

# The “What” and the “How” of Student-Centered Leadership

Most school leaders are motivated by the desire to make a difference to their students. They want to lift their students’ achievement, increase their confidence, and give them opportunities they would never find elsewhere. Although we should admire their moral purpose, fine words and high ideals are not enough. If leaders don’t know how to put their words into action, if they follow the wrong paths and take the wrong turns, then their sense of moral purpose can quickly give way to cynicism, frustration, and fading commitment.

This book is not another call to the moral high ground. Most educational leaders are already there or at least want to be. Instead, it is a book about how to turn ideals into action. It provides leaders with guidance about how to make a bigger difference to their students—guidance that is based not on fad or fashion but on the best available evidence about what works for students.

When school leaders reflect on what keeps them in a highly challenging job, they typically describe the difference they make to the lives of children and the difference children make to their own lives. They describe how, on the “horrible days,” they get an emotional lift by stopping by classrooms to see children and celebrate their achievements. They believe passionately that “you can’t beat working with children.” But they are just as aware of the children they have not reached—the children for whom school was a place of failure and humiliation or the children for

whom school did make a difference but not enough to overcome the challenges of their family circumstances.

The job of school leadership offers enormous rewards and increasing challenges. My motivation for writing this book is to help school leaders increase the rewards while meeting the challenges by describing, explaining, and illustrating new research evidence about the types of leadership practice that make the biggest difference to the learning and well-being of the students for whom they are responsible.

## Leadership in Challenging Times

The expectations for today's school leaders have never been more ambitious. Leaders work in systems that expect schools to enable *all* students to succeed with intellectually challenging curricula. Although no education system in the western world has achieved this goal, and it is not clear how it can be achieved at scale, school leaders are held responsible for making progress toward it. In the United States, under the federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the accountabilities associated with these policy expectations can be punitive and demoralizing, especially for leaders in schools that serve economically disadvantaged communities (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009).

These ambitious expectations come at a time when the school population has never been more diverse. This diversity has revealed the limitations of schooling systems that cannot rapidly teach children the cognitive and linguistic skills that enable them to engage successfully with the school curriculum. Because increasing numbers of children arrive at school without these skills, achieving the goal of success for all students may require major changes to business as usual.

On the positive side, these increased expectations have been accompanied by a greater understanding of the importance of leadership for achieving the goal of success for all students. A new

wave of research on educational leadership has shown that the quality of leadership can make a substantial difference to the achievement of students, and not just on low-level standardized tests (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In schools where students achieve well above expected levels, the leadership looks quite different from the leadership in otherwise similar lower-performing schools. In the higher-performing schools it is much more focused on the business of improving learning and teaching.

There is no doubt that this body of evidence about the links between leadership and student outcomes has been noticed by policy makers and professional associations. It has informed the development of educational leadership standards in the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008), the work of the National College of School Leadership and Children’s Services in England (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006), and the development of leadership frameworks in Australia and New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008). The research has confirmed what school leaders knew all along—that the quality of leadership matters and that it is worth investing in that quality.

Another positive feature of the leadership environment is the shift from an emphasis on leadership style to leadership practices. Leadership styles, such as transformational, transactional, democratic, or authentic leadership, are abstract concepts that tell us little about the behaviors involved and how to learn them. The current emphasis on leadership practices moves leadership away from the categorization of leaders as being of a particular type to a more flexible and inclusive focus on identifying the effects of broad sets of leadership practices. Rather than anxiously wonder about whether you are, for example, a transformational leader, I will be encouraging you to think instead about the frequency and quality in your school of the leadership practices that this new research has shown make a difference to the learning and achievement of students.

## What Is Student-Centered Leadership?

In this book, the ruler for judging the effectiveness of educational leadership is its impact on the learning and achievement of students for whom the leader is responsible. Although educators contest the value to be given to particular types of achievement, and argue about whether certain assessments and tests measure what is important, the principle at stake here is willingness to judge educational leadership by its impact on the educational outcomes of students. Do the decisions and actions of the school's leadership improve teaching in ways that are reflected in better student learning, or is their focus so far removed from the classroom that leadership adds little value to student learning?

There are compelling ethical arguments for student-centered leadership. Because the point and purpose of compulsory schooling is to ensure that students learn what society has deemed important, a central duty of school leadership is to create the conditions that make that possible. Although this criterion for leadership effectiveness might seem to some readers to be too narrow, in reality it is not because leaders need to work on so many different fronts to achieve it.

Typically, judgments of leadership effectiveness stop short of asking about effect on student learning. Perhaps the most common approach to judging school leadership is the quality of school management—children are happy and well behaved, the school is orderly, the property is looked after, and the finances are under control. Although high-quality school management represents a considerable achievement, it should not be equated with leadership effectiveness because it is possible for students in well-managed schools to be performing well below their expected level. High-quality management is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for leadership effectiveness because it requires, in addition, that the school's management procedures ensure high-quality teaching and learning. There is a considerable stretch between the two.

A second approach to judging leadership effectiveness is based on the quality of leaders' relationships with the *adults* in the system. Principals who are popular with staff and parents and get along with district officials are judged to be effective. These relationships are important because little can be achieved by school leaders if they alienate their staff, are in constant dispute with district officials, or cannot earn the trust of their communities. But once again, this criterion is not sufficient for judging the effectiveness of school leaders because good relationships with adults do not guarantee a high-quality learning environment for students.

A third unsatisfactory approach to judging leadership effectiveness is to equate it with innovation. Leaders who get on board with the latest innovations in school organization, curriculum, or community outreach often have high profiles and are showcased as effective leaders. But like good staff relationships, innovative practice is not necessarily predictive of student learning. We know that many innovations do not work and that schools engaged in multiple innovations can burn out staff, create incoherence in the instructional program, and actually make things worse for their students (Hess, 1999).

One of the reasons that school management, staff relationships, and innovative practice have overshadowed student impact as the criterion for leadership effectiveness is that it is very difficult to isolate the contribution of leadership to student progress. Except in the smallest of our schools, leaders influence students indirectly by creating the conditions required for teaching and learning. It is easier to create those conditions in schools that enroll students with high levels of prior achievement than it is to create those conditions in schools that enroll students with lower achievement levels. The apparent success of leaders in the first type of school may be more a reflection of the students and of the community from which they are drawn than of the effectiveness of the leadership.

The indirectness of leadership effects on students, plus the confounding influence of factors such as student and community

background, make it very difficult to isolate out the contribution of leadership itself. That is probably why leadership effectiveness has been judged by qualities such as staff relationships and degree of innovation—qualities that are assumed to be good for students. In the absence of good evidence, these taken-for-granted assumptions have become substitutes for student-centered measures of leadership effectiveness. In advocating a student-centered approach to leadership effectiveness, I am seeking to disrupt the assumption that what is good for the adults is good for the students and to encourage a more deliberate examination of the relationship between the two.

## Whose Leadership?

My answer to this question is that this book is for everyone who exercises leadership in schools. But that answer just raises further questions about what I mean by leadership. And until we sort out what is meant by leadership in this book, I can't answer the question of whom this book is for.

It is commonly asserted that leadership is the exercise of influence, but so is force, coercion, and manipulation, and we wouldn't call those types of influence *leadership*. So there must be something else. Leadership is distinguished from force, coercion, and manipulation by the *source* of the influence. The influence that we associate with leadership comes from three different sources. The first source is the reasonable exercise of formal authority—the critical factor here is that those who are influenced see the use of the authority as reasonable. The principal had a tough decision to make—she explained why she made it, and although we didn't all agree we do understand that a decision had to be made.

A second source of leadership influence is attraction to one or more of the personal qualities of the leader. The leader is admired for his dedication, selflessness, ethic of caring, or courage. This is when character enters the frame—attractive personal qualities

increase the chance of being influential with colleagues. A third source of leadership influence is relevant expertise—one gains influence by offering knowledge and skills that help others make progress on the tasks for which they are responsible.

In the following scenario in which a group of teachers meet to review the results of a recent assessment in science, we see the fluid operation of these sources of influence (Robinson, 2001, p. 92):

*Mary, the head of science, is chairing a meeting in which her staff are reviewing the results of the assessment of the last unit of work. She circulated the results in advance, with notes about how to interpret them, and asked the team to think about their implications for next year’s teaching of the unit. The team identifies common misunderstandings and agrees they need to develop resources that help students to overcome them. Julian, a second-year teacher, was pretty unhappy with the assessment protocol used this year and suggests revisions that he thinks will give more recognition to students who have made an extra effort. Most of his suggestions are adopted. Lee, who teaches information technology as well as science, shows the group how the results have been processed on the computer so that they can be combined with other assessments and used in reports to parents and the board. Several team members express nervousness about reporting to the board so they decide to review a draft report at the next meeting.*

Mary, as head of science, influences her colleagues by asking them to prepare for their meeting and structuring the agenda. Despite Julian and Lee having no formal authority, they too influence how the task is done through their ideas about how to improve the assessment and reporting procedures. All three people in this meeting exercised leadership because their authority (in Mary’s case) and their ideas changed how the task was done. They moved fluidly between being in the lead and following the lead of others.

So leadership is, by its very nature, not just the purview of those with formal authority over others. One can also lead from a basis of expertise, ideas, and personality or character, and, in principle, these sources of influence are open to anyone. This means that leadership is by its very nature distributed. It follows, therefore, that this book is for all who seek to increase their leadership influence, whether or not they have a formal leadership position.

## **The “What” and the “How” of Student-Centered Leadership**

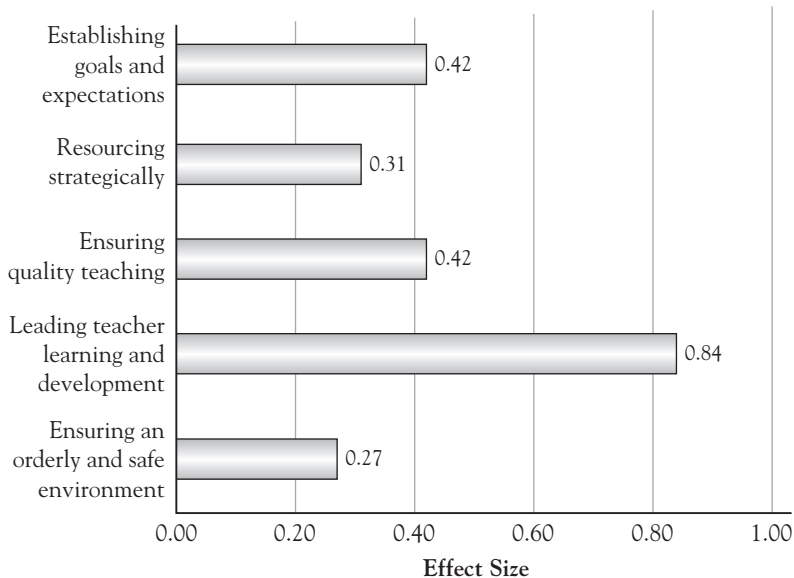
If student-centered leadership is about making a bigger difference to student learning and well-being, then leaders need trustworthy advice about the types of leadership practice that are most likely to deliver those benefits. This book offers such advice based on a rigorous analysis of all the published evidence about the impact of particular types of leadership practice on a variety of student outcomes.

The first thing I learned in doing the analysis is that of the hundreds of thousands of studies about educational leadership only a minuscule proportion of them have examined the impact of leadership on any sort of student outcome. This, in itself, shows the radical disconnection between research on educational leadership and the core business of teaching and learning. In the end, I found about thirty studies, mostly conducted in the United States, that measured the direct or indirect impact of leadership on student outcomes. In about half of these thirty studies, leadership was measured by asking teachers to complete surveys about the practices of their principal. In the other half, teachers were asked about the leadership of their school. That is why the findings in Figure 1.1 tell us about the impact of school leadership rather than principalship. The student outcome measures were usually about academic achievement (math, literacy, or language arts), though a few studies used measures of social outcomes such as



students’ participation and engagement in their schooling. The five dimensions presented in Figure 1.1 were derived by listing all the individual survey items that had been used to measure leadership and grouping them into common themes. Once the 199 survey items had been sorted into the final five leadership dimensions, the statistics reported in the original studies were used to calculate an average effect size for each dimension. The effect size statistic alongside each of the horizontal bars indicates the average impact of the leadership dimension on student outcomes. (More details about the methodology of the meta-analysis can be found in Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008.)

Our analyses of these studies enabled us to sort the different leadership practices into five broad categories or leadership dimensions. For each dimension, we used the information in



**Figure 1.1** Five Dimensions of Student-Centered Leadership

*Note:* The effect size statistic indicates the average impact of the leadership dimension on student outcomes as calculated from the available published studies (see Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, for further details).

the original studies to calculate its impact on student outcomes. Technical information about how these calculations were performed is available in Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008).

The average impact of each dimension on student outcomes is represented by the effect size statistic at the end of each horizontal bar in Figure 1.1. Although there are no hard and fast rules about how to interpret this statistic in educational research, an effect of 0.20 is usually considered small, 0.40 a moderate effect, and 0.60 and above a large effect (Hattie, 2009). Given these rough benchmarks, Figure 1.1 presents a very positive story about the contribution leaders can make to the achievement and well-being of their students.

Although I could have ordered the horizontal bars in Figure 1.1 to reflect the relative size of their effects, I have chosen instead to order them in a way that tells a story about their inter-relationships. The story is that student-centered leadership sets clear goals for student learning, provides resources for those goals, and works closely with teachers to plan, coordinate, and monitor how they are achieved. Through such oversight, they are likely to learn that goal achievement requires increased teacher capacity. Leaders' close involvement in building such capacity gives them a clear understanding of the conditions and the support teachers need to learn more effective instructional practice. These four types of leadership are enabled by, and contribute to, an orderly and safe school environment.

The five dimensions work together as a set and have strong reciprocal effects. When, for example, student learning goals are clear, leaders are more likely to discover what teachers need to learn in order to teach their students. When leaders provide high-quality opportunities for teachers to learn those practices, student-learning goals are more likely to be achieved.

Some, if not all, of the five dimensions in Figure 1.1 will be familiar to many readers. After all, the importance of instructional

leadership—broadly speaking of leadership that is focused on teaching and learning—has been a recurring theme in recent leadership research and policy thinking. What this book does that is different is to go well beyond the broad idea of instructional leadership to identify and explain specific leadership practices involved in each of the five dimensions so that readers can enhance their understanding and their skills in what I have called *student-centered leadership*. In order to apply the five dimensions wisely in any given context, leaders need to understand why and how the practices involved make a difference to teaching and learning. For that reason I have given considerable emphasis in this book to clearly explaining and richly illustrating the theory and principles that are responsible for these leadership effects. The explanations are based on relevant theories and concepts from business, organizational studies, and social psychology as well as education. For example, in the chapter on goal setting, I draw on the very rich literature from social psychology and organizational studies to explain how goal setting works and the conditions under which it does and does not increase performance. This evidence forms the basis of my discussion of the practicalities of using goal setting in schools, including how to respond to possible objections to its use. The descriptions and explanations of the five dimensions are intended to provide a rich and rigorous guide to the question, “What practices are involved in student-centered leadership?”

My illustrations of the dimensions include positive and negative examples because I want readers to discriminate the qualities that actually make the difference to student and teacher learning. I want to disrupt the assumption that having a general idea about, for example, goal setting or teacher professional learning is sufficient for effective leadership. There are often subtle but critical qualities that make the difference between whether or not the practice in question will deliver the intended benefits. That is why I spend some time explaining and illustrating what does and does not work. I want readers who have a

“general idea” to gain a more precise understanding of the shifts in their practice that will enable them to lead in ways that have a higher probability of enhancing the learning of their teachers and students.

The scope of leadership work is huge, and, not surprisingly, many books on leadership try to match that scope. In writing this book, my personal mantra has been, “a few powerful ideas, clearly explained and richly illustrated.” The key ideas I have selected are those that I believe will provide leaders with the understanding they need to adapt the outcomes-linked evidence in Figure 1.1 to their own schools. As I explain in Chapter Six on leading teacher professional learning, we know that professional development by bullet point does not work because it uncouples practical “tips” from the principles that enable practitioners to make the tips work in their own setting. You will find plenty of practical tips in this book, but they will always be linked to evidence and theoretical principles.

### **The “What” of Student-Centered Leadership: Five Dimensions**

The first dimension of student-centered leadership involves establishing goals and expectations. Goal setting is a ubiquitous feature of leadership work. It is part of strategic and annual planning, principal and teacher evaluation, and many other school development and review processes. Yet despite this, much goal setting remains a paper exercise that fails to focus the collective effort of staff on agreed priorities. In Chapter Three, I describe the conditions needed to make goal setting work properly and how to overcome challenges to its use. I explain how, in a world where everything seems important, or at least important to someone, goal setting enables leaders to sort through the multiple demands to establish the *relative* importance of these various demands and thus provide a clear steer for an otherwise rudderless ship. Once clear goals are established, the second dimension of effective leadership—resourcing

strategically—comes into play (Chapter Four). Scarce resources—money, time, teaching materials, and instructional expertise—are allocated in ways that give priority to key goals. Staff can see an alignment among school goals, expenditure, and reform initiatives. Efforts to recruit and develop instructional expertise are aligned to the student needs that have shaped current goals.

Strategic resourcing and strategic thinking are closely linked. Strategic thinking involves asking questions and challenging assumptions about the links between resources and the needs they are intended to meet. Too often leaders invest time and energy in an innovation without asking, “What conditions are required to make this resource work for the students in my school?” “What evidence do I have that this type of resource allocation will help me achieve this goal?” Problematic assumptions about the effectiveness of particular types of resourcing are identified throughout this chapter.

The third dimension of student-centered leadership involves ensuring quality teaching through planning, coordinating, and evaluating teachers and their teaching (Chapter Five). The evidence suggests that in schools where teachers report that their leadership is heavily involved in these activities, students do better. This type of leadership is at the heart of what is called *instructional leadership* in the North American literature. The powerful ideas that are discussed in this chapter are program coherence, effective teaching, and creating a culture of inquiry. It is not often that a theory of effective teaching is included in a book on educational leadership, but I believe that because assumptions about effective teaching inform many leadership practices, leaders need an explicit and defensible theory if they are to lead the improvement of teaching and learning.

Strong instructional leadership focused on ambitious learning goals soon uncovers shortfalls in teachers’ knowledge and skill. In many cases, those shortfalls are shared by their leaders as well. A powerful difference can be made by teachers and leaders learning

together on the job about how to achieve their student learning goals. Chapter Six deals with leading teacher learning and development (Dimension Four). The two powerful ideas discussed in this chapter are collective responsibility for student learning and effective professional development. The latter discussion introduces readers to the evidence about the types of professional development that are more and less likely to make an impact on the students of the participating teachers. Just as for research on leadership, the ruler I use to judge the effectiveness of teacher professional learning or development is its impact on students.

The fifth dimension of student-centered leadership provides a foundation for all the rest. Student-centered leadership ensures an orderly and safe environment for staff and students. Teachers feel respected, students feel their teachers care about them and their learning, and school and classroom routines protect instructional time. The big ideas discussed in Chapter Seven are student engagement and two features of school organization that are strongly predictive of engagement—students' perceptions of safety and parent-school ties.

All research evidence is partial and subject to change as new evidence emerges. One obvious gap in Figure 1.1 is any reference to leaders' involvement with their various communities. The reason for this gap is not that this type of leadership is unimportant but that the research that contributed to Figure 1.1 included no measures of how leaders engaged their communities in the work of educating children. Without such measures we could not calculate the effects of this leadership dimension on student outcomes. Even though this type of information is missing, there is other evidence about the importance of trust between a school and its communities and about what leaders can do to build trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). That is why I have made many references to the work of engaging the community throughout this book, especially in the discussions of trust building in Chapter Two and of creating a safe and orderly environment in Chapter Seven.

The big message from the research on how leaders make an educational difference can be summed up as follows:

*The more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater will be their influence on student outcomes.*

At one of the first professional conferences where I presented these findings, I was asked if the five dimensions would be a good framework for evaluating principals. I replied that I would prefer they were used to evaluate the strength of leadership across the school or in particular departments or units. The scope of the work is too great and the expertise required too broad to reasonably expect a single leader to demonstrate high or even moderate levels of competence in all five dimensions.

Individual leaders may wish to get feedback on how strong they are in leading each area, but such developmental purposes are very different from holding individual leaders accountable on all five dimensions. Such accountabilities reinforce unrealistic conceptions of heroic leadership and deny the reality of distributed leadership in schools (Spillane, 2006). A more useful exercise is to involve the whole senior leadership team in a discussion of the emphasis currently given to each of these dimensions. One leadership team I have worked with reallocated leadership responsibilities to ensure that at least one team member had oversight of each of the dimensions. Other teams have independently rated the strength of school leadership on each dimension and then discussed their reasons for their various ratings.

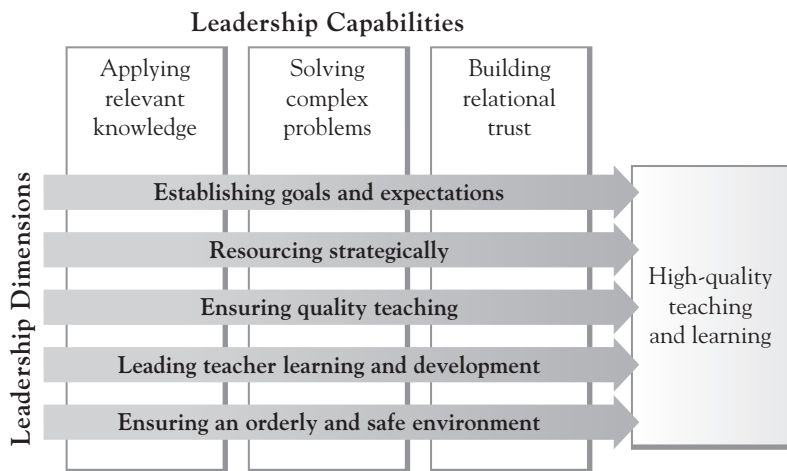
Another question I am often asked is, “What has happened to relationships?” It is a good question because most theories of effective leadership make specific mention of relationship skills. My answer is that because relationships are central to success on *all* the dimensions, they are included not as a separate dimension but as one of three capabilities that informs

them all. Effective educational leadership is not about getting the relationships right and then tackling the difficult work challenges. It is about doing both simultaneously so that relationships are strengthened through doing the hard, collective work of improving teaching and learning.

**The “How” of Student-Centered Leadership:  
Three Capabilities**

Student-centered leadership is about knowing *what* to do and *how* to do it. Although the five dimensions tell leaders *what* to focus on to make a bigger impact on students, they say little about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to make the dimensions work in a particular school context. The knowledge and skills needed to engage confidently in these five dimensions are described in three broad leadership capabilities (see Figure 1.2).

First, student-centered leadership involves applying relevant knowledge to one’s leadership practice. Although the depth of knowledge required for student-centered leadership is often



**Figure 1.2 Five Dimensions Supported by Three Leadership Capabilities**



underestimated, this capability is not about being highly qualified or getting high grades in courses about teaching and learning. Rather, it is about using knowledge about effective teaching, teacher learning, and school organization to make high-quality administrative decisions. In order to develop this capability, leaders need multiple opportunities to deepen their knowledge *and* consider its implications for administrative processes, such as teacher evaluation, student grouping, and curriculum choices.

The second capability required for student-centered leadership is skill in solving complex problems. If a high school leader wants to improve academic goal setting in subject departments, there is much more involved than learning about goal setting. In addition, the leader must be able to discern and overcome the challenges involved in implementing new goal-setting procedures in his or her particular context. Discerning what these challenges are and crafting solutions that adequately address them are the processes of problem solving. The account of problem solving that I provide in Chapter Two provides a model for good problem solving and uses research on leaders’ problem solving to illustrate more and less skillful problem-solving processes.

The third capability involves building the type of trust that is essential for doing the hard work of improving teaching and learning. Leaders might understand the theory of student-centered leadership, but if they cannot develop trust among leaders, teachers, parents, and students they will have great difficulty practicing it. We know, for example, that many leaders have difficulty discussing their concerns about a teacher’s classroom practice. In Chapter Two, I provide a detailed account of how to have such conversations in ways that both build trust and address the difficult issues. The values and skills involved in building trust provide an ethical foundation for all five leadership dimensions.

Student-centered leadership involves a skillful integration of the “what” and the “how” of leadership. Because I intend to demonstrate this integration in each of the five chapters devoted to a

leadership dimension (Chapters Three through Seven), I introduce the three capabilities in Chapter Two so that readers will have some background principles before these are encountered in the discussion of each dimension. As depicted in Figure 1.2, the three capabilities are relevant to all five leadership dimensions.

## **Striking a Balance**

Discussions of leadership can easily become extreme. Those who exaggerate its influence and importance attribute more influence, power, and energy to leaders than is either reasonable or realistic. Those who reject such heroic conceptions of leadership sometimes go to the opposite extreme, seeing school leaders as having little leverage over the most important determinants of student achievement. The truth no doubt lies somewhere in between. What is important to me in this book is to avoid both extremes by recognizing the challenges of the contexts in which leaders work while seeking to expand their influence over the learning of the students for whom they are responsible. The new research on which this book is based is a resource for doing just that. My hope is that it inspires leaders to experiment with changing how they lead and see if those changes, however small, expand their influence in ways that improve teaching and learning in their school.

## **Summary**

The ruler I use in this book to judge the effectiveness of leadership is impact on the learning of those students for whom the leader is responsible. This ruler is justified by new research that shows that leaders can have a considerable effect on the social and academic achievement of their students. In schools where students achieve at higher-than-expected levels, leaders are much more focused on the improvement of teaching and learning than in similar schools where students perform at lower-than-expected

levels. My analysis of this research identified five leadership dimensions that contribute to this focus: establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment. In the following chapters I explain how each of these leadership dimensions works and provide rich examples of their use. I also introduce three leadership capabilities that leaders need in order to engage successfully in these five dimensions of student-centered leadership.

