The Instructional Role of Elementary School Principals

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To study elementary school principals' understandings and enactments of instructional leadership, we collected data through individual interviews, focus-group discussions, and in-school observations. Three categories captured principals' conceptualizations of instructional leadership: curriculum expertise, formal delivery of professional development, and informal culture building. Their enactment of instructional leadership was influenced by three dimensions: their personal style, degree of coherence in agendas and initiatives, and availability of enabling structures. We anticipated the influence of personal style, but not the impact of coherence and structure, which introduces a new dimension to the literature on contextual influences impinging on individual practice

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Pour étudier la conception et la mise en œuvre du leadership pédagogique chez des directeurs et directrices d'école, les auteures ont colligé des données au moyen d'entrevues individuelles, de discussions en groupe et d'observations sur place. La conception du leadership pédagogique des directeurs et directrices d'école a été analysée à l'aide de trois catégories : expertise en matière de programmes scolaires, prestation de services de perfectionnement professionnel et édification d'une culture informelle. La mise en œuvre du leadership pédagogique a été étudiée pour sa part à l'aide de trois volets : style personnel, degré de cohérence dans les calendriers et les initiatives et mise en place de structures d'incitation. Les auteures avaient prévu l'influence du style personnel, mais non l'impact de la cohérence et des structures, ce qui introduit une nouvelle dimension dans la littérature au sujet des influences contextuelles sur la pratique de chacun.

Mots clés : amélioration scolaire, leadership en éducation, perfectionnement professionnel, culture de l'école.

The instructional leadership role of the school principal has interested educational administrators and scholars since at least the advent of

school improvement programs in the 1970s. Hallinger (1992) points out that the recognition that principals could play a role in school improvement ushered in a period of intense scrutiny into how principals enact the educational aspects of their work. He contends that the term *instructional leadership* has consistently suffered from conceptual and practical limitations, first because the term means different things to different people and second because transforming practice takes a longer time than scholars and administrators have patience for. Consequently, he says, interest in instructional leadership has waned over the years as researchers have turned their attention to other aspects of the principal's role such as strategic planning, goal setting, and problem solving (p. 39).

From a practical standpoint, other factors over the past two decades have also served to move instructional leadership down on the priority list for many school principals. Prominent among these factors are shifts in educational policies and structures. In some jurisdictions, for example, system restructuring has positioned principals as officers of the organization rather than as lead teachers (Jones, 1999; Law, 1999). In such contexts, instructional leadership drifts to the background as school principals struggle to keep up with managerial tasks and paperwork. Marsh (2000) makes a further point: the current focus on accountability, and the management necessary to meet accountability requirements, implies that personal attention to instructional leadership may not be an appropriate role for school principals to assume. He argues that principals could track results and build support, but should leave instructional leadership functions to teachers.

Despite Marsh's contention, however, evidence suggests that the drive for accountability should not spell the demise of instructional leadership for principals. Newmann, King, and Rigdon (1997), for example, found that a singular focus on externally mandated accountability measures reduced the capacity of school principals and teachers to implement educational changes that were responsive to school realities. Principals in the more successful schools remained connected with daily classroom operations, relying on internal accountability practices. Furthermore, Malen, Croninger, Muncey, and Redmond-Jones (2002) found in their study that the attempt to improve student test scores by restructuring and re-staffing a school did not lead automatically to school

improvement. Such studies imply that academic and intellectual concerns should remain at the top of a principal's priority list and that principals need sufficient role autonomy and role flexibility to focus on teaching and learning in classrooms.

Given the debate about principals as instructional leaders, and the perception that the context has been nudging principals away from instructional leadership tasks, we felt the need to investigate ways to bring greater visibility to that aspect of a principal's role. We see this focus as a high priority for studies with school principals because instructional leadership deals with the ways in which principals take on educational tasks. It is precisely this educational work that distinguishes school principals from other sorts of leaders. Fortunately, recent literature has pointed to a resurgence of interest in instructional leadership (e.g., DuFour, 2002; Fiore, 2004; Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Ruebling, Stow, & Kayona, 2004), but these researchers have not achieved consensus around conceptualizations and expressions of such leadership. To contribute to the research in this area, we explored how a specific group of elementary school principals understood and enacted instructional leadership within their schools.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE LITERATURE

To begin our study, we reviewed in the relevant literature the way educators have conceptualized instructional leadership. We found a tendency to tie conceptualizations to how school leaders carry out the role. This trend concerned us because in our recent study of Ontario principals (Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2002), principals who had been out of the classroom for some time felt uncomfortable serving as instructional leaders because they equated instructional leadership with curriculum expertise.

Some recent literature, however, does not cast principals as experts in educational matters. Researchers such as Grimmett (1996), Reitzug (1997), or Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) argue that the educational role of the principal is more appropriately configured as the facilitator of such processes as collaborative inquiry, problem solving, and school development. These studies suggest that if principals see their

instructional role as one of encouraging, inviting, and promoting inquiry, the length of time they have been out of the classroom becomes irrelevant; what matters instead is their capacity to lead teachers in a process of critical inquiry, collective reflection, and problem solving. From this perspective, principals understand their role as instructional leaders to be as much about bringing visibility to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of staff members as about imparting new knowledge.

This latter perspective on instructional leadership is consistent with Blase and Blase's (1999) contention that the primary strategy for principals' instructional leadership is to promote professional dialogue among the instructional staff. In their study, teachers highlighted methods used by principals to promote such dialogue: "making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling, using inquiry and soliciting advice and opinions from teachers, and giving praise" (p. 367). Along a similar line, Grimmett (1996) identified the roles that educational leaders should play in collaborative inquiry: accepting tension and dealing with conflict, modeling collegiality and experimentation, focusing teacher talk on action, helping teachers to frame their inquiry, and connecting action with student learning. Within these frameworks, instructional leadership does not depend on direct intervention by school principals, but rather arises from a culture of professional inquiry among the teaching cadre. This conceptualization of instructional leadership sees principals taking responsibility for building organizational capacity for school improvement. According to Newmann, King, and Rigdon (1997), such capacity can be measured along three dimensions: "teacher knowledge and skill, school autonomy to act, and shared commitment and collaboration toward a clear purpose for student learning" (p. 47). They found that the capacity of school personnel to deal gracefully and effectively with changing times (and timely changes) increases in proportion to the degree to which these elements are evident in a school. In schools with high organizational capacity for improvement, leaders and staff saw educational change not just as inevitable but also as desirable because it offered targets for improved professional practice.

Our review of the literature on instructional leadership revealed a question as to whether school principals should take on an instructional leadership role. In response to this question, Sergiovanni (1992) contends

that a community of teacher leaders could serve as an effective alternative to a school principal; Marsh (2000) argues that principals should serve global rather than direct functions in instructional improvement. By contrast, Hannay and Ross (1997) found that the direct involvement of principals in school improvement initiatives is absolutely crucial, a result echoed in our own earlier investigation of the role of principals (Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2002). The principals in our study played a key role in the school, especially when teaching and learning were at stake. They sat at the hub of school activity, and their offices were the centre of information, co-ordination, decision making, and problem solving for the school.

Given the contradictory perspectives that exist in the literature on the instructional role of school principals, we saw the need for further research to anchor conceptualizations of instructional leadership in the educational work of school principals. We set out on this research path in response to one specific finding from our earlier study (Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2002): principals' belief that they were not effective instructional leaders. In that investigation, many participating principals did not see themselves as the best person to take on that role, especially if they had been out of the classroom for a long time. For the most part, they attached their concern to curriculum leadership rather than to a more general understanding of instructional leadership. We found, however, that many of their actions were educational in nature even though the principals had not categorized them as such. This discrepancy between their statements and their actions signaled for us a need for further research. In the present investigation, we set out to explore how selected elementary school principals understood and enacted instructional leadership and what influences shaped their instructional role.

THE CURRENT STUDY

To understand how specific school principals thought about and carried out instructional leadership, we used a qualitative methodology that allowed the participants to interpret the topic in their own way and to share their experiences in their own words. We felt that the sharing of

these storied experiences could serve to generate new insights for the participants themselves as well as for the researchers.

The participants in the study were 12 elementary school principals in southern Ontario, six from a public board of education and six from a publicly funded separate board. Eight of the principals continued from our earlier study; we added four new principals to replace those who had retired or been reassigned. The participants constituted a purposive sample selected from recommendations made by school board officers and other principals because they had a reputation for building instructional capacity among their staffs and a history of generating effective school improvement strategies. The participants included three male principals and three female principals from each of the two boards.[1]

The study, which took place over an entire school year, incorporated a variety of data collection methods. The first data source consisted of individual interviews with each principal, once at the beginning of the school year and once in mid-May. During these semi-structured interviews, the principals responded to open-ended questions about how they understood and carried out the educational aspects of their role. In the first set of interviews, the principals articulated their definitions of instructional leadership, described what the term meant to them, and outlined how they saw themselves serving as instructional leaders. In the second set, they reflected on the study activities and discussed how their understandings of instructional leadership had evolved during the year.

A second source of data consisted of observations of each principal in his or her school. At the mid-year point, each of us observed six principals, with each principal being observed for one and a half or two full days, depending on school activities. We did not go into the field with a list of expected behaviours; instead, we observed the interactions and activities of the principals in informal conversations and in individual, small-group, and full-staff meetings. We kept field notes of the principals' actions and the strategies they used to engage teachers, students, and other members of the school community in educational moments. At the end of the day, we took notes as the principals reflected on the day in relation to instructional leadership.

The third source of data came from three focus-group sessions conducted in January, April, and May. In each time period, we

conducted two separate sessions, one with the principals from the public board and one with the principals from the separate board. In June, we brought all 12 principals together for a final session. The group sessions gave the principals an opportunity to share their stories about the educational aspects of their work and to discuss the practical issues associated with instructional leadership. We opened these sessions by asking the principals to respond to propositional statements that reflected various views about instructional leadership. We took some of these statements from the research literature and others from the data collected in earlier interviews or group sessions. We used the principals' responses to the statements to launch the discussion into a consideration of instructional leadership. We also asked the principals to confirm or revise our interpretations of previously collected data and to offer new insights into their experiences.

We used the constant comparison method for data analysis, which began immediately following the first set of interviews and continued throughout the study. We first labeled units of data with two broad categories of descriptive codes: understanding and action. We compared data units within and across each category to detect overlap and distinctions in the categories, which yielded a set of descriptive themes relative to expressions of instructional leadership. We then searched for points of similarity, difference, and tension in the data that could offer insights into how and why specific thoughts and actions emerged as they did. This analysis led to a set of interpretive themes relative to influences on instructional leadership.

In each iteration of analysis, we individually conducted a preliminary analysis and then shared our interpretations with one another and negotiated common understandings. These findings were shared with the participants and negotiated further for the purpose of achieving consensus around the identification of themes. Each principal received copies of the analysis summaries, his/her own transcriptions and observational notes, and all subsequent interpretations of the data. Our final analyses led to a set of findings relative to conceptual and practical expressions of instructional leadership and to specific influences on the role.

FINDINGS

Because conceptualizations of instructional leadership are often tied to leadership style and behaviours, we spent much of our time with the principals examining both their thoughts and activities. In our discussions with the principals and in our observations in their schools, we found considerable diversity in their views and actions concerning the instructional role, and we detected a number of tensions as they worked through the instructional role. Several themes emerged that highlighted commonalities in these principals' expressions of their role. We present these results under two broad categories: approach to instructional leadership and direction of instructional leadership.

Approach to Leadership

When asked at the outset of the study to define instructional leadership, the principals' responses demonstrated a range of understandings. Some expressed a broad view of the concept: "Instructional leadership is basically teaching people how to teach people." Others focused their views more on purpose: "Instructional leadership is all about improving instruction for students." Gradually, however, some common understandings emerged across the group. First, the majority of the principals initially equated the notion of instructional leader with that of "curriculum expert." From this perspective, they were reluctant to label themselves as instructional leaders because they no longer saw themselves as curriculum experts. It also emerged that the group viewed instructional leadership as having both formal and informal dimensions. The formal dimension consisted of conferences, workshops, and sessions in which experts deliver information to teachers, and they saw themselves as having limited capacity in this dimension. These principals felt they had a greater role to play in the informal dimension, where their role was to motivate others and to create a learning environment.

Our interview data revealed a range of strategies that these principals associated with the informal dimension: chatting casually with teachers, providing positive feedback to teachers, discussing teaching strategies,

arranging mentoring opportunities, modeling teaching, modeling reflection, conducting performance appraisals, and providing materials and resources. During our observations in the schools, however, we found these strategies to be unequally represented. The two overriding strategies we observed were informal daily dialogue with teachers and the use of praise and encouragement with teachers and students, both of which served a culture-building function. Less prevalent was the use of explicit capacity-building strategies such as facilitating staff mentoring, coordinating staff expertise, or modeling reflection.

As we worked with these principals to understand how they viewed and carried out their instructional role, we saw that the role was complex, located within a number of competing and opposing demands. Much of this complexity came to the forefront during focus-group conversations where both sets of principals described themselves as "balancing on a tightrope." As we probed into the nature of this balancing act, and worked with the principals to deconstruct their comments, especially in light of our in-school observations, we identified three sets of tensions that affected the principals' approach to leadership.

Proactive and Reactive. One balancing act found these principals striving to enact both a proactive and reactive leadership approach. From our in-school observations, we classified much of the instructional leadership as reactive in nature. The remark of a principal during a focus group session illustrates this observation. "Yes, there are a lot of times that I don't have control over my day and things are constantly being thrown at me. . . . I seem to be always making decisions after the fact." Other participants, however, pointed out that they took a proactive stance at certain times. As one explained,

> Remember, proactive things happen in the summer. You set up timetables, you cluster prep periods, you facilitate a working environment, you do a gap analysis, you order resources, and all those kinds of things — those are already done, so you just don't see that. (public school principal)

The pull in both directions remained a source of tension for many: "What causes me stress is having to be reactive all the time when I'm proactive by nature."

Facilitative or Directive. A second tension that principals articulated

related to perceptions of control and autonomy and to the choice of a leadership approach that was either facilitative or directive. On the one hand, these principals expressed a desire to establish school cultures that would give teachers the freedom to serve children's needs as they saw fit; on the other hand, they wanted to direct activities themselves to ensure that certain plans of action were put into place in specific ways. All principals asserted that their work to establish learning climates led to collegial decision making, but we observed some of them taking explicit control of a number of situations and asserting their authority directly rather than facilitating a collaborative decision-making process. When we shared our observation with the group, all principals noted that it was difficult to choose between being facilitative or directive and that the choice generated tension.

Building Consensus or Gaining Compliance. Closely connected to the decisions around adopting a facilitative or directive approach were decisions linked to a third opposition, that of building consensus or gaining compliance. Our data suggest that these principals did not use open confrontation to promote instructional improvement; all were vocal that the staff should be working together on common goals. Yet a general agreement emerged that times had changed greatly and that principals needed to take control on occasion to ensure that certain follow-up action occurred. Attempts to find a balance between directing, expecting compliance, and gaining consensus often led to tension. During school observations, we noted that some principals did take direct control of specific instructional initiatives. One principal approved of this action: "By giving teachers the information and knowledge they require, you are in turn making that giant step to work with them. . . . There is a time you just know you have to control. And they really appreciate this." Another principal agreed that some teachers appreciated directive leadership because it helped them know the expectations and gave them a level of comfort and confidence as they responded to external initiatives such as a board-mandated literacy program. Of interest to us was that the principals in this study found it difficult to portray themselves as operating in any way except through a consensus model, even though both their actions and their descriptions indicated otherwise.

Direction of Leadership

Although much can be learned about principals' conceptualizations of instructional leadership by exploring their approach to leadership, we found that it was equally important to consider where principals direct their attention as instructional leaders. On a broad level, instructional leadership calls for principals to direct their attention to the affective and cognitive climates within the school. On a more specific level, principals direct attention to different members of the school community — to students, teachers, parents, and outside agencies.

With regard to the broad level, we found that the principals placed most emphasis on building an affective climate in their schools. They contended that the best way to establish this climate was to build positive relations with and among staff members. Further, all these principals insisted that such relationship building, often ad hoc in nature, facilitated instructional leadership. As one principal stated, "Our job is to basically develop a positive learning environment in the school. If you can do that, people will thrive." Another explained that a positive climate was essential in bringing about the teamwork approach that was part of the board's philosophy.

> We're encouraging them to be a part of the team — getting them to buy in to the "us" system. As the principal, we can dictate to teachers, but if we don't encourage and praise them, we would be banging our head up against the wall. (separate school principal)

Although these principals directed their attention to creating an affective climate in the school, they were aware that their role also called for them to establish a cognitive climate. It proved difficult, however, for them to articulate the nature of this cognitive dimension. Some held that a cognitive climate occurred during informal relationship building; others held that they addressed cognitive aspects through formal professional development. A focus-group conversation on this question led one principal to remark,

> All the formal has to be supported by the informal — that's where we have to balance it. We have times where we need the formal, but a lot of that has to be supported by

the informal conversations, the prior visits to classrooms, the mentoring, and so on. (public school principal)

After much back-and-forth around this topic, the principals pointed out that to attend to the two distinct climates required behaviours that were often difficult to negotiate. They commented openly on feeling more adept at establishing an affective climate and finding it difficult to balance this with a cognitive climate. As one explained, "For me, the question is how to strike a balance between formal instruction and supportive leadership — how do you balance the two?"

Our observations also revealed that the focus of these principals' leadership differed across the group in that they directed their attention to different members of the school community. Most participants directed their instructional activities predominantly at teachers, while some focused attention on students, and one principal focused primarily on contacts with outside agencies. All principals appeared to be unaware of how they directed their time and attention, but when asked to reflect on our observations, they articulated a rationale. Those who directed attention to students did so to free up time during the school day for teachers to attend to their own instruction. Those who focused more directly on teachers claimed that they saw their role as working alongside teachers to ensure that they developed knowledge and skills to improve instruction. Yet our in-school observations suggested that the decision to focus more on students, teachers, or outside agencies rested as much on contextual conditions like the socio-economic status of the students, the behavioural management environment in the school, and the personal style and comfort level of the principal, as on clearly articulated pedagogic goals. Regardless of the underlying reasons for where they chose to direct their leadership, these principals came to admit that they felt tension and, at times, guilt about not attending equally to all members of the educational community. As one principal noted, "There's only so much time in the day, and you try to do it all, but you can't."

Influences on Participants' Role Enactment

We set out in this study to explore principals' views and constructions of

their roles as instructional leader, but worked with them to go beyond merely describing their understandings and expressions to uncover more about how and why specific views and behaviours came about. We came to see that the expression of instructional leadership was influenced by a number of issues, which we teased from the data by paying careful attention to points of difference, tension, confusion, or controversy in the data provided by participants or noted in observations. We present here the three dimensions we found to influence the views and behaviours of these principals, and we highlight the sources of the tensions embedded in each factor.

Style. Style speaks to the variety of approaches to and directions for instructional leadership and the associated difficulty of identifying best practices for the role. This concern appeared in the data when principals noted that using different approaches in their educational role often proved to be difficult, and that they were not completely comfortable or satisfied with the degree of balance they had achieved among approaches. As one principal remarked, "I know I should conference more [with teachers] but there are so many fires, so many things that are out of control. They come up and my best-laid plans are just laid to waste."

Without exception, the principals in this study were more concerned with building an affective than a cognitive climate in their schools. Attention to the affective climate, they said, had a number of payoffs: it was encouraged by their supervisory officers; it offered teachers and students a nurturing environment; it helped everyone, including the principal, to feel good about coming to school; and it provided the foundation for the cognitive climate. The following comment illustrates their thoughts on the value of the affective climate: "Trust is the big thing. If they don't trust you, then they won't work for you or with you. You are snookered before you begin." The primary trade-off, however, was that, for the most part, principals gave surprisingly little attention to the development of the cognitive climate. One principal explained it this way: "It's about relationship building. That's what I spend the most amount of time on; that's the heart of it. I think that's what we're after." Another individual confirmed this stance: "That whole notion of relationships is what keeps it all going."

The principals did not initially appear to be concerned about this trade-off. Instead, they observed that, if a principal took care of the affect, the teachers would take care of the cognition. As one principal explained,

> The more you take care of the relationships, the more you are showing your staff how you take care of them, and they will be able to deal with their parents and their children as part of that modeling. You are leaving them to do their jobs, and there is mutual respect there. (public school principal)

Another principal noted that teachers might view the use of explicit activities directed at promoting a cognitive climate in the school as an intrusion: "I wonder what [the teachers] would think about that. Would they want you to be conferencing more often or putting your nose in where it doesn't belong?"

When we showed the principals this imbalance in attention between affective and cognitive climates, they first defended their choice but gradually moved into a deeper analysis of their roles. During one group session, the following comment was instrumental in shifting their perspective:

> This [result] is an opportunity for us to look and see that maybe we are not focusing on other things like school planning, conferencing, et cetera, as much as the others. I think that our awareness level can go up from this and we can say, "Okay, maybe there are some areas. Maybe we can look at our methods and maximize our opportunities to further our curriculum work." (public school principal)

Following that comment, the principals began to examine the choices they had made in their educational role and to reflect on how their choices had served certain purposes at the expense of others. This kind of reflection highlighted for the principals the educational aspects of their role and prompted them to consider ways in which they had built and could build the cognitive climate in their schools.

Coherence. The influence of coherence on these principals' expressions of instructional leadership rested on the degree of order within and consistency among various agendas, directions, and instructional moments in a school. Our observations in the schools indicated that, for the most part, coherence emerged when the principals kept a firm hand

on the instructional environment and engaged teachers directly in educational discourse and activity. Although we saw many instances of principals delegating specific instructional leadership tasks to teachers, the mark of the principal was clearly detectable. One set of field notes, for example, reads:

> It is interesting that her manner is like a teacher. She uses her voice to create excitement and gain interest, and she uses stories to illustrate her points. The staff seems to enjoy the format. They're attentive and laugh often. (separate school field notes)

In the school observations, we found that a tacit agreement existed between these principals and their teachers; they would work together on the academic aspects of school life, but what the principals held important would take priority in the school. The following comment illustrates this point: "If we, as leaders in the school, don't value target setting, we are certainly not going to put the time into it to have it work. We value different things in different schools." Our observational data supported this comment. We noted that instructional leadership, regardless of where responsibility was located, thrived when the principals gave priority to teaching and learning, but in schools where other agendas, such as relationship building or student conduct, were primary concerns, the instructional environment did not appear to have a high priority in school-wide discourse.

What these principals held to be important is instructive in considering the issue of coherence. Both the interview and observational data demonstrated a clear focus during the more formal moments of instructional leadership on school improvement plans, literacy programs, and target setting, all of which were connected to the provincial testing initiative for elementary students. Every principal stressed that the testing agenda directed their instructional leadership initiatives.

> It's the driving force because we're answerable to it. The public sees it, the target setting is all based around it, and the money for early literacy is based on it. Consequently, so much of what we do is driven by it. (separate school principal)

Principals noted that the attention to provincial tests had been escalating

for several years and that school responses were becoming increasingly focused each year. As one principal commented,

> The push is bigger now. The educational environment is a lot more intense. When I think back to the first year of [testing], we were all asking why we were doing this. Now I'm looking at my staff and we're working together as a team and asking ourselves how we can get all our students to a level 3 or 4. (public school principal)

The principals welcomed the focus on literacy development from both the school board and the ministry of education. One principal expressed it this way: "Now we have our directives. Now we know what's expected, and that's a big relief." Another said,

> It helps to know what the focus is so that when I'm working with students or teachers, we all know what direction we're going in and we can start funneling in that direction. . . . Teachers find that comforting because when the [school] leadership changes, they would like to know that we are all going in the same direction. (separate school principal)

In spite of the coherence around literacy goals, we detected tensions about how instructional leadership should be configured to achieve the goals, with different principals experiencing different sources of tension. A point of tension for one principal was the role that teachers played in the process. She had made a personal commitment to turn much of the process over to teachers but struggled with the associated shift in her own role and with the problem of finding the right person for the task.

> This is a big change for me because I used to be the one to lead the workshops — that's what I did. I was the expert then, but I'm the gatekeeper now. I'm not an expert, and that's been hard for me. So the key for me now is to find the person in the school and empower them to be the expert. (public school principal)

By contrast, another principal did not see leadership by teachers as an issue. He said,

> They don't want autonomy, but they do want direction. They're happy to do what they're told as long as they know that's what they're supposed to do and as long as they can see that the students are doing better with it. (public school principal)

These different beliefs about the place of teachers yielded different ways of bringing coherence to teacher activity. The first principal adopted an informal approach through strategies such as doing paperwork in the staff room to hear teacher conversations, and we saw her take advantage of opportunities to focus casual staffroom talk on teaching and learning or on broader educational matters. The second principal had a more formal approach: he personally directed school planning for field trips, with a stated focus on relating the trips to curriculum objectives. In spite of different styles, however, these two principals were equally clear about their own focus on teaching and learning, and that focus was evident throughout their schools. We observed a similar degree of influence, albeit different types, in every school we visited, and it was the principal who always tended to bring diverse activities into some degree of coherence.

Structure. The presence of structures to facilitate instructional leadership emerged as a critical influence on the principals' capacity to serve in the role. Participants identified specific system-level structures such as a coordinator for administrators' professional development, system-wide school improvement planning committees, and focused professional development workshops for teachers and principals that had been helpful in building their capacity for instructional leadership. One principal put it this way: "[The workshops and meetings] give us an opportunity to really talk about instruction and take something back to the school." Another said, "All the principals are talking about this and all the pieces are starting to pull together. You have support from your peers and the committee."

Even as the principals appreciated the system-level structures, they also recognized the need to build school-level structures to focus teachers' attention on teaching and learning. They had begun this process by establishing grade-level and division-level meetings for teachers to discuss grade-specific approaches to school improvement initiatives, but the principals acknowledged that much more could be done at the school. One principal, for example, remarked that

> Our teacher meetings are too valuable to waste on items of business. We need to do more PD. I had some resistance with that this year, but next year I will do it all the time. We need a more teacher-oriented meeting to happen. It seems like it isn't a big

step, but it is. (public school principal)

From our point of view, it was a big step, indeed, because it was an explicit recognition of the critical importance of structure.

In addition to internal structures, the ministry of education had provided structure by mandating two professional days for every elementary school in the province, one for provincial-test target setting and one for school-based professional development. We observed each type of session at least once during our study, and we found that the level of intellectual discussions and attention during these days was in sharp contrast to what typically transpired during the days when students were in class. Our field notes for those days indicated that teachers willingly engaged in academic discussions with the principal. They were eager to ask questions, provide information, propose ideas, suggest possibilities, and plan new directions; the discussions invariably went longer than the allotted time. In his post-meeting reflection, one principal remarked: "What happened today is what instructional leadership is all about. This shows what can happen when there's time to meet with teachers during school."

The principals noted that the existence of school structures served to anchor instructional tasks in their daily work. One principal, for example, told us he had written himself into the teaching timetable to free teachers for divisional meetings and team planning. He said,

It's written in the timetable so it's now a responsibility for me and I don't miss it for anything. Once it's in the timetable, it's set in stone and nothing conflicts with it. If I didn't put it in the timetable, it would get set aside. (public school principal)

Furthermore, system structures helped the principals to implement plans and directions and to assess the success of the plans. This comment is illustrative:

There are some people who talk up a storm but they're not actually doing things in the classroom, and that's where the formal thing [such as mandatory performance appraisal] comes into play. . . . You need to have the formal part there to make sure you're following up. (public school principal)

The principals saw school structures as helping to focus teacher talk,

thus raising the level of academic discourse in the school. These comments are particularly illuminating:

> If you think about the staff meetings where you've done a lot of PD time, they don't seem to want to leave and sometimes it's hard to bring those sessions to an end. When you do a business meeting, it's quite different – every eye is on the clock. In the PD sessions, there's that level of excitement that the staff have, and they don't watch the clock. (public school principal)

> I was target setting [with the teachers] and I would never have thought that after two and a half hours of talking they would still be going strong. That was the most stimulating conversation, educationally speaking, that we've had this year. There was no lunch program, or track and field, just good debate and strategizing. (separate school principal)

The importance of school- and system-based structures became compelling for us when we considered them in relation to the structures in place to support and channel student learning. It is difficult to imagine schools without timetables, curricula, units of study, and other strategies that structure students' academic work, and we came to see that it makes equal sense to have structures that promote and facilitate teachers' and principals' work.

RETHINKING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Our work with the principals in this study does not resolve the debates associated with instructional leadership. Instead, it confirms that the process of instructional leadership continues to elude definition and that the associated tasks continue to fall among the more neglected aspects of principals' work. Because recent trends emphasize managerial, political, and accountability imperatives (Johnson, 2002; Marsh, 2000; Newmann et al., 1997), we were not surprised that the principals had vague conceptualizations of the instructional role or that they found it palatable to hand off instructional tasks to teachers. But what was a surprise was the extent to which the priorities of the principals became the priorities of the rest of the school people. Specifically, we discovered that the degree to which principals paid personal attention to teaching and learning sent a distinct message about the importance of these activities.

This conclusion confirmed for us that instructional leadership is a key aspect of the school principals' role, and this study has given us some unique insights into the character of this role.

One insight rests on the variability in leadership style. This issue, a longstanding concern in the literature, led Hallinger and Murphy (1985) to lament that "principals spend relatively little time on instructional management because it is unclear whether one way of attaining a desired outcome is more efficient than another" (p. 220). Consequently, the search for best practice became a central focus in educational improvement literature. Several authors, including Dufour and Eaker (1998), Fiore (2004), and Marsh (2000), offer versions of best leadership practice that they contend will generate best teaching practice. Our experiences in this study challenge this trend and suggest different questions about instructional leadership. From our perspective, the question is not whether principals are doing instructional leadership correctly, effectively, and efficiently, but how aware principals are of what they are doing in the guise of instructional leadership. Why do they do what they do? What are the associated trade-offs and payoffs in what they do? How aware are they of alternative ways? These latter questions turn the discourse away from a search for best practice toward a concern for informed practice. This direction departs from current emphases because it honours the complexities and tensions that inhabit instructional leadership, it positions leaders as thoughtful reflective professionals, and it disrupts the technical rational assumptions of best practice discourse.

The tendency in the literature to shine the spotlight on individual styles, skills, and strategies also fails to address adequately the contextual influences that impinge on individual practice. We agree with Gronn and Ribbins (1996) and Hallinger and Heck (1996) that instructional leadership is context-specific, but we are not as comfortable with their depictions of context. They describe context primarily in terms of school sites, populations, purposes, and activities, but we have come to see that context goes deeper than physical phenomena. It speaks also to the tacit agreements and implicit psychological contracts between principals and other members of the educational community. We hold that attempts to understand and construct instructional leadership are

incomplete if they do not include an examination of the belief systems that shape behaviour and influence relationships.

Coherence, too, can be considered an aspect of context, and insights about coherence are timely in light of current calls for distributed or shared leadership. Hart (1995) and Marsh (2000), for example, recommend devolving instructional leadership tasks to the teachers, whereas Lambert (2002) and Reitzug (1997) situate instructional leadership as a joint endeavour between teachers and principals, with each taking on different but complementary aspects of the role. The latter direction is reflective of what we found with these principals. However, the confusion the principals felt over unclear or contradictory directions suggests that shared leadership should not mean fragmented leadership. Without coherence, we found that individuals galloped off in many directions, but when activities were aligned, everyone had something in common to work on and to talk about. We are not suggesting that principals should have unilateral control over instructional leadership, and we are not advocating that school principals should be the only or even the most visible instructional leaders. Instead, we have come to understand that instructional leadership, regardless of whether it comes from teachers or principals, should offer a focus for teachers' and principals' academic work, and that alignment should exist among the instructional efforts and directions of principals, teachers, and central office personnel.

A third contextual influence highlighted in our study was the presence of enabling structures for instructional leadership. Unfortunately, structure has received little attention, at least in recent years, in academic discourse. Gronn (2000) contends that researchers have neglected scholarship on structure partly because of an implicit bifurcation of individuals and organizations and a preference for emphasizing people rather than structures. Believing this to be a false dichotomy, he urges that educators and researchers construct bridging mechanisms to link individual activity and organizational structure. We support this suggestion. Our experiences in this study have led us to believe that enabling structures can serve as reminders to principals that instructional leadership is an important part of their work. Furthermore, with structures in place, principals are not left to their own devices to

raise the intellectual level in the school. Instead, they receive a degree of support and substance for engaging school people in educational matters and for building their own capacity for instructional leadership.

We have also come to a deeper understanding about the relationship between the cognitive and affective climates in schools. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) describe this relationship as reciprocal and mutually reinforcing, and they contend that deep improvement hinges on explicit development of both aspects of school climate. We are sympathetic to this position, but we wonder how often principals take responsibility for developing a cognitive climate. We have come to believe that school principals might benefit from some reminders about the pivotal role they play in this endeavour. If they are able to anchor their activity in instructional leadership, they are well positioned to create conditions that encourage intellectual conversations, stimulate new thinking, and energize teaching and learning. This kind of activity honours and extends the connection that Dufour (2002) and Grimmett (1996) believe exists between leadership and learning.

In the final all-participant group session, as we listened to the principals share their thoughts on the study, we all came to understand that no right or wrong way exists to enact instructional leadership. Instead, specific contexts, conditions, and dispositions coalesce to construct a particular profile at a particular time, and the important issue for us was the extent to which the principals were able to reflect on their own conceptualization and practice of instructional leadership, to consider the effects of these constructions, and subsequently to refine their beliefs and practices. We are well aware of the challenge in changing long-standing views and habits of practice, especially for school principals whose task environment is fraught with complexity and unpredictability, but we contend that the instructional aspect of principals' work is too important to be neglected, marginalized, or delegated. We return to our original comment that the educational part of a school principal's role sets such individuals apart from leaders in other organizations, and we believe that removing principals from the instructional equation would have deleterious effects on the intellectual climate in schools and on the capacity of school people to build exciting and stimulating learning environments.

Finally, we want to emphasize that we have come to appreciate the complexity of school principals' lives. They are caught in the crossfire between competing demands, conflicts, and tensions, and we have found them to be resourceful in bringing order out of chaotic situations. Our work with these principals brought the role of instructional leadership to the forefront of their minds, made it a central topic of their conversation and reflection, and gave them a chance to think in a more informed way about their own practice. We hope that their experiences and the insights we gained from them will serve a similar function for others: to bring visibility to a crucial part of a school principal's work life and to raise awareness of the variety of ways in which school principals can wear the instructional mantle.

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NOTES

[1] The pool of potential participants for the study included 96 elementary principals in the public board and 51 in the separate board.

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