

Introducing the School Leader as Researcher Concept

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This article introduces and explores an inter-play between school leadership and research practice in a context of school improvement. This work is timely because school leaders are under increasing pressure to continuously improve the performance of their schools (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Lynch, Madden & Doe, 2015; Hattie, 2009, 2012). This paper argues that school leader research is a potent means through which the school leader can grow professionally, and is also empowered to engage more deeply, insightfully and effectively with the many variables which underpin and mediate their plans for school improvement. This concept has its genesis in a coupling of ‘practitioner research’ (Hilton & Hilton, 2017; Lynch & Sell, 2014; Robinson & Lai, 2006) with the day-to-day work of the school leader.

While engagement in research from a practitioner perspective is commonplace in professions such as medicine and engineering, its application in education, particularly school leadership, is minimal at best (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Lynch & Madden, 2017; Robinson & Lai, 2006). This lack of engagement is in our minds, a loss of potential and opportunity for sustainable evidence-based school improvement.

The context in any change agenda is important and before examining our school leader as researcher concept more closely, a brief introduction is provided to the complex world in which school leaders now operate.

Factors Influencing the Work of the School Leader

Two important factors have ‘disrupted’ the work of the school leader in recent decades. The first is a political agenda to improve schooling in order to access the positive social and economic benefits a highly skilled and educated population offers. The second is a consequence of the first and is linked to research in recent years that connects school leadership to student learning outcomes (see: Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). These

factors are now explored to set the context in which school leader research has emerged. The role of professional learning in this context is also examined due to it being a key response to change agendas.

Government Pressure for Sustained School Improvement

Since the 1990s governments across the globe have focused relentlessly on the performance of their schools, primarily because high performing education systems create economic leverage which in turn generates national prosperity (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010; OECD, 2010). This is not to diminish the social justice and emancipating role that education plays in a modern technological society, but it highlights the motivation that global economics plays in the action of governments that fund and operate education systems (Access Economics, 2005; OECD, 2013; McGaw, 2008; Rothstein, 2010; Scheerens, 2013).

This importance is highlighted through international reports which describe, compare and evaluate the learning outcomes of countries and their education systems which in turn results in a league table of global education system performance. The role of international testing regimes – including the English Proficiency Index, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) – in government policy formulation is evidence of how this data has influenced schooling. In Australia, performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has likewise been a focus for governments and school systems.

In response to the inherent pressures that government policy brings, education systems seek to intervene in the operations of schools through policy positions that mandate an orchestration of ‘strategic system imperatives’ to generate schooling improvements. This, as well as the often talked about increasingly complex world in which we live (due to technological and social change), is a reality for school leadership.

The Impact of the School Leader on Student Outcomes

For clarity of definition, leadership is considered as being inclusive of the school’s principal, deputy principal, and other positions that line manage staff responsible for teaching and learning. This is because each of these roles is deemed to be accountable for providing leadership and direction in relation to the school’s educational outcomes.

The key functions of school leaders include shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to learning, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Lynch, Madden & Doe, 2015; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Scheerens, 2013). In an extensive meta-analysis study Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) found a 0.25 effect size linking a principal’s leadership and student achievement and interpreted this to indicate that principal-led school leadership can increase student achievement by up to 22% in most school improvement programs. In a

comprehensive study the relationship between school administrator actions and student academic achievement, the Wallace Foundation (Mendels, 2012) identified five school-level factors and six teacher/student-level factors that seem to correlate strongly with effective teaching and learning across schools as a whole. The following five practices, in particular, appear central to effective school leadership in this respect:

- School leaders shape a vision of academic success for all students, based on high standards/expectations.
- School leaders create a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- School leaders seek to cultivate leadership in others, so that teachers and other staff assume their part in realizing the school vision.
- School leaders mentor instructional improvement in order to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.
- School leaders seek to manage people, data and processes with a view to fostering and supporting school improvement.

Further supporting the links between school leadership and student learning outcomes is the work of Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) who identify five dimensions worthy of a school leader's attention:

- establishing goals and expectations
- resourcing strategically
- planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
- promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
- ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

Of note in this study is that the school leader's promotion and participation in teacher learning and development had a 0.84 effect size which is highly significant.

The knowledge and skills base of school leaders wishing to improve their schools includes-placing an emphasis on classroom level instructional variables. The impact of the quality of teaching is clear and accepted (Hattie, 2009, 2012). In this respect the evidence appears to suggest that the establishment of instructional variables such as emphasising the importance of prior knowledge, developing self-regulated learning and teaching, dealing with meta-cognitive strategies and establishing structured teaching and explicit instruction matter most in relation to improvement-focused leadership (Scheerens, 2013; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

Although tentative, Scheerens (2013, p. 23) claims that there is a 'fair consensus among reviewers' on the rank order of such variables according to the average effect size reported in meta-analyses. Combining the main results from other studies, Scheerens (2013) suggests that the evidence provides a 'relatively clear idea on what aspects of school functioning should be optimized in order to enhance student performance' (pp. 23-24). This indicates that strategic leadership which seeks to optimise school talent and resources is essential to school change programs that focus on improved student achievement.

Irrespective of such findings Feser, Mayol & Srinivansan (2015) point out that the kind of leadership behaviour that organisations should encourage to underpin positive school improvement remains unresolved. This is partly because there are many different priorities to consider, including role modelling, making decisions quickly, defining visions, and shaping leaders who are good at adapting, as well as effective communication. The consequence is that leadership development programs take on an extraordinary range of issues and, faced with imperfect data, the authors report that only 43% of CEOs are ‘confident that their training investments will bear fruit’, meaning they are not certain what to focus on in relation to leadership development (Feser et al., 2015). This is compounded by the fact that these programs are often offered in response to political demands for change, accountability regimes (for example, key performance indicators), bureaucratic policy and similar such factors that tend to demand ‘quick fix’ responses from a school’s leadership.

The studies that highlight the importance of school leadership, together with the policy imperative to improve overall student performance, encourage a greater interest in and concern with the concepts of ‘educational effectiveness’ and ‘school improvement,’ although the distinction between them has eroded somewhat (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2012). However, as Scheerens (2013) observes, a clear understanding of educational effectiveness requires us to be able to identify the links between ‘means and ends in a complex practical situation’ (pp. 5-6) as the cited studies show.

In this respect Scheerens (2013) identifies as among the main focus areas for ongoing school improvement research studies of unusually effective schools, studies of the effectiveness of teachers, classes and instructional procedures, and studies of the effectiveness of system level policies and institutional arrangements. As pertinent as these findings may be, the studies all require underlying elements relating to alignment and optimisation to be functionally coherent. That is, because they all represent components of a larger, often complex education system, research in this area needs to examine how they are aligned in terms of function, purpose and goals, with a view to understanding how this alignment allows the optimisation of school and system improvement. Working from this perspective, the book seeks to investigate an approach to professional learning where engaging in the process of research is used to inform leadership development and strategies for school improvement.

The Role of Professional Learning

One way that education systems intervene in the operations of schools is through targeted ‘outside class’ teacher professional learning, which is used as a primary means of promoting better learning outcomes as a system (Ingvarson et al., 2014; Leahy & William, 2009). It is important to point out that teachers are no stranger to the preponderance of the ‘withdrawal from class’ professional learning approach (Hattie, 2009; Yeigh & Lynch, 2017). Unfortunately, professional learning programs for improving teaching quality generally adopt a generic, one-size-fits-all approach – the

efficiency factor – that does not take into account the highly variable nature of teacher quality, the specific needs of the individual teacher, the poor knowledge transfer capacity of such sessions or the differential impact that other school factors – such as the role and function of leadership – can contribute (Hattie, 2009; Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull & Hunter, 2016; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

In contrast a study conducted by Hilton and Hilton (2017) revealed that ‘engaging in practitioner research as a professional development activity has a profound effect on teachers’ professional knowledge and practice’ (2017, p. 92). Hilton, Hilton, Dole and Goos (2015) indicated that successful school leaders promote climates that support teachers’ professional growth and ‘that a significant and powerful means by which to promote supportive school climates is through leaders becoming active co-participants in teachers’ professional development activities’ (2015, p. 121). This is supported by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) who identify that school leader involvement in the professional learning agendas in schools has a significant impact on student learning outcomes. The concept of school leader research is built on these understandings.

The professional learning regime for school leaders is more ill-defined in the literature, but generally entails a combination of supervisor interventions and mentoring and education system sponsored professional learning sessions (Rowland, 2017). These sessions, which parallel those of teachers, are more often focused on introducing and enabling leaders to navigate the policies and procedures of the system (Lynch & Madden, 2017).

The central argument in providing these professional development insights is there is a more potent way by which school leaders and their teachers can engage with professional learning and in doing so generating an applied agenda for school improvement. This agenda is evidence-based, reflective and developmental by nature and contributes to the broader field of school improvement (AITSL, 2014; Halbert & Kaser, 2013; Kaser & Halbert, 2017; Timperley, 2011; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014). This agenda is termed ‘school leader research’ and it is a variation on the literature informing practitioner research, in that school leaders use research-based processes to inform and direct their professional work.

Introducing the School Leader Researcher

At its heart, improving the learning outcomes in a school can be understood as an ongoing commitment to ‘continuous improvement’ (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull & Hunter, 2016; Lynch, Madden & Doe, 2015; Scheerens, 2013). Central to the premise of continuous improvement is a cyclic process of review and evaluation and the parallel design and activation of informed plans for corrective actions. This cyclic process references reliable data sources (Lynch, Madden & Doe, 2015; Lynch & Madden, 2017). It is the strategic review of these data sources, in association with the application of research processes aimed at solving a defined ‘research problem’, that underpins the work of school leader research. To understand the logic of the school leader researcher one must first understand what is meant by ‘conducting research’.

In the school context research effectively means the critical engagement with data to clarify issues, solve problems or generate evidence-based foundations for innovation, change and further learnings. One can understand ‘data’ as comprising reports on student learning outcomes, the results of satisfaction surveys or research papers and other forms of literature which inform a particular phenomenon. Data can be qualitative or quantitative in nature or a combination of the two. The concept of research can be further understood in an ‘application’ sense when the school leader formulates a plan to investigate their own circumstance and hence activates a process of ‘action research’. Action research:

[I]s undertaken in a school setting ... [and] is a reflective process that allows for inquiry and discussion as components of the ‘research’. Often, action research is a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement. Rather than dealing with the theoretical, action research allows practitioners to address those concerns that are closest to them, ones over which they can exhibit some influence and make change (Ferrance, 2000, p. 1).

Irrespective of the data source or the problem under investigation, engaging with research requires the school leader researcher to be party to what can be termed a ‘culture of inquiry’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kaser & Halbert, 2017; Timperley, 2011; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014).

According to Madden, Lynch and Doe (2015) a school-based culture of inquiry has two fundamental aspects. The first is the creation of an environment in which the use of research is valued and policies and procedures are enacted to sanction and support associated processes. This environment is enmeshed in a climate where educators engage with research processes through collaborative projects, conversations and reflections where the central tenet is to ask ‘why?’ and ‘how can we improve?’ and to suspend judgements until a result emerges. The second is a set of applied knowledge and skills which enable the school leader (and teachers for that matter) to strategically design for and then collect, analyse and generate findings supported with evidence.

The actual process of ‘engagement with research’ becomes embedded in the work of the school leader and the school’s teachers such that it is considered part of their overall professional modus operandi which in turn becomes key to their effect strategy (Lynch & Sell, 2014; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

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