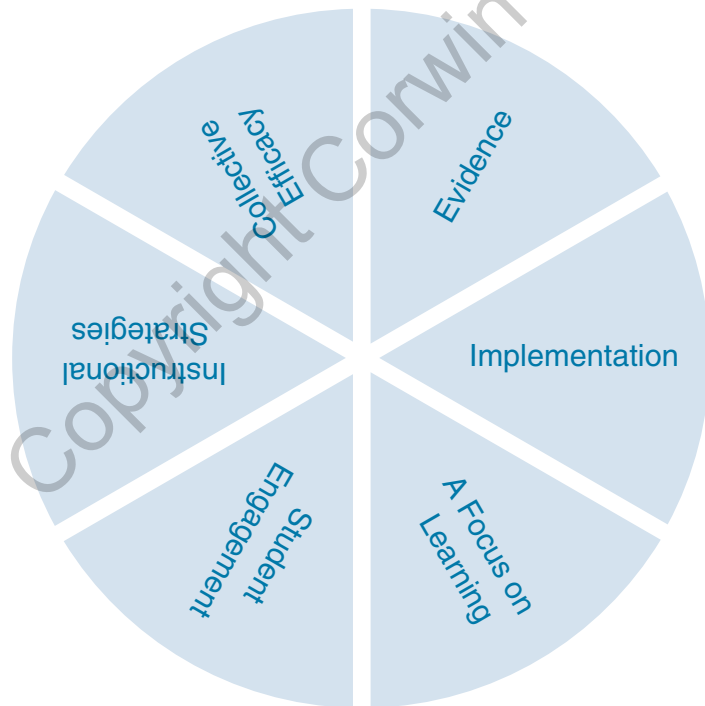


# 1

## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

A Holistic Approach



Scan this QR code for a video introduction to the chapter.



Over the last six years, I have conducted workshops; delivered keynote speeches; created a multi-day competency-based course around collaborative leadership that has been adopted at the state and university levels; and been coaching the same elementary, middle-, and high-school principals for over two years. The first influence out of the six that I explored in my book *Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most* was that of instructional leadership, which is a direct focus on teaching and learning. After teaching the six influences and all the research and nuances that come with implementing each one, I found that I was often asked back to work with leaders on instructional leadership. It happened once, and I enjoyed going deeper into that form of leadership. However, it began to happen again and again, and that's when I realized that there must be some unanswered questions around the research. Why else would there be so much interest?

As I have met and presented for so many school leaders (i.e., instructional coaches, teacher leaders, building and district leaders), I have had the opportunity to survey several hundred leaders, teachers, and instructional coaches, as well as interview dozens of leaders. All of this work originated in North America but has branched out to Europe, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

What I have found is that many leaders both nationally and internationally want to be instructional leaders, and so many of them do an outstanding job in the role, but others are desperately looking for a place to start. Instructional leadership is when those in a leadership position focus on implementing practices that will increase student learning. I believe strongly that through research and experience, I have found the necessary components of instructional leadership that will help guide leaders through that role.

When we understand effective implementation processes, we build collective efficacy and work together to develop common understandings of learning concepts. That collective efficacy and those common understandings will improve our teaching strategies and have a positive impact on student learning, and we can collect evidence to understand that impact. I believe this can be a powerful way for those in leadership positions to practice instructional leadership.

#### **Instructional leaders focus on:**

- Implementation
- Learning
- Student engagement
- Instructional strategies
- Efficacy
- Evaluation of impact

Focusing on the six areas I have identified will help leaders work alongside teachers to set a clear, practical, and impactful vision for quality instruction, which will help them continually place a focus on learning.

The idea of putting a focus on learning in school may sound like common sense, but too often the focus in our schools centers around the adults more than the students (Hattie, 2015). This focus on adult issues can take so much time that leaders don't even clearly understand how much time they are taking to talk about union issues, prep time, student discipline that may have resulted from an uninspiring lesson, or conversations with parents around a lack of communication from their child's teacher. All of those real-world problems (a) prevent leaders from getting into classrooms to focus on instructional practices and (b) force them to rush through formal observations and conversations with teachers, which does not build their credibility as an instructional leader. In fact, many leaders surveyed believe they are instructional leaders, but many teachers who answered the same survey do not feel the same way about their leaders (DeWitt, 2019).

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### Student Voice Questions

How do you encourage student voice in the learning that takes place in your school?

Are students represented in stakeholder groups? Not as tokens so that the adults can *say* students have a voice, but real, authentic opportunities for students to share their voices?

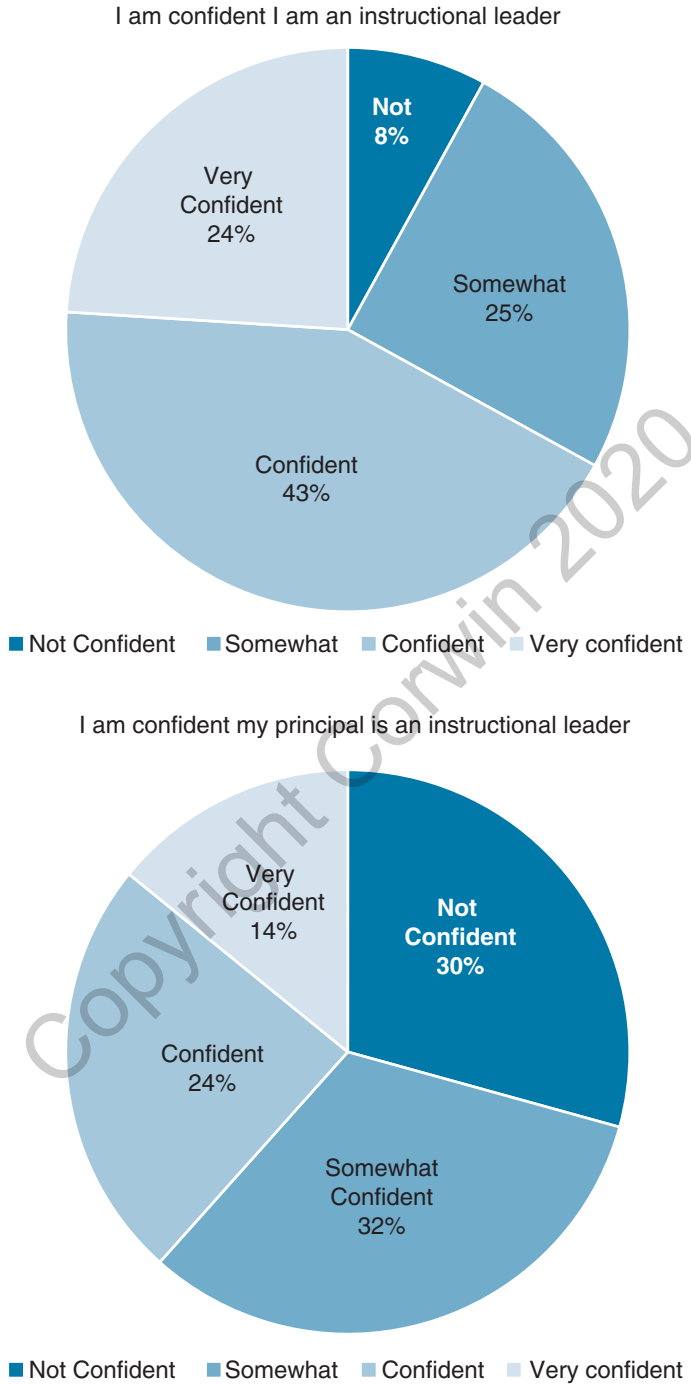
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Figure 1.1 shows the results of a survey that I did in 2019. In the small-scale survey involving more than 300 building leaders and 300 teachers, 67% of leaders (principals) said they were either confident (43%) or very confident (24%) that they were instructional leaders; 25% said they were somewhat confident; and only 8% said they were not confident in this regard.

However, teachers did not reflect the same levels of confidence about their principals being instructional leaders. While 67% of leaders reported feeling confident or very confident, only 38% of teachers said they were confident or very confident that their principal was an instructional leader. Another 32% were somewhat confident in their principal's ability to be an instructional leader. Nearly one third (30%) of teachers confessed to a lack of confidence in their principal's ability to be an instructional leader (DeWitt, 2019).

12 Instructional Leadership

**Figure 1.1** Leaders' Perspective vs. Teachers' Perspective



### Mindful Moment

Reflect on the discrepancy between leaders' and teachers' responses to the instructional leadership survey. How would the teachers you work with answer the survey question? Sometimes leaders have an inflated view of their instructional leadership practices, while teachers do not see their leaders often enough in classrooms, so they have a less generous view.

Complete the following sentence.

As a leader, I:

- A. know what I'm talking about and can follow through.
- B. know what I'm talking about, but I don't communicate that fact effectively.
- C. think I know what I'm talking about, but teachers don't believe it.
- D. know what I should be focusing on but can't do it as much as I would like to.
- E. don't know where to begin.

Take a step back and think about whether you should explore this issue. One way is to administer a building-specific survey in which teachers can anonymously provide their thoughts to you, their leader. Additionally, you can share the pie charts in Figure 1.1 at a faculty meeting. Please just keep in mind that teachers will not speak truthfully if they do not trust their leader.

Believe it or not, a leader may be seen as an instructional leader by some teachers but not others in the same building. The leader in question may spend more time in certain classrooms because of his or her good relationship with those teachers and have conversations around student engagement or instructional strategies. However, that same leader may spend less time in other classrooms because of a lack of confidence in his or her relationship with those teachers. Those teachers who see their leader most often may believe that he or she is an instructional leader, while those who see the leader least often will not consider that person an instructional leader. What this means is proximity matters. All leaders need to maximize the time they have with all staff members, and that time is best used when it is focused on learning.

### Mindful Moment

Consider the times that you have proximity to all staff in your building. Whether you are a building leader, a teacher leader or an instructional coach, do you have access to all staff members for equal amounts of time? How do you spend that time? Is there a focus on learning? Answering this question is not a time for confirmation bias. Please don't quickly answer, "Of course I focus on learning!" Seek out the opinion of a few of your staff members.

An interesting issue with instructional leadership is that many new leaders come to the position with teaching experience, but they leave that experience at the door because they believe they have somehow gone to the “dark side.” They abandon their former lives as teachers in an effort to dive into their new life as a principal or other leader. Other times, leaders are not as keen on teaching as they are on management, so they spend their time focusing on their management responsibilities. This begins to spiral into spending more time in their office checking e-mails; attending administrator meetings scheduled by their district or their regional or state education department; meeting with students to wade through discipline issues; and meeting with families to work out communication issues with teachers. All of this makes it difficult for them to focus on large-scale consistent improvement in the buildings they lead.

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### Student Voice Questions

If your students were asked to answer a similar survey regarding instructional leadership, what would their answers look like? Let’s make an assumption that students understand that an instructional leader is someone who enters classrooms and talks with students about learning. Would your students see you as an instructional leader?

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Elmore (2000, p. 20) provides five principles to help leaders focus on the large-scale improvements they desire:

- The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role.
- Instructional improvement requires continuous learning: Learning is both an individual and a social activity.
- Learning requires modeling: Leaders must lead by modeling the values and behavior that represent collective goods.
- The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution.
- The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

These five principles are not easily made evident, especially by leaders who have not built credibility in their role. Leaders who try to dive into the five principles without first building credibility can create major misunderstandings within their school community.

### Mindful Moment

Think of an instance when you tried to improve your instructional practice at school or made an improvement in your personal life.

What did that feel like to accomplish?

Too often we forget those moments. Think of how they helped make you the person you are today.

These misunderstandings are not just an issue in the United States; they happen in countries around the world, including those that are often seen as providing a more robust educational experience to students. Too many leaders are so busy in their management role that they cannot find time to focus on their role as instructional leader. This constant cycle of moving forward without deep thinking can create stress, especially when it's happening in a district where principals feel like their schools are in competition with each other. Salo, Nylund, and Stjernstrøm found that “school leadership practices, even though they are played out quite differently in relation to the various national contexts and local traditions, have been affected by the global discourses of competition and accountability” (2015, p. 494).

For many principals, in the blink of an eye, the life they once had as teachers in the classroom seems so very long ago. Instructional leadership is about finding a balance and weaving that teaching experience into your practices as a principal. I know what you are wondering: What if I didn't start out as a classroom teacher? Can I be an instructional leader if I wasn't a teacher first? What does that mean for me? It means that you will have to work equally as hard with your staff to prove your credibility as an instructional leader, because you may not have teaching experience to draw on.

Principals who did not begin as a classroom teacher—who instead had experience as a school psychologist, as a counselor, or in some other role—can use that unique experience to provide a different perspective on students and mix it in with the best practices of an instructional leader. Instructional leadership isn't about always having the right answers; it's about asking the right questions, and it often begins with how you implement improvements in your school.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Edmonds (1979) began researching instructional leadership in the late 1970s in mostly high-poverty urban settings. The research suggests that instructional leadership includes practices aimed at fostering teachers' professional learning and growth, as well as facilitating work around teacher and

building goals, school climate, and implementing curriculum in classrooms and grade levels that will ultimately have an impact on student engagement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, pp. 638–639; Southworth, 2002, pp. 76–86; Salo et al., 2015, p. 491). Additionally, research shows that leadership practices have a strong impact on student learning both directly and indirectly (Kruger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007).

Unfortunately, there is not much research focusing on specific ways to put instructional leadership into practice. Salo et al. (2015) highlighted this deficiency, saying, “Despite the emphasis on the effects of school leadership regarding teaching practices and learning outcomes, research on direct instructional leadership is scarce.” The researchers have referred to instructional leadership as a sort of black box: “Not much is known about why, when and how principals guide teachers’ work in the classroom” (Salo et al., 2015, p. 490).

Rigby (2014, p. 611) described the lack of data as a problem of details: “Currently, there is no characterization in either the practice or research leadership literature that outlines the various ways in which instructional leadership is presented in the institutional environment.” To Elmore (2000), a good definition of “instructional leadership” seemed so hard to find that he called it “the holy grail in educational administration” (p. 7).

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004, p. 3) stated: “While evidence about leadership effects on student learning can be confusing to interpret, much of the existing research actually underestimates its effects. The total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects.” However, the researchers warned: “The term ‘instructional leader’ has been in vogue for decades as the desired model for education leaders—principals especially. Yet the term is often more a slogan than a well-defined set of leadership practices.” Leithwood et al. (2004) went on to say, “It is no more meaningful, in and of itself, than admonishing the leader of any organization to keep his or her eye on the organizational ‘ball.’” This is one of the reasons that I wanted to introduce you to the implementation model before we move on to any real discussion focusing on instructional leadership.

During their research, Hallinger and Heck (1996) found that instructional leadership was the most commonly researched form of school leadership, which illustrates the high level of interest in the topic. Hallinger has long been one of the most notable researchers when it comes to instructional leadership. He has broken the practice of instructional leadership down into three categories, each with many components (2005, p. 5).



## Hallinger's Three Categories of Instructional Leadership

1. Defining the school mission
2. Managing the instructional program
3. Creating a positive school climate

### Mindful Moment

Does your school mission focus on learning? Is the word "learning" in your mission statement? If so, it makes it easier to focus on the instructional program and creating a positive school climate.

## Rigby's Three Forms of Logic Behind Instructional Leadership

**Prevailing logic:** The role of the principal is to be both an instructional leader and manager of the school site.

**Entrepreneurial logic:** The focus of instructional leadership is to alter inequitable outcomes through innovation and mechanisms from the private sector. It rejects the traditional training of education schools and a model that includes multiple and flexible approaches.

**Social justice logic:** Focused on the experiences and inequitable outcomes of marginalized groups (Rigby, 2014)

## Moving From Theory to Practice

It is easy to research and talk about instructional leadership, and even easier to debate its nuances, but much harder to put it into practice. Implementing improvements takes a great deal of time and research if you want to do it right, and principals do not always feel like they have the time—or they simply don't care to take the time—to do that.

What makes leadership so difficult is that we do not always approach it with the right mindset. We dive into our perceived improvement before we even know why we are diving in. At the Visible Learning World Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in March 2019, renowned leadership researcher and professor Viviane Robinson said it best when she stated, "Don't design the future until you deeply understand the present." Some of that understanding means diving into the research about the improvement you want to implement. Sadly, I have found that most leaders and teachers do not

take the time to study the improvement enough before they dive into the implementation.

We know that all the managerial aspects to the job mentioned above make practicing instructional leadership difficult for school principals, but all schools need their principals to spend some of their time, even if it's one quarter of their time at first, in the role of instructional leader.

### Mindful Moment

Reflect on your day. Do you have 30 minutes in your day to spend in classrooms? Many times leaders spend time in classrooms but bring their laptop or phone with them, even though the time spent in the classroom is not for an observation. This means they're distracted from what's going on in front of them. Start by disconnecting, and spend 30 minutes in several of your most inspiring classrooms. It will help you remember why you love education.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) correctly stated that leaders at “system, district, and school levels need to influence the culture and processes that support learning and working together in purposeful ways” (p. 53). The authors went on to write that policymakers at the state and district levels made a mistake in positioning principals in the role of instructional leader. Fullan and Quinn write that those policymakers “overinterpreted the research that the principal was the second (to the teacher) most important source of learning for students and proceeded to position the principal as conducting classroom visits, performing teacher appraisals, and taking corresponding action to develop or get rid of teachers” (p. 53). They pointed out that there is not enough time in the day for leaders to move forward this way given their other responsibilities, and those leaders need, instead, to focus on being a “lead learner,” which would indirectly influence each teacher, and to focus on human capital.

I believe we need to take that important work of Fullan and Quinn and find a balance between a focus on human capital and a focus on being an instructional leader. After all, whether we refer to a principal as a “lead learner” or the “instructional leader,” the word “lead” is always involved. Taking a leadership position means taking the responsibility to move a building forward. We just need to make sure we are working collaboratively in order to do it, because the teachers we work with may have a higher level of expertise than we do. We should learn from them in the same way we want them to learn from us.

## IN THE END

Research on instructional leadership has been around for decades, but it is often so diverse in its findings that it doesn't always help building principals become instructional leaders. Over the last five years, I have worked closely with researchers, some of whom will be cited in this book, and have taken the opportunity to do my own research around instructional leadership because I coach leaders, conduct workshops for them, and have a deep desire to make sure that I blend research with practical strategies that will help them grow.

As I mentioned before, instructional leadership really comes down to six driving forces. Those six areas are implementation, a focus on learning, student engagement, instructional strategies, efficacy, and collecting evidence to understand our impact (DeWitt, 2019). If you are truly going to begin on the path of instructional leadership, you must start by focusing on these six areas.

What I would like to do in the following chapters is take the research—both others' and my own—and define “instructional leadership” in a way that building principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders can use. My goal is to bring research and practice together, despite the many challenges to doing that. I will provide practical suggestions on how to move forward, and I hope that I will also challenge some of your beliefs and get you to reflect on your own practices as a leader.

### STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

- How do you build credibility as an instructional leader?
- What is the relationship between your level of instructional leadership and the ways students learn in your school?
- How do you incorporate research into your leadership practices?
- Where is there a gap in what the research suggests you do and what you are allowed to do?
- How has social media impacted your leadership practices?
- How do you go about implementing new strategies?
- What evidence does your leadership team collect to understand whether those leadership practices are working?
- Out of the six areas of instructional leadership that were highlighted, and which we will explore deeply in this book, which one will be the starting point for each person on your team?