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Introduction

Research Conference 2007 special edition

The following articles are based on papers presented at the ACER Research Conference 2007, held in Melbourne, 13-14 August 2007 on the theme of *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*.

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Principals warned: Don't carry the burden alone

School principals charged with improving educational outcomes should adapt their leadership style to fit in with the context of the school's needs rather than adopting a one-size fits all approach according to Professor Philip Hallinger, Chief Academic Officer of the College of Management, Mahidol University, Thailand.

Delivering the opening keynote address to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) annual conference on the theme *The Leadership Challenge: Improving Learning in Schools*, Professor Hallinger contrasted the two most influential models of educational leadership: instructional leadership and transformational leadership offered possible paths towards their integration in the practice of educational leadership.

Instructional school leadership is characterised by strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction by the principal – a 'top down' approach. Transformational leadership, by contrast, focuses on the leader's role in fostering a collective vision and motivating members of an organisation to achieve extraordinary performance – a more 'bottom up' approach.

While there is now an unprecedented global commitment among government agencies towards training principals to be instructional leaders, Professor Hallinger argued that this leadership method is not always appropriate. The type of leadership that is suitable at one stage in a school's journey may become a limiting or even counter-productive force as the school develops.

"One of the major impediments to effective school leadership is trying to carry the burden alone," Professor Hallinger said.

"Long term sustained improvement in a school will ultimately depend upon the staff assuming increasing levels of ownership over proposed changes in the school."

"Leadership must be conceptualised as a mutual influence process rather than as a one-way process in which leaders influence others. Effective leaders respond to the changing needs of their context. Indeed, in a very real sense the leader's behaviours are shaped by the school context."

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Phillip Hallinger is Professor of Management and Chief Academic Officer of the College of Management, Mahidol University, Thailand. Prior to joining Mahidol University in 2000, he held the position of Professor of Leadership and Organisations at Vanderbilt University for 15 years.

[Download Professor Hallinger's conference paper.](#)

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Understanding student motivation a key to raising academic standards

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 according to a visiting international expert on educational leadership.

Professor Elizabeth Leo of the University of Dundee, Scotland visited Melbourne on August 13 to speak at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) annual conference, *The Leadership Challenge: Improving Learning in Schools*.

In her keynote presentation Professor Leo presented evidence from a longitudinal research study of an Academy school in England that has moved from being in the country's lowest 10 per cent on academic achievement to the top 10 per cent without a change in student profiles.

The school achieved this remarkable turnaround through a series of research-led intervention strategies.

"School leaders who focus the organisation on learning and learners, as opposed to simply performance can transform motivation learning and subsequently, achievement," Professor Leo said.

"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."

"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."

Elizabeth Leo is Professor of Organisational Leadership and Learning and Dean of the School of Education, Social Work and Community Education, University of Dundee, Scotland. She has worked successfully with schools and local education authorities to promote research-led educational reform that inspires leadership for inclusion and learning and in turn promotes student motivation and achievement.

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School leaders must focus on teaching and learning

The more school leaders focus their influence, their learning and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their likely influence on student outcomes. This is among the findings from a review of published research focused on identifying the relative impact of different types of leadership on student outcomes.

The research findings were presented to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) annual conference, *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*, by Professor Viviane Robinson of the University of Auckland.

Professor Robinson and her colleagues reviewed 24 international studies published between 1985 and 2006 that provided evidence about the links between leadership and student outcomes.

They identified five leadership dimensions that had a particularly powerful impact on students: Establishing goals and expectations; Strategic resourcing; Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

"There is unprecedented international interest in the question of how educational leaders influence a range of student outcomes," Professor Robinson said.

"This interest reflects the conviction of the public and politicians that school leaders make a substantial difference to the quality of teaching, and hence the quality of learning, in their school.

"However, while this belief is supported by the qualitative research on the impact of leadership on school effectiveness and improvement, quantitative research, using large samples of schools produces more modest findings for the effect of leadership overall. Despite this overall finding, there are particular types of leadership that do have an important indirect effect on student outcomes. Those types include involvement with teachers in planning and oversight of the teaching programme and active participation with teachers in professional learning and development."

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Leadership theory, research and practice needs to be more closely linked to research on effective teaching, so that there is a greater focus on what leaders need to know and do to support teachers in using the teaching approaches that raise achievement and reduce disparity.

Viviane Robinson is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She is an organisational psychologist, specialising in organisational effectiveness and improvement, leadership and the relationship between research and the improvement of practice. The research she is presenting is part of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis programme which examines the impact of selected aspects of the education system on student outcomes.

[Download Professor Robinson's conference paper.](#)

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Leadership stress deters potential principals

Fundamental cultural change is necessary to reform the institution of school leadership in the 21st century, says education policy researcher Dr Louise Watson.

Dr Watson addressed the challenge of attracting and sustaining effective school leaders at the Australian Council for Educational Research annual conference on 13 August.

Posing the question 'Why would anyone want this job?' Dr Watson argued that while there has been considerable concern about an impending crisis in school leadership due to a shrinking pool of applicants for principals' positions, the problem is not a lack of qualified leaders, but a lack of interest in leadership roles due to the increasing pressure such positions entail.

The total number of schools in Australia has remained roughly the same over the past 30 years, whereas the size of the teaching workforce has increased by over a third, which implies that there should be ample numbers of potential applicants for leadership positions.

There is compelling evidence, however, that the role of school principals has also changed over time, with increased expectations of management at the expense of educational leadership.

"If the job of school principal has become more demanding and stressful, this knowledge could be deterring potential applicants from applying for the principalship, and may also account for their different levels of interest in applying for positions in particular types of school," Dr Watson said.

Governments have responded to the perceived crisis in school leadership primarily by building capacity within the existing teaching force, through programs to identify and support potential school leaders early in their teaching careers – but, if it is the stress and demands of leadership deterring potential applicants, such government initiatives may not be enough.

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“Fundamental policy reform may be necessary to make educational leadership sustainable in the future,” she said.

Louise Watson is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and Community Studies, University of Canberra.

[Download Dr Watson's conference paper.](#)

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The best principals are both demanding and responsive

Schools that focus only on being more responsive to students without also setting high expectations and demands are making a fundamental mistake according to a paper delivered to ACER's Research Conference 2007 - The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools.

[Professor Stephen Dinham](#), ACER's Research Director, Teaching and Leadership, told delegates that educational leadership, like teaching and life generally, is heavily dependent on relationships.

In his presentation Professor Dinham explored two fundamental dimensions to relationships: responsiveness and demandingness and their influence on teaching and learning in Australian schools.

According to Professor Dinham, since the 1960s there has been a greater focus on meeting individual student needs and this has been reflected in school teaching and leadership styles which focus on the individual student, sometimes at the expense of high academic expectations.

"Put simply, demandingness and responsiveness have been falsely dichotomised. Ideologically it was believed that any increase in responsiveness towards students required a decrease in demandingness: to be responsive was to be progressive; while to be demanding was traditional."

"However, our research has shown that the best school leaders and teachers see a focus on individual needs and student self esteem as underpinning academic success. They adopt an 'authoritative' style that blends high responsiveness and high demandingness rather than treating the two as mutually exclusive."

He argues that the 'false dichotomising' of demandingness and responsiveness in teaching and school leadership has been a mistake and remains a problem in some schools today.

Professor Dinham joined ACER in July 2007.

[Download Professor Dinham's conference paper.](#)

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Leadership standards the key to preparing better principals

Australia must implement school leadership standards if it wants well-prepared principals according to Dr Lawrence Ingvarson and Michelle Anderson of ACER.

Dr Ingvarson and Ms Anderson presented the findings of their international review of leadership standards to the ACER annual research conference *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*.

Traditional methods for preparing school leaders do not stand up in the changing context within which school leaders work, characterised by increasing complexity in expectations of school leaders and greater demands for accountability, the researchers say.

They argue that the quality of school leadership has seldom mattered more, and yet it has been possible to gain school principal positions with little formal training in school leadership, because Australia has no systematic program for preparing school leaders across most states and territories.

"Many attempts are being made in Australia, as elsewhere, to use standards to guide professional learning. The challenge is to find methods of professional learning that are effective in helping future leaders develop toward those standards and show that they have met them. To this end, Australia must act urgently if it wants well-prepared principals," Ms Anderson said.

"The teaching profession must play a strong role in not only developing, but operating, a national system for the professional development of its school leaders and principals. The system must be guided by profession-wide standards and it must provide a certification that holds respect and credibility with all education authorities as a valid indicator of a principal's demonstrated leadership abilities," Dr Ingvarson said.

[Dr Lawrence Ingvarson](#) is a Principal Research Fellow, and [Michelle Anderson](#) is a Senior Research Fellow, in the Teaching and Learning Program at the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER).

[Download the conference paper.](#)

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ACER UPDATE

Research Conference 2008

Research Conference 2008 will take place at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, Queensland from 10-12 August 2008. The theme of the conference will be *Educating for Effective Participation - Citizenship and work: what the research says*. Conference speakers will include Professor Richard Sweet of SweetGroup, ACT; Professor Stuart Macintyre of Harvard University and Suzanne Mellor and Gabrielle Matters of ACER. Further information on the conference will be added to the conference webpage as it becomes available. Information available to date is included in the conference flyer.

Australian Education Review 53

Australian Education Review 53 will elaborate on issues raised by Research Conference 2007 - *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*. The review argues for an emphasis on continuity, independence, community and heterogeneity, to balance the current overemphasis on constant change, dependence, individualism and homogeneity. Successful school leaders avoid the much promoted one-size-fits-all approach to leadership, and become an independent rather than a dependent variable in their school. They can take the opportunity to create communities of professional learners.

Australian Education Review 53 is written by Professor Bill Mulford, Professor and Director of the Leadership for Learning Research Group, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania. It will be available early in 2008. For further information about the Australian Education Review series visit the [AER website](#).

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Conference proceedings available online

The full conference proceedings and individual papers from Research Conference 2007 - *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools* are now available online.

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