

**How do principals influence teaching practices that make a
difference for student achievement?**

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Those who study leadership in schools often set a goal to demonstrate the influence principals have on student learning outcomes. A recent review of the leadership literature lays out the presumed links in the causal chain between administrative action and the achievement of students (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Among school related factors, leadership matters a great deal, perhaps second only to teaching. What's more, these two influences are most important in schools where students' learning needs are acute.

The prominence of teaching and leading as factors related to student learning underscores the importance of better understanding the relationship of leadership to teaching. One might ask the question, "How do principals influence teaching practices that matter?" Or, from the perspective of a teacher, "How does the principal influence my decision to abandon current practice in favor of something presumed to be better?" Maybe even more important, "How does the principal influence my and my colleagues' decisions to commit to work together to improve our common instructional practices?"

Seeking to explain how leadership makes a difference, I first present a brief review of the research findings pertinent to the principals' influence on teachers instructional decisions, highlighting high schools where possible. I then present a model integrating my own understandings of school leadership with other current theoretical approaches that inform discussions of how schools can work on improving instructional quality. My intent is to bring various models of leadership into conversation so as to extract leverage points as guidance for how formal leaders might engage teachers in making productive improvements to their individual and collective teaching practice – with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement. My position is that instructional leadership (i.e., leadership oriented around instruction, curriculum, and assessment) needs to be a shared endeavor, with principals and teachers learning and leading interdependently so that the school achieves its instructional and student learning goals (Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy, 2008; Printy, Marks, & Bowers, in review).

Research on Leadership Style

Current accountability policies place responsibility for students' learning outcomes on building principals (with threat of firing or reassignment) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, on teachers (through building reconstitution). While the policy press suggests that principals and teachers need to work collaboratively to improve their situations, primarily as gauged by student achievement on standardized tests, the means to bring about such collaboration is uncertain and increasingly the focus of empirical research.

Most quantitative studies conclude that principals exert indirect influence on student achievement through teachers and school culture; in essence, principals establish conditions (e.g. professional learning opportunities, student assignment, teaming and group arrangements) so that teachers make the direct effort toward improving student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Qualitative research supports the essential contribution of principals, particularly in turning around low performing schools (Leithwood et al., 2004) and in sustaining organizational

improvement (Datnow, 2005). Robinson et al.(2008) suggest that the disparity between the qualitative and quantitative findings results from the ways in which leadership is measured, principally whether the research inquires about the principal's transformational leadership (i.e. interpersonal influence that encourages followers to exert more than normal effort toward goals) or the principal's instructional leadership influence. Robinson et al., report that when considering each leadership type separately, the impact of instructional leadership is greater on student outcomes than transformational leadership.

Printy and Marks (2003) resolve this distinction by offering evidence that the principal is most effective when engaging in both transformational and instructional behaviors and by creating conditions where teachers, too, exert both instructional and transformational influence. The researchers place high value on the intellectual inspiration of the principal as an activating agent for educators' collaborative efforts. They emphasize that integrated leadership increases the likelihood of improving instructional quality and student achievement.

Leadership and Teaching

A number of recent studies investigated whether principals have any impact on how teachers teach. These studies vary by 1) how leadership is conceived and measured, and 2) the type of instructional practices being investigated.

Marks and Printy (2003) demonstrated a moderately strong, positive relationship between integrated leadership (transformational and shared influence on instructional) and authentic, quality pedagogy (see Newmann and colleagues, 1996, for a full discussion). Analysis of related school cases (Printy, Marks, & Bowers, in review) provides insight into the importance of the principal setting compelling intellectual challenges, promoting teachers' leadership capacities, and making multiple and frequent connections to teachers work in their classrooms. While these factors held across all levels of schooling, the evidence supporting them in high schools was less compelling.

In another study, Printy (2008) looked at the relative influence of principal and departmental leadership to high school science and mathematics teachers' impact on teachers' use of standards based teaching methods, conceived as problem-oriented and student-centered. She measured formal leaders as agenda setters, knowledge brokers, and learning motivators (with the measures including both transformational and instructional indicators) and found that principals are well removed from teachers' instructional decisions and that department chairs serve to slow down teachers' move to these reform-oriented practices. Teachers' decisions about how to teach are influenced by opportunities to learn through a rich web of interactions with professional colleagues.

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) offer a solid and informative study that seeks to find leadership patterns that promote good instruction. Leadership is measured in two ways: first, as teachers' trust of their principal (highly indicative of transformational leadership) and second, as instructional influence shared among teachers. Instruction is

conceptualized in three ways: 1) flexible grouping practice that signals targeted or differentiated instruction and student grouping for cooperative learning; 2) standard contemporary practice in which teachers organize instruction around specific goals in a rich learning environment, and 3) focused instruction which combines teacher guided instruction with opportunities for students to explore topics of interest, all on a carefully paced schedule.

Results of the relationships of leader trust and shared leadership to the instructional outcomes vary dramatically by school level, and I report only the high school perspective here. Wahlstrom and Louis find that teachers' trust in the principal is unrelated to teachers' instructional practice of any sort. Shared leadership, however, is a significant predictor, but only for focused instruction. Also contributing to focused instruction are two domains of teachers' professional community, collective responsibility and shared norms. These findings for focused instruction suggest that carefully paced teaching succeeds in a school where teachers have the opportunity to make collective decisions that impact instruction and where they have a sense of responsibility that goes beyond the boundaries of their own classrooms. Standard contemporary practice is influenced by reflective conversation within teacher communities and by deprivatized practice. Deprivatized practice is the only professional community domain that influences flexible grouping practice. These latter findings perhaps indicate 1) the power of collaborative inquiry to change how teachers teach and 2) the necessity of collaborative inquiry to depart from staid, teacher centered practice.

Principals and Teachers: The Way Forward

The lack of quantitative findings for principal influence on teaching practice reviewed above suggests the durability of teachers' professional discretion in deciding what to teach. This reinforces what we have come to understand as the loose coupling between school leadership and classroom teaching. It is a noteworthy and happy finding, however, that teachers are influenced by their peers, particularly when they are members of communities of practice with norms for sharing work and responsibility for students, when their influence over instruction is legitimated, when they participate in school wide decision making, and when they inquire into their practice together. Herein is the path by which principals do make a difference for what happens in classrooms: they orchestrate conditions in the school that prompt teacher learning and collaboration (Printy, 2008). It is these indirect linkages to teaching and learning that emerge strongly in qualitative studies (Printy, et al., in review). "The closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students' outcomes" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 664).

Models for Leadership

In this section, I introduce three current models for leadership, suggesting a way to identify high leverage practices that principals and teachers can undertake together (as leader or follower) with the promise of better teaching and learning. Figure 1 depicts the intersection of three models: Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006; Spillane &

Diamond, 2007), Leadership Content Knowledge (Stein and Nelson, 2003), and Instructional Rounds (City, Elmore, Fierman, and Teitel, 2009). In this discussion, I point to the leadership relationship of principals and teachers with deliberate attention to intellectual stimulation and motivation (transformational leadership) and influence over the instructional program (instructional leadership), but I invite readers to consider other high leverage practices within each area of overlap. While each of these models deserves in-depth treatment, the following is meant to be just a starting point for further consideration.

Distributed Leadership

Building on the general understanding that leadership refers to activities that are either understood by, or designed by, organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, and practice of other organizational members in the service of the organization's core work, the distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice. Distributed leadership practice is defined specifically, as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. Distributed leadership practice is co-performed in interactions of leaders, followers, and aspects of the situation such as tools and routines. This suggests that leadership does not reside only in the principal's office or even in the formal roles held by specialists or head teachers. In fact, a distributed perspective on leadership moves us beyond seeing leadership as synonymous with what those individuals in formal leadership positions do (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

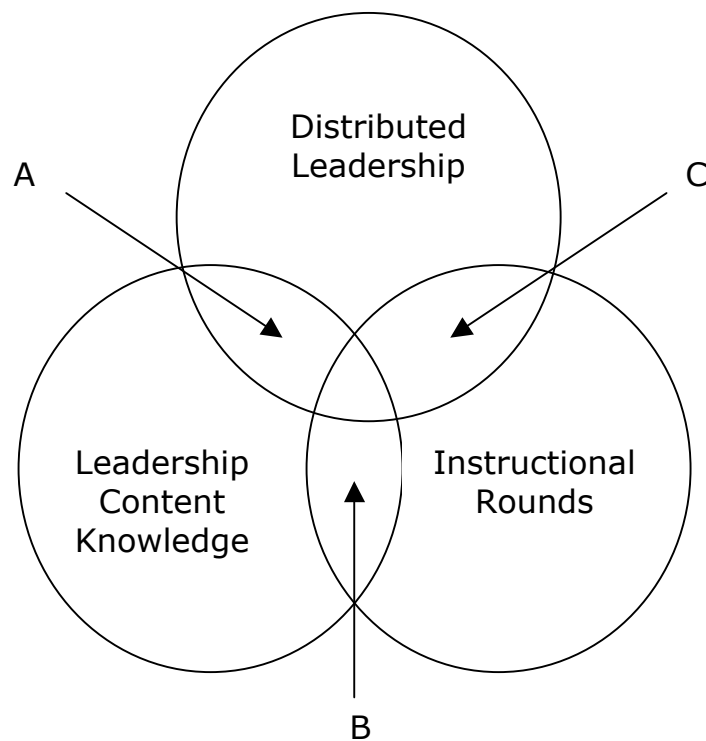


Figure 1.
Exploring Leadership Levers for Instructional Quality

Leadership Content Knowledge

Leadership content knowledge is a parallel construct to pedagogical content knowledge. Defining the concept is, in fact, the answer to the question, “What does a leader need to know about a given content to ensure that ambitious teaching and learning is occurring in classrooms?” Stein and Nelson (2003) began to answer that question based on their extensive research in school districts. Principals, they say, need to understand not only how students learn the content, they also need to understand how teachers learn the content and learn how to teach it. Leaders need to know how to create the conditions (e.g. build structures, use resources) that help teachers learn deep content knowledge and associated pedagogical skills. Recognizing what a task it would be to know all of that about all the content areas, the researchers advocate that school leaders have deep content knowledge in at least one academic area so that they can then transfer that knowledge, or associate it, with other content areas. Researchers have found that principals’ content knowledge influences the way they observe classroom practice (Nelson & Sassi, 2000), provide feedback to teachers (Nelson et al., 2001), and structure learning opportunities for faculty (Burch & Spillane, 2003).

Instructional Rounds

Instructional rounds is a process for “putting all educators into a common practice disciplined by protocols and routines and organized around the core functions of schooling in order to create common language, ways of seeing, and a shared practice of improvement” (City et al., 2009, p. 4). An exemplar of a general category of collaborative inquiry, the rounds model integrates walkthroughs with network type engagement in order to pursue district or school level improvement strategies. Rounds is a four-step process: identifying a problem of practice, observing, debriefing, and focusing on the next level of work. The authors note that rounds is at once an organizational process, a learning process, a political process, and a culture-building process.

Leadership Leverage in the Intersections

A. The intersection of distributed leadership and leadership content knowledge, particularly in high schools, underscores the essential leadership contributions of a range of educators as a way of meeting the challenge a principal might face when not having sufficient knowledge in all content areas. Department chairs and instructional coaches are formal leaders who support and supplement the intellectual leadership direction established by the principal and provide particular instructional leadership guidance to teachers within a content area. Teachers, within their communities, offer both transformational and instructional support to colleagues. Carefully developed routines composed of multiple tasks, completed by varied individuals, using appropriate tools and protocols keep instructional planning, decision making, and monitoring on track. (See McBeth, 2008 for ideas.)

B. Leaders’ need for leadership content knowledge prompts the necessity of instructional rounds (or other collaborative inquiry process). While opportunities to learn discrete content knowledge can be useful to teachers and administrators, the process of learning

about a particular problem of practice through observation, description, and professional conversation – with educators from various backgrounds and roles – has a greater chance of influencing what happens in classrooms. Together, teachers and administrators analyze current practice and trends within the school and consider what they would want to see happen next. Instructional rounds challenges numerous educational norms and depends on the intellectual pull provided both by the convener or facilitator and by the motivational forces exerted by the group. The success of rounds also depends on teachers who open their classrooms to visitors and trust them to observe with intention to learn.

C. Instructional rounds requires a network of participants who inquire about problems of practice over an extended period of time. The membership of the network can be organized by role or with mixed roles, within schools or across schools or districts. The responsibility for learning and leading within the network is shared by all members through their dispositions and interactions, though formal leaders must arrange for the rounds to occur. The use of routines and protocols to provide structure and safety to participants is key to the success of rounds, particularly in curbing the rush to judgment and guarding trust.

At the Core

All three of the models discussed share a constructivist perspective in that leadership and learning are constructed through interaction of educators in particular contexts. When the principal and other formal leaders create the opportunities and conditions for informal teacher leaders to interact with them around matters of instructional importance, the chance that teaching in classroom improves is greater. Better equipped with content knowledge and insights gleaned from collaborative inquiry, teacher leaders are able to influence their peers with the likely outcome that students across classrooms have more equitable access to quality learning experiences. Principals' influence on student outcomes may be second to that of teachers, but principals play a critical role in influencing how teachers learn to improve their instructional techniques. When teachers pull in the same direction as the principal, good things happen for students.

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