CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

David Costello

Of the many responsibilities tasked to principals, instructional leadership has been receiving increased attention since the 1980s and continues to dominate the literature in this age of achievement and accountability. Despite the mounting focus on instructional leadership, the literature remains unclear, at best, as to what is defined as instructional leadership and how this style of leadership is implemented. The purpose of this paper is to describe some core challenges associated with being an instructional leader and provide practical suggestions of how a principal can successfully deal with these challenges.

What is Instructional Leadership?

According to King (2002), instructional leadership, defined in the simplest of terms, is anything that leaders do to enhance teaching and learning. This definition might suffice if instructional leadership were simple, however simplicity is not the case. Instructional leadership is a complex process, which differs across settings, based on individual style, school context, and constituents. Despite the complex nature of instructional leadership, researchers agree that teaching and achievement are at the heart of instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 2000; Fink & Markholt, 2013; Hallinger, 2005; King, 2002). What researchers cannot agree upon is how to define instructional leadership in a one concrete way. There are similarities, however, in what researchers consider to be aspects of instructional leadership, including: ensuring quality instruction (Blase & Blase, 2000; Fink & Markholt, 2013; King, 2002); developing a desirable teaching and learning environment (Blase & Blase, 2000); increasing student achievement (Hallinger, 2005; King, 2002) and, more recently, building shared instructional leadership capacity (King, 2002). Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008) described this shift toward shared leadership as a move away from the traditional view of leader as manager, toward the more recent view of leader as facilitator.

Although research literature reflects this shift toward instructional leader as facilitator, traditional forms of leadership are still prevalent in practice due, in part, to what principals perceive their role to be in response to their school context. Recent studies reveal a range in the perceptions of leadership to which principals subscribe and the contextual nature from which these roles develop (Hallinger, 2005; Reitzug, 2008). Although different approaches to leadership can be viewed as inconsistent implementation, these studies demonstrate the necessity of flexibility when addressing individual school needs.

Challenges Impeding Instructional Leadership

One of the reasons for the shift toward shared instructional leadership is the realization that lone instructional leadership has become less possible as demands on principals have increased (King, 2002; Lambert, 2002; Meyer & Macmillan 2001). Among many of the demands and challenges surrounding instructional leadership are vague conceptualizations of the instructional role, feelings of inadequacy related to curriculum and expertise, work intensification, and time constraints. Because of the lack of a universal definition of instructional leadership, many principals are unsure of what instructional leadership should look like in their schools and how to implement this type of leadership in an effective manner. Fink and Markholt (2013) suggested that, without common standards for the professional practice of instructional leadership, principals tolerate a vagueness that privileges good intentions over effectiveness in the practice. In this scenario, lack of clarity related to instructional leadership results in subpar instructional performance.

Mitchell and Castle (2005) highlighted feelings of inadequacy as a major issue facing principals who viewed instructional leadership as their sole responsibility. In these instances, principals viewed instructional leadership as being synonymous with being a curriculum expert; however, because many principals had been out of the classroom for quite some time, they tend to be uncomfortable viewing themselves as curriculum experts. Additional authors reported similar findings explaining that principals feel they have less knowledge and skill in some subject areas than the teachers they supervise and evaluate (Barth, 1980, 1986, 1990; Cuban, 1988; Hallinger, 2005; Lambert, 1998).

Another challenge inhibiting instructional leadership in many schools is the increasing task demands on principals. Similar to teachers, principals have experienced work intensification over the past few decades, resulting in an increase in daily responsibilities. Such intensification has included added managerial responsibilities, administrative tasks, student issues, personnel management, dealing with external agencies, conflict resolution, resource management, and working with parents (Meyer & Macmillan, 2001; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Because of the nature of such demands, instructional leadership tasks are often left until after hours, at which point, it becomes more difficult to share this role.

Shared instructional leadership alleviates some of the challenges noted above and helps reduce the pressure felt by principals attempting to tackle this responsibility independently. Although there are undoubtedly issues and challenges associated with shared leadership, for example, difficulty getting all staff members on board, the advantages of shared instructional leadership outweigh the disadvantages.

Developing a Framework for Effective Instructional Leadership

There is value in developing a framework to assist principals and teachers to identify what type of instructional leadership would best suit the needs of their school. Avila (1990) developed guidelines to support staff in this process, which recognize

and support the unique context of individual schools. Within these guidelines first, principals are encouraged to create a definition of instructional leadership that suits the needs of their school. In order to develop this school-specific definition, Avila (1990) recommended beginning with a review of the literature to provide principals with a global understanding of the various perspectives represented within the literature, discussing leadership with superiors and colleagues, and soliciting staff input. Providing input enables staff members to express their perceptions of instructional leadership and understand the perspective of the principal. Although not all staff members may agree with the definition, knowing and understanding the definition helps to ensure that everyone knows what to expect from the principal in terms of instructional leadership (Avila, 1990).

Conclusion

Leadership, regardless of the definition, can take many forms. Increasing achievement through developing strong teachers and learners is often forefront for most leaders. This goal can be accomplished by providing opportunities for staff to grow as teachers and learners. Leaders can visit classrooms and follow up with dialogue about what is going well and what could be worked on. Leaders can share resources, materials, and ideas at staff meetings and can invite other staff to do the same. Recognizing the expertise of other educators helps share the school leadership. Leaders can invite teachers into their classrooms or free up teachers to visit one another's classrooms. They can inspire a climate of shared responsibility by developing school goals, activities, and events with the school team. Working as part of a team creates strong teachers who, in turn, create strong students.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding instructional leadership, one thing is clear: instructional leadership needs to be context specific. It needs to be reflective of the unique embody the supports, expectations, and limitations necessary for shared responsibility, developing leadership capacity, and increasing student achievement.

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