

Introduction

Have you ever tried to go on one of the popular diets out there? Whether we are on social media or sitting back watching television at night, we are exposed to what seems like countless diets. Some ask us to cut out carbs, some tell us to cut out sugar and some prohibit foods containing flour. Some of them ask us to fast for 16 hours a day. What I have often found is that these diets give quick results, but we cannot maintain such eating habits for a long time. We cannot sustain diets that ask us to cut out so much of what we eat, because at the first feeling of frustration we will go back to old habits. Even when we are excited about the prospect of losing weight, we have those moments that take us two steps forward and one step back, and that's when we are on the verge of collapse.

Over the last couple of years, I have turned to a healthier way to live. It began when I started looking at photos of myself that people shared on social media, and I thought the photos made me look heavy. So many times I chalked it up to a bad photo or a bad angle. I soon realized it was not the photo and that I was no longer looking like the long-distance runner I used to be so many years ago. So, I talked with a few friends who lived healthy lives and began to change small areas that had led to my weight gain. I cut down on snacks. Instead of doing the elliptical machine for 30 minutes five times a week, I bumped it up to 60 minutes five or six times a week. I began practicing meditation every morning and every night, because I found that some of my unhealthy habits, like drinking too much red wine, were triggered by the anxiety and stress I was feeling. After a few months of meditation, I cut out red wine and cut down on drinking overall. Over the last year and a half, I changed my habits one small step at a time and ultimately lost 35 pounds. I hadn't signed on to a miracle diet; instead, I had taken a much more holistic approach to changing my lifestyle. Now I am much healthier, I don't need as much prescription medication for my aging body, and my mind is much more clear. I have been able to keep going on this much healthier path for two years.

2 Instructional Leadership

The research around instructional leadership is much like the information we see online around diets. Fads, shiny new toys found on social media, and prescriptive guidelines of “don’t do this—do that” abound, but many times such approaches lead to change that doesn’t last, and then we find ourselves going back to old habits. The heavy weight of our jobs returns like the pounds we once thought we had shed forever.

That doesn’t seem healthy. I prefer a much more holistic approach to instructional leadership, where we can make small changes that will persist for a long time. The teachers and students around us are tired of quick fixes that never last. They deserve more from us. That means we must invest in collaborating with our staff and work on improvements that may take a year or two to achieve. Yes, instructional leadership and improvement can have short-term benefits, but we need to make sure we focus on long-term commitments as well.

Instructional leadership is a topic that I have long been interested in. We have all had great times in our lives that we remember fondly. One of those times for me was when I was teaching at a high-poverty elementary school in the city while also completing my degree in school administration, doing a 600-hour internship as part of that degree, and teaching as an adjunct professor at the same university I was attending. Yes, my life was busy, but I had a supportive partner, and it was one of the most influential learning experiences in my life. During that crazy period, I was taking a Critical Issues course from 4:00 p.m. to 7:15 and then teaching a course from 7:30 to 10:00, and that was after a full day of teaching and putting in internship hours.

It may sound overwhelming, and perhaps it was (a little), but I was living through a time when I was completely enveloped by leadership and watching how it transferred to the students in my elementary classroom, the graduate course I was teaching, and my administrative internship. That desire to learn more about leadership continued to drive me over the eight years of my role as a building leader and the last five years of my consultancy and independent research.

Mindful Moment

Take a moment to reflect on how you entered into school leadership. Who inspired you? Why did you want to become a leader?
Keep that inspiration close to you as you negotiate your way through this book.

I believe it is that passion for leadership, and my need to try to figure it all out as I work with leaders who come from very diverse backgrounds and

are working through a wide variety of issues, that has led me to enter into my own phase of educational research. But here's the thing: The research alone will not make instructional leadership happen. Understanding practices is not enough; we need knowledge around implementation and a commitment to our practices, which is where I see a continuing issue with instructional leadership.

Sometimes a lack of strong instructional leadership practices is due to leaders' need to stay in the role of manager, and other times it is because they don't know where to start as an instructional leader, even after all the theory they learned in their leadership training. After all, some of the research on instructional leadership was published before leaders began to face so many pieces of accountability and mandates, and a lot of it was certainly published before leaders had to work with teachers to find a balance between students' academic and their social-emotional learning.

For one reason or another, many leaders seem to operate in perpetual crisis mode, which prevents them from entering into classrooms as often as they would like to. Their district leaders pull them out of the school several times a week for meetings, professional development that is often geared toward sit-and-get compliance issues, or, ironically, to cover other buildings because that leader is out. Yes, leaders are called out of their buildings to deal with discipline issues in other buildings because that principal is out of district. And we wonder why instructional leadership seems so elusive.

As a leadership coach, I have worked with principals who have to deal with gang activity, students who are being trafficked for sex, homeless students, drug abuse, and many other extreme issues. If we want to talk about instructional leadership, then we also have to have an open discussion about such issues, yet very few leadership researchers bring those topics up at all.

In preparation for this book, I have been doing research around instructional leadership. I sent out surveys that were completed by close to one thousand general and special education teachers, instructional coaches, and school principals. Additionally, I completed one-on-one interviews with teachers and principals. What I have found is that leaders are so busy putting out fires, so to speak, that they don't often enough get the opportunity to be proactive. They rarely have a chance to deepen their understanding of instruction and student learning.

My research shows that many principals believe they are instructional leaders, but many teachers don't share that view. Some of that discrepancy around instructional leadership has to do with proximity. Teachers only believe what they can see. If a principal practices instructional leadership and teachers don't see it, did it really happen?

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I have the good fortune to meet and work with many researchers in the field of education, and I have taken the opportunity to do my own research as well. Many of the people I work with have done outstanding research on educational leadership or instructional leadership. In fact, while writing this book I was in Edinburgh, Scotland, and spent time with Michael Fullan, Viviane Robinson, John Hattie, Shirley Clarke, and Jenni Donohoo. Through their words, feedback, and insight, all of these individuals helped me shape what you are about to read.

Sometimes, though, the actions that researchers recommend don't fit with what leaders can actually do. Is that because many of the researchers were never in a leadership position themselves? Maybe. Is it because the research is great but leaders never have the time to read it in depth? That is definitely part of the issue. It's also because researchers may focus on best practices at a time when leaders do not always have the opportunity to focus on those best practices.

TAP INTO YOUR TRUE INNER INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

We need a starting point, and that starting point may look very different for each and every leader reading this book. It is not enough to just call ourselves "instructional leaders" or "lead learners." In fact, it's important that we stop using the term "instructional leader" if, in fact, we aren't practicing instructional leadership, because misusing the phrase chips away at our school climates and our own credibility. Teachers and students certainly get tired of our actions not matching up with our words. This discrepancy between claims and actions is a topic that I have focused on many times before, including in the following blog post (DeWitt, 2014a), which I think best illustrates my point.

Help! My Principal Says He's an Instructional Leader!

To me, instructional leadership is not about the leader at all but about how the leader works as a team with their students, staff and parents to put the focus on learning.

What works? What doesn't? What is the new fad? What are the tried and true methods that have always worked?

In these days of quick fixes and fast moving initiatives, we spend most of our time at the surface level. We look at numbers and sometimes make rash decisions.

We read a blog, article or book and quickly believe what we read will solve our problems, only to find we had surface level knowledge and the fix was more of a distraction.

Although we know reflection is important in what we do, we often don't do it until something goes wrong. Even with our best intentions, our haste makes waste when we try to solve our issues without having a true understanding of what they are and how to use the "fix" properly. This happens in leadership all the time.

One of the focal points of educational leadership is that of the difference between transformational leadership and instructional leadership. Long ago when I was knee-deep in a leadership program, transformational leadership was all the rage. Over the past few years though, some researchers have pointed out that transformational leadership has a smaller effect size than instructional leadership (see Petty, n.d.).

According to leadership expert Viviane Robinson, the effect size of transformational leadership is .11 while the effect size of instructional leadership is .42. In his several decades of research John Hattie has found that anything over a .40 (Hinge Point) can provide at least a year's growth in a year's time.

And this is where weak leadership can ruin the effects of instructional leadership. . . .

It's easy to get caught up in the numbers. Principals, new or old, read the effect size literature and note that instructional leadership can have an impact on student growth, so they begin walking into classrooms all the time. Without the proper mindset, knowledge of instruction, and prep work done with staff, leaders are in jeopardy of using the right term (instructional leadership) while doing it the wrong way.

And teachers and students are the ones on the receiving end of the out-of-control swinging pendulum.

Going Deeper . . .

I once read a tweet by a teacher who said, "It irritates me every time I see my administrator walk in with his iPad." As much as that may be an arrogant statement on the part of the teacher, they may have had many reasons for feeling irritated. What if their administrator liked to document everything and tell the teacher what they were doing wrong but lacked the instructional knowledge to really offer effective feedback?

If school leaders do not involve teachers in the process of being an instructional leader, they're really not leading at all. Leaders need to offer clarity of what instructional leadership looks like, and to do this correctly they need to make sure they are

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asking teachers for their input. What do teachers want out of instructional leadership? To be left alone is not acceptable. Teachers can really offer guidance of what good instruction looks like, and instructional leaders know that and have a lot of dialogue around it.

Leaders need to not only read the latest research but become familiar with practical examples of how to be an effective instructional leader. In doing their research of the philosophical and the practical, they need to also make sure that they are using building structures like faculty meetings, Principal Advisory Council and student focus groups to make sure they are sharing (and hearing!) best practices and keeping the focus on learning.

Being an instructional leader is more than just saying they are the lead learner, but it's about acting accordingly. It's not just the words that leaders use but how they act and what they model. It's about using the expert teachers around them to model great instruction.

To me, instructional leadership is not about the leader at all but about how the leader works as a team with their students, staff and parents to put the focus on learning.

Characteristics of an Instructional Leader

Viviane Robinson says, "While there is considerable evidence about the impact of instructional leadership on student outcomes, there is far less known about the leadership capabilities that are required to confidently engage in the practices involved (2010, p. 1)."

Robinson outlines the characteristics needed for leaders to be instructional leaders. They are:

- **Leadership Content Knowledge**—Robinson says, "Their (Nelson & Sassi) research showed that as leaders gained a deeper understanding of what is involved in effective teaching of particular curriculum areas, they were able to detect and correct mismatches between those understandings and the administrative routines that were intended to support them."
- **Solving Complex Problems**—Robinson says, "Experts in their field use problem-solving processes that are distinguishable from those of less expert performers and that expertise is inextricably linked with that discussed in the first capability—leadership content knowledge."
- **Building Relational Trust**—Robinson says, "The importance of relationships is evident from the fact that leadership is, by definition, a social process. Leadership is attributed to those members of a group or organization who are seen to influence

others in ways that advance the group or organization's progress toward its goals (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Robinson, 2010)."

In the End

Sometimes leaders work in the very silos that they accuse teachers of living in. Being an instructional leader is vitally important, but making sure that it is being done correctly is even more important. Saying and doing are two different things. Teachers are the ones who never left the classroom, and instructional leaders are the ones who make it a point to go into those classrooms as often as possible (every day!), but going into the classroom isn't enough. We need to go deeper, and it takes the conversations before, during and after those classroom visits to bring us there.

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Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016, p. 222) found that a "school's abilities to improve and sustain effectiveness over the long term are not primarily the result of the principal's leadership style but of their understanding and diagnosis of the school's needs." Throughout this book, I will take the research around instructional leadership and make it practical for you to go deeper with instructional leadership practices that will help you understand the needs of your school.

Day et al. (2016, p. 222) go on to say that to sustain effectiveness over the long term, which should be the goal of all leaders, leaders must spend time creating an "application of clearly articulated, organizationally shared educational values through multiple combinations and accumulations of time and context-sensitive strategies that are 'layered' and progressively embedded in the school's work, culture, and achievements." No more fad diets, just slow and long-lasting improvement.

8 Instructional Leadership

This book is about addressing the research and understanding where to start, because we need leaders like you. I don't want that passion you entered into your leadership degree with to fizzle out during your first years in the role. However, I also want to make sure that if you refer to yourself as an "instructional leader," you are actually doing the work to back it up.

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