Chapter 1
Educational Leadership in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

Students today live in a constantly changing, technologically driven, extremely fast-paced, culturally diverse, and media-saturated world. This necessitates a response from education. However, our schools today continue to deliver a twentieth-century, scientific-management, and factory model of education (Martin 2016; Schleicher 2018). Instead, education needs to be redesigned with a focus on student success in schools, their future workplace, and community life in the twenty-first century. While the definitive contents and specifics of a twenty-first-century school curriculum may remain contested for some time, there now appears to be some uniformity among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners on what twenty-first century competencies are required by students to build a more sustainable future (Martin 2016; Schleicher 2018; Tan et al. 2017).These critical competencies typically include critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, technology literacy, information literacy, and collaboration (see Fig. 1.1) (OECD 2009; Schleicher 2018; Trilling and Fadel 2009).

However, there is a growing concern among various stakeholders that schools are not preparing students for the new demands of the twenty-first century (Meyer and Norman 2020). In schools, the school leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al. 2006). However, among the leadership, it is the principals who are the key personnel that can influence school improvement and enable change (Harris et al. 2017), and act as "powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools" (Manna 2015, p. 7). This is because their influence is not confined to only the teaching and learning in the classroom but is also school wide.

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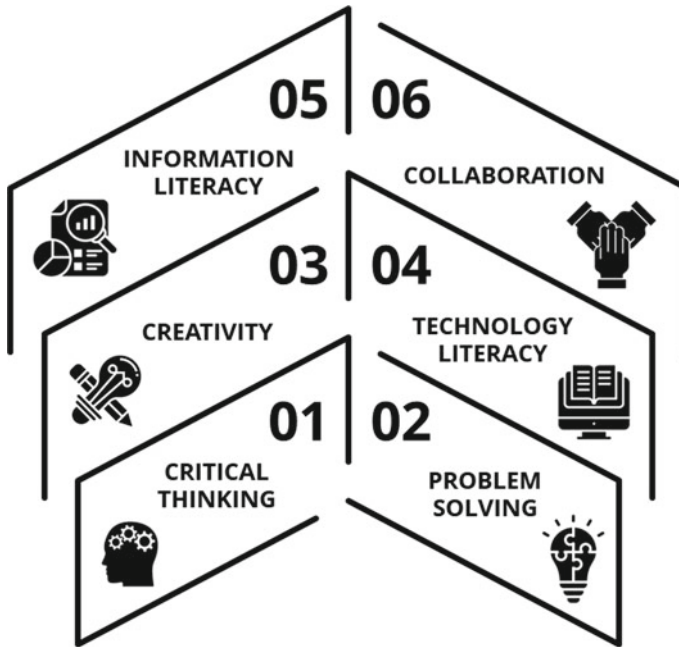Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Fig. 1.1 Twenty-first century competencies required by students

This chapter begins with a brief overview on the importance of school leadership by highlighting the principal's role in developing effectual collaborative working conditions for student achievement and school improvement. It then discusses the challenges, areas of concerns, and struggles faced by principals in today's schools such as burnout leading to their wanting to leave the profession. The chapter then highlights the future of leadership such as instructional leadership, and its proven impact on school performance and student outcomes, followed by teacher instructional leadership, a new paradigm shift that enables principals to find ways to include and strengthen teacher participation in instructional decision-making processes as well as on building teacher capacity in schools. Finally, the chapter explores ways to sustain educational excellence in schools in the twenty-first century.

School Leadership Matters

The school principal's role has changed dramatically over the last decade (Adams and Muthiah 2020; Ferrandino 2001; Marsh 1997), particularly after the release of the famous Coleman Report in the United States (Coleman et al. 1966). The report confirmed the obvious that school principalship is much more demanding than it used to be. Nevertheless, principals are still held primarily responsible for

school performance and outcomes (Adams et al. 2021b; Bush 2022; Harris et al. 2017). However, Hallinger and Chen (2015) observed that the field of educational leadership has seen considerable growth in research especially among developing societies over the past 10 years. The combined forces of information technology, globalisation and a knowledge-driven economy have brought forward an age of accelerations, bringing about major changes in schools and societies (Adams et al. 2017), with school leadership standing in the midst as schools are clearly a "result-driven" business.

School leadership has been given increased attention since then, and the aim of educational research has shifted to identifying school-level factors that might impact student achievement (Özdemir et al. 2022). Research evidence has deemed the quality of school principals as the second biggest school-based factor influencing student learning after classroom teaching (Bush 2022; Day et al. 2016). Subsequently, many scholars in the field of educational management were intrigued by the relation of school leadership to student outcome. Findings have shown either a direct (Chen et al. 2022; Gümüş et al. 2021) or indirect (Harris et al. 2017; Leithwood et al. 2020) influence of leadership practices, theories, models, preparations, and qualifications on student achievement, and that such influence is attained through its effects on teacher behaviour, culture, and school organisation along with classroom practices (Adams et al. 2021b; Özdemir et al. 2022).

Consequently, the literature has established that school leadership matters for student achievement and school improvement (Adams 2018; Bush 2022; Özdemir et al. 2022). An outstanding principal that focuses on instructional rather than administrative leadership may raise student outcomes by as much as 20% across schools (Adams 2018; Bush 2022; Harris et al. 2017). This effect may become more powerful when principals utilise instructional leadership and distribute leadership widely within the school to improve student learning (Day et al. 2016; Harris et al. 2017). Additionally, Hallinger's (2010) review of empirical research on school leadership over 30 years highlights that those principals who build collaborative organisational learning, structures, and cultures, create a positive school climate, and build staff leadership capacities will in turn increase students' engagement and motivation in learning.

Thus, principals play an important role in developing effectual collaborative working conditions (Jensen et al. 2012). Other scholars suggest that principals now have a broader set of responsibilities, including towards the teachers, such as creating professional learning communities to improve teaching practices, making them better teachers, and keeping them on track to improve student learning outcomes (Adams et al. 2022). Thus, the role of principals has become increasingly challenging as they are viewed as the key personnel for effective schools (Day et al. 2016; Harris et al. 2017). The next section of this chapter outlines leadership challenges encountered by school principals, and how these subsequently affect their job performance.

Challenges of School Leadership

The roles of principalship have considerably changed in today's educational era causing significant expectations and demands on school principals (Hult et al. 2016). For example, school principals now work longer hours (an average of 44 weeks per year) in most education systems, manage a larger school (an average of 500 students), and oversee more staff (an average of 40 teachers, and other staff members) than school principals in past decades (OECD 2021). In addition, principals are now faced with new expectations, constant change in governmental policies, and accountability pressure (West et al. 2014). Their role is akin to a chief executive officer (CEO) of an organisation, who is responsible for setting goals and directions, capacity building, acquiring resources, budgeting, and managing stakeholders.

Hobson et al.'s (2003) review epitomised the main challenges experienced by school principals in the UK, Europe, and the USA between 1982 and 2002. Among the challenges principals faced were feelings of loneliness and isolation, the need to emulate the successful leadership styles of previous principals, handling ineffective staff, maintaining the infrastructure of the school, managing the school budget, and implementing new government policies, on top of many other tasks (see Fig. 1.2). Though Hobson et al.'s (2003) work encapsulated the many challenges faced by the majority of principals worldwide, there were still significant challenges, particularly those relevant to the twenty-first century, that were not covered.

Tintoré et al.'s (2022) recent attempt to analyse the literature concerning principals' leadership challenges for the past 15 years highlights several areas of concern, such as the lack of preparation for the job, acute shortage of qualified educational leaders, poor leadership practices, increased standards and accountability, and difficulties in juggling the daily demands of the job (e.g., budget and teacher evaluation, dealing with parents' expectations, lack of parental involvement and support,

Fig. 1.2 Hobson et al.'s (2003) review of challenges experienced by school principals

Fig. 1.3 Tintoré et al.'s (2022) review of principals' leadership challenges

managing change, ensuring equity and equality in schools, maintaining good relation-ships with teachers and staff, handling multiple tasks, dealing with scarce resources, and inappropriate continuous professional development programmes) (see Fig. 1.3).

The struggles and challenges faced by school principals as highlighted above distract principals from focusing on what is the essential, which is improving teaching and learning in the school. Recent empirical studies show that these challenges contribute to a principal's job dissatisfaction (De Jong et al. 2017), and the low attractiveness of the profession (Tintoré et al. 2022). Principals are more likely to experience role ambiguity and work overload on a regular basis. In turn, these expe-riences cause occupational stress and job burnout, particularly among principals who are new to the profession. In the next section, we outline how principals' increasing accountability for implementing changes impacts their health and well-being, leading to principal burnout.

Burnout

School principals lead human-service organisations; this means that the nature of their work requires them to manage multiple people in the organisation, such as staff, teachers, and students (DeMatthews et al. 2021). Principals also need to deal with people within their school, district, and community, all of whom may have different interests, needs, and requirements. Overall, principals work in a highly social and dynamic environment that requires constant adaptation to policies and expectations at the local, state, and federal levels. Consequently, they are also the mediating agents between the school's district authorities and the community, managing both internal

needs, and external requirements (Reid 2020; Shaked and Schechter 2017). Thus, principals hold a significant, but potentially stress-inducing position.

Burnout has been described as a job stress phenomenon (DeMatthews et al. 2021). The intensity of a principal's job can negatively impact their work performance (Wang et al. 2018), health, and well-being (Chen 2021), causing, for example, fatigue, depression, low energy, and weight gain. As their well-being declines, their ability to influence school improvement initiatives and enable change also declines (Maxwell and Riley 2017), leading them to develop undesirable feelings toward their work, such as low self-efficacy, and a reduced sense of personal achievement (De Jong et al. 2017). This inevitably leads principals to develop negative emotions, such as burnout (Chen 2021).

As principals try to keep up with the increasing pressures and demands from the authorities, parents, and teachers, job burnout becomes an all-too-common occurrence. They are expected to be self-sacrificing, always putting the needs of their students and teachers before their own (DeMatthews et al. 2021). Such views, coupled with high job demands, can contribute to stress and burnout. Additionally, challenging work conditions, such as long hours of work, lack of autonomy, and erratic and unpredictable school conditions, can also contribute to job burnout (DeMatthews et al. 2021; Oplatka 2017). While scholars have identified some of the factors leading to principal burnout, there has been limited guidance in terms of principal self-care and healthy coping strategies (DeMatthews et al. 2021).

If left unchecked, principals could resign and seek employment at better schools, or they could quit the profession altogether. Since burnout has been identified as a main factor that contributes to principal turnover (Yan 2020), this makes principalship a less attractive profession, affecting the recruitment and retention of future principals (De Jong et al. 2017). The following section delineates principal shortage, and clearly articulates the factors contributing to it.

Principal Shortage

According to a survey with over 1000 school principals by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP 2021), 45% of them wanted to leave their position due to the working conditions during the pandemic. Among some of the reasons reported were worsening relations with staff, some of which were irreversible, devastating feelings of failure in keeping their staff or students safe, and mental strain. School principals faced an unprecedented situation over the past three academic years, finding themselves leading their schools on top of responding to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were forced to rely on virtual meetings to communicate with their stakeholders, stay informed about standard operating procedures, and make decisions collaboratively (Gkoros and Bratitsis 2022).

Principals were confronted with tough decisions to make to provide assurance, hope, and transparency to anxious parents who were very concerned about their children's education (Weiner et al. 2021). They were not trained to handle such a

crisis, yet they needed to make decisions, and deal with various levels of anger, anxiety, and frustration from the school community (Adams et al. 2021a). In the United States, 26% of principals reported receiving in-person threats from their school community, with 20% reporting that these threats have made them much less likely to continue as principal (NASSP 2021).

Virella (2022) found that new principals desired guidance from their community and stakeholders while leading through the crisis. The findings further highlighted novice principals' need for interdependence as they lacked leadership skills such as decision making. While schools are reopening, and operating under new norms, principals have to be realistic, and resign to the fact that the old norm may not return, and they must live in times of adaptations, and uncharted systemic reforms (Harris 2020). They may have to evolve alongside the virus and learn to live with the pandemic if it remains a clear and present danger. Principals need to alter the curriculum, teaching and learning materials, oversee pedagogy to overcome learning loss, and readjust learning objectives and priorities. Evidence has shown that without effective leaders who are able to focus on instruction, meeting the needs of all students remains out of reach (Benton et al. 2020).

The Future of Leadership

The future of leadership in education is dynamic and multifaceted. It requires leaders who can adapt to changing instructional paradigms, prioritize well-being, and harness the potential of technology. The following sections delve into these topics, providing insights into how educational leadership will continue to evolve in response to the needs of 21st-century students and teachers.

Instructional Leadership

The social and political pressure on education and school systems in the twenty-first century has led both researchers and policymakers to critically examine inequalities in student outcomes among different social groups in almost every society (OECD 2001). Research has proven that students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds do not benefit equally from their education as compared to their peers with higher SES (van Ewijk and Sleegers 2010). Despite the alarming circumstances, there is limited evidence on the role of school leadership in overcoming the achievement gaps between students from different SES groups (Steinberg and Yang 2022; Urick et al. 2021). Instructional leadership remains one of the most popular models in school leadership, primarily due to its proven impact on school performance and student outcomes (Harris et al. 2017; Leithwood et al. 2020; Robinson et al. 2008).

While there is emerging research that discloses distributed/shared leadership as the most studied leadership model during the last two decades (Gumus et al. 2018),

a systematic review by Özdemir et al. (2022) indicates that instructional leadership is still the predominant link between school leadership and student achievement. This trend was also validated by previous reviews that confirmed the importance of instructional leadership in influencing student achievement (Hallinger and Heck 1996; Robinson et al. 2008). Empirical evidence from school leadership research also reveals that these instructional leadership practices are needed to raise student achievements in low-SES environments (Heystek and Emekako 2020; Leithwood et al. 2010) as their central purpose is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Thus, it is possible for disadvantaged students to benefit from it since they have limited external support (Gümüş et al. 2022).

The nature of instructional leadership is that it emphasises the direct involvement of school principals in the improvement of teaching and learning efforts. Thus, it has now emerged as a prominent model to raise student outcomes in disadvantaged contexts. Principals' instructional leadership could also reduce the negative learning consequences of students from low-SES environments by bringing in external support, protecting instructional time, supporting teacher professional development, and promoting a positive school climate (Gümüş et al. 2022). This is because the literature has underlined that instructional leadership practices are contextually influenced and have to be mediated by certain elements of the school for leadership to have any effects on student learning (Hallinger and Wang 2015). This suggests that "instructional leadership is a process of mutual influence that is both adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of the school over time" (Hallinger and Wang 2015, p. 14).

The global trend for accountability in education has kept instructional leadership relevant from the 1960s and 70s till today (Gümüş et al. 2022). Pont et al.'s policy analysis of 22 countries' educational systems concluded that "while practices vary across countries, it is clear that school leadership is generally expected to play a more active role in instructional leadership" (2008, p. 26). Effective instructional leaders are those armed with the expertise to observe and evaluate teachers and provide guidance to them in the form of effective, structured feedback, with the goal of motivating teachers, and enabling them to deliver high-quality instructions. In the next section, how school principals involve teachers as partners in instructional leadership to ensure twenty-first century teaching and learning in classrooms is highlighted.

Teacher Instructional Leadership

It is essential for school principals to find ways to include and strengthen teacher participation in instructional decision-making processes (Ezzani 2020). Often, teachers are not included in this. This makes implementing instructional decisions challenging as teachers are the ones who enact the instructional changes made in schools. Principals should empower teachers to make decisions together as this enables them to become part of the process (Marsh and Craven 2006), whereby they now work with the school principal instead of for the school principal. Teachers

are the personnel who are aware of the barriers in student learning and have the ideas or suggestions to improve classroom instruction. This perspective enables the school leadership teams to make better and more informed decisions to improve the teaching and learning processes in classrooms.

Thus, principals have lately begun to engage in a paradigm shift by developing instructional capacity within their schools to serve the diverse needs of students. These principals engage teachers as partners in instructional leadership (Ezzani 2020; Howard 2006). This approach transforms the school culture in a way that focuses the school community on student learning, and benefits all students, particularly for students from low-SES environments (Harris et al. 2017). The approach of teacher instructional leadership helps diffuse the pressures of high-stake assessments, and places added attention on school culture, where both principals and teachers share collective beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Ezzani 2020). A strong culture, coupled with shared decision making in instructional leadership between school principals and their teachers, has proven to lead to student success (Ezzani 2020; Howard 2006).

A study by the National Education Association found that, as principals and teachers share instructional leadership, they demonstrate a "commitment to the student" and to "the profession" in their obligation "to help each student realise his or her potential as a worthy and effective member of society" (see NEA Handbook 2021–2022, p. 451). Teachers within a school climate that emphasises instructional leadership constantly refine lesson plans, set goals, manage curriculum, allocate resources, and involve themselves in continuous professional development (Park and Datnow 2017). A school culture that cherishes student success through quality instruction will inevitably result in student empowerment in their learning (Marsh and Craven 2006). However, recent evidence indicates that teacher quality can also affect student learning (Adams 2018). The next section offers insights into professional learning communities (PLC) as one activity that maximises teacher learning and makes them better educators.

Building Teacher Capacity in Schools

Barber and Mourshed (2007) observed that in high-performing school systems, principals invested heavily in teachers' professional growth. They play a vital role in encouraging teachers' collective learning, and a collaborative culture in schools (Adams et al. 2022). Upon grasping the full benefits and potential of professional learning communities (PLC), principals are now adopting this concept of collective and diverse groups of learning in schools (Adams et al. 2022). However, empirical findings from past studies indicate that supporting structures must be in place before teachers could be encouraged to participate in PLC activities. In addition, teachers' involvement in PLC requires proper planning to allow feedback, profound conversations, reflective practices, and collaborations among teachers.

Current literature from Western societies indicates that PLC processes at schools have successfully changed teaching practices and behaviours as they involve teamwork and collaboration to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of classroom instruction (Thien et al. 2021). This ultimately improved student achievement (Dogan and Adams 2020). As such, PLC shapes teacher professionalism, transforming them to become better teachers, and producing quality students as a result of their teaching practices (Owen 2017). However, past findings of PLC practices in Asian schools reveal that, although the systems in these countries encourage schools to practise PLC, not all of them are able to adopt it well due to various issues and limitations, such as excessive teacher workload, passive attitudes among teachers, and unsupportive conditions in the school (Thien et al. 2021).

Taking the Bull by the Horns

As principals utilise instructional leadership, and distribute leadership across the school (Day et al. 2016; Harris et al. 2017), school leadership has now shifted from a centralised manner to a decentralised one. Consequently, the old norm can no longer fit its present purpose (Harris and Jones 2020; Thien and Adams 2021). At a system level, it is imperative that schools no longer operate as one entity, but rather operate within the larger ecosystem they are in. Schools should develop networks or collaborate with one another as they have already done with other entities or groups in their communities (e.g., universities, non-governmental organisations, companies, and businesses) to drive a shared agenda for improving standards in the system (OECD 2019).

In order to keep principals in the profession, and to attract new ones, education systems should move away from the traditional function of independent entities, and form a larger ecosystem to which they contribute, and by which they are influenced. In line with this change, shared responsibility and decision making is also required among stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, and the school community) for them to work together and be accountable for students' learning. With this change, the traditional way of schools being accountable for student learning will now transform into continuous system improvement through feedback at all levels of the system (OECD 2019).

Apart from trying to reduce the excessive workload of principals, or increase resources, system leaders need to invest in the health and well-being of the school principals by preparing the principals of tomorrow and training them today on engaging in self-care and healthy coping strategies (DeMatthews et al. 2021). Topics such as mental health and well-being should be incorporated into principal preparation programmes, and continuous professional development programmes (NASSP 2021). Additional support and autonomy from educational authorities is also needed if principals' occupational stress and job burnout is to be reduced (Tintoré et al. 2022).

It has been shown that leading schools during the pandemic requires a different form of leadership (Bush 2020; Harris 2020). Schools needed to be managed virtually (Adams et al. 2021a) while simultaneously requiring swift actions and foresight, with careful decision making in consideration of all options and consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic pointed to implications of the evolving role of principals during a crisis, with research showing that crisis management and communications being important areas of expertise for principals (NASSP 2021). Additionally, principals will certainly need to be trained and prepared in integrating educational technology into their schools. Both future and in-service principals will need additional training and support in these areas, thus placing them at high priority for staff development.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a brief overview on the importance of school leadership by highlighting the principal's role in developing effectual collaborative working conditions for student achievement and school improvement. The chapter then discusses the challenges, areas of concern, and the struggles faced by school principals in today's schools such as burnout, and issues such as principals wanting to leave the profession. The chapter then highlighted the future of leadership such as instructional leadership and teacher instructional leadership and building teacher capacity in schools. The chapter then explored sustaining educational excellence in schools in the twenty-first century.

As principals prepare for challenges in the twenty-first century, the continuous and constant changes in education and in society as a whole could present an entire new set of challenges in the years ahead (Ferrandino 2001). Educational leadership in the twenty-first century require more than a compendium of skills—it requires the ability to lead and empower others, and to stand alongside them to execute important ideas and values that make schooling meaningful for students (Marsh and Craven 2006). School leadership in this era requires principals to never lose sight of a vision, even when confronted with tough decisions.

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