

Preface

“It is somewhat surprising and discouraging how little attention has been paid to the intimate nature of teaching and school learning in the debates on education that have raged over the past decade.”

—*The Culture of Education*,
Bruner, 1996 (p. 86)

This is a book for instructional leaders who want to learn more about how to help teachers improve their teaching methods. It is based on the belief and promise that if you become a better instructional leader, you will, in fact, be helping to close the teaching gap. The focus is on the fundamental nature of the instruction that occurs each day in the classroom. This book, by providing you with (a) new insights into leading instructional change, (b) ideas for helping teachers create better learning opportunities for students, (c) proven strategies for changing methods where students are not succeeding, (d) ways to improve results using a theory of action perspective, (e) leadership tools designed specifically for improving teaching, (f) approaches for developing shared instructional leadership, and (g) suggestions for enhancing self-improvement, will help you become a better instructional leader.

Yes, the education debates described by Bruner in 1996 are still raging today. These conversations, however, have been so taken up with noninstructional reform issues and policy changes that we have practically forgotten that “teaching is the activity most clearly responsible for learning” (Stigler & Hiebert, 2009, p. 3). Good teaching needs to be at the heart of any reform movement in the

United States. Expectations for increasing the level of student learning must be matched by efforts to improve teaching methods.

My understanding of good teaching comes from teachers like Mrs. Battaglia, my second-grade teacher, who had us kids thinking we were world explorers; from Miss Coonan, my fifth-grade teacher, who insisted that we question everything we studied; from Mr. Reeves, my seventh-grade social studies teacher, who had us debate the causes of the Civil War; and from Mr. Collins, my high school science teacher, who helped us discover physics applications at home and in school. Although the circumstances surrounding their work as teachers were certainly less complicated than today, there is a thread that runs so true for these teachers. They loved teaching, and they loved teaching their subjects. We need to return to this way of thinking and doing.

MY BELIEFS ABOUT INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

I have worked with many hundreds of students, teachers, and administrators in just about every way possible for an educator in public education. I have observed some exciting teaching and worked with education leaders dedicated to improving teaching and learning. They have taught me a great deal.

In recent years, however, I have seen teachers becoming increasingly frustrated. Even teachers recognized as highly effective say that they have lost some of the joy of teaching. These teachers tell me that their frustrations are mainly due to having to spend so much time preparing their students for tests. Has this been happening in your school or district?

As an instructional leadership developer and coach, I have listened to many administrators frustrated because they are not able to spend more time in classrooms. These administrators feel overwhelmed. Expanding leadership responsibilities and pressing accountability issues have taken them farther away from where they feel they belong—in classrooms.

I have seen the concept of instructional leadership rise out of a need to support and guide teachers asked to do more and more with students. Under the guise of needed school reform, these instructional leaders are asked to lead instruction in new directions with little or no support for their own growth and development. Because

of this lack of instructional leadership support, throughout this book, I try to serve as your coach to help you enhance your leadership skills and develop effective strategies that you can feel comfortable using in your work to improve learning and teaching.

Good teaching, for example, can be observed. Instructional leaders need to hone their observational skills and make time to be in classrooms. They need to look at how teachers connect students with meaningful learning in ways that are interesting to students. Yes, caring for students is important, but caring is not enough. Teachers must know what to teach and how to teach it. Instructional leaders must know how to help teachers improve teaching. I believe this relationship of *learning and doing* forms the foundation of an effective instructional leadership practice. I feel strongly that this relationship has the potential to close the teaching gap described in Chapter 1.

The goal of good teaching is the same as the goal of good instructional leadership—to maximize learning for students and teachers. Accomplishing the goal has widespread meaning.

- For students, it means understanding what they are learning, connecting that understanding to new learning, and applying it in ways that are meaningful.
- For teachers, it means that they understand how students learn best and can translate that understanding into generating better learning opportunities for students.
- For instructional leaders, it means that they understand how to help teachers improve their practice and can turn that understanding into the action needed to lead desired instructional change.
- For parents, it means that they understand their role and how important it is to support the work of teachers, stay in close communication with the schools, and make sure their children are trying their best.
- For board members, it means that they understand their role as policymakers and turn that understanding into guidelines, procedures, and decisions that will strengthen and support student learning and effective teaching.

The goal to maximize student learning cannot be achieved unless more attention is paid to improving teaching methods. Oftentimes, classroom practice does not match what is known

about how students learn best. This is the challenge that grounds this book in reality. The joy of teaching and learning, somewhat lost in the flood of school reform issues, can be reignited through the efforts of many, but especially through the efforts of a good instructional leader. Becoming that kind of instructional leader is what this book is about.

What Does It Take to Become a Better Instructional Leader?

This may sound a bit negative, but it is not easy to become a better instructional leader. There are many things that can go haywire, different personalities to satisfy, complicated accountability issues to wrestle with, mushrooming initiatives, and many different beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching. The good news is that you can help yourself to improve. The bad news is that you will probably have to make some changes in the way you strive for improvement.

The work of an instructional leader crisscrosses the preferred teaching styles of many teachers and is set in the school's culture of teaching that does not come with a set of instructions. Inside this culture, you can find everything from the unrelenting quest to protect the status quo to the satisfaction that occurs when like-minded educators address student needs in ways that improve future learning.

EIGHT FUNDAMENTAL TENETS FOR AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

Below are eight fundamental tenets that are essential for growth as an instructional leader. These eight tenets are the nuts and bolts of this book and are based on research tied to teaching and learning, experience, and common sense. Each one of these tenets will receive special attention in the chapters that follow. When viewed together, these eight tenets represent what an instructional leader must do in order to help teachers improve their teaching methods.

- *Develop an in-depth understanding of teaching and learning.* Nothing is more important for an instructional leader than

understanding teaching and learning. This understanding should be based on how students learn best and helps to establish an instructional leader's credibility with teachers. It goes far beyond a simple knowledge of best practice. The need to better understand teaching and learning is one of the main reasons why good instructional leaders spend so much time observing in classrooms.

- *Maintain an insider's understanding of the school's culture of teaching.* Informed leadership is needed to address the challenges related to ongoing instructional improvement. Without an accurate picture of *workplace reality*, an instructional leader is as vulnerable as an ice fisherman on thin ice. Attempting to lead learning in a culture of teaching may include everything from having to deal with passive resistance to strengthening teamwork. An effective instructional leader must learn how to work within the culture of teaching that exists in the school. There is no guidebook for that.

- *Inspire teachers to create better learning opportunities for students.* Student learning depends in large measure on the quality of the learning opportunities students receive in classrooms. In order to inspire teachers to produce better learning opportunities for students, an instructional leader must make a personal investment in building relationships. This is leading by influence. Teachers are more apt to try to improve when they feel understood, trusted, and involved in the decisions that impact their teaching. A good instructional leader models the behavior and actions expected of others.

- *Work with teachers to change methods where students are not succeeding.* This is the toughest challenge for an instructional leader. Ironically, even when the need for a different teaching method is obvious to everyone involved, the agreed-upon instructional change may be perceived by some teachers as second-order in nature (i.e., beyond current competencies). This perception can easily become reality causing a desired instructional change to stall, fail, or end up on the shelf. A good instructional leader recognizes the critical relationship between how staff perceive desired change and the need to adjust leadership responsibilities and associated practices accordingly. Without a balance between perception and leadership response, the change will most likely fail.

- *Support teacher improvement.* Timing is everything. When teachers begin to move forward with their practice, they need to

receive ongoing in-class support. Delivering on promised follow-up is another way for an instructional leader to earn credibility with teachers. This level of follow-up support includes a safe environment for teachers to take risks, coupled with timely and specific feedback aimed at reinforcing progress and overcoming barriers to success. Teacher-specific support is invitational, and the critical question from the instructional leader becomes: What do you want to learn next?

- *Help teachers learn more about teaching.* A professional acts on the most current knowledge that defines her field. The highest plane of professional development for teachers can be found in a culture of trust where teachers are in each other's classrooms learning about effective instruction from each other. But, for many teachers this is just too big a jump. Consequently, a good instructional leader looks for alternative ways to help teachers learn more about teaching. Collaborative analysis of student work is an example of one such way to promote this type of professional learning. Peer observations are treated like a series of approximations—one step at a time.

- *Understand the why behind the how.* The blend of principle and practice produces better teaching and stronger instructional leaders. That means having a working knowledge of student-centered research. An instructional leader needs to be able to explain why a certain method or proposed instructional change is worth considering. Developing a theory of action perspective (i.e., a way to move from the current to the desired state) gives teachers a better understanding of the why behind the how. A good instructional leader must be able to translate ideas into action (i.e., theory into practice).

- *Use self-reflection and staff feedback to improve.* Experiential learning is high on the list for self-improvement. An instructional leader can improve her practice by keeping a journal and seeking feedback from those who know her work the best. A reflective practitioner thinks about his work and is often able to make needed leadership adjustments based on earlier reflections. Although staff members may be hesitant to provide face-to-face honest feedback, a good instructional leader finds ways to help them do so.

CONNECTING YOUR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

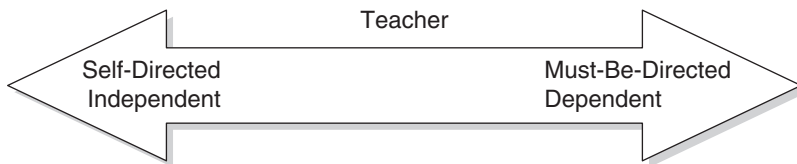
As I always say whenever I start a seminar with instructional leaders, “You did not come here today empty. You came here with front-line experience and knowledge that can be used to connect with new learning.” It is what learning is all about—making connections. The same is true about reading this book. Build on your experience and use this opportunity to grow as an instructional leader.

No one needs to tell you that these are challenging times to be an instructional leader. You understand how important it is for you to help teachers give students the best learning opportunities possible. When that happens, students will learn more and you will feel the satisfaction of a job well done. But, you also know how frustrating it can be trying to improve teaching and learning.

The path to becoming a better instructional leader is not a simple one. It will require new thinking on your part and thoughtful action that might take you out of your comfort zone. This book is designed to help you do just that. Your degree of difficulty will be determined by how much you intend to learn and accomplish.

As you move through the book, allow your work experience to be your learning laboratory. You learn the most on the job, but sometimes it helps to have a steady frame of reference and a reason for self-reflection. I hope the ideas, suggestions, activities, tools, and strategies found in this book will guide and support your growth as an instructional leader.

Continuum of Instructional Leadership



Most of us received better learning opportunities because a teacher decided that her teaching needed to improve. No one told her that she had to change. She changed because she knew that her teaching was not the best for students. This is the highest level

of instructional leadership because it comes from the person most responsible for learning in the classroom—the teacher. Self-directed improvement is a wonderful thing to behold.

The same is true for principals who can pull a team of teachers together to develop an instructional program with project-based learning activities that truly excited students and helped them learn at higher levels. It happens when teachers and administrators center their work on improving instruction. This is also a wonderful thing to behold because it is the kind of instructional leadership that many teachers seem to need.

Unfortunately, too many classrooms have kids lined up row-by-row at their desks, listening to a boring lecture, when they should be actively involved in their learning. This is not a wonderful thing to behold. But, it represents one end of the continuum of instructional leadership (i.e., from self-directed to must-be-directed).

So what is my point? My point is that when there is a need to improve student learning, chances are there is also a need to improve instructional leadership. That need could be filled by teachers working alone, but often it requires the support and guidance of colleagues and good instructional leaders. Stigler and Hiebert (2009) point the way when they remind us that “the system must support teachers to improve teaching, because teachers are the key to closing the gap” (p. xx). One thing is for sure—students deserve great teaching.

ABOUT THE BOOK

I wrote this book because I believe that the results we are seeking in public education in the United States are only possible through good teaching. Look around your school. Ask yourself this question: Does the teaching match what we know about how students learn best? In the vast majority of situations, the answer to this question is easy to predict: “No.” Our goal should be to be able to answer that question in the positive. Effective, dedicated instructional leaders can be important change agents to transform teaching and public education.

This book presents the actions needed to improve as an instructional leader. It serves as both a *what to do* and a *how to do it*

resource. The contents are built on a solid foundation of research and my years of practical experience as an instructional leader, leadership developer, and coach.

The book is designed for principals, assistant principals, teachers developing as instructional leaders (e.g., grade and department chairs), assistant superintendents of instruction, and other school leaders with responsibility for improving teaching and learning. Written for practitioners like you, it assumes that the reader has some degree of background and experience in the field of instructional leadership. Together, we will build on that background and experience to help you become a better instructional leader.

As you go through the book, you may feel like you are being coached one-on-one, and in a way, you will be. The book contains the main responsibilities and tasks required of an instructional leader. So although face-to-face coaching is impossible, the book is written so you can reflect on your practice in ways that are similar to the coaching process. This interactive approach may provide the framework needed to help you dig deeper into your own growth as an instructional leader. Your insights into your work need to be tempered with reality. Just as there is no such thing as a perfect lesson, there is no such thing as a perfect instructional leader.

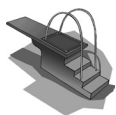
You will be able to use the book to not only help you validate current practice, but also to extend your thinking into new areas of development as an instructional leader. The book is designed to challenge your current thinking and actions. It does this by drawing you into a meta-cognitive exchange of learning and doing that personalizes the content around your particular job situation. If taken seriously, the book can help you to more quickly grasp what you need to understand and do in order to become more successful as an instructional leader. You will not be trying someone else's strategies; instead, you will be using the book to help you develop and plan your own strategies to improve the methods needed to close the teaching gap.

How the Book Is Organized

In each chapter of the book, you will find six common elements. Each element serves as a scaffold that supports a greater understanding of what is to come. The purpose of these scaffolding

elements is to provide a more in-depth and focused inquiry into your work as an instructional leader. These elements are as follows:

- Springboards
- Voices of Experience
- Case Illustrations
- In-Your-Head Quizzes
- Research Moments
- Journal Reflections



Springboards

Springboards are carefully selected quotations found at the top of every chapter. The purpose for including these statements is to help you establish perspective. Point of view is essential to learning and is important for developing a deeper understanding of instructional leadership. After reading each quotation, take a few minutes to let the quotation sink in. Wrestle with its meaning for you. To illustrate the value of a Springboard, consider the quotation found at the beginning of the Introduction to this book.

“It is somewhat surprising and discouraging how little attention has been paid to the intimate nature of teaching and school learning in the debates on education that have raged over the past decade.”—*The Culture of Education*, Bruner, 1996 (p. 86)

This statement speaks to a profound perspective about school improvement. The reader knows instantly that the person quoted believes that what is happening in the classroom is what is important to improving education. Yet for some strange reason, reform debates seldom mention the importance of improving the teaching methods. The reader begins to think about how much attention is being paid to improving the teaching methods in his own school situation. A point of view is re-examined and trumpets entry into the book.



Voices of Experience

It is often said that experience is a good teacher. In this book, you will have an opportunity to judge that saying for yourself. The book contains statements from five instructional leaders recognized for their ability to improve teaching and learning. Together they

have more than 150 years of practical experience in rural, urban, and suburban school districts.

These five educators have been kind enough to share their thoughts about their efforts to become better instructional leaders. As a way of an introduction, below is a little background about each one of the Voices of Experience.

1. Ardis Tucker—Her 35 years of experience included employment as an instructional consultant, assistant superintendent for instruction, language arts director, reading teacher, teacher leader, and classroom teacher. Ardis worked primarily in rural and suburban schools. As an instructional leader, she worked to create classroom-learning environments that helped each student reach his/her potential.

2. Anita Clark—Her 33-year career includes work as an instructional leader and literacy consultant, principal, reading coach, teacher leader, and classroom teacher. Anita worked primarily in suburban and rural education. She considers herself an instructional leader because she worked with teachers to define what student learning should look like and identified instructional approaches that would support that learning.

3. Anthony Giannavola—During his 32-year career he has worked primarily in urban education in principal, assistant principal, and classroom teacher positions. As an instructional leader, Anthony constantly challenged teachers to improve their teaching proficiency in a mutually respectful professional learning environment.

4. Jay Costanza—Jay has 30 years of experience as an instructional leader, adjunct professor, lead teacher, and classroom teacher. He has worked primarily in urban education. Jay considers himself an instructional leader because he has the ability to guide and coach both teachers and administrators in their efforts to better understand how students learn in order to improve student achievement schoolwide.

5. Bill Davis—Over his 32-year career, he has worked as an instructional leadership consultant, principal, and classroom teacher in primarily rural and suburban schools. In his role as an instructional leader, Bill has helped focus the nature of conversations and actions on student learning.

You will see their comments throughout the book in text boxes like the one featured below.

"An instructional leader is a person who has the ability to learn, is a master teacher, and can engage in a reflective practice." ~ Anthony



These five instructional leaders do not pretend to be experts. They would each tell you how challenging it is to develop as an instructional leader. They are, in a sense, pioneers. They lived through the period in public education when school leaders went from being managers of a school to leaders of instruction. You cannot do that without learning quite a bit. As you read their comments, think about yourself and your own growth as an instructional leader. Use what they have to say to validate and rethink your own practices. I sometimes use collaborative reflections when I am coaching more than one person at a time or between myself and another leader. Let the “Voices of Experience” be your source of collaboration. Learn from them.



Case Illustrations

There are a number of Case Illustrations presented in the book. Case Illustrations are based on real problems of practice that have been accumulated over the years and are used to illustrate a particular point or concept. The reason for including Case Illustrations is to give you a pragmatic context for self-assessment using your own experience and leadership position as a frame of reference. The Case Illustrations are more for reflection than for teaching. The problems of practice are not meant to be case studies. As you go through a Case Illustration, visualize what you would do (or have done) in similar situations. Whenever possible, write down your responses to the reflection questions. Writing will help to clarify your thinking and consider other alternatives for the future.



In-Your-Head Quizzes

In-Your-Head Quizzes are like little personal challenges to give the reader an objective way to check understanding and the author an alternative way of making a lasting point. With all the testing going on these days it would be a shame not to include a few short-answer questions. The answer to this first one is, of course, instructional leader. The answers to the Quizzes appear on page 221. Good luck!

In-Your-Head Quiz #1

What kind of school leader is described below?



- Has an in-depth understanding of teaching and learning.
- Spends a great deal of time observing in classrooms.
- Understands the culture of teaching.



Research Moment

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.
 ~ Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004 (p. 3)

Each chapter has a Research Moment like the one above. It is a device to call your attention to an important piece of research linked to instructional leadership. Research Moments are single-focus reminders that research counts. Research tied to improving

teaching and learning will help you substantiate your beliefs and actions as an instructional leader.

For example, the Research Moment from Leithwood and colleagues is significant because effective education leadership makes a difference in improving learning. There's nothing new or especially controversial about that idea. What's far less clear, even after several decades of school renewal efforts, is just how leadership matters, how important those effects are in promoting the learning of all children, and what the essential ingredients of successful leadership are.

The point here is that a good instructional leader must have a working knowledge of the educational research that grounds good teaching practice and related leadership responsibilities. Often teachers and other educators rely on an instructional leader's knowledge of research to help them make important instructional decisions. Keeping up-to-date with current research is a must.



Journal Reflections

At the close of each chapter, you will find a Journal Reflection. It consists of three to four questions that are aligned to the content found in the chapter. The idea is to reinforce the importance of becoming a *reflective practitioner* as you relate what you have read to your own situation. The use of the term *reflective practitioner* is credited to Donald Schön (1983) when he theorized that “a reflective practitioner reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior” (p. 68).

It is well known that professionals learn through action—through doing their jobs. Experience coupled with deliberate reflection on past performance, in a range of situations, can produce enriched understanding that guides instructional leadership growth and development. This deeper understanding fuels the notion of reflection-in-action and explains why some instructional leaders have the ability to not only think on their feet, but to see how they must work with teachers to design better learning opportunities for students. In this regard, reflection is futuristic.

It is a good practice to develop a weekly journaling habit. My advice for becoming a lifelong reflective practitioner is to find 15 minutes each week (e.g., before you go home on Friday

afternoons) to write about your work. Include successes and as well as the challenges you face solving problems or making decisions. Returning to that journal every so often will give you a realistic idea of how you are developing as an instructional leader. It is an authentic form of self-assessment. Keep in mind the words of Vincent van Gogh (1887), who wrote in a letter to a friend that “reflection [makes] us see in ourselves.”

LEARNING EXTENSIONS

At the end of each chapter, there are two learning extensions. These devices are designed to help you apply what you are thinking and learning directly into your work as an instructional leader. The first learning extension is for you as an individual and is called “Try THIS.” This device is indicated by the icon shown below.



Try THIS are sidebar notes with tips, suggestions, and ideas for experienced and emerging instructional leaders. The following example should help you better understand how this personal learning extension will work in each chapter of the book.

You are beginning a book about instructional leadership where the book is like a coach. This is different from most books. Throughout the book, you will receive direct and indirect coaching about all facets of instructional leadership. This subconscious coaching, if you will, is real. It is based on years of experience coaching and working with instructional leaders from many different perspectives.

Take advantage of this opportunity to put yourself in a position to benefit from being coached. Be open to rethinking what you are doing and trying some things differently. Respond the way you would if your coach was sitting next you asking questions, giving you feedback, and providing ongoing support.

Try taking an action-oriented approach to reading this book.

The second learning extension is for you as a facilitator of a “Leadership Team Activity.” There may be times when you are using the book with a leadership group and you might want some suggestions on how to facilitate a particular aspect of the

book or a group-learning process. This learning extension device helps to maximize the use of the book and is indicated by the icon shown below.

The example found in the shaded box below should help you better understand how this facilitator extension will work in each chapter of the book. It will serve as a guide as you apply or extend knowledge with an instructional leadership team. The format is flexible (you may wish to modify the process), but is structured in ways that will increase group participation and collective leadership learning in about a 60-minute single-focus seminar setting. The purpose of this extension is always to build on thinking and learning generated by the book.



LEADERSHIP TEAM ACTIVITY

Orientation to Learning Together

Purpose

Start with the end in mind.

- Understand how valuable it is for a team of instructional leaders to explore a topic or concept together.
- Visualize the action needed to transfer seminar learning and understanding to current instructional leadership practice.

Perspective

- A lot has been written about the value of professional learning communities. Regrettably, there is little evidence that this concept has progressed beyond collegial relationships.

Challenge

- To be effective, an instructional leader must be able to put good intentions into thoughtful actions that will improve teaching and learning.

Plan

- The basic steps for facilitating a tailor-made seminar (1 -2 -3).

Personal and Team Connections

- Participants will be asked to connect their unique leadership challenges to the content of the seminar.
- The team will ask two essential questions: (1) What have we been learning? (2) How can we use this learning to strengthen our work as instructional leaders?

This is my first book, but not, as the phrase goes, my first rodeo. My experience as an educator transcends everything from filmstrip projectors to SMART boards, from open education to programmed learning, and from do your own thing to mandated standardization. Take the opportunity this book affords to revive yourself as an instructional leader. Come to terms with what you really believe is the way students learn best. Base those beliefs on classroom observations and solid research and use those beliefs to guide your work with teachers. As you grow as an instructional leader, you will gain confidence in knowing that you are closing the teaching gap by helping teachers to improve their teaching methods.