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Changing Understandings of School Leadership

Tony Townsend

Over the past 30 or so years, I have been incredibly lucky to have been able to see educational systems in many parts of the world. Not only have I held tenured positions in Australia, the United States and Scotland, but I have also had shorter periods of being a visiting professor in other countries, such as Canada, Ireland, Macau, Malaysia, Oman and South Africa, as well as presenting, either at conferences or in professional workshops, in more than 50 countries. One of the things that I have found in these travels is that education is very different, whilst having the same underlying aims. How different parts of the world see things differently can be shown in many ways, but one simple way is to describe how I was identified when being introduced. In Australia, I was usually introduced as Tony Townsend, but in the Middle East and Asia I was Prof Tony, in the United Kingdom I was Professor Townsend, in the United States I was Dr Townsend and in some European countries I was Professor Dr Townsend.

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In each case, I was being treated with respect, but each of these introductions signified a slight difference in local perceptions of the importance of various qualifications or positions. In the United States, most people who work in universities are professors, whether assistant, associate or full, so having a doctorate was a higher symbol of recognition, to the point where I had great difficulty in even getting my colleagues to call me Tony. In the United Kingdom, most people who work in universities have doctorates, but only about 5% of those in universities become full professors (with maybe 20% associate professors), so professor becomes the term of respect. In Europe (especially Germany), both the doctorate and the professorship are considered as a mark of excellence, so both are used, and in the Middle East and Asia, there is an endearing respectful friendliness of the shortened 'Prof' and the use of one's first name. But in Australia, I was just me. None of these is more or less respectful than the others, they just happen to have their own histories attached.

We need to be just as respectful when it comes to looking at education systems and what they are trying to do. Underlying every education system is the ultimate aim of providing for students within their care the best possible start to their adult life. But when it comes to seeing how they do this, once again difference becomes the norm. We have some systems of education that span more than 800 years and others that are less than 50 years. The three universities that I worked for over an extended period of time demonstrate this. The University of Glasgow was formed in 1451, but both Monash University in Australia and Florida Atlantic University in the United States had their first students more than 500 years later, in 1961. Some countries in the Middle East and Asia did not have any university until the 1990s.

Many school systems, especially the religious ones, date back to the middle ages, many government school systems came about in the mid- to late-1800s and some countries did not really have a system of education (just a few schools here and there) until the 1970s. We have some countries that are well resourced, where every child gets to go to school, and we have others that struggle to ensure an education for every child. By 2030, there may be up to 50 million children (with, unfortunately, girls being in a strong majority) that will never step foot inside a school. In the past 30 years, we have talked about school, classroom and system

effectiveness and what that might mean, but can a system ever be effective if some of its students never go to school and a substantial proportion leave school without the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to become a successful adult, as a worker, parent or citizen?

The school effectiveness and improvement research that really started to take shape in the 1980s has been very influential and many countries have drawn on the research from these two areas of study to shape the education systems of today. One of the things that can be confirmed is the important role that school leadership plays in the process of improving individual schools and, ultimately, educational systems. However, the concept of school leadership is a comparatively recent one. Until the 1980s, the term commonly used was 'school management and administration'. Schools in the 1800s had a headmaster or a principal, but the oversight of the management and administration of the school emerged on both sides of the Atlantic in 1837 when in the United Kingdom, two inspectors were appointed by the British Government to oversee grants made to religious schools, and in the United States, the Buffalo Common Council appointed the first superintendent of schools as the Chief School Administrator. These systems of inspection in the United Kingdom and superintendency in the United States remain intact even today, although the roles have changed substantially.

However, after the Second World War, history tells us that school education moved into the modern age. A substantial and rapid growth in the size of educational systems in many parts of the world in the early 1960s was brought about by a post-war baby boom, coupled with an increasing demand for more schooling by societies around the world, during a time of economic strength. Subsequent to this period of rapid growth, a downturn in birth rates in many parts of the Western world enabled some countries to turn their attention from expanding education towards assessing the quality of what was being offered.

In the United Kingdom, works such as *The Home and the School* (Douglas, 1964), *Children and Their Primary Schools* (the Plowden Report, 1967) and *Parents and Teachers: Partners or Rivals* (Green, 1968) had considered the relationship between family background and success at school. When these were followed up by such documents as *The Crisis in Education* (Boyson, 1975) and *The Black Papers* (Cox & Boyson,

1977), the standard of students' academic performance in the United Kingdom became a critical issue. The British Government's response to these concerns was the establishment of the Assessment of Performance Unit within the Department of Education and Science in 1974.

In the United States, formal reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), *Education and Economic Progress* (Carnegie Corporation, 1983), *Investing in Our Children* (Committee on Economic Development, 1985) and *Who Will Teach Our Children?* (Commons, 1985) indicated a similar level of government and public concern about the outcomes of the schooling system and this created a climate in which the relationship between education and competitiveness on the international market became inextricably linked, leading to a situation where schools were charged with turning out, in the most cost-effective way, the maximum number of graduates with the 'right' skills and knowledge as possible.

Concerns for the effectiveness of schools in the United Kingdom (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) and the United States (Edmonds, 1979) were exacerbated in the 1980s by these countries having a seemingly diminished status as the economic superpowers of the world, when other countries such as Japan and Germany attracted increased economic and political status in world affairs.

Concerns for the efficiency of education, related to the cost of education, became associated, as in business, with outputs. Given that a large proportion of government spending was directed towards education, governments were asked to account for their spending in terms similar to those used in business. The issue of the effectiveness of schools became related to the number of students who completed school successfully and the qualities those graduates had, ones that would enable graduates of schooling systems either to become employed or to enter higher education. Thus, the twin concerns of quality and quantity merged and the concept of market-driven education was born.

The notion of the market upturned the previous concept of school systems, where individual educational systems oversaw the operations of the schools within them, to one where each school was charged with doing what was required to ensure that the students within the school achieved the levels reflected by all students in the system. More pressure

was applied on individual head teachers and principals to ensure that 'their' school was one that could be considered effective.

This movement of responsibility from the system level to school level in many school systems around the world changed the way in which the administration of schools was undertaken. Concepts such as school-based decision-making or self-managing schools (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988) emerged in government systems in England and Wales, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, all in the 1980s, and with them came the understanding that school leaders would require a range of new skills and knowledge to be able to undertake the tasks as required. However, in each case the relationship between governments, education systems and individual schools was slightly different. In England and Wales, from 1988, some schools were able to opt out of the Local Education Authority (LEA) system to become Grant-Maintained schools, and received funding directly from the government, while others stayed within the LEA. Edmonton, Canada, pioneered site-based decision-making in 1976 and expanded it to all its schools in 1980 while Victoria, Australia introduced Schools of the Future, where schools became self-managing, in the early 1990s. In New Zealand, from 1988, the government funded the schools directly and there was no education system in between. On the other hand, the United States maintained the relationship between the school district and individual schools until the first charter schools, semi-autonomous public schools that received public funding, were established in Minnesota in 1991. With the support of the Bush Government, which promoted them as a viable alternative to the public school system, more than 5000 (and growing) charter schools now operate across the country, many of them being for profit, which makes them very different from other forms of self-management.

Government funding of schools also varies substantially in different parts of the world: some countries such as the United States only fund public education (but with increasing under-the-table funding for non-government education, through voucher systems); some countries such as Australia have mixed funding, with states mostly funding government schools and partially funding non-government schools, while the Commonwealth government provides the majority of funding to non-government schools with some funding for government schools; some

governments pay for teachers' salaries if the local community is able to finance the building of the school; and yet other countries in Asia and Europe fund both government and non-government schools in equal measures, to make all schools 'public' schools.

What this brief overview provides is a short analysis of just some of the ways that education, although it may have the same underlying purpose globally, has very different approaches locally to actually fulfilling that purpose. One area that has changed over the three decades that have passed since many of the changes described briefly above were introduced is the nature and responsibility of school leadership.

If we think back to the 1970s, leadership (or management) of schools was systematic and hierarchical. Ministers of Education made decisions that were implemented by Education Departments. The fidelity of the implementations was ensured by inspectors (or superintendents) who oversaw the work of school principals. School principals' responsibilities were to implement (faithfully) the decisions made by others and to ensure that teachers followed the requirements related to their employment. The 1980s and 1990s saw that hierarchical approach start to change as more and more responsibilities were shifted from the system level to the school level. These first steps have continued over the past 20 years to the point where we now see school leadership in a different light. Three major shifts have occurred.

The first shift is that we used to see leadership as being the sole responsibility of a single person—the school principal—and everyone else in the organisation was subservient to this person. Now, we see leadership as being a collective activity, with the more people involved and taking part, the more likely that all the issues arising in the increasingly complex environment that schools face these days will be addressed.

The second major shift is related to the first, in that leadership previously was seen as positional: principals were the leaders because they were principal, not because of anything they might do. Principals had been appointed (mostly) because they had been around longer than anyone else, rather than because they were seen to be good at leading a school. Now we see leadership as being an activity; we still have principals, but how they get to become principals now involves them demonstrating that they understand how to lead other people. We also now recognise

that people other than the principal can also be leaders in their schools. In fact, we could argue that for a school to be really successful, everyone needs to be a leader; administrators might lead the school, but teachers need to lead learning in their classrooms and students are most successful when they are leaders of their own learning. So, in many primary schools, we have moved from the principal managing classroom teachers (or in secondary schools, from the principal and department heads overseeing classroom teachers) to leadership teams and professional learning communities where teachers take responsibility for the issues directly affecting them and their students.

The third major shift is that we used to think that leadership was generic. If you could lead in one place, you could lead anywhere. However, numerous examples abound of principals who had led some schools to high levels of success but were not as effective in other places. We recognised that leadership is context specific and that leading a school that is successful is not the same as leading a school that is not. A leader of a school that goes from being less to more successful requires that the leader changes style as the success builds. We also recognise that leadership is purpose specific: we must know why we are leading and be sure to build a common, moral purpose within the school community, if we are to be successful.

These changing understandings of leadership were brought about, in part, during the 1980s when a number of leadership terminologies entered educational conversations. These included transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), shared leadership (Lambert, 2002) or distributed leadership (Cox, Pearce, & Perry, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004). Many other terms have emerged as well: moral leadership, teacher leadership, servant leadership and so on. To try and consider all of these in some depth would be an almost impossible task.

However, instructional leadership, which emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s and leadership for learning, which emerged in the United Kingdom in the second half of the 2000s, are leadership theories worthy of being considered in some detail, for two main reasons. First, these might be considered as successful models of school leadership across many countries. Second, on the surface, they might be seen as

opposing theories, with a strong focus on student outcomes promoted by instructional leadership, on the one hand, and an equally strong focus on developing the processes associated with learning (for everyone in the school) promoted by leadership for learning, on the other. One seems to promote a hierarchical approach to leadership, where the leader tells others what needs to be done, then ensures that it happens, and the other seems to be promoting a much broader involvement of others in the school in the process of leading the school forward and then establishing processes that enable this to occur.

Instructional leadership emerged in the early 1980s and was researched and conceptualised by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The authors proposed three main dimensions—defining the school mission, managing the educational programme and promoting a positive school-learning climate—with a number of specific tasks that are undertaken within each of those dimensions. Leadership for learning was developed by the University of Cambridge through its Carpe Diem project (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2006), and identifies five different principles: a focus on learning (for everyone in the school), the conditions for learning, dialogue, shared leadership and shared accountability.

The focus of this book is to consider whether instructional leadership and leadership for learning can be seen as two sides of the same coin, underpinned by the question, 'How do we provide the best possible educational experience for young people as they move through schools?', or whether they are two very different approaches to leading school improvement. It is clear that, as school leaders, we need to focus on student outcomes and achievement on the one hand, but on the other, we also need to think about the processes that we use to increase learning across the school. It could be argued, however, that the choice made by a practising principal, to be either an instructional leader or a leader of learning, will influence the strategies and actions taken by that principal to lead the school towards improvement.

In order to consider this issue in some detail, we will first focus our attention on the theory behind these two approaches to school leadership, followed by chapters that consider how these theories have impacted on school leadership developments in different parts of the world and then others that provide a better understanding of how school leaders are

developed and then use what they have learned to implement approaches to school improvement.

The Chapters to Come

The chapters of this book are collected into a number of parts. The first part of the book contains chapters by David Ng Foo Seong and John MacBeath that provide us with the theoretical underpinnings of the two leadership theories that are the focus of the book, instructional leadership and leadership for learning. Here, we get a better understanding of the history and theoretical bases of the two approaches to school leadership.

The second part of the book looks at how these theories of school leadership are seen and used in various parts of the world, with chapters from David Gurr looking at research into school leadership and how it influences student learning in Australia, then from David Imig, South Holden and Dale Placek, who consider whether or not the United States has moved away from instructional leadership and towards a leadership for learning approach, and Maria Assunção Flores and Fernando Ferreira providing a European perspective from Portugal that considers both school and teacher leadership in times of economic downturn.

The third part of the book considers how the two leadership approaches may have been incorporated into the preparation of school leaders, with David Ng Foo Seong from Singapore providing an Asian perspective on what it means for school leaders to be prepared for an uncertain future and whether leadership for learning approaches might support this challenge. Then Brian Caldwell considers leadership development in Australia, making the case for professional autonomy, rather than structural autonomy, as a way of empowering school leaders to enable school systems to become more adaptable in the future. Margery McMahon provides information on leadership at all levels from the Scottish context, where the focus on leadership for learning has intensified after a recent report in teaching and school leadership, and then Parvany Naidoo and Raj Mestry consider the development of school principals in South Africa, where making principals effective instructional leaders takes

priority when the massive changes required after Apartheid continue to create challenges.

The fourth part of the book considers putting the theoretical and professional learning elements of the two theories into practice, in different ways, in different parts of the world. Anne Bayetto and Tony Townsend, using case studies, consider the impact of a programme designed to improve school leader support for changes in literacy in Australian schools using a leadership for learning approach, and Toshiya Chichibu, Tetsuro Uchizaki and Yumiko Ono consider a case of instructional leadership as it applies to lesson study in Japan. We then move beyond the school in three very different ways, with George Otero looking at school leaders working with the whole school community in the United States, with a recognition that relationships within the school community must be developed if we are to be successful, not only in academic terms but in other ways as well. Suzanne Cridge discusses an example of a not-for-profit agency working with schools to enable them to network with other schools in ways that support and promote student learning success in disadvantaged schools in Australia and Chris Chapman, Alison Drever, Maureen McBride, Craig Orr and Sarah Wheatley look at schools networking with other agencies within their communities, in a project called Children's Neighbourhoods, Scotland, to provide a comprehensive approach to student learning and wellbeing in the United Kingdom.

Finally, Neil Dempster uses the information provided in the chapters, together with further research findings, to draw some conclusions about school leadership and focuses particularly on the two main approaches we have discussed, instructional leadership and leadership for learning. In doing so, he identifies four main characteristics that must be considered when any form of school leadership exists: purpose (why we are doing what we are doing), pedagogy (how we will do it), people (who we are doing it for, and with) and relationships (which bring the other three issues together into a single focus). In doing so, he covers what Townsend and Bogotch (2008) called the 'what' and the 'how' of school leadership. His conclusion is that leadership for learning and instructional leadership are two very different approaches to leading schools and that leadership for learning has the best chance of fulfilling the moral purpose of education: to liberate all students through learning.

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