able to do in order to meet those needs.

We do inquiry projects - is that what 'holding an inquiry stance' means?

Holding an inquiry stance and [engaging in inquiry](#) are not exactly the same thing. Holding an inquiry stance is a way of being that means you are curious, open-minded, willing to withhold judgment and comfortable with ambiguity. Inquiry projects sometimes embrace this way of being, but not always. Instructional leadership requires an inquiry stance from all those involved, and is something that can be learned.

What does it mean to ensure coherence?

You might have heard people say that 'keeping the main thing the main thing' is important. Coherence is related to this. Instructional leadership is all about focusing on practices and strategies that support the improvement of teaching and learning. One aspect of coherence involves avoiding a focus on multiple different change initiatives at once (sometimes referred to as 'initiativitis'). Ensuring coherence also involves directing resources and attention towards addressing specific problems related to student learning needs, and monitoring progress towards resolving those problems.

What is collective responsibility?

Collective responsibility happens when teachers stop thinking in isolated and individualistic ways about students, and instead take a view of the whole school and its students. It involves moving from a culture of 'my students' to a culture of 'our students' in the way people think about students in the school.

How can we do all of this?

All these strategies and approaches are important to focus on, although it is impossible to do everything at once. Schools can and should focus on different aspects at different stages. The important thing is keeping the big picture in view and monitoring progress as you go. Instructional leadership is

both **adaptive and responsive to changing conditions and contexts**⁵. It cannot be reduced to a list of dispositions, behaviours or tasks, and involves more than the list of strategies provided here. The strategies provided are part of a bigger picture and it is important to remember that creating improvement is complex work. These strategies are intended as a starting point, and if you are interested in learning more, you may find the recommended reading and links provided below helpful.

Recommended further reading

Bendikson, L., Robinson, V., & Hattie, J. (2012). Principal instructional leadership and secondary school performance. *Set*, 1, 1-8.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40,1, 5-22.

Townsend, T. (2019). *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning in schools: Understanding theories of leading*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Endnotes

1 Elmore, R.F. (2004). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice, and performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

2 Robinson, V. (2011). *Student-centered leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

3 Goddard, R., Goddard, Y., Kim, E.S., & Miller, R. (2015). A theoretical and empirical analysis of the roles of instructional leadership, teacher collaboration and collective efficacy beliefs in support of student learning. *American Journal of Education*, 121, 501-530.

4 Timperley, H., Ell, F., Le Fevre, D., & Twyford, K. (2020). Chapter Two: Creating a learning culture (29-39). In *Leading professional learning: Practical strategies for impact in schools*. Australian Council for Educational Research.

5 Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H., Twyford, K., & Ell, F. (2020). *Leading powerful professional learning: Responding to complexity with adaptive expertise*. Corwin.

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