

Leadership matters



Does school and college leadership really matter?
World renowned educationalist Professor John Hattie, says yes but it has to be the right type of leadership.

By Professor John Hattie - Chief Education Advisor to Visible Learning^{plus}

www.visiblelearningplus.com

Collecting and analysing evidence on what improves student learning outcomes has been my life's work. Some might even call it an obsession. Over the last 30 years, I have analysed the findings from over 1,400 meta-analyses based on 80,000 studies on educational effectiveness – involving more than 300 million students.

If I've learned anything from all this research, it's that almost everything a teacher does in a classroom works. The key question is not, 'What Works?' but 'Is it working sufficiently above the average of all the possible things I could be doing in the classroom?'

Shortly after my research synthesis Visible Learning (2009) was published (<https://tinyurl.com/ya8wyz6k>), many of my colleagues were unhappy with the findings related to the overall effectiveness of school leaders. Across the many tens of thousands of studies I had synthesised – the average effect size of all influences combined was .40 but the average effect size for school leaders was .36, a little below average. Some of my colleagues were disappointed that the impact of school leaders appeared to be less than other influences on student achievement. It begged the question: does school leadership really matter?

The reassuring answer is yes it does but it has to be the right type of leadership. That effect size of .36 is a composite score reflecting the sum total of all the

different types of approaches a school or college leader might deploy. Some of these approaches are so ineffective that, if selected, leaders may as well not bother clocking in for duty. Whilst others are akin to the mother lode.

Transformational Leaders v Instructional Leaders

In 2008, my colleagues Viviane Robinson, Claire Lloyd, and Ken Rowe conducted a meta-analysis that compared two types of school leaders: Transformational Leaders and Instructional Leaders.

"If I've learned anything from all this research, it's that almost everything a teacher does in a classroom works. The key question is not, 'What Works?' but 'Is it working sufficiently above the average of all the possible things I could be doing in the classroom?'"

They found that Transformational Leaders focus more on teachers. They set a vision, inspiring goals for the school, energise staff, protect teachers from external demands and give them high levels of autonomy in the classroom.

By contrast, the focus for Instructional Leaders is not the teachers but the students. They factor in much more on the teachers' and school's impact on student learning and instructional issues. Instructional Leaders spend much more of their time conducting classroom observations, building the collective professional trust to enable teachers to conduct peer observations, ensuring that teachers receive professional development opportunities that enhance student learning, and that all aspects of the school environment are conducive to learning.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself which style of leadership best describes your personal approach. If you identify mostly with the transformational leadership approach you are with the majority. According to various self-perception surveys – more than 80% of school leaders claim to adopt the transformational approach (Marks, W. (2013), unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wollongong, New South Wales).

It's arguable that the push for a transformational approach to school and college leadership has come partly from our collective fascination with the leadership styles of many rags to riches business tycoons and also from policymakers who

increasing look to 'transform' schools and colleges. I would argue that this has contributed to a corporatised approach to school and college leadership.

This is fine if it works. But what my colleagues discovered was that the average effect size from transformational leadership was .11, whereas the impact of instructional leadership was .42. This is like the difference in punching power between Mr Bean and Chris Eubank J.

The golden approach

When we drill further down into the detail of different aspects of the instructional leadership approach, the effect sizes of the following are well above average:

- » *Leaders who see that their major role is to evaluate their own impact (Effect Size = .91).*
- » *Leaders who get everyone in the school working together to know and evaluate their impact (Effect Size = .91).*
- » *Leaders who are explicit with teachers and students about what success looks like (Effect Size = .77).*
- » *Leaders who set appropriate levels of challenge and who never retreat to "just try and do your best" (Effect Size = .57).*

These approaches are golden. The hero model where, like Atlas, leaders try and hold the weight of the world alone are to be avoided at all costs. Building teams and leading team work is key.

Improving student outcomes requires a team of teachers, students, parents and community members all working in collaboration to agree what success looks like for a school year; and to mutually agree that any interventions that don't achieve the intended impact will be adjusted or dropped altogether. And all this fed with evidence of the impact on student learning.

Visible learning

A core role for school and college leaders is leading discussions about the nature and quality of evidence that would convince everyone that a particular approach is having an above average level of impact on student achievement. This is a key focus of our Visible Learning^{plus} professional development program for teachers (www.visiblelearningplus.com); that is moving away from anecdotes and war stories and instead focusing on the quality of evidence that leads to enhanced learning and evidence-based decision-making.



High-impact instructional leaders seek the agreement of their colleagues (i.e. the other stakeholders in the school or college) about what constitutes convincing evidence that their school or college is truly engaged in high-impact practice. Visible learning high-impact leaders also welcome errors from teachers and students – so long as those errors are used as learning opportunities. This means moving away from high-stakes lesson observation for accountability purposes, to low-stakes approaches that allow for teacher trial and error, and real learning. High-impact leaders also encourage teacher collaboration on assessment and lesson planning – particularly on generating learning intentions and success criteria.

“This isn't just about better process, it's about better outcomes. It's about creating visible learners who are fully invested in their learning, who can evaluate their own progress, who know what to do when they get stuck and who can collaborate with others to pursue their learning.”

This isn't just about better process, it's about better outcomes. It's about creating visible learners who are fully invested in their learning, who can evaluate their own progress, who know what to do when they get stuck and who can collaborate with others to pursue their learning. All of these attributes are teachable and in a world where

employers lament over the lack of job-ready school, college and university leavers – they are needed now more than ever.

So, does school leadership really matter? It depends on your willingness and commitment to adopt a high-impact instructional leadership approach.

Otherwise you may be clocking in to clock out.

ASCL Annual Conference 2018

Professor John Hattie is a keynote speaker at ASCL Annual Conference. The event is an excellent opportunity to hear from high-profile and influential experts.

WHEN: 9–10 March 2018

WHERE: Birmingham

BOOK a place for your leadership team and attend our flagship event.



Find out more:
www.ascl.org.uk/annualconference