

Open-to-learning™ Leadership: The Evidence Base

Prepared by Viviane Robinson, August 22, 2015

There is a long tradition of theoretical and empirical research behind the OTL™ leadership model. Much of the evidence for its importance and effectiveness can be found in the publications of its originators, Donald Schön and Chris Argyris. Since adapting their work to create the OTL™ model in 2012, Distinguished Professor Viviane M.J. Robinson has led a team of researchers who have addressed questions about the need for the intervention and its impact on leadership capability and effectiveness. A selection of these publications is annotated below. A more complete list of Robinson's publications can be found at the website of the Leadership Research Group at www.auckland.ac.nz/leadershipresearchgroup

Book

Robinson, V.M.J. (2011). *Student-Centered Leadership*. (Leadership Library Series, Editor: Andy Hargreaves). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

In her book 'Student-Centered Leadership' Robinson outlines five dimensions of leadership practice and the evidence for their effects on student outcomes. The evidence is derived from two meta-analyses of published studies of the relationships between types of leadership and student outcomes. The five dimensions with their average effects sizes are: setting goal and expectations (0.4), resourcing strategically (0.3), ensuring quality teaching (0.4), leading teacher learning and development (0.8) and ensuring an orderly and safe environment (0.3). Robinson's model of student-centered leadership is completed by a description of the three capabilities that leaders need to engage confidently in the five dimensions; integrating deep educational knowledge into decision-making; solving complex problems and building relational trust. The latter two capabilities are developed through the OTL™ intervention.

Journal Articles

Robinson, V.M.J., Sinnema, C., & Le Fevre, D. (2014). From persuasion to learning: An intervention to improve leaders' response to disagreement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 13(3), 260-296. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2014.922997

This study evaluates an OTL™ intervention which was designed to improve leaders' effectiveness in conversations involving difference and disagreement. Theories of interpersonal effectiveness, negotiation, and conflict resolution were used to identify what makes such conversations difficult, and to design an intervention which interrupts leaders' counterproductive patterns of thought and action. In this study, Australian regional directors were shown how to build trust with principals and teachers while addressing important problems of teaching and learning. The intervention began by teaching participants how to analyse and evaluate their own

conversations. Facilitators then used videos, structured practice and feedback to coach participants in how to be more effective in progressing their problems while building trust. Pre and post-intervention assessments of conversation skills and outcomes showed moderate to large intervention effects which in some cases were associated with a corresponding shift in the way directors framed the problem and the other person. This study provides rare behavioural evidence about how leaders respond to interpersonal difference and an intervention process that can close the gap between their espoused values of respectful and productive interaction and their actual behaviour.

Le Fevre, D., Robinson, V.M.J. & Sinnema, C. (2014). Genuine inquiry: Widely espoused yet rarely enacted. *Educational Management and Leadership*. doi: 10.1177/1741143214543204

The concept of inquiry is central to contemporary discussions of teacher and leader professional learning and problem-solving in inter-personal contexts. However, there has been little discussion of the significant challenges inherent in engaging in genuine inquiry. This paper distinguishes between genuine and pseudo-inquiry, and defines the former as motivated by an open-minded stance and desire to learn. It is argued that, while both forms of inquiry may share the same linguistic features, deeper analysis of underlying thoughts and motives is required to distinguish the two types of inquiry. A descriptive study is reported of how school leaders (in a simulated setting) inquired into their concerns about a teacher's behaviour. The analysis of their conversation transcripts showed that they engaged in limited genuine inquiry. Leaders' capacity for genuine inquiry was constrained by their judgmental thinking, tendency to avoid negative emotion, and desire to maximize staying in control of the conversation.

Le Fevre, D., & Robinson, V.M.J. (2015). The interpersonal challenges of instructional leadership: Principals' effectiveness in conversations about performance issues. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(1), 58-95. doi: 10.1177/0013161x13518218

Principals commonly struggle to have effective conversations about staff performance issues, tending to tolerate, protect, and work around such issues rather than effectively addressing them. This article evaluates principals' effectiveness in having "difficult" conversations with parents and with teachers. The theoretical framework of Argyris and Schön was used to analyse the interpersonal effectiveness of 27 newly appointed principals in two conversations, one with a parent and one with a teacher, about a parental complaint. The conversations were standardized by limiting each to seven minutes and using the same actor to play the part of the parent complainant and the teacher. Overall, principals demonstrated consistently low to moderate levels of skill across the two conversations. Typically, principals were more skilled in advocating their own position than in deeply inquiring into and checking their understanding of the views of the parent or teacher. Leaders need the confidence and skills to engage in productive and respectful conversations about the quality of teaching and learning to be effective instructional leaders. The consistently low to moderate capabilities demonstrated in these conversations suggest that educational improvement demands targeted professional learning for leaders. This research contributes to a research and development agenda by identifying the patterns of reasoning and action that constrain and facilitate more effective interpersonal capabilities.

Sinnema, C., Robinson, V.M.J., Le Fevre, D., Pope, D. (2013). When others' performance just isn't good enough: Educational leaders' framing of concerns in private and public. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 12 (4), 301-336. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2013.857419

Effective instructional leadership demands that leaders address the inevitable problems and concerns that exist in any educational organization. Unfortunately, much evidence suggests that many important concerns, including teacher performance issues, continue to be unaddressed and unresolved. This article portrays the nature of concerns facing educational leaders about others' performance and the variable effectiveness of their attempts to resolve them in both private and public contexts. The majority of concerns identified by these leaders were about behavioral issues, with others being about attitudes, relationships, effectiveness, and capability. Concerns were found to persist longer than is desirable, and leaders reported difficulty in resolving them.

Robinson, V.M.J. & Le Fevre, D. (2011). Principals' capability in challenging conversations: The case of parental complaints. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49 (3), 227-255. doi: 10.1108/09578231111129046

This article won the Ross Thomas award for the best article in the volume year as judged by the members of the editorial board. It used empirical research on complaint interactions and interpersonal effectiveness to develop and trial an assessment of principals' interpersonal effectiveness in challenging conversations with parents. The paper presents descriptive data about principals' level of skill in one such type of conversation. The findings indicated that the principals were, on average, more skilled in advocating their own position than in deeply inquiring into and checking their understanding of the views of the parent. Many had difficulty respectfully challenging the parent's assumptions about the situation and reaching a shared understanding of what to do next.

Robinson, V.M.J. (2010). From instructional leadership to leadership capabilities: Empirical findings and methodological challenges. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9(1), 1-26. doi: 10.1080/15700760903026748

This article was included in the "Class of 2011", meaning it was the most downloaded article published in 2011 in *Leadership and Policy in Schools*. The article uses the limited available evidence about instructional leadership capabilities, combined with relevant theoretical analyses, to propose a tentative model of the leadership capabilities required to engage in effective instructional leadership. Research is suggestive of the importance of three interrelated capabilities: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solve complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students. It is argued that there is considerable interdependence between these three capabilities, and fine-grained specification of each is less important than developing leadership frameworks, standards, and curricula that develop their skilful integration.

Robinson, V.M.J., Lloyd, C. & Rowe, K. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes. An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635-674. doi: 10.1177/0013161X08321509

This article received the William J Davis Award, 2009, presented by the Editorial Board of the *Educational Administration Quarterly* for the most outstanding paper published in the journal during the preceding volume. It was also reprinted in English, F. W., Lumby, J., Papa, R., Samier, E., & Walker, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Educational Leadership and Administration*. London: Sage. And in: Wise, C., Bradshaw & Cartwright, M. (2013). *Leading Professional Practice in Education*. London: Sage and Open University Press)

This study presents an analysis of findings from 27 published studies of the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. The first meta-analysis, involved a comparison of the effects of transformational and instructional leadership on student outcomes. It indicated that the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was three to four times that of transformational leadership. Inspection of the survey items used to measure school leadership revealed five sets of leadership practices or dimensions: establishing goals and expectations; resourcing strategically; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. The second meta-analysis compared the effects of five inductively derived sets of leadership practices on student outcomes. The comparisons between transformational and instructional leadership and between the five leadership dimensions suggested that the more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes.

Robinson, V.M.J. (2001). Descriptive and normative research on organizational learning: Locating the contribution of Argyris and Schön. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 15, 58-67. doi: 10.1108/EUM0000000005395

This paper has a dual purpose: to locate the contribution of Argyris and Schön to the field of organisational learning, and to discuss aspects of their work which are particularly distinctive or controversial. There are two distinct strands of research on organisational learning: the descriptive strand and the normative strand. While Argyris and Schön, with their emphasis on intervention and improvement, belong to the latter normative strand, they have also contributed greatly to the descriptive strand because their normative theorising is grounded in detailed empirical study of organisational processes. The article contrasts Argyris and Schön's account of learning as the manipulation of symbolic representations of organisational life, with the non-symbolic, feedback-driven account of learning offered by many descriptive researchers. It suggests how these two accounts could be integrated by recognising that differing tasks or problems require different learning processes and different types of expertise. This more differentiated approach casts doubt on the notion of a generically capable "learning organisation". The paper concludes with a call for more researchers to bridge the divide between the descriptive and normative strands of research on organisational learning.