How do we learn to be successful school leaders?

Teachers, school leaders and early childhood professionals work in highly dynamic and complex settings. The remit of the Bastow Institute is to provide a range of differentiated and continuous professional learning opportunities that will enable members of the school and early childhood workforce to perform successfully in these settings. Bastow Institute professional learning will develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions that individuals and teams need to meet a range of organisational challenges and improve outcomes for Victorian children.

The DEECD’s Developmental learning framework for school leaders, released in 2007, is very clear about the attributes of effective school leaders and represents the research base that informs all Bastow Institute professional learning. However, because research into leadership is ongoing, the institute must keep abreast of new and emerging knowledge about what effective leaders know, understand, and are able to do.

This article provides a brief overview of some of the latest research into effective school leadership. While the research is centred on school leadership, the findings apply equally to those working in early childhood settings.

International studies have identified school leaders of successful school improvement initiatives as typically open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent in their pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all, and resilient and optimistic (Leithwood et. al. 2006). This raises the question: How do people learn to be successful leaders?

Lieberman and Friedrich (2008) found that many teachers ‘grow into’ leadership roles by developing their own teaching expertise. Achieving improved student outcomes leads to them becoming models for others who seek their advice. Some teachers feel more comfortable with this gradual shift from ‘being a messenger’ to ‘taking an active voice’. Others develop their leadership practices through initiating successful pilot projects or learning communities in areas of personal interest, or through functions outside school. In interviews with successful school leaders in the UK, West-Burnham (2009) found a symbiotic relationship between personal growth, professional growth and effective learning.
Many teachers are engaged in leadership roles and activities, even though they may not readily identify themselves as leaders (Fitzgerald & Gunter 2008). Leading learning at any level in a school involves influencing and working with others in a highly collaborative, collegial and supportive environment that places learning at the centre of all activities. Individual teachers feel that developing their own powerful teaching practices is the foundation for their credibility and collegiate support as leaders. These practices help teachers to better understand and respond to the needs of students and colleagues (Lieberman & Friedrich 2008). Victorian research (DEECD 2009) has found many instances of teachers coaching and mentoring each other and sharing expertise.

A common theme in the research findings is that relationships and collegiality are key to successful professional leadership. Teachers need a high level of trust and professional respect from their colleagues if they are to be confident and successful in their leadership roles. For this reason, Leithwood et. al. (2006) highlight the importance of emotional understanding in successful leadership.

There is increasing evidence of leadership as a collaborative, collective phenomenon, distributed through organisational structures and behaviours (DEECD 2009). A democratic perspective of distributed leadership allows for all members of a school community to contribute as leaders (Youngs 2007). This includes administrators, students, parents, individual teachers, staff teams, regional and central office staff as well as the principal and leadership teams.

Regular scans of international research combined with local research and insights will enable the Bastow Institute to provide professional learning experiences that respond to the changing needs of Victorian schools and the early childhood sector. This, in turn, will support the institute’s long-term commitment to building the capacity of the workforce to equip children with the knowledge and skills they need to become capable and confident citizens.

**Bibliography**


