


Effective instructional leaders don't just focus on student learning. They relentlessly search out and interrogate evidence of that learning.

John Hattie

LEADERSHIP



Shortly after my research synthesis *Visible Learning* (2009) was published, many of my colleagues were unhappy with the finding relating to the overall effect of school leaders. Across the 55,000 studies, which represented a quarter of a billion students, the average effect size of all influences was .40, whereas the effect size for leaders was a few notches below, at .36. An effect size is a standardized method to measure the strength or magnitude of a relationship. My colleagues were disappointed that the effect size for school leaders was below average.

Transformational or Instructional?

In the meantime, my colleagues Viviane Robinson, Claire Lloyd, and Ken Rowe (2008) conducted a meta-analysis that compared two types of school leaders. They found that *transformational leaders* focus more on teachers. They set a vision, create common goals for the school, inspire and set direction, buffer staff from external demands, ensure fair and equitable staffing, and give teachers a high degree of autonomy.

In contrast, *instructional leaders* focus more on students. They're concerned with the teachers' and the school's impact on student learning and instructional issues, conducting classroom observations, ensuring professional development that enhances student learning, communicating high academic standards, and ensuring that all school environments are conducive to learning.

According to various surveys, the majority of school leaders (more than

80 percent) claim to be mainly transformational leaders (Marks, 2013). The push for transformational leadership has come from the business community and from policymakers who are looking to “transform” schools, and it has led to higher status for these business look-alikes within and outside schools.

What Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe discovered was that the overall effect from transformational leaders was .11, whereas the overall effect from instructional leaders was .42. That’s a huge difference.

High-Impact Mind Frames

Let’s look, then, at the attributes of high-impact instructional leaders. It all starts with what leaders think their job is in the school.

Seven major mind frames inform high-impact instructional leadership. These leaders

- Understand the need to focus on learning and the impact of teaching.
- Believe their fundamental task is to evaluate the effect of everyone in their school on student learning.
- Believe that success and failure in student learning is about what *they*, as teachers or leaders, did or didn’t do. They see themselves as change agents.
- See assessment as feedback on their impact.
- Understand the importance of dialogue and of listening to student and teacher voice.
- Set challenging targets for themselves and for teachers to maximize student outcomes.
- Welcome errors, share what they’ve learned from their own errors, and create environments in which teachers and students can learn from errors without losing face.

High-impact instructional leadership is riskier than transformational leadership because leaders have to publicly declare what success means—and they may not get there, at least not quickly.



that is desired for current or projected initiatives. This can be expressed in effect sizes or more informally, such as through improvements observed in student work samples over time.

- *What teacher practices are most related to student learning?* Leaders need to systematically consider causes instead of focusing exclusively on effects. Not doing so is tantamount to praising someone for weight loss without knowing whether he or she lost the weight as a result of diet and exercise or as a result of an eating disorder or drug abuse. Teaching practices need to be based on evidence of their impact in the school.

Approaches that Work . . . Better

If I’ve learned anything from the Visible Learning research, it’s that almost everything in education works. The key question is not, What works? but, Is it working sufficiently above the average of all possible influences? The evidence is clear that leaders who embed evaluation as a core professional responsibility and who know the impact of those serving in the school have a significant effect on student learning outcomes (Hattie, in press).

For example, the effect sizes (ES) of the following are well above average:

- Leaders who believe their major role is to evaluate their impact (ES = .91).
- Leaders who get everyone in the school working together to know and evaluate their impact (ES = .91).
- Leaders who learn in an environment that privileges high-impact teaching and learning (ES = .84).
- Leaders who are explicit with teachers and students about what success looks like (ES = .77).
- Leaders who set appropriate levels of challenge and who never retreat to “just do your best” (ES = .57).

This focus on impact highlights the capacity of leaders and teachers to design effective programs, implement

Defining Impact

The Visible Learning mantra is “know thy impact,” but what does *impact* mean? It’s more than a simple increase in test scores. When effective instructional leaders consider the concept of impact, they think about four related questions:

- *Is the impact valid?* How do others in the school understand the concept of impact? What specific outcomes will you focus on? Do students, parents, the community, and the system agree that these outcomes are worthwhile? Examples of impact include gains in achievement, effects of wellness programs, increased attendance, and evidence that students are moving to deeper learning.
- *Is the impact equitable?* How extensive is the impact? Does the initiative positively affect all students—or only certain groups within the school?
- *How great an impact are you seeking to achieve?* School leaders need to discuss the magnitude of the impact

them with quality, and determine the magnitude of their outcome on student learning. The high-impact leader creates a school climate in which everybody learns, learning is shared, and critique isn't just tolerated, but welcomed.

It Needs a Team

The Visible Learning model isn't one in which the leader is a hero who does everything alone. Improving outcomes requires a team of teachers, students, parents, and community members, all working in collaboration. The team works together to agree on the nature of success throughout the school year. This success can be reflected in the degree of improvement in students' understanding of specific content, through development of more effective learning strategies, or in a greater desire among students to invest in their learning.

There's mutual agreement that any interventions that don't achieve the intended impact will be changed or dropped. If a given program influences only a certain subgroup, teachers use a variety of differentiation strategies to ensure all students experience success.

Start with the Evidence

A major task of school leaders is to lead discussions about the nature and quality of the evidence that would convince everyone in the school that a given practice, program, or initiative had above-average impacts on student learning. This is a key concern of our Visible Learning work—moving away from anecdotes and war stories and focusing instead on quality evidence.

High-impact instructional leaders seek their colleagues' agreement about what constitutes convincing evidence that their school is engaged in high-

impact practices. They might look at

- *The degree to which errors are welcomed* from both teachers and students. Teachers believe it's OK to take risks, to say "I don't know" or "I need help"; the school culture encourages students to actively seek feedback from their teacher and peers. A good test is to watch what students do when they confront errors and mistakes: Do they see these as opportunities for learning or do the errors simply stop them in their tracks?



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- *Teacher collaboration.* The timetable gives teachers opportunities to collaborate on assessments; teachers collaboratively plan lessons with specific learning intentions and success criteria.

- *Teachers as visible learners.* Staff and team meetings focus on how to develop assessment-capable, visible learners. Visible learners are invested in learning, can evaluate their own learning, know what to do when they get stuck, and collaborate with others to pursue their learning. All these attributes are teachable.

- *Teacher appraisals—and their impact on student learning.* In the prevailing environment of high-stakes observation and evaluation, the high-impact leader creates

opportunities for low-risk, zero-stakes observations that allow for teacher experimentation, error, and learning.

- *Teacher observations—and their impact on student learning.* Senior staff members regularly carry out walk-throughs and observations that focus on what students are learning rather than on what teachers are teaching.

The process of clarifying what counts as evidence and then using that evidence as a guide for deciding which interventions to keep and

which to drop is no easy task, especially when pet projects turn out not to be having the desired effect. It all requires strong leadership driven by a relentless determination to maximize the impact on student learning, improve the nature of the evidence about that impact, and make the right decisions going forward.

An Example from Practice

Keilor Views Primary School, outside Melbourne, Australia, exemplifies high-impact leadership. As a newly merged elementary school

(two schools became one), the school experienced significant challenges, but it also had the opportunity to reinvent its aspirations for students. School principal Charles Branciforte, who ultimately was named the 2013 Victorian Principal of the Year, knew he needed to create a leadership team that would work together to drive change.

Student achievement data showed that students were not progressing at the national average, although there were pockets of success. The leadership team gathered evidence through classroom observations and walk-throughs, and it became clear that students were often not at the center of teaching and learning and certainly didn't have the understandings and strategies they needed to

“see themselves as their own teachers.”

For example, when members of the student focus group were asked to describe a “good learner,” they suggested, “Good learners listen to the teacher,” “Do their work,” “Are well-behaved,” “Try their hardest,” and “Start their work straight away.” The school decided that its central purpose was to support each student to achieve at least one year’s growth for one year’s work. Its strategic outcome for students—the outcome through which the school would achieve this purpose—was to grow students as

leaders, did or didn’t do. Noted Branciforte, “We did a lot of work expelling the ‘but’ culture—for example, ‘but our kids are poor,’ ‘but our kids don’t read at home.’”

The school also had to look at what was worth keeping and what needed to go. A commercial spelling program that everyone liked proved to have insufficient evidence of impact. Teachers began to regularly discuss what “impact,” “progress,” and “seeing through the eyes of students” actually meant and looked like. They jointly analyzed effect sizes of their own pro-

include developing strategies for sharing and transferring knowledge and good practice about how students learn, collecting and regularly using data to turn information into insight, and explicitly focusing on student-centered learning.

It’s About the Students

This is instructional leadership in action. It’s as much about choosing what not to do as choosing what to do. The evidence can lead to stopping programs, changing how some teachers teach, highlighting those who have the greatest impact on student learning, and creating ongoing dialogue and professional development that aim to maximize this impact for all students. [EL](#)

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visible learners. Visible learners clearly understand what they’re learning, know where they are in the learning progression, and can articulate their personal learning goals.

It soon became clear that the variability in student outcomes was the consequence of the variability in teacher effectiveness. Too many teachers weren’t making the connection between student achievement and their own practices, weren’t paying enough attention to what students were saying or doing, and didn’t understand the importance of learning intentions and success criteria as a means of ensuring that they and their students understood the purpose of learning and could monitor its progress.

This was where the mind frame of being a change agent became so crucial. It was of utmost importance for school leaders to believe that success or failure in student learning was about what *they*, as teachers or

grams and used evidence of student growth to answer such questions as, What does this mean for future planning? How can we share practices to make the data reflect more consistent success across the grades? and What could be the cause of the differences among individual students? Feedback conversations that center on “knowing thy impact” have become a normal part of how things are done at Keilor Views.

In its first two years, the school exceeded its target for year 5 students: The students, on average, gained almost two years of growth for one year’s input. As students developed their own voice in their learning, they began to see themselves as the key to their own success. Students now discuss what they’re learning, not what they’re doing.

This process has opened the school’s eyes to a whole new set of goals and targets, which have paved the way for future work. New goals

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