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**HOW INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IS CONVEYED BY HIGH SCHOOL
PRINCIPALS: THE FINDINGS OF THREE CASE STUDIES**

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Abstract

In this case study, high school principals who were active instructional leaders appeared to recognize that school and instructional improvement required change, and therefore they challenged old practices, beliefs, and tacit knowledge held by teachers. These principals comprehended that their mission as the school's instructional leader was to facilitate learning across the organization and therefore to change the existing context of student learning and teaching. In these case studies, I have described principals as being active or passive in their role of instructional leader. Other scholars have also recognized this pattern of activity in the role of leaders in general (Bass, 1999), and, more specifically, leaders in schools (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Lambert, 2003). Active leadership has been shown in these case studies to consist of actions by principals that can be discerned using nine categories that describe instructional leaders' practices and responsibilities. These categories provided me with a means of making sense of the instructional leadership role of the high school principals in these case studies. The nine categories helped to illuminate the coherency between the behaviours of principals who guided and directed instructional improvement and the magnitude of the changes confronting the school. I concluded that, to succeed in changing the culture of instruction, high school principals must first accept their role as their school's instructional leader and actively lead teachers. This paper is a précis of the dissertation, *How Instructional Leadership is Conveyed and Perceived in Three Alberta High Schools* (Goslin, 2008).

Schools and school districts have evolved into complex systems embedded in complex and globally responsive societies. High schools appear as somewhat chaotic networks of people who are systemically, culturally, and emotionally associated with practices coupled to schooling's core technology of teaching and learning. Complex overt and covert networks within organizations form naturally for many purposes, including the building of shared knowledge such as in the case of communities of practice (Wenger, 2006). For leaders seeking change, the challenge is making sense of the "hairball" (Davis, 2008, p. 241) like connections and networks in such a way that allows them to contribute to shaping the growth of individuals in a meaningful way.

The purpose of this paper is to share and discuss the findings arising from my case study analysis of how, amidst the complex context of high school, four principals conveyed their instructional leadership to teachers. I focus on a constellation of actions and responsibilities that principals actively and passively engaged in as they lead instructional changes and improvements. This research supports and extends other

scholars' beliefs that school principals who are effective in facilitating school improvement recognize the magnitude of the change sought and accept an active role in leading change (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Schein, 2004).

Assumptions

Four assumptions underscore the course of this discussion. The first assumption is the distinction between leadership and management. Kotter (1995) differentiated these two acts suggesting that leadership is about change and those actions taken by someone to advance change. Management is about maintaining organizational equilibrium. Out of necessity, school principals must be engaged in both. However, principals repeatedly report their time is dominated by managerial duties. There is a lack of research to suggest whether this situation is more as a result of job design, principal's leadership knowledge, or principal's choice. Regarding the latter, managing what is known may be more appealing to principals as it is less complicated, less risky, and more comprehensible than leading the *unknown*. Further, site-based decision making has down-loaded more managerial responsibilities to principals and schools, thus drawing valuable time away from principals' ability to lead improvements (Billot, 2003).

My second assumption is that schooling's core technology is teaching and learning, to which all other activity becomes secondary (Elmore, 2000). This being the case, then all primary activity undertaken by schools' leadership should be tightly coupled to the core technology. This assumption allowed me to distinguish between a principal's actions that concentrated on affecting changes in their school's administrative systems, and those principals engaged in the improvement of teaching in order to improve learning.

The second assumption supported the third which is that a principal's primary role is instructional leadership and as such guides and directs changes to teaching and learning (Elmore, 2005). This is not to say that others within the school are not instructional leaders also. However, how distributed the leadership is appeared to be associated with the principal's perception of leadership, their role as leader in the change process, and their capacity to grasp the magnitude of the change they desired. This last point frames the forth assumption.

Change, albeit complex, can be described in terms of magnitude that can help guide principals, and other school leaders, in their approaches to leading (Marzano et al., 2005). This assumption has helped me and others to account for principals effectively leading changes in a more flexible and oscillating manner rather than a dichotomous style. When confronted with mechanical change issues, Marzano and colleagues recognized effective school leadership adopted a transactional style. Confronted with culturally embedded change issues, a transformational approach was more often used successfully by principals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Perspective

Instructional leadership has evolved to integrate concepts of different leadership approaches and thinking. The context within which instructional leadership is practiced influences the nature and distribution of leadership. The complexity of that context also influences the cultures and leadership in the schools. The press for reforms in education

appears to work against an established organizational culture that has demonstrated resiliency to change (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001).

High school administrators typically have demonstrated top-down transactional leadership for over a century (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Hallinger, 2005; Murphy et al., 2001). The organizational structure of the high school, its lack of clear focus on a central purpose, and its administrators' proclivity to manage rather than to lead have neutralized most instructional improvement efforts (Murphy et al., 2001). However, radical changes in global technologies and economies have caused school policy makers and school leaders to be conscious of the changing context within which schools now operate.

Scholars have acknowledged that the growing complexity of schools necessitates that principals adopt a less leader-centered approach to school leadership (Gronn, 2002; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Wassink, Sleeper, & Imants, 2003). The widespread emphasis in education on accountability that emerged in the 1990s broadened the school reform movement beyond making individual schools more effective to include attention to quality teaching and learning for all students (Leithwood et al., 2002). Governments' policy changes have highlighted the need for "substantially different school leadership capacities" (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002, p. 850). School leaders now must have the capacity to utilize both transformational and transactional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003).

For this study, the operational definition of instructional leadership helps to differentiate it from school leadership in general. Daresh (2007) and Elmore (2000) use a similar definition for instructional leadership, which they suggest is leadership that guides and directs instructional improvements associated with student learning. Principals engage in many actions that lead to changes in their schools, such as record keeping, financial management, and physical plant management. The definition used here is helpful in its focus on actions that are associated with improving instruction. Elmore (2000) supports this perspective, stating that it is critical to establish instructional leadership foremost and "to define everything else as instrumental to it" (p. 14).

Method and Data Sources

Case study was chosen as the method to explore how instructional leadership is conveyed by principals and perceived by teachers in three Alberta high schools. Semi-structured interviews focused on exploring how principals' instructional leadership was conceptualized and expressed in selected high schools. Four principals, two associated with the same school, were interviewed. Twelve teachers were also interviewed. Participants were provided with anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

During the data gathering and analysis steps, the study utilized an adaption of the constant comparative approach advocated by Merriam (1998). This inductive and systematic approach allowed for the construction of categories and descriptors. Examining the interrelatedness of the categories produced an "explanatory framework" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). I regarded the relationships between categories as constellations (Wenger, 2006) representing the beliefs and behaviours of principals as instructional leaders at these secondary schools. The constellation is posited as explanation as to how instructional leadership is conveyed by principals and perceived by teachers.

The high schools in this study shared three commonalities: increased accountability, ongoing organizational reform, and a focus on instructional improvement. All three schools were products of the mandated school district amalgamation process that occurred in the province in the mid-1990s. No facility was older than 11 years. While the student populations varied in size, the three might be considered mid-sized schools in Alberta. The schools serve both a rural and suburban mix of students. The communities surrounding each of the high schools are bedroom communities to larger city centers close by, as well as hubs for local business.

The tenure of the school principal in each school was three years or fewer. However, at one site, the discussion about instructional leadership became slightly more complicated because the current principal had replaced the previous administrator only eight months prior to the study's commencement. At the insistence of the new principal, and other staff members, I interviewed the previous principal, who worked out of the school's district office. It was evident to me that, while he had physically left the school, the influence of his eight-year tenure as an instructional leader continued to shape the teachers' capacity to improve instruction.

My analysis revealed that these principals worked from a guiding principle about their understanding of what instructional leadership meant to them. I suggested that two principals were guided by their belief that instructional leaders model or exemplify through their behaviours the intended improvements they sought. One principal's comments implied that district policies defined and thus guided his efforts as instructional leader. I described a fourth principal's instructional leadership practices as being guided by his belief that he was a preceptor to teachers.

Constellation of Instructional Leadership

Nine categories of instructional leadership practices and responsibilities appeared to some degree in each case studied and are represented in the overarching constellation portrayed in Figure 1. Principals' beliefs influenced the other decisions they made about the actions they chose in their process of leading innovations to improve instruction and learning. Their beliefs also influenced what they focused on as needing change and improvement. Their understanding of their role in leading change and their focus for change influenced the different combinations of the other seven categories. The practices they described in these categories illustrate how leadership actions conveyed to teachers either an implicit or explicit message about change.

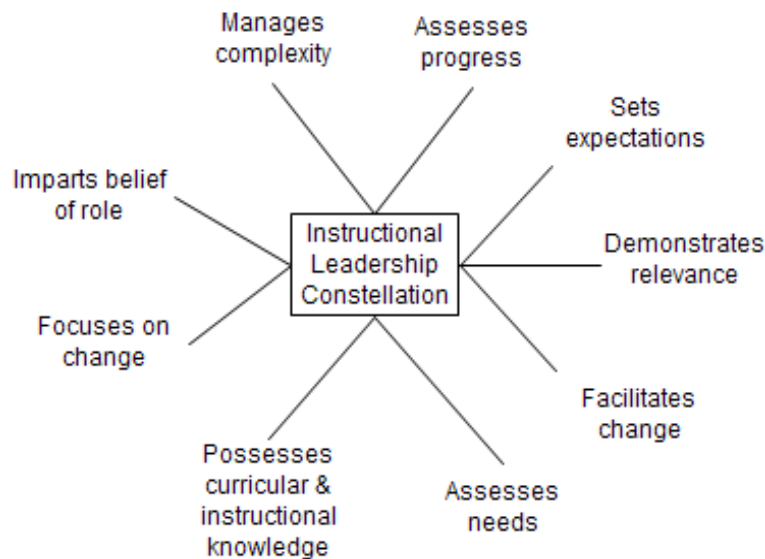


Figure 1 Constellation of instructional leadership practices and responsibilities

Principals impart a belief about their role as instructional leader

Do principals believe they are their schools' instructional leader? Do they conceive of their role as being central to the change processes? Or, do they regard themselves peripheral to instructional change, believing it to be the exclusive domain of teachers? In this study, how a principal conceived of their role as instructional leader influenced the level of engagement they had with improvement initiatives. Further, it shaped the culture of professional learning within the school.

Two principals understood their role as being side-line supporters and facilitators who dealt with administrative details. They believed that to do so would enable teachers to pursue the changes and improvements they felt were important. These principals believed that through their modelling of caring for others, teachers would tacitly adopt similar attitudes and incorporate them into their instruction, thus improving instructional practice. Teachers reported these principals to be absent from the discussions about how to improve student learning. They sensed that these principals trusted teachers to take

whatever measures were necessary within their classrooms and subject departments to improve student learning. These principals subscribed to a passive form of leadership, Bass (1999) referred to as management-by-exception. While the principals espoused the belief their approach was “positive empowerment” (p. 21), and for a few teachers it provided license to pursue individual agendas, for other teachers it produced a sense of abandonment (Blasé & Blasé, 2004).

In contrast, two principals espoused an explicit belief of their role as their school’s change agent. They purposefully positioned themselves central to the action by guiding and, when necessary, directing the change process. One principal understood his instructional leadership role as one of teaching teachers. Shaped by classic pedagogical practices, he believed his job was to determine how student learning could be improved by enhancing teachers’ instructional practice and to actively supervise instruction and learning. He conveyed his role assertively and explicitly through the other eight categories within the instructional leadership constellation.

The fourth principal regarded his role was to purposefully guide and support the growth of teachers’ professional practices across his school. As such, he framed his role within the larger context of the school and the school district. He understood that hierarchies existed in high schools and creatively used such structures to share leadership. This principal believed his role was to actively guide teachers through processes that would bring to the surface areas for improvement and he explicitly shared with teachers his beliefs about changes. He made clear his expectations that everyone would participate in the process.

Principals possess and articulate a focus for change

What a principal focused on as a subject of change and how they conveyed that focus appeared to influence teachers regarding their commitment to the change process. Principals who championed well-meaning but ambiguous themes for change had difficulty articulating what these meant for teachers. Iconic themes for change, such as ensuring success for all students, were difficult for principals and teachers to operationalize.

Visiting classrooms allowed one principal to recognize opportunities to improve the technical aspects of instruction. From his extraordinary number of classroom visits, this principal precisely defined the focus he had on improving the school’s instructional and assessment practices. As an example, he set a goal to enhance teachers’ review methods. Throughout the year he expressed the value of the changes and after his coaching of teachers in the new skills, he noticed improvement in teachers’ abilities and student performance. Further, he reportedly never wavered from the goal until he felt teachers had successfully embraced the practice.

Often principals are confronted with responding to external pressures to demonstrate changes for improvement. As such, the principal’s focus for change is contingent upon the change issue and how the principal can interpret the issue into a meaningful goal for teachers. One principal was convinced that he would be met with resistance if he simply announced to teachers that he expected them to improve their assessment practices according to a district directive. Instead, he investigated teachers’ current assessment practices through classroom visits and discussions at department

meetings. Recognizing inconsistencies in practice and misunderstandings the teachers held about student assessment he presented articles on various assessment issues to the teachers. From this he led an inquiry process as to what good assessment involves. While teachers respectfully engaged in the process, the departure from the more directed and transactional leadership practices of the past toward an expectation by the principal for teachers to become self-guided learners was unsettling for many.

Principals possess curricular and instructional knowledge

Some principals delegated to teachers the responsibility of instigating instructional change believing them to possess the curricular and instructional knowledge needed. To teachers, these principals were physically and mentally absent from learning about curricular and instructional improvements, thus effectively removed themselves from any change process. In contrast, possessing the knowledge and having an understanding about the intended change appeared to make the principal a credible leader to teachers. When the focus for change was identified accurately by the principal as a technical, or “first-order” (Marzano et al., 2005) change, the principal was able to take ownership of the necessary knowledge and instruct teachers as to how to improve their practice. Knowing from extensive research that reviewing prior knowledge with students improves student achievement, one principal focused on enhancing teachers’ review practices of past lesson material. He developed his own knowledge base and skill on the subject and then proceeded to instruct the teachers in the process.

In one instance a principal realized that the focus for change was more complex, with connections to the culture of teaching at his school. This principal understood that to be taken seriously he needed to know more about the new directions for student assessment. But he also understood that teachers throughout his school were untapped sources of knowledge. Through his intentional identification of lead teachers, the principal established a distributed knowledge network across grades and subject levels that worked as a “guiding coalition” (Kotter, 1996, p. 21) supporting the intended change initiative.

Interestingly, in these cases in which principals appeared to advance changes, the necessary knowledge base they possessed was not subject specific. That is, the principals needed to possess knowledge about effective pedagogical practices that had application across subject areas. These principals were served well by their understanding of how curricula are designed and by their general knowledge of the broad general learning outcomes subjects contained.

Principals assess needs

Study participants reported they felt inundated with external initiatives and pressures to change. Filtering these external forces and constructing an alignment between innovations swarming outside the school and the more authentic needs within the school was accomplished by principals who actively assessed the current state of instruction and learning in their schools. Principals, acting as assessors rather than as evaluators, visited classrooms regularly and often to gather first hand evidence of instructional practices. They spoke to teachers about how they taught, rather than what they were teaching. The principals surfaced pedagogical issues for improvement and

associated these needs with more ambiguous, external demands for innovation. Enhancing student achievement through improved formative assessment practices was one example. When a high school principal assessed the evidence that his school's teachers typically relied on summative evaluations, he recognized the instructional practice as reducing the opportunities teachers had to provide students with constructive feedback that would improve student performance. Hence, he defined a school focus for changing assessment practices based on the needs of all teachers.

Principals facilitate change

Removing barriers that inhibited teachers from engaging in change processes was a practice of principals when they guided and directed instructional improvement. However, principals whom teachers believed to be leaders of their schools' change initiatives, also constructed new systems to promote and support the change efforts of teachers. These principals facilitated changes by creating time within the schedule for teachers to collaborate, focusing teachers' attention on specific issues of inquiry, providing researched resources to teachers, and coaching first-hand the changes in instructional strategies. For these principals, facilitating change meant more than managing away bureaucratic roadblocks. It meant collaborating with teachers to design a course of action that was explicit in its intention to build teachers' instructional capacities.

Principals demonstrate relevance of change

When external change initiatives were adopted by principals and applied to their schools, teachers reported that they lacked an understanding of how these changes were relevant to their situation. Principals who had developed their knowledge about the intended changes and had authentically assessed a need for change were also capable of effectively responding to teachers' questions about the relevance of the innovation. However obvious this practice might be, it is also one that is apparently overlooked by principals. This study suggested that district leaders and principals often surmise a need for change in instructional practices simply because a topic is popular and of widespread interest in the educational press. Often framed as annual themes, teachers regarded these initiatives as irrelevant to their daily work, giving them only lip-service compliance. However, principals more successful at guiding and directing instructional improvements did so because they were capable of associating the changes they sought to a pedagogical or instructional need that teachers understood as being real to their situation.

Principals set expectations

Kotter (1996) suggested that a critical element in any change process is the leader's ability to plan for results rather than pray for them. This sentiment was clearly evident when principals discussed the changes they were leading and their expectations of teachers. Regardless of whether the principal's leadership orientation was transactional or transformational, the efforts that produced the most promise were those where the principal set explicit expectations for teachers' involvement. These unambiguous messages were not perceived by teachers as being draconian because the principal had created an authentic framework around them composed of knowledge, legitimate need,

and facilitative structure. Teachers received implicit messages from principals through their own modelling of the expected behaviours. Further, the principals' explicit messages to teachers individually and during meetings conveyed that teachers were expected to collaborate, contribute, lead, and demonstrate change. In these instances, principals grasped the need to lead with integrity and were prepared to confront individuals who resisted involvement. With an unwavering focus on their mission, these principals approached those individuals with tact, understanding, and resolve. In contrast to leaders who pray for buy-in and can only hope for results, principals who set clear expectations about the change process worked from a well planned framework that teachers understood could produce challenging yet realistic change.

Principals assess progress

Developing an unambiguous sense of achievement is the culminating factor in leading change. Determining if changes were successfully implemented is difficult if the intended change was couched as a vague ideal. Working from a clearly articulated focus for change helped principals and teachers to assess their progress. Principals who had assessed teachers' needs, designed supportive approaches to facilitate capacity building, spoke with authority and knowledge about the intended changes, and set expectations for teacher involvement, had the necessary resources from which they could assess progress. Through their classroom visits principals witnessed changes in teachers' instructional practice, reviewed improved student learning results, and documented shifts in teachers' conversations about their understanding of their curriculum and instruction. These principals could describe what still needed to be accomplished and what had been achieved, thus lending credibility to the transformation efforts of teachers.

Principals manage the complexity of the high school organization

A resounding theme from all participants in this study was that of principals being systematically confined to managing the complexity of a high school. Principals commented on the challenge they had providing instructional leadership to teachers. Compelled by the urgency to attend to the administrative duties of managing the building and its people, principals overlooked their responsibilities of instructional leadership. To cope, principals explicitly delegated instructional leadership duties to vice principals or department heads, or implicitly hoped teachers would take up the responsibility themselves. Teachers and principals rationalized the behavior suggesting principals lacked the vast curricular knowledge to be valuable instructional leaders and that site-based management simply did not allow for anything else. This study's evidence substantiated Murphy and others' (2001) claim that the culture of high schools can effectively neutralize instructional improvement efforts. However, evidence also existed pointing to principals who were prepared to challenge the traditional high school culture by actively leading changes to improve instruction and learning. As their schools' instructional leaders, these principals employed management strategies that afforded them the opportunity to do the transformative actions necessary to change how teachers work. They delegated managerial tasks to vice-principals and department heads, designated substantial blocks of time each day to observe classroom instruction, and met regularly with teachers about the implementation process. Further, these principals

learned about the innovations being implemented through personal study, attended in-service sessions with teachers, and authorized lead-teacher teams to become specialists in the innovation. One principal stated that nothing else was as important as his involvement in guiding and directing instruction and learning. Setting instructional leadership as their priority, these principals appeared to embody Elmore's (2000) assertion that a school's leadership should focus on improving instruction and learning, "and define everything else as instrumental to it" (p. 14).

Leading from the Inside or Managing from the Outside

Two of the four principals in this study exhibited behaviors that suggested they were active instructional leaders, prepared to lead teachers in changes that were explicitly associated with instruction and learning. Two other principals placed on teachers the responsibility for changing instructional practices, thus limiting the role of the principal in the change process. Bass (1999) labelled this approach "management-by-exception" (p. 21), which included leadership behaviours ranging from active to passive. Bass described leaders who ascribe to the management-by-exception style as, at best, bystanders to the change processes in which their constituents might engage. Operating from a mental model in which the high school context of department structures dictates and regulates their influence as leaders, these principals positioned themselves outside the improvement processes (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). "Instead of leading from the center they are left to manage from the edge" (Fink & Brayman, 2006, p. 85). These principals trusted that teachers would enact changes to improve instruction. Subject department members provided the knowledge, support, and guidance to teachers who individually accepted the responsibility to change as they saw fit.

In contrast, two principals positioned themselves as instructional leaders, central to the change initiatives sought. These individuals understood their role as active, guiding participants in the process of change. Purposefully, they placed themselves in the midst of the improvement processes that created first and second-order changes. These instructional leaders conveyed explicit acceptance of their responsibility for change and improvement of instructional practices in three characteristic ways. First, these principals made explicit to teachers the mission for change to be achieved. Second, these principals accepted responsibility for change efforts and were central in guiding and directing the process that led to improvement. And third, these principals actively monitored the progress that teachers were making toward the intended goals for improvement.

Magnitude of Change and Instructional Leadership

The nine categories of the instructional leadership constellation helped to create a description of how principals conveyed themselves as active or passive instructional leaders. As a tool, the constellation also permitted me to highlight the changes sought, assess the complexity of those changes, and consider if the principal conveyed the magnitude of the changes accurately. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) asserted that, in order to succeed in leading change in schools, principals as instructional leaders must accurately recognize the magnitude of the change confronting the school and adjust their leadership behaviours to suit the magnitude of the change.

The three common leadership characteristics of principals who actively and explicitly expressed instructional leadership in this study are similar to those identified by Marzano et al. (2005). These researchers indicated that principals were responsible for: (a) “monitoring and evaluating” (p. 72) the change process; (b) providing “well-articulated ideals and beliefs” (p. 51) of the school, instruction, and learning; and (c) developing and possessing an “extensive knowledge about effective instructional ... curricular ... assessment ... [and] classroom practices” (p. 55). Marzano et al. suggested that these responsibilities are vital to principals’ success in advancing change in schools.

Summary

This study’s contribution is the development of an analytical tool designed to assist researchers and other educational stakeholders to describe and discuss instructional leadership. As a tool designed to describe and assess leaders’ actions, the constellation of instructional leadership accommodates both the transformational and transactional orientations of leadership. Researchers may then use these descriptions to assess leaders’ behaviours in relation to the magnitude of change in the innovation they seek.

The findings from this study contribute to our conceptualization of instructional leadership. The results suggest that to succeed in changing the culture of instruction, high school principals must first accept their role as their school’s instructional leader and actively lead teachers.

I suggest that high school principals’ instructional leadership may be described as being actively or passively conveyed. The evidence from this study suggested that principals who actively conveyed instructional leadership were engaged in explicit actions that guided and directed instructional improvements at their schools. I found these principals to be at the center of change, working with teachers, rather than at the periphery of changes, delegating the responsibility to teachers. In one case, a principal who led teachers through more complex, less manageable changes drew upon his knowledge of transformational leadership to begin developing a collaborative culture prepared to tackle difficult problems. In another case, a principal reported his understanding and use of transactional leadership behaviours to make technical changes in teacher’s teaching practices.

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