

Leadership Attributes that Support School Improvement: A Realist Approach

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The importance of the school leader's role in school improvement research is well supported, as is the understanding that leadership in general involves leadership attributes that can cause intentional influence of others in the group or organisation. This paper reports on findings from a study that took a realist approach to understanding and explaining how school leaders influence school improvement. Pawson and Tilley's seminal work (1997) draws on realist philosophy and considers the nature of reality, including an exploration of how causation works. Previous research in school leadership has not taken a realist approach. We adopted Pawson and Tilley's (1997) notion of context that encapsulates not only locality, but also other factors such as interpersonal and social relations and conditions. With this in mind, we suggest that the context of the school includes the attributes of the school leader. We sought to understand how school improvement operates and to explore underlying invisible causal processes. Two primary sources of data were used in this study: semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants. Interviews were conducted as an appropriate means of addressing case study research into human experiences, events, and perceptions (Yin, 2011). Our study was designed to address the research question: How do contextual leadership attributes influence decision making and staff sentiments that lead to school improvement outcomes? A realist approach was used to understand how leadership attributes spark related social mechanisms that lead to improved outcomes. Data analysis generated four leadership attributes: 1) valuing diversity, 2) support for staff, 3) collaborative leadership style, and 4) valuing teachers' professional learning. Each of these was found to have influenced decision making and sentiment, which generated positive school improvement outcomes in the two case study schools. Evidence about school leader attributes such as flexible, empathetic, collaborative, and reflective have the potential to contribute to professional learning which can improve understanding of how leadership attributes in context bring about school improvement. Our study revealed school principals and their leadership teams in the two case study schools were instrumental in achieving successful school improvement outcomes. These principals established leadership teams that embraced the principal's vision and direction of the school. Drawing on our findings, we present four propositions that summarise the initial theory of how leadership attributes support school improvement.