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# Leadership for learning: lessons from 40 years of empirical research

Philip Hallinger

*Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change,  
Hong Kong Institute of Education, Tai Po, Hong Kong*

Leadership for  
learning

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to present a research-based model of leadership for learning. It argues that the field has made substantial progress over the past 40 years in identifying ways in which leadership contributes to learning and school improvement. Four specific dimensions of leading for learning are presented: values and beliefs, leadership focus, contexts for leadership, and sharing leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper employs a review methodology but focuses especially on evidence from several recent empirical studies. While the author argues that progress has been made, limitations – especially with respect to linking leadership practice to different contexts – are noted.

**Findings** – The paper finds that significant progress has been made in identifying the means by which leadership impacts on learning.

**Research limitations/implications** – The key limitation in this research lies in the difficulty in linking leadership to its context. While progress is also beginning to be made in this area, it remains a limiting factor in interpreting the findings from this body of research.

**Practical implications** – The above limitation means that individual school leaders must still apply the findings both with caution and with an understanding of their own particular school context.

**Originality/value** – The paper extends prior reviews by its inclusion of findings from a series of important studies that have emerged since 2008.

**Keywords** Leadership, Learning, Schools, Principals, Organizational change, Change management

**Paper type** Research paper

Of the seven major task areas for which principals have responsibility, curriculum and instruction has generated the most sound and fury. On the one hand, the principal has been exhorted to exert instructional leadership, while on the other hand, he has been told flatly that such a role is beyond his or any other human being's capacity. The problem with these disputations is that the exponents of a given position have neither defined sharply what is signified by the concept of instructional leadership nor made their assumptions explicit (Bridges, 1967a, p. 136).

Bridges' assertions about instructional leadership in 1967 continued to ring true 15 years later at the dawn of the effective schools era (Edmonds, 1979; Bossert *et al.*, 1982). This research had identified "strong instructional leadership from the principal" as a hallmark of effective urban elementary schools in the USA. While this finding attained



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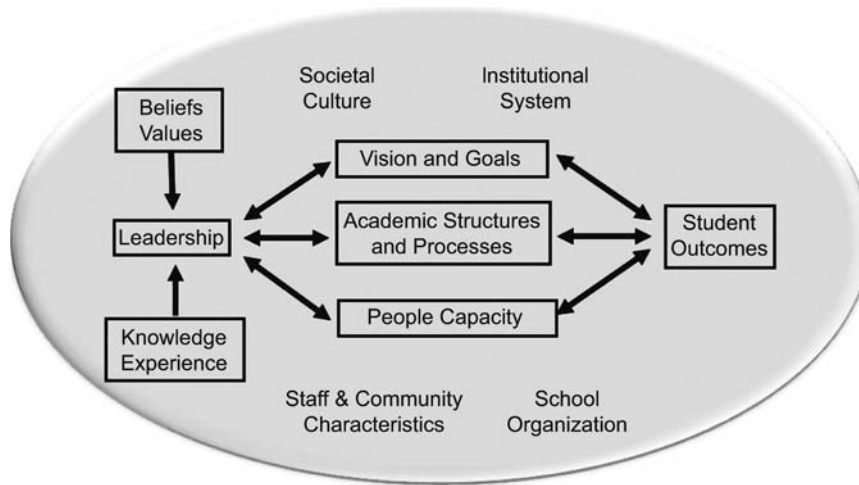
a ready reception among American policymakers, it was in fact, only a by-product of the effective schools research and there continued to be considerable ambiguity concerning both the nature of this role and its contribution to school improvement (Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Leithwood and Montgomery, 1982; Purkey and Smith, 1983). Moreover, in a reprise of Bridges' earlier assertion, respected critics continued to question the extent to which instructional leadership represented a viable model that could be applied broadly to the principalship (Barth, 1986; Cuban, 1984).

During subsequent decades researchers took up the challenge of studying not only instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2010; Hallinger *et al.*, 1996; Heck *et al.*, 1990; Kleine-Kracht, 1993; Leitner, 1994; Wiley, 2001), but also competing models such as transformational leadership (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999, 2000; Silins, 1994), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003; Spillane, 2006), and shared leadership (Barth, 1990; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Heck and Hallinger, 2009; Marks and Printy, 2003; Pounder *et al.*, 1995). This body of research has sought not only to define these constructs, but also to examine if and how leadership impacts students learning (Bell *et al.*, 2003; Cheng, 1994; Day *et al.*, 2010; Hallinger and Heck, 1996, 2010; Heck and Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Mulford and Silins, 2003, 2009; Robinson *et al.*, 2008; Southworth, 2002; Witziers *et al.*, 2003). The fervor of debates over which model offers the greatest leverage for understanding how school leaders contribute to learning has reduced in recent years. Empirical results across a large number of studies have begun to show fairly consistent patterns of impact, and today, the term "leadership for learning" has come to subsume features of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Heck and Hallinger, 2009; MacBeath and Cheng, 2008; Marks and Printy, 2003; Mulford and Silins, 2009). This is the term that will be used for the leadership model employed in this paper.

Although important challenges remain to be addressed, 40 years after Bridges' analysis scholars have concluded that this body of empirical research has matured to the point where it offers a sounder foundation for leadership practice (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). This paper examines progress towards understanding how leadership contributes to school improvement and student learning. More specifically, the paper asks: "What have we learned over the past 40 years about 'leadership for learning' that can provide a guide for practice in schools?". The paper begins by presenting a broad model of leadership for learning, followed by the body of the paper, which examines several key dimensions of the model.

### **Perspective on leadership for learning**

Leadership for learning describes approaches that school leaders employ to achieve important school outcomes, with a particular focus on student learning (Hallinger, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006, 2010; MacBeath and Cheng, 2008; Mulford and Silins, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). While the term "instructional leadership" originally focused on the role of the principal, "leadership for learning" suggests a broader conceptualization that incorporates both a wider range of leadership sources as well as additional foci for action. The model portrayed in Figure 1 synthesizes conceptualizations proposed by leadership researchers over the past several decades (e.g. Bass, 1990; Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Kouzes and Posner, 2007; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Murphy, 1988, 2005; Pitner, 1988).



**Figure 1.**  
A synthesized model of  
leadership for learning

This model highlights several important assumptions about leadership for learning. First, it emphasizes indicates that leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context. School leaders operate in an “open system” that consists not only of the community, but also the institutional system and social culture (Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Mulford and Silins, 2009). Effective leadership is both shaped by and responds to the constraints and opportunities extant in the school organization and its environment (Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Bridges, 1970, 1977). Second, the exercise of leadership is also moderated by personal characteristics of the leaders themselves. In particular, we wish to highlight personal values, beliefs, knowledge, and experience of leaders as sources of variation in leadership practice. Third, the figure suggests that leadership does not directly impact student learning; rather, its impact is mediated by school-level processes and conditions (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Pitner, 1988; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, the double-headed arrows in Figure 1 suggest that school leadership both influences and is influenced by these school-level conditions (Hallinger and Heck, 1996, 2010; Mulford and Silins, 2009). Finally, we note that this conceptualization frames leadership as directed explicitly, though not solely, towards student growth, and particularly learning outcomes.

This model provides a wide-angle lens for viewing the contribution that leadership makes to school improvement and student learning. In the following section we zoom in on selected dimensions of this model, highlighting findings from empirical research conducted over the past four decades. We focus in particular on findings from a recent set of empirical studies that offer potentially important advances in understanding the enactment of leadership for learning in school settings (Day *et al.*, 2010; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Mulford and Silins, 2009; Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). We note that these specific studies span a wide range of international settings including the Asia Pacific, North America, the UK and Europe.

## Leadership for learning

This section presents four dimensions subsumed within this model of leadership for learning. They include values leadership, leadership focus, context for leadership, and sources of leadership.

### *Values leadership*

The leadership model portrayed in Figure 1 is a values-based leadership framework. In the words of McCrimmon (2004, p.1):

I refer to Kouzes and Posner's theory as values leadership, because asking people to undertake a risky journey with you depends on your credibility, as they rightly argue, which in turn depends on what you stand for as a person – your values. Moreover, the changes advocated by such leaders generally entail a shift in cultural or personal values.

Our proposed model of leadership for learning shares a similar normative assumption. Indeed, the model conceptualizes leadership as explicitly aimed at the improvement of student learning (i.e. the model presumes a specific thrust that should be the aim or goal) Moreover, it also highlights the role of values in shaping leadership. Values define both the ends towards which leaders aspire as well as the desirable means by which they will work to achieve them.

A decade ago, Ronald Wolk (2000), the founder of *Education Week* stated, "What we need more than anything else today are principals who are asking hard questions about what it is we want from our schools, what it is we want from our students and how we get it". When he said, "what we want from our schools and students", Wolk was referring the principal's role in defining and prioritizing the school's "terminal values" (e.g. learning growth, academic achievement, social development, virtue, community service, equity in learning, etc.). "How we get it" refers to the "instrumental values" that leaders manifest and nurture in working to achieve their goals (e.g. self-discipline, integrity, fairness, caring, mutual respect, risk taking, inter-dependence, etc.). Every school has a mix of values that shape the day-to-day behavior of principals, teachers and students regardless of whether leaders are aware of or seek to impact them (Barth, 1990; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Saphier and King, 1985).

Indeed, this perspective is not meant to suggest that principals "dictate" the values that guide the school. Indeed new principals must begin by taking the time to understand the values that already predominate in the school culture and the extent to which they are creating a healthy productive learning culture (Deal and Peterson, 1999; Saphier and King, 1985). Principals may choose to subtly or, at their own risk, dramatically introduce changes into the value mix of the school. Dramatic changes in core values are, however, generally reserved for crisis or turnaround situations, and even then school cultures demonstrate a surprising ability to return to the "norm" after overt pressure is removed (Deal and Peterson, 1999).

Principals also act as "gatekeepers" monitoring and managing the introduction of new values are introduced into the school (Hall and Hord, 2002). Saphier and King (1985) highlighted this role of the principal as values leader, stating that principals are responsible for "protecting what's important". Implicitly, "what's important" refers to the school's values. The principal acts in this role through decisions made on a day-to-day basis concerning resource allocation, staffing, problem finding and problem resolution. It can involve taking a stand on a program that the school will and will not

adopt, or on what is defined as acceptable behavior of a student or teacher, or how instructional time will or will not be used.

Values also play an instrumental role in the principal's decision making in another way. Research conducted by Leithwood and colleagues (e.g. Leithwood and Stager, 1989) found that expert principals tend to have a high degree of clarity about their own personal values. They use their values as a "substitute for information" when solving problems in ambiguous and information poor situations. In sum, values both shape the thinking and actions of leaders and represent a potentially useful tool for working with and strengthening the school's learning culture.

### *Leadership focus*

We use the term "leadership focus" to refer to the indirect "means" through which leadership impacts learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). Here we highlight three main avenues or paths through which we believe leadership is linked to learning:

- (1) vision and goals;
- (2) academic structures and processes; and
- (3) people.

Moreover, we further note that leadership is commonly viewed as a driver for organizational performance (Bass, 1990; Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Even the increasingly common "indirect effects" conceptualizations implicitly assume that leadership drives performance.

In contrast, our model frames leadership as a process of mutual influence (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). It proposes that effective leadership for learning is adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of the school over time. The dynamic nature of this model implies that the means through which leadership is linked to learning cannot be reduced to a list of dispositions, strategies or behaviors. No such list could fully account for the contextually contingent nature of successful leadership practice. We shall elaborate on this point below.

*Vision and goals.* A prominent synthesis of the school leadership effects research conducted during the 1990s by Hallinger and Heck (1996) identified vision and goals as the most significant avenue through which school leaders impact learning. More recently, in a meta-analysis of the school leadership effects literature, Robinson *et al.* (2008) reaffirmed this conclusion. Indeed, they placed vision and goals as the second most significant path through which principals contribute to improved learning in classrooms. "Vision" refers to a broad picture of the direction in which the school seeks to move (e.g. educating the whole child). In contrast, "goals" refers to the specific targets that need to be achieved on the journey towards that vision.

Vision and goals achieve their impact through two primary means (Hallinger and Heck, 2002). First they inspire people to contribute, even sacrifice, their effort towards the achievement of a collective goal. This motivational power of vision is highlighted in the theory of transformational leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 2002; Leithwood, 1994). Through joining a collective effort to reach a challenging but meaningful goal, people may come to realize new aspirations and achieve higher levels of performance. Goals also impact performance by limiting staff attention to a more narrow range of desired ends and scope of activities. Clearly defined goals provide a basis for making decisions

on staffing, resource allocation, and program adoption. They help to clarify what we will do and what we will not do.

It should be noted that the early research on effective schools identified a “clear academic vision and mission” as a hallmark of these schools (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983). Subsequent research, however, found important differences across effective schools that appeared to be related to their social context. For example, Hallinger and Murphy found that effective schools in high SES contexts with a history of success appeared to operate with a clear academic vision and mission, but without clearly defined goals (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986). In contrast, low SES effective schools that had more recently “turned around” had both a clear academic vision and mission as well as clearly defined goals. The researchers proposed that in schools with a history of success, the vision was strongly embedded in the school’s culture and provided implicit guidance in maintaining the school’s direction. The low SES effective schools had used goals as a means of developing a shared vision and direction for improvement. This finding is supported in recent research conducted on school improvement in the UK that we will describe in greater detail below (Day *et al.*, 2010).

A notable finding that emerged over the years with respect to the use of vision and goals in school improvement concerns the conceptualization of these constructs by scholars studying instructional leadership and transformational leadership. The instructional leadership literature asserted that goal-related constructs (e.g. vision, mission, goals) must contain an academic focus (e.g. Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Murphy, 1988, 2005; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). In contrast, the application of transformational leadership to education (e.g. Leithwood, 1994; Mulford and Silins, 2003), left open the “value” question as to the focus of the vision and goals. Research findings that compare these two different treatments of goals in research on leadership for learning favor the instructional leadership approach (e.g. Leithwood *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2008).

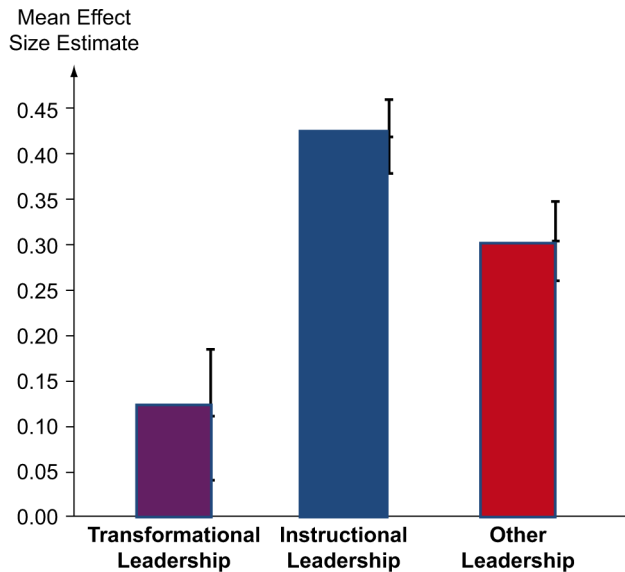
Thus, for the purposes of school improvement, the school vision and goals should be learning-focused. This highlights the critical role that principals play in sustaining a focus on learning in the school. We note that this finding is supported by research on successful implementation of school-based management as well as school improvement, and applies even in contexts where there is strong collaborative leadership (Barth, 1990; Leithwood and Menzies, 1998; Murphy, 2005).

*Academic structures and processes.* As noted earlier, scholars have debated the applicability of instructional and transformational leadership models to understanding how different leadership foci contribute to school improvement. Again using the international meta-analysis conducted by Robinson *et al.* (2008) provides useful guidance in this regard. They were able to estimate the relative effects of different leadership models and foci on student learning (see Figure 2).

These results clearly show that instructional leadership better captures the impact of school leadership on learning. That is, transformational leadership as applied to education does not appear to measure all of the processes by which leaders impact teaching and learning.

We note that this conclusion should be tempered for two reasons. First the studies included in the meta-analysis were all cross-sectional studies and did not assess the impact of leadership over time. Second, it is also true that selected dimensions of the two models do overlap (e.g. focus on vision, and goals, rewards). Nonetheless, Robinson’s study highlights the fact that successful leadership in schools must





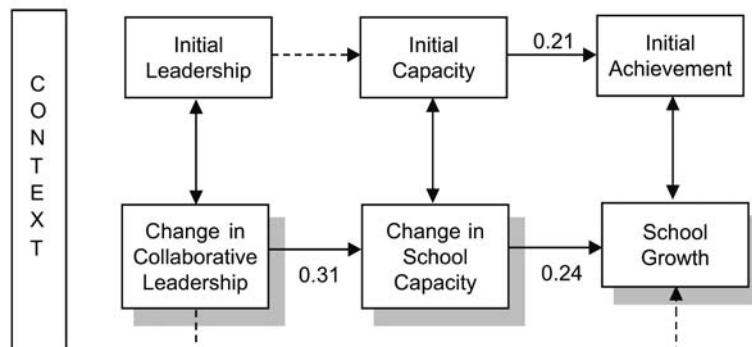
Source: Robinson *et al.* (2008, p. 656)

**Figure 2.**  
Comparison of effect sizes  
attributed to leadership  
models

incorporate an educational focus that is lacking from the transformational leadership model (Hallinger, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 2008).

A recently conducted series of studies (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Heck and Hallinger, 2009, 2010) offers further insight into the issue of leadership focus. We tested a variety of different means by which school leadership could potentially impact student learning. Figure 3 shows a “mediated-effects model” of leadership and learning. This model proposes, as in Figure 1, that the effects of leadership (i.e., of the principal and/or collective leadership) are not direct. Instead they are “mediated” or achieved through school-level conditions that impact directly teaching and learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1996, 2010). In Figure 3, these school level conditions defined as

**Mediated Effects** Where Leadership Drives Change in Improvement Capacity



Source: Hallinger and Heck (2010, p. 103)

**Figure 3.**  
Mediated effects model of  
leadership effects



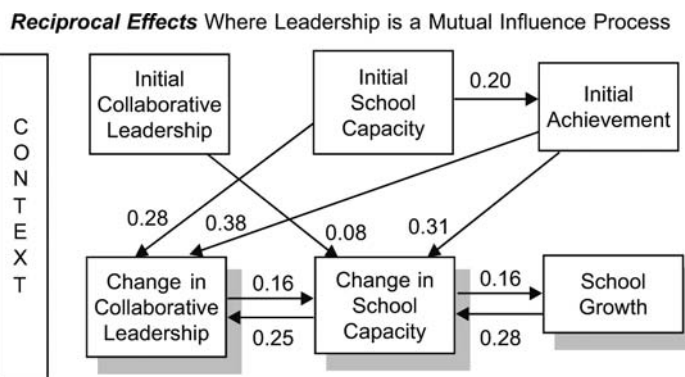
the school's "capacity for academic improvement". This broad condition of the school incorporates the three main vehicles of leadership that were depicted in Figure 1 (i.e. school culture, work processes, people). Leadership was measured as an organizational property (Ogawa and Bossert, 1995) and defined as collaborative leadership.

Several features of this model are noteworthy. First, the model suggests that leadership is enacted in a context. In the case of this particular study, the context was comprised of various organizational conditions such as prior achievement and the socio-economic status of the students in the school. Second, this research examined change in the school and growth in student achievement over a four-year period. Therefore Figure 3 depicts both the initial state of leadership, capacity and student math and reading achievement in the school (i.e. the top half of Figure 3) as well as change in these conditions over time (i.e. the bottom half of Figure 3). This feature of the research was significant in that it enabled the researchers to measure the impact of leadership on school improvement and growth in learning. Interpretation of Figure 3 yields three specific conclusions:

- (1) there was no direct effect of collaborative leadership on growth in student learning in these elementary schools (the dotted line indicates no significant relationship);
- (2) collaborative leadership impacted growth in student learning indirectly through building the school's capacity for academic improvement (i.e. effect size of 0.31); and
- (3) the school's capacity for improvement impacted growth in student learning (i.e. effect size of 0.24).

This study also examined a variation of the mediated effects model which proposed that leadership both shapes and is shaped by the school's academic capacity. Together, this process of mutual influence creates an impact on student learning. This conceptualization, termed a reciprocal effects model, is shown in Figure 4 with the results from the same study. Based on a variety of criteria, the data provided stronger evidence in support of a reciprocal-effects perspective on leadership and school improvement.

These findings are also highly relevant to our discussion of leadership focus. It should be noted Initial Achievement was positively related to subsequent changes in both collaborative leadership (0.38) and academic improvement capacity (0.31).



**Figure 4.**  
Reciprocal effects model of  
leadership effects

**Source:** Hallinger and Heck (2010, p. 103)

However, the converse was not true; neither initial levels of collaborative leadership nor initial levels of academic improvement capacity were directly related to subsequent growth in achievement. These findings provide empirical support for the premise that schools can improve learning outcomes regardless of their initial achievement levels by changing key organizational processes such as leadership and improvement capacity.

In addition, initial academic improvement capacity positively affected subsequent changes in collaborative leadership, and initial collaborative leadership positively affected subsequent changes in academic improvement capacity. This suggests that these constructs were part of a mutually reinforcing relationship in which growth in one led to positive change in the other.

It was further noted that improvement in the schools appeared to “gain momentum” over time through changes in leadership and academic improvement capacity that were organic and mutually responsive. Moreover, the effect of academic improvement capacity on collaborative leadership was stronger over time than the corresponding effect of collaborative leadership on academic improvement capacity. This suggests that leadership can be an important catalyst and supporting factor for school improvement, but that the school-levels conditions, whether referred to as “academic improvement capacity” always exercises an even stronger influence on leadership.

Having seen that leadership for learning is both mediated and shaped by the school’s academic capacity is an important finding. It suggests that leadership is not by itself a solution to the “problem” of school improvement. Change in schools must be systemic (Fullan, 2001), producing positive impact on academic structures that shape and enhance the practice of teachers (e.g. Hall and Hord, 2002; Mulford and Silins, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Murphy *et al.*, 1982; Oakes, 2005). With these results in mind, we assert that research has made important progress in understanding both if and how leadership contributes to student learning (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2008).

*People.* Capacity building focuses not only on the organization but also people. This focus has received increased attention with the onset of studies of organizational learning in the late 1990s (e.g. Leithwood and Louis, 2000; Mulford and Silins, 2003, 2009). Fullan, a strong proponent of this perspective, asserted: “It has become increasingly clear that leadership at all levels of the system is the key lever for reform, especially leaders who focus on capacity building and develop other leaders who can carry on” (Fullan, 2001, p. 21). But where should principals put their focus in order to develop the school’s capacity to produce a positive impact on student learning? For example, should goal-setting, curriculum alignment, teaching observations, staff development, or strategic planning receive greater attention and priority for resource allocation? The earlier sections of this paper addressed this question indirectly. Now we wish to place this question squarely at the center of our focus.

Robinson *et al.*’s (2008) meta-analysis again offers insight into this issue. Their results are shown in Table I. The effect sizes shown in Table I suggest that the principal’s support for and participation in the professional learning of staff produced the largest effect size on learning outcomes of students. This was followed by setting goals, expectations and planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

These results are fascinating in the light of earlier questions about if and whether principals (and these studies mostly focused on principals) could fulfill the instructional leadership role. It does not seem a coincidence that the highest-impact functions in Table I all related to instructional leadership. This suggests that when

**Table I.**  
Leadership impact on  
learning: results from a  
meta-analysis

Leadership dimension	Definition	Effect
Establishing goals and expectations	Sets, communicates and monitors learning goals, standards and expectations; involves staff and others in the process so that there is goal clarity and consensus	ES = 0.42 (0.07)
Strategic resourcing	Aligns resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals. Ensure quality staffing	ES = 0.31 (0.10)
Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum	Direct involvement in the support and evaluation of teaching through regular classroom visits and feedback to teachers. Direct oversight of curriculum	ES = 0.42 (0.06)
Promoting and taking part in teacher learning	Promotes and participates with teachers in formal or informal professional learning	ES = 0.84 (0.14)
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	Protects time for learning by reducing interruptions; established orderly and supportive environment	ES = 0.27 (0.09)

**Source:** Robinson *et al.* (2008, p. 657)

principals are able to maintain an instructional leadership focus in these key areas, it does pay off. The importance of this finding should not be underestimated as it is based on a large body of research completed over a substantial period of time.

*The context for leadership*

We earlier noted that the initial impetus for the empirical study of instructional leadership, the precursor of leadership for learning, came from the studies of effective schools (Edmonds, 1979). A key strength and limitation of this research was the focus on urban elementary schools in challenging circumstances. While improving this class of schools represented an important policy goal, selected scholars reasonably questioned if and how the results about “what works” in this narrowly defined set of schools could generalize to the wider population of schools (Barth, 1986; Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Cuban, 1984).

Implicit in this critique was the recognition that the school context represents an important factor in understanding both leadership and student learning results (Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2007). Leadership theories such as situational and contingency leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977) had, for example, proposed that the leadership effectiveness was dependent or contingent upon identifiable features of the context or situation in which the leader worked (e.g. staff characteristics, hierarchy, availability of resources, power relationships, etc.). Different leadership styles were therefore recommended in response to different situational factors (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977). Indeed, the descriptions of highly “directive” instructional leadership that emerged from the effective schools studies brought to mind a basic tenet of situational leadership. Contexts that are characterized by an urgent need for

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improvement, a lack of demonstrated success, and uncertain confidence may call for a more directive style of leadership.

The limited empirical research that did explore this issue appeared to support this theoretical proposition that leadership styles would be differentially effective across school contexts. Yet, despite this convergence of theory and empirical data, limited though it may have been, policymakers ignored the impact of context when framing new policies, programs and curricula for school leadership. Barth (1986) eloquently decried the pervasive effects of “list logic”, whereby a set of descriptors of effective leadership from one small set of schools was conceived to be suitable for all schools. Nonetheless, a “one size fits all” approach took hold that failed to take into account the contextual differences in which leadership was enacted.

It is only in recent years that researchers have begun to redress this oversight and illuminate the relationship between school context and leadership. Findings have, for example, emerged out of a recent study of school improvement in the UK (Day *et al.*, 2010). A team of researchers examined patterns of leadership across a set of “high improvement schools”. They were able to identify four broad stages of school improvement and approaches to leadership for learning:

- (1) coming out of special measures (turnaround phase);
- (2) taking ownership;
- (3) developing creativity; and
- (4) everyone a leader.

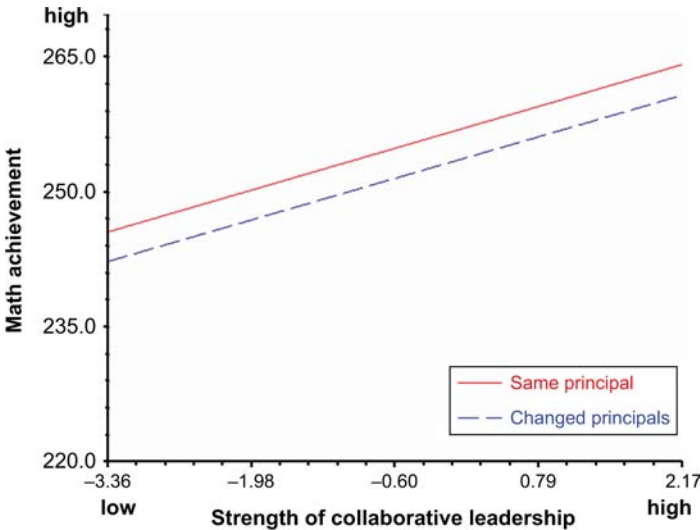
This analysis offers strong support for linking patterns of leadership behavior to successful school improvement across different contexts (Day *et al.*, 2010). It counters both the perception and the policy prescription that one style of leadership is suitable across all school contexts. More specifically, it begins to provide an empirical basis for action that is based on the needs of the school rather than normative prescriptions about “good leadership”. We shall return to this point in our discussion of shared leadership in the following section of the paper.

A second contribution made by the UK study concerns the more in-depth description of how leadership was enacted over time, what the researchers termed “layered leadership” (Day *et al.*, 2010). Layered leadership refers to the “density of focus” or priority assigned to different leadership foci at different stages in the school improvement journey. While these findings are not definitive, this is quite useful information for school leaders. Rather than working with a single set of “commandments” about “effective leadership”, they can work towards developing a more finely tuned set of leadership strategies that are grounded in the needs of their schools. Moreover, a principal working in a challenging situation, for the first time, has empirical support for the proposition that adopting a directive leadership style may be necessary, for the short to medium term. Similarly, a principal who has been using a highly directive style and succeeded in “turning the ship” onto a more productive heading will be prompted to see that use of this style may have run its course. Fundamentally, this research demonstrates that leaders must adapt their styles to changing circumstances and highlights the need for leadership development that enhances flexibility in leadership styles and strategies.

*Sharing leadership*

The questions of whether, why and how to share leadership have been central in discussions of leadership for centuries, not decades (Bass, 1990). The “why” question often conjures up rationales related to democratic decision making and social justice (Crowther *et al.*, 2008). The “whether” and “how” questions relate back to contingency theories that link organizational conditions to leadership styles. As Bridges (1967a, b) noted 40 years ago, “how” a principal chooses to “share leadership” is also more complex than might appear at first glance. Shared leadership is not, therefore, a unitary construct, but rather is comprised of a range of different behaviors or strategies for involving others in decision-making (e.g. consensus decision making, voting, input, delegation, etc.). Recent conceptualizations of distributed leadership highlight this facet of shared leadership (Crowther *et al.*, 2008; Gronn, 2009; Murphy, 2005).

The prior section on context highlighted an important set of conditions that have a bearing on whether and how to share leadership. As Figure 5 suggests, a school that is under special measures may require more centralized, directive leadership in order to create a sense of urgency and jump start the change (Kotter, 1996). As the school’s capacity develops over time, part of that process of capacity development will involve broadening the sources of leadership within the school (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 2001; Murphy, 2005). Finally, during the latter stages during which the school is experiencing success, succession planning must already be in place. This is the time to truly increase the density of leadership throughout the school (see Figure 5). While this pattern of leadership distribution or sharing is suggested by these studies of school improvement, further research is needed to verify that this actually works as a planned intervention strategy.



**Figure 5.**  
Principal stability,  
collaborative leadership  
and student achievement

Source: Heck and Hallinger (2009)

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## Conclusion

This paper started with the goal of illustrating the evolution of research findings on school leadership over the past three decades. It is our premise that this knowledge base, while still incomplete, provides better guidance for those occupying the role of principal today than was the case 40 years ago. In this final section, we will summarize the key findings and briefly comment on the application of this knowledge base in schools.

### *Principals are value leaders*

Both awareness of and the ability to articulate personal values and beliefs represent foundational competencies for leaders in any sector. Values guide decision making and approaches to problem solving, either implicitly or explicitly; explicit articulation is the preferred mode. Learning to use one's values, beliefs, and expectations in concert with the values of the school is a requirement for leadership for learning. Borrowing from Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the change you want to see in your school".

The ability to articulate a learning focused vision that is shared by others and to set clear goals creates a base for all other leadership strategies and actions. The principal's vision and goals should be linked to core values of the school's leadership team and the school community more broadly. Visions written down on paper only come to life through the routines and actions that are enacted on a daily basis. This was the message from research conducted by Dwyer (1985) 25 years ago, and it stands in good stead today. Leadership for learning is not the dramatic flourish or grand announcement of a new innovation. Rather, it is the persistent focus on improving the conditions for learning and creating coherence in values and actions across classrooms day in and day out in the school.

### *The principal is important, but s/he can only achieve success through the cooperation of others*

The impact of the principal's leadership is mediated by the culture, work processes and people. More specifically, the "mutual influence" model emphasizes the profound impact that the school's context has on both leadership and on learning. This perspective should be both encouraging and humbling.

### *Leadership should be aimed at building the school's capacity for improvement*

Both education and school improvement are about the development of human capacity. Leadership for learning should be as well. Robinson *et al.* (2008) produced the rather startling finding about the important effects of principal involvement in the professional learning of teachers. This recalls Barth's (1990) characterization of the school as a community of learners and the important linkages between the learning of school heads, teachers and students.

### *Take time to understand the context first, then develop suitable leadership strategies*

Leaders who possess a single set of tools will find themselves bouncing around from success to failure without understanding why. The capacity to read your context correctly and adapt *your* leadership to the needs largely determines your success. There is no one best leadership style for fostering learning in schools. We are learning more and more about the ways that leaders need to match strategies to contexts; more research on this point is needed.



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*Leaders should seek to share leadership and empower others, but they must pick the right time and methods*

Shared leadership, collaborative leadership, and distributed leadership have become mantras in the profession over the past decade. Unfortunately, much of the discussion is prescriptive, based on values rather than data. Both theory and empirical research suggest that there is a time and a place for sharing leadership. Guidance is available for analyzing when and how to share leadership for learning. When used well, shared leadership is a powerful tool for expanding the school's capacity to achieve its vision and create its own desired future. Note that research does suggest that even where shared leadership is being supported by policy measures, the principal's own leadership is essential to fostering the leadership others.

At the outset of this paper, we asserted that recent empirical findings about leadership for learning represent a sounder foundation for leadership practice in schools compared with 40 years ago. Nonetheless, principals and other school leaders are still advised to use their judgment in applying these findings across different contexts. We recall the words of Hargreaves and Fullan (1998, p. 106), who asserted:

There is no ready answer to the "how" question. Singular recipes oversimplify what it will take to bring about change in your own situation. Even when you know what research and published advice tell you, no one can prescribe exactly how to apply to your particular school and all the unique problems, opportunities and peculiarities it contains.

The next generation of research in our field will need to focus on contextualizing the types of leadership strategies and practices discussed in this paper. That is, we need to obtain better information not just about "what works" but "what works" in different settings. This research will require both quantitative and qualitative studies that describe successful leadership practices across different school levels, at different points in the "school improvement journey" and across different cultures. This is an ambitious but worthy agenda.

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### About the author

Philip Hallinger is Chair Professor and Director of the Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. His research focuses on school leadership effects, leadership development and problem-based learning. He received his EdD in Administration and Policy Analysis from Stanford University. His research publications can be accessed at [www.philiphallinger.com](http://www.philiphallinger.com). Philip Hallinger can be contacted at: [hallinger@gmail.com](mailto:hallinger@gmail.com)

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