The Problem of Incomplete Leadership Development

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The instructional leadership role of the school principalship has become all the rage. The main stumbling block for most principals is that they don't know what it means and/or how to do it. This article names three successively rigorous criteria that the new leadership development will have to meet if the new role is to be realized. A minority of programs meet the first criterion hardly anyone meets the other two.

The three successively difficult characteristics of that future programs must meet are **job embedded learning**, **organizationally embedded leadership**, and **system embedded leadership and learning**.

Job Embedded Learning

Most people think that job embedded learning is the full answer. Job embedded silent leadership development consists of the cultivation, development and continuous support of individual leaders with much of the learning occurring *in situ* or embedded in real on-the-job settings. The vast majority of principal preparation don't do this very much or very well. There are some exceptions, and these exemplary programs allow us to see the specific features of these programs up close.

The best single study of these exemplary programs has just been completed by Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2009). Eight programs were studied in details: four pre-service or preparation programs—Bank Street College, Delta State University, University of Connecticut, and University of San Diego City Schools; and four were inservice programs—Harford (CT) Lealand District, Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools (also included preservice), Region 1 in New York City, and the San Diego City Schools.

Darling-Hammond, et al claim more generally that "relatively few programs have had strong clinical training components," and that "often missing from the curriculum are topics related to principles of effective teaching and learning, the design of instruction and professional development, organizational design of schools that promote teacher and student learning, or the requirements of building communities across diverse school stakeholders" (pp. 11-12). Even when programs include these elements and adhere to good standards like the Interstate School Leaders Consortium (ISLC), Darling-Hammond and her colleagues observe that either key program components are missing or lack coherence and integration.

In summary, Darling-Hammond and colleagues found that exemplary programs:

  • Explicitly recruit dynamic teachers and leaders into programs that focus on instructional and organizational transformation;

  • Create a theoretically-rich and produce-sensitive curriculum that links theory to practice;

  • Wrap highly relevant coursework around field-based experiences organized so that candidates learn a coherent form of practice from expert leaders and instructors;

  • Blend coaching that models and supports practice with analytic work that helps reveal the basis for practical action;

  • Create cohorts of professionals who learn to collaborate and turn to one another for learning and resources;

  • Secure the financial support and other material resources that allow leaders to spend significant time learning about practice in practice (p. 5, italics in original).

Within these programs there is great precision and specificity on what I would call the 'nitty gritty of success'. And it works. On almost every component graduates of the exemplary programs scored significantly higher on perceptions of the quality of their experiences compared to a national sample (typically 4.4 on a five-point scale, compared to 3.5). Inservice programs were similarly highly valued compared to a national comparison sample.

This is all to the good and exemplary programs such as these should be admired and emulated. But by themselves they are not nearly enough. If you look closely they are job embedded alright, but they are *individualistic*. There are cohorts, mentors and coaches but they are primarily in the sense of producing better individual leaders. They are, in my terminology, splendid examples of job embedded but not organizational embedded learning.

Organizationally Embedded Leadership

In organizationally embedded leadership the primary focus is directly on improving the organization—its culture, structure and processes. What is embedded is not individual jobs, but organizational culture. And this is hard.

City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel (2009), in their groundbreaking *Instructional Rounds in Education* make the nature and the difficulty of doing this work crystal clear—"We learn to do the work by doing the work" (p. 33)—not just by bringing in individuals who have done the work but by doing the work together, day after day. As they put it:

> You can tighten up on standards and incentives, raising the level of expected performance. You can clarify the content you expect to be covered…and adopt curriculum materials to support that. You can fill the system with information about student performance and create the expectation that people will monitor and change the practice. You can provide training and professional development for teachers and administrators [even job embedded] and you can provide support for schools that are building higher level instructional practice. The aggregate effect of these measures is that some schools move in the desired direction; some essentially stay where they are…and typically some schools actually continue to get worse against an increasingly challenging standard (p. 36).

Organization learning, per se, is precisely what I was getting at in Secret Four in my *Six Secrets of Change* (Fullan, 2008)—learning *is* the work. This means that successful organizations (only a small minority in practice) organize themselves to learn and problem solve all the time.

Liker and Meier (2007) in their study of Toyota's culture of success over 50 years put it best:

> If we were to identify the single greatest difference between Toyota and other organizations it would be the [shared] depth of understanding among Toyota employees regarding their work" (p. 112, italics added).

Organization embedded learning is about the collectivity; it is about deeply shared practice; it is about relentless consistency concerning evidence-based effective practices while pursuing innovation and continuous improvement; it is about identity to an entity bigger than oneself (peers and other leaders); it is about shared learning in the setting in which you work.

Let me return to the Darling-Hammond study. Recall that participants felt more qualified to lead on just bout every important dimension. Now, compare to the following table from the Darling-Hammond study.

Principal's Perceptions of their School Improvement Strategies and Climate

Extent to which principal feels these qualities characterize his/her school: 1 = strongly disagree… 5 = strongly agree	Program Principals n = 124	Comparison Principals n = 571
School improvement strategies		
- Teacher collaboration	4.1	4.1
- Active shared, distributed leadership	4.2	4.2
- Data driven decision making/ organizational learning	4.2	4.2
School climate conditions		
- Coherence	4.3	4.2
- Accessible quality instruction	4.1	4.1
- Teacher commitment encouraged and practiced	4.3*	4.2
- Student effort and engagement	4.3	4.2

*$p < .05$ – Darling-Hammond, et al, 209

In other words, beyond job-embedded learning, and into the arena of organizationally embedded characteristics associated with school improvement there is virtually *no difference* between exemplary prepared principals and comparison principals, i.e., no difference in their *organizational* cultures.

I am not saying that better prepared principals never make a difference or don't do some good, but I am saying that job-embedded development of individuals is not the same as organizational development. You have to do both simultaneously.

If you want to integrate individual and organization development you have to create a culture of instructional rounds, do what Toyota does, follow Secret 4, and basically do the hard work of learning in context.

As City, et al (2009) observe, "virtually all low performing schools are overwhelmed with help." And, the knowledge and support that most schools receive fall on an organization that is weakly equipped to use these offerings because it doesn't have the *internal structures, processes and norms* that are necessary to pick up the knowledge and deploy it in classroom (p. 9, italics in original).

One other reinforcing tidbit: Vivianne Robinson (2007) conducted a meta-study of leadership dimensions that affected student outcomes. There was one factor that was twice as strong on effective size than any other and that was 'promoting and participating in teacher learning and development'. In other words, principals who participate as learners along with teachers in figuring out on an ongoing basis how to get improvement get better results. This is because it is 'organizational' work.

Job embedded and organizationally embedded leadership in the absence of the third component will get ad hoc individual school examples of success, but it won't get whole system reform—all schools, not just some.

System Embedded Leadership

System embedded concerns the 'system' outside the school. It has two levels—district and state. Our current work on the whole system focuses on the whole state, province or country, but the district is an important piece in its own right.

Starting with the district level, Louis, et al, and Leithwood, et al's (2009) Wallace Foundation comprehensive research study of districts effects on student achievement confirms that I have been saying about school-embedded reform, and adds an important set of findings about the school-district combination—9 states, 43 districts, and 180 schools were examined.

Aside from within school leadership which Leithwood, Robinson and others have already clarified (learning is the work), what stands out at the district level in the Wallace Foundation study is that the most powerful source of the districts' influence on schools and students is "through the development of school leaders *collective* sense of efficacy about their jobs (p. 10, italics added). "Collective" sense of efficacy is a system quality.

Further evidence is district-wide embedded leadership and its impact can be found in our work with York Region District School board (YRDSB), a large urban district just north of Toronto with 190 schools with a highly ethnically diverse population. Over the past decade YRDSB has increasingly and comprehensively and deeply embedded its leadership and released instructionally focused work in all 190 schools—in what we have come to call moving from capacity-building to realization (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

The way to think about this is that successful districts foster organizationally embedded work in *all* of its schools—partly through direct, purposeful developmental work between the school and the district, and partly through creating school-to-school clusters and networks whereby schools learn from each other.

There are a number of districts like YRDSB in North America. They are effective, they pursue and embed 'learning is the work' district-wide. And they are distinctly in the minority—10% or less I would say. It is hard work to do, and even harder to keep on doing with the policy churn at district, state and federal levels.

By system embededness I do not mean simply that leadership development is being addressed at that 'level'. Rather it is about system coherence in such leadership development, curriculum and instruction, assessment and so forth are aligned. It is systemness that counts in which each element that effects school and classroom improvement is integrated into a seamless whole.

There is an interesting analogy with a research finding that Doug Reeves (2008) identified at the school level. He found that when only a few teachers implemented a given effective practice there was not much impact on student learning, but "when 90% of teachers implemented the same practice, a high percentage of students scored at the proficient level." "The difference was not professional development", he said, "it was leadership and implementation that made the difference" (p. 40). Thus, when a critical mass of teachers are using the same practice they positively rubbed off on each other.

The analogy is this, when 90% of school principals in a district are engaged in instructional leadership they affect one another. This, in other words, is a system effect.

So, we have job embedded programs which are very much in the minority and insufficient even when exemplifying. We have organizationally embedded, learning is the work, situations at ad hoc schools with limited overall impact because districts are not systematically engaged, and we have district-wide embedded leadership, again in the minority affecting only a small percentage of districts overall. What about the bigger system?

Well, the bigger system—state, federal, province—is not doing too well when it comes to system embedded leadership, Louis, Leithwood and their colleagues (2009) in the Wallace Foundation stud of school-district-state linkages made this blunt conclusion:

> Few states have comprehensive approaches to reform, state agencies and districts are provided with general directions but limited guidance for how to achieve the goal of improving student learning p. 139).

Linda Darling-Hammond, et al (2009) examined three major policy strategies (1) the purposeful use of standards to leverage change, (2) support for the proactive recruitment of aspiring principals, and (3) development of a state infrastructure for supporting ongoing learning (p. 16).

Only one of the states approximated this degree of coherence, and note this is not what I call **whole system** reform anyway. It is reform of the leadership element but does not integrate leadership, instruction, assessment, capacity building and monitoring and intervention. Further, I have argued that it is not just alignment of these elements that is called for but also coherent learning in

contact, i.e., in the day-to-day cultures of schools, districts and whole states.

Leadership development is certainly part of this, and a crucial part at that. But it has to be a means to an end and that end combines job embedded, organizational embedded, and system embedded whole system reform for the moral purpose of raising the bar and closing the gap for all students. Embedded, yes, but that means learning is the work. And it must be evidence in the whole system, 90% or more proficiency in situ or it does not take on a system quality. This is the work that my colleagues and I are engaged in now—in Ontario and around the world.

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