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Robinson, Viviane (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Student-Centered Leadership provides an evidence-based approach for school leaders to enhance the provision of teaching and learning in their institution with a constant view to improving the student experience. Viviane Robinson has written a book that is both highly practical and accessible, particularly for those who are perhaps not immersed in the literature to make sense of the latest research and how it might be applied to one's practice. In line with the findings of recent research, at the heart of the book is the belief that common measures of the effectiveness of school leadership are flawed (Harris, 2002). Robinson encourages the reader to move beyond models of leadership success based on the quality of management, the quality of a leader's relationships with

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adults, or the level of innovation evident at the school. Instead, she argues that schools' leadership should be judged solely in terms of the impact that leadership has on the learning and achievement of those for whom the leader is responsible, focusing on the core business of schools – the learning of those who attend them. Robinson has synthesised her main ideas into five leadership dimensions, based on different leadership practices identified from an exhaustive review of the literature, which indicate *what* leaders should focus on to make a significant impact on students. Following a brief discussion of the three leadership capabilities that Robinson identifies to facilitate success in these dimensions, each of the five dimensions is discussed in turn.

The first substantive chapter in *Student-Centered Leadership* provides an overview of three capabilities that Robinson deems necessary to achieve student-centred leadership. Later in the book, as each dimension is discussed, Robinson returns to the capabilities to explain how they link to the particular dimension under consideration.

The first capability is the ability to apply relevant knowledge. Put simply, Robinson maintains that for student-centred leadership to take place, leaders must be conversant in the findings of research on how students learn and how teachers can aid student learning. This knowledge must underpin the leader's observation of colleagues and discussions about curriculum selection and student groupings. The second capability is the ability to solve complex problems – without this skill, the leader's knowledge may well be redundant as they may find themselves unable to apply it to practical problems. Finally, Robinson outlines the importance of building relational trust, noting that student progress is much higher in high-trust schools than in low-trust schools. To enhance relational trust, Robinson advocates an 'open-to-learning' approach, with conversational prompts to help ensure that discussions with colleagues over difficult issues are conducted in a manner in which trust is built through learning together. This chapter is at pains to move away from a 'heroic' concept of leadership that is often flagged as destructive by raising unrealistic expectations (Harris, 2003). Instead Robinson notes that leaders do not need to

be experts in each capability, but should work to develop at least a minimum standard for each using the very practical steps provided. While hardly an exhaustive guide to what makes an effective leader, in a relatively short chapter Robinson provides both a research-basis for her approach and very clear, practical steps to help leaders develop.

The first leadership dimension that Robinson proposes is the establishment of clear goals and expectations, a central way in which “leaders can reduce fragmentation and promote coherence” (p. 45) in an educational institution. The point of goal setting is that it gives explicit focus to what should be given high-priority, what should be given a low-priority and what should be left altogether - a particularly important aspect at a time of considerable flux in many educational systems worldwide (Huber and Mujis, 2010). A number of elements are identified that make goal setting effective, including gaining ‘goal commitment’ and ensuring that there is the capacity to achieve any goals that are set. Robinson argues that strict promotion of goal specificity may at times be inappropriate, as when goals involve new challenges it is difficult, if not impossible, to know what a specific outcome is likely to be and how long it will take to achieve it. In these instances, Robinson argues that it would be more appropriate to set a “learning goal” that “expresses your shared commitments and helps keep you focussed” (p. 55). Such goals focus on learning how to do a task as opposed to measuring an output, not only making them more appropriate to new challenges, but more likely to foster a culture in which teachers focus on the student experience as opposed to an environment in which targets are either ignored or manipulated.

Resourcing strategically is the second dimension, wherein it is argued that leaders should ensure that the resourcing of time, money and people reflects and contributes to the goals they have set. This chapter offers clear views on how to attract highly qualified and effective teaching staff by developing proactive recruitment strategies through linking with teacher-education providers and developing comprehensive induction, mentoring and incentive programmes to ensure that good staff stay in an institution. This is accompanied by a somewhat brief and pointed attack on the use of support staff in schools, which argues that when focussed on student outcomes, Teaching

Assistants add little, if any, value commensurate to their cost. When choosing instructional resources, a simple but effective approach to determine which are most suitable is offered, noting that the underpinning pedagogical assumptions must match the aims of the school and that the design of the resource should be of an appropriate standard, which can be ascertained through discussion with others who have used the resource. Finally, Robinson argues that an important aspect of resourcing strategically is through “establishing a school culture in which instructional time is treated as a strategic resource” (p. 74). Instructional time should be constantly revisited in light of the goals of an organisation, while any additional time deemed necessary to support students should be closely aligned to the classroom programme. While there is little here that will come as a surprise to experienced leaders, again Robinson does well to develop some key points in a succinct and accessible style to help direct leaders to resource strategically.

Ensuring quality teaching, the third dimension, is clearly one of the core responsibilities of school leaders. Having clearly established the central importance of this dimension and its impact on student learning, Robinson maintains that an important aspect of this is having a coherent instructional programme, which can be achieved by ensuring that teachers have a common approach to teaching and learning which is shared with and understood by all staff. Robinson argues that effective teaching is not about meeting the preferred styles of students or simply looking at student outcomes, instead she maintains that quality teaching is about providing opportunities to learn – “high-quality teaching maximises the time that learners are engaged with and successful in the learning of important outcomes” (p. 90). This is supported by a timely caution on the use of data – adding her voice to an increasingly vocal movement, Robinson maintains that while data can help to calibrate professional judgement, it should not replace it (Anderson, Liethwood & Strauss, 2010). A series of tools are offered to help make meaningful use of data in schools, notably a number of questions that can be deployed to test the validity of inferences made about data. These questions and the “ladder of inference” (p. vii) on which they are based challenge taken-for-granted viewpoints about data use and in so doing can help leaders create a culture of enquiry in their school.

Dimension four, which is concerned with leading teacher learning and development, looks at how schools can build capacity “by integrating doing the work with learning how to improve the work” (p. 103). From analysis of research on high-performing schools, it is clear that they are characterised by openness about discussing teaching amongst staff and with senior leaders. Indeed, Robinson argues that promoting and participating in the continuous professional development of teachers is “the most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students” (p. 104). Teacher learning is posited as a collective endeavour because getting students to succeed is by nature a collective enterprise, reflection on one’s own practice is a difficult activity for which colleagues can provide vital support and teacher learning continues to build the instructional programme coherence discussed in dimension three. As elsewhere, Robinson maintains that the only measure for the impact of teacher learning should be the impact on the learning of the students who are taught by teachers taking part in such training. A number of principles are provided for effective professional development, which include the importance of training development opportunities: being targeted at specific student and teacher learning needs, looking at the interface between teaching and student learning, containing worthwhile content, integrating theory and practice, utilising external expertise and finally providing multiple opportunities to learn. Guidance on dimension four concludes with a framework for dealing with resistance, encouraging leaders to engage teachers in a dialogue about the principles that inform that resistance rather than seeking to bypass them. This is commensurate with guidelines on creating Professional Learning Communities and facilitates leaders in establishing a culture in which teachers are both open to and actively engaged in developing their own practice (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

The final dimension involves establishing an orderly and safe environment. Robinson takes a broad view of this, highlighting for instance the importance of ensuring that teachers are free to get on with their job, while issues raised by other stakeholders are run through appropriate channels rather than going direct to teachers in the first instance. The focus though is on student behaviour, with

the aim of this dimension being “to create a school environment that promotes the willing engagement of students in their own learning” (p. 127). Robinson outlines a series of practical steps that can facilitate this which include making sure students feel safe by mobilising staff around a vision of a calm and safe environment, having clear policies that foster inclusion and offering active learning opportunities and more student choice which have been shown to significantly reduce disruptive behaviour (Kaplan, Gheen & Midgley, 2002). It is further suggested that this is underpinned through strong links with parents, which should be developed by providing teachers and parents with more opportunities to discuss educational issues, rather than relying on Parent Teacher Associations and parent governors.

Collectively, the five dimensions and three capabilities that are outlined in *Student-Centered Leadership* provide a clear, evidence-based approach to developing leadership with a view to having a direct impact on the learning of students. The dimensions and capabilities are linked in a logical manner and are clearly focussed on student outcomes. The book is not the last word on effective school leadership, offering a particular approach based on an interpretation of the literature. Indeed, in some cases sweeping claims are made – for example, the view that Teaching Assistants have little impact on student learning – with a minimal level of discussion and support. Additionally, many readers would have benefitted from a more extensive, themed bibliography to follow up particular aspects. Nonetheless, the brevity of the volume is also one of its main strengths. Robinson has succeeded in presenting a succinct and highly accessible volume that provides leaders with a series of evidence-based, practical steps to enhance their practice and the impact they have on the learning of their students. The structure of the book is particularly helpful in this respect with each chapter including a summary section at the end and reflective questions to promote discussion about each dimension. *Student-Centered Leadership* is essential reading for schools leaders, offering eminently practical advice based on the latest research in this field – it is a powerful leadership tool and should be essential reading for schools leaders at all levels.

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