School Environment and Leadership: What makes a difference?

Prof Rob Coe, Evidence Based Education
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Cambridge Assessment International Education
School leadership: What I used to think

- Leaders think leadership is very important, but most learning happens in classrooms, led by teachers. They probably **overestimate** their importance.
- Most discussion of ‘leadership’ is pretty **frothy**
  - Common sense and ‘truthiness’
  - Poorly defined terms
  - Advice that is not actionable
  - Training with no evidence base
- All the research is **dreadful**
School leadership: What I now think

• Leadership is probably quite **important**
  • Teachers in troubled schools cannot turn things round without strong leadership
  • Good research now shows that environment and leadership matter

• Most discussion of ‘leadership’ is pretty **frothy**
  • Common sense and ‘truthiness’
  • Poorly defined terms
  • Advice that is not actionable
  • Training with no evidence base

• **Most** of the research is dreadful
Three big problems in the leadership research

• Correlations interpreted as causal levers
• Poorly operationalised constructs
• Advice that is neither meaningful nor actionable
Correlation ≠ Causation

• Teacher/principal individual/collective efficacy:
  • “beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997)

• Many studies find correlations between teacher efficacy beliefs and student attainment (after controlling for other things), and interpret them (uncritically) as evidence that high efficacy leads to better attainment.

• But
  • High student attainment / progress / value-added could cause teachers to believe that they are effective
  • Correlations are small and inconsistent anyway (Kim and Seo, 2018)
  • Interventions that raise efficacy perceptions lead to no increase in attainment (Jacob et al. 2015)
Jingle-jangle
(same word, different meaning, different word, same meaning)

- Types of leadership
  - Instructional
  - Transformational
  - Distributed
  (These are all meaningless / contested / vague)

- We need
  - Clear definitions/operationalisations
  - Common usage across researchers
  - Validity evidence
Advice for leaders

Table 1. What successful school leaders do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of practice</th>
<th>Specific leadership practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set Directions</td>
<td>• Build a shared vision**&lt;br&gt;• Identify specific, shared, short-term goals&lt;br&gt;• Create high-performance expectations&lt;br&gt;• Communicate the vision and goals**&lt;br&gt;• Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff&lt;br&gt;• Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members&lt;br&gt;• Model the school’s values and practices**&lt;br&gt;• Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents**&lt;br&gt;• Establish productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build Relationships and Develop People</td>
<td>• Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership**&lt;br&gt;• Structure the organization to facilitate collaboration**&lt;br&gt;• Build productive relationships with families and communities**&lt;br&gt;• Connect the school to its wider environment**&lt;br&gt;• Maintain a safe and healthy school environment&lt;br&gt;• Allocate resources in support of the school’s vision and goals**&lt;br&gt;• Staff the instructional program**&lt;br&gt;• Provide instructional support&lt;br&gt;• Monitor student learning and school improvement progress**&lt;br&gt;• Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop the Organization to Support Desired Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve the Instructional Program</td>
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Work with the energy at hand rather than try to resist it. Tap into your emotions and use them to your advantage. Make sure that you do not let your incredible creative talent go to waste. Make a plan as to how you can make this happen during the days ahead.

Sources:
www.horoscopes.com
Leithwood et al (2020): Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited
What can the research tell us?

• There is no convincing evidence that any training or support programme for school leaders makes them better
  • **We don’t know how to train effective school leaders**
• There is no convincing evidence about the qualities, skills/knowledge, or behaviours of school leaders we should select for or promote
  • **We don’t know how to select effective school leaders**
  • **We can’t give evidence-based advice to school leaders about what to do**
• It seems likely that
  • A school’s environment does make some difference to student outcomes, over and above the impact of individual teachers and school context
Papay & Kraft (2016)

- Ordered environment: rules consistently enforced, teachers supported.
- Professional development: time and resources for professional development that enhances teachers’ instructional abilities.
- School culture of mutual trust, respect, openness, collaboration and commitment to student achievement.
- Constructive monitoring: Fair performance management with meaningful feedback that helps teachers.

- Not so much
1. **Effective Leaders**: curriculum, leader trust, teacher influence, instructional leadership

2. **Collaborative Teachers**: Collaboration, collective responsibility, Quality PD, commitment, teacher-teacher trust

3. **Involved families**: teacher-parent trust, parent involvement & influence

4. **Supportive environment**: safety, student peer press, student-teacher trust, high expectations

5. **Ambitious instruction**: quality of instruction, academic press
Caveats for school leaders

• Before you invest in leadership training
  • Be clear what you hope to gain (eg confidence, feeling of support; it is unlikely to lead to higher student attainment)
  • Compare the costs/benefits with other things you could do (eg GTT courses 😊)
• With a few exceptions, don’t bother reading the research about school leadership
• Anyone who claims to have generalisable knowledge about school leadership is wrong – don’t give them attention
• Think critically about any advice you hear. Be wary of
  • Survivorship bias
  • Context misfit
  • Opportunity costs and failure to prioritise
More constructive advice

- **Understand** how/when/why different school-level factors may impact students’ learning
- **Monitor** each factor in your context
- **Prioritise** one factor to address, that is both a ‘barrier’ and a ‘lever’
  - **Barrier**: A factor whose current status significantly limits the effectiveness of teaching and learning
  - **Lever**: A factor that can realistically be changed by enough to make a difference
- **Contribute** to the collection of better evidence and generation of stronger recommendations by using the GTT to share data about the status, progress and impact in your school
## The Model for Great Teaching

Great teachers:

| 01 | **understand the content** they are teaching and how it is learnt |
| 02 | **create a supportive environment** for learning |
| 03 | manage the classroom to **maximise** opportunity to learn |
| 04 | present content, activities and interactions that activate their students’ thinking |
Our model: The classroom

- Teacher-student (Dimension 2)
- Creating a supportive environment
- Student-curriculum (Dimension 4)
- Activating hard thinking

Teacher-curriculum (Dimension 1)
Understanding the content
Learning Supports (outside the classroom - mostly)

1. Classroom time allocated
2. Time outside the classroom
3. Attendance at school
4. Disruption to timetabled lessons

1. Family and community support
2. Student fundamental needs
3. Student beliefs and dispositions
4. Teacher collaboration
5. Collective teacher expertise
6. Professional learning
7. Curriculum goals and demands
8. Resources and materials
Management factors

1. Supportive working relationships
2. Improvement mindset
3. Delivery
4. Staffing
Great Teaching Toolkit

• School Environment and Leadership Evidence Review
  • https://evidencebased.education/school-environment-and-leadership-evidence-review/

• Survey tool (in beta)
greatteaching.com
Great Teaching Toolkit

rob@evidencebased.education

@ProfCoe