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Take me to your leader: Leadership and the future



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Professor Leo has held a range of academic and senior management posts in a number of UK universities including the Institute of Education, University of London where she was Assistant Dean of Research and Associate Director of the International School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre. She was also seconded to Government in the Department for Education and Skills, London as the Senior Adviser for Research.

She is currently developing innovative research methodologies involving co-disciplinary and co-professional research teams focusing on leadership for the professions.

Abstract

Students need to leave school with dreams for the future, high aspirations and goals for themselves and society; young men and women who will contribute to active citizenship, community renewal and economic regeneration. Schools are critical in realising this mission. The majority of our schools have talented leaders and teachers with the vision, energy and passion to create a sustainable future for their students and their communities. However, it is more difficult for school leaders serving disadvantaged communities to succeed, not only in improving learning and attainment, but in sustaining these. Contemporary research on human motivation and learning is enabling schools to understand better students' reasons for learning and in turn, how they can raise academic achievement.

Introduction

'The future is not a gift, it is an achievement.'
Harry Lauder

It would be difficult to put a start date on the long history of the study of leadership. The central architect of government reform of schools stated recently that leadership is to this decade what 'standards' were to the last decade. However, leadership is a seductive yet elusive concept. Conceptual differences between leadership theories contribute to the continued quest for knowledge about what it is and how to do it. Many concepts underpinning leadership studies in education are rooted in historical theories, although this is rarely acknowledged. From its historical roots in trait theory focusing on common characteristics of effective leaders, to style theory and its embodiment of democratic and meritocratic leadership behaviours to, more recently, contingency theory

and the interrelationship of leadership and contexts, leadership remains a compelling field of study in the social sciences (Leo & Barton, 2006).

Key areas of my research on school leadership and learning focus on the role of social context and socio-cultural factors in cognitive-motivational processes, in particular on achievement motivation. School leaders need to understand how motivational processes can be optimised at all levels in schools and what forms of leadership promote adaptive motivation to learn and achieve in and beyond school. And so, leadership needs to be conceptualised in the context in which it acts. The question of: 'What is leadership?' is, therefore, reframed in my research to ask: 'What is leadership for?' And, who should be leading?' Context is a critical factor in any leadership enquiry.

The question of why students learn – their reasons for learning – has been shown to be among the most critical factors in research on human motivation and achievement in education. Of significant importance, too, is that teacher and student motivation and learning are inextricably linked. The leadership challenge of improving learning in school then becomes a question of student and teacher learning.

The presentation will draw on empirical evidence from of a longitudinal study of leadership in what has become England's flagship 'Academy' for improving learning and performance – leadership that has transformed this school from one of the bottom 10 per cent to one of the top 10 per cent of schools in England – without changing student intake profiles. These improvements were achieved through a series of research-led intervention strategies (Leo & Barton, 2006; Leo et al. forthcoming).

School leaders who focus the organisation on learning and learners,

as opposed to simply performance, can transform motivation, learning and subsequently, achievement. More pertinently, better understanding of the causes of and ways of dealing with underachievement in schools can come from better understanding of students' views of their own ability, competence and motivation to learn. This research is now extending to other academies.

Academies and their communities

'Academies' are a new type of school in England and were developed to replace schools that were struggling to meet the educational needs of young people and their communities. Such schools are located in areas of high social and economic disadvantage, of high poverty and deprivation. Evidence over the last five years indicates that low-income families have become increasingly concentrated in particular schools leading to schools in deprived areas having to cope with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students. Academies are expected to play a key role in the regeneration of their communities in helping to break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation (DfES, 2007). Academies are financially supported by private sponsorship and government funding and provide new state-of-the-art buildings or refurbishments that aim to be innovative in design and built to high environmental standards.

Whether or not academies prove to be a long-term solution to improving learning and achievement in these communities, there can be little doubt that poverty in childhood is the forerunner of poor health, education and other key outcomes in our society. Poverty inhibits motivation to achieve and as a result, future life chances. If we are to break the cycle of disadvantage by which children who grow up in

poverty continue to experience poverty as adults and parents, we will have to tackle deep and prevalent inequalities of achievement. Academies are a key policy driver in addressing these issues. However, the challenge for leadership of academies is not simply economic. Leadership in this context needs to address a poverty of student aspirations; sense of belonging; voice; motivation and choice. Many of these students also experience a poverty of social networks. For schools serving disadvantaged communities, reducing inequalities in a student's life chances by ensuring they do well at school is paramount. However, the challenge here is about much more than qualifications; it is also about imparting a set of values and attitudes that not only mean students do well in school, but that they succeed outside of school in their own communities. The UK is not alone in this leadership challenge.

Leadership in and for the future

Let us now turn towards the future and imagine every school able to respond to the challenge of high achievement, excellence and inclusion and the equitable distribution of educational outcomes (Putnam, 2000, 2004). In envisioning a role for schools such as this, the leadership challenge focuses on students as learners and on the social and pedagogical contexts that facilitate the development of lifelong learning dispositions and skills (Leo et al., forthcoming). This possibility takes place within a complex ecology of learning that includes qualities of leadership, teacher practices, the built environment and the values and relationships that create a culture for the development of lifelong learners. It is in this context that students need to learn how to think about their futures (Covington, 1998; 2005). For leadership, the challenge of what is to be learned and the

capabilities students need to thrive in the future is critical.

Within the turbulent and changing world of educational policymaking, the difficulties and challenges school leaders face are multiple and contradictory. School leaders have to mediate conflicting pressures, including the expectation to contribute to the task of economic regeneration, to help develop active citizens and to contribute to social inclusion. In addition, school leaders have to respond to the proliferation of government initiatives; multiple funding streams; workforce reforms; competition and, at times, a lack of cohesion and sense of direction in the wider policy arena.

Put simply, schools, and their leaders, are now expected to:

- deal effectively with local community needs and a more diverse student population
- be sensitive to culture and gender issues
- promote tolerance and social cohesion
- use new learning technologies
- keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and approaches to leadership and management, professional learning and development
- access high quality research as a basis to develop curriculum and pedagogy
- bring practical and theoretical knowledge together to promote advanced teaching practices
- model democratic forms of leadership in schools that are both strong and participative
- locate their work in the wider community context, balancing professional and lay interests

- have the capacity to adapt and continuously improve their organisation and practice
- close the achievement gap between the highest and lowest attaining pupils.

(OECD, 2005)

Therefore, the context in which leadership is to be exercised is one of constraints and complexities (Leo & Barton, 2006).

Lessons from the future

The idea of continuous improvement in outputs and performance is now an established benchmark for leadership at all levels in schools. For example, the reform agenda has resulted in the schools being driven by such concerns as competitiveness, 'performativity' (i.e. being seen to be good), narrow measurable outcomes and value for money. In this sense, performance is of critical importance. However, performance is not learning. And, rather than a concern with whether schools assess too much (i.e. have too many formal examinations and testing), it is vital to consider whether they assess too little or too narrow a range of human abilities and skills by too limited testing methods (Robinson, 2005).

Sir Ken Robinson, Chair of the UK Government's report on creativity, education and the economy (Robinson, 1999), described creativity as the 'genetic code' of education, and essential for the new economic circumstances of the 21st century. Therefore, a key question for school leadership is how to develop more imaginative approaches to educational assessment that illuminate how schools develop capabilities such as motivation and creativity and to ensure that these are among the outcomes of education for all students. Education systems focus on measurable skills and formal qualifications precisely because we lack

data about educational outcomes which are more difficult to measure.

The corollary to this position is that school leadership for the future requires not only extensive knowledge and a rich repertoire of pedagogic skills, but also the willingness to learn. There is also a pressing need for researchers to pick up the gauntlet of responding to the needs of school leadership to identify conceptual and practical tools that place these aspects of assessment at the heart of learning and teaching for the future (Leo et al., forthcoming; Deakin Crick, 2006).

Despite a vast amount of recent literature on school leadership, there have been few longitudinal studies of the impact of school leadership on student learning and achievement. In addition, research methodologies have not always served school leadership studies well in helping to tease out these complex relationships and effects, in particular in relation to improving learning. More longitudinal research on leadership and improving learning is vital in enabling us to map the challenge of sustained improvement in learning over time, as well as in relation to the leadership context in which not only learners' progress, but in what aspects of their learning progress is made.

New research undertaken jointly by the University of Dundee, Scotland and the University of Bristol, England is comparing student learning and motivational characteristics with other important student variables, including attainment (Leo et al., forthcoming). Building on previous research (The ELLI Project) undertaken at the University of Bristol, we have developed and are currently piloting a new profiling tool (i.e. ELOISE) capable of large-scale statistical analysis of a greater range of complex variables to track individual/group/institution level motivational and learning characteristics to enable us to compare attainment scores in

different curriculum areas. We are also investigating group relationships between attainment, learning and other variables such as behaviour, attendance, ethnicity, religion, teacher, subject and value added score. Working with school leaders and schools as co-researchers, we are, in addition, developing new approaches to the study of leadership and its relationship to improving learning in schools. Through this research, school leaders are learning to enhance their understanding and know-how about how these ideas and strategies can be deployed to optimum effect in improving learning in schools and in creating a context in which communities of individuals can thrive. In this way, students can leave school able to impact on, and contribute to, their social contexts and communities.

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The ELLI Project: www.ellionline.co.uk