

Leading with integrity

How principals influence teacher effectiveness without derailing morale

It was JF Kennedy who said that leadership and learning are indispensable to one another, but what makes for good leadership in educational settings? In a new study, David Grant of the University of Redlands in the United States integrates practices from diverse leadership models which have been debated for many years. His research determined which practices have the greatest impact on teacher effectiveness and teacher morale. The integrated model predicted whether teachers would be engaged, overextended, burned out, or ineffective.

Whether we want to play chess, football, or the piano, we are often told that practice makes perfect: talent is not enough, and to acquire true expertise we need to focus on a rigorous programme of self improvement.

The theory of deliberate practice over time extends to the world of work, including teaching. For example, experts quoted in a new study by David Grant, of the University of Redlands, USA, say that it takes eight years for teachers to reach their optimum level of effectiveness.

However, researchers at the US Learning Policy Institute report that 40 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of qualifying. So, what can school principals do to increase teacher effectiveness and boost teacher morale?

Grant's study looked at different models of leadership and identified a range of principal practices which were tested using a survey of middle school teachers in California. Through his research, Grant set out to discover whether there

is a range of integrated practices that improve teacher outcomes, and what can be learned from integrated leadership functions.

LEADERSHIP DEBATES

Instructional leadership developed in the 1980s in response to concerns that poverty levels in school neighbourhoods predicted learning inequality in student outcomes and school factors were unable to change this outcome. The instructional leadership model asserts that teachers and principals can alter inequitable learning outcomes. According to the model, student learning improves as a result of improvement in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Principals lead by observing teachers in class, providing growth feedback, monitoring student learning, and ensuring a safe and positive learning climate.

However, the model is not without fault. As Grant notes, research shows that instructional leadership can reduce teacher morale and increase stress. Both of these can lead to teacher exhaustion and burnout, not least because teachers may feel they are to blame for lower levels of student achievement.

In contrast, transformational leadership focuses on collective responsibility for student achievement. In this model, the principal's role is to lead by example and provide inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation to foster group learning between professionals. The model was adapted for use in education by Kenneth Leithwood in the 1990s. Grant reported that research suggests it is a poor predictor of student attainment.

Transactional leadership was first contrasted from transformational leadership by James Burns in 1978.



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A measure of leadership was developed by management theorist Bernard Bass in the 1980s. Transactional leadership focuses on the role of principals in setting expectations and goals, and motivating teachers through the appeal of self-interest and reward. Part of this model is 'management by exception active' – the idea that principals should control and monitor teacher performance, stepping in when there are signs of failure. According to Grant, this is problematic as research shows that many of these practices have a negative effect on teacher morale, even if they have a positive effect on student achievement.

The binary thinking embroiled in evaluating leadership styles has masked the nuanced value of the individual approaches. This is not a choice of either/or. Overgeneralisations and assumptions can stop us seeing greater possibilities. The problem of the above models is that they improve one outcome at the expense of another. This realisation has led to the more recent development of the integrated leadership model. Rejecting binary thinking, Grant argues that this blends leadership practices from diverse styles, on the understanding that improving teacher effectiveness and/or student achievement cannot be done in isolation from teacher morale.

THE BURN-OUT CONTINUUM

Grant's research specifically focused on teachers. It sought to identify principal practices that impacted, and could be integrated to predict, teacher effectiveness and teacher morale.

In an online survey, 240 middle school teachers were asked to rate their principal for 58 practices. The leadership practices were rated using valid and reliable questionnaires. In total, 13,920 observations were recorded. The results were then analysed using respected statistical techniques, including discriminant function analysis.

The practices surveyed were wide-ranging. They varied, for example, from whether the principal 'waits for things to go wrong before taking action' and 'directs teacher attention toward failures to meet standards', to whether they 'express confidence that goals will be achieved' and 'take time to talk informally

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with students and teachers during recess and breaks'. They also included whether the principal 'uses tests and other performance measures to assess progress towards school goals' and 'creates professional growth opportunities for teachers as a reward for special contributions to the school'.

Analysis of the responses identified four teacher profile groups which combined teacher effectiveness and teacher morale. These ranged on a continuum from 'engagement,' through 'over-extended' and 'burned-out,' to 'ineffective'. For example, teachers who were seen to have high effectiveness and high morale were said to be 'engaged', and teachers who demonstrated low effectiveness and low morale were described as 'burned out'.

The results identified two functions of integrated leadership named 'improvement-responsivity' and 'community learning'.

'Improvement-responsivity' disregards continuum thinking, rebuffs the 'either/or' paradigm and deals with autonomy-accountability tension. Principals who moderate practices to improve teacher effectiveness with, for example, corrective feedback or direct coaching, rather than eliminating the practices altogether, are most effective. Responsivity to teachers' questions or concerns is moderated at the same time to prevent the extremes of overextended or ineffective (although satisfied) teachers. Conversely, principal behaviours such as not getting back to teachers, and waiting for situations





The leadership functions identified by the study have important implications for schools and policy-makers, as well as for teacher training and professional development.

to deteriorate before taking action, were more associated with teacher burn-out and teacher ineffectiveness. Grant comments how equity leaders go against the grain when they judiciously act to improve teacher effectiveness and increase responsiveness to teacher needs.

'Community learning' refers to principal practices that included such things as taking time to talk informally to students and teachers during recess and breaks, and creating professional growth opportunities for teachers. The results showed that greater frequency of principals' community learning practices was an important predictor of teacher engagement. Ineffective teachers experienced a lower frequency of community learning. Community learning fits the continuum paradigm. Moreover, when amalgamated with improvement-responsivity, an upsurge in community learning practices leads to more engaged teachers.

MORE IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER

One of the survey's major findings is that more is not necessarily better. For example, results for improvement-responsivity showed that principals frequently focused on teacher improvement leads to teachers being over-extended. At the other extreme, principals who rarely seek to influence teacher improvement led to ineffective but satisfied teachers.

As Grant explains, there is an optimal level. 'Effective principals moderate but do not abandon direct practices to improve teacher effectiveness.'

Frequency was, however, found to be important for community learning, and increased community learning practices by principals predicted more engaged teachers. Practices included using student achievement data to develop school goals, motivating the community through relationships, and expressing optimism that goals would be realised. Although

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the results suggest that principals should set community learning in motion, they also imply that principals should not be the sole drivers of initiatives – learning is best enacted within communities of practice.

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING INEQUALITY

Grant's research identifies improvement-responsivity and community learning as the most significant leadership functions to help principals to deal with the competing demands they face. Following an integrated leadership model, improvement-responsivity challenges the either instructional or transformational leadership models by

holding that principals must work to both support teachers and create a sense of collective responsibility for student achievement. In addition, principals must respond more frequently to teachers' needs for support and improved working conditions. As Grant explains, 'With specific effective practices in their repertoire, principals can adapt so as to influence engaged teachers who are more likely to improve their practice, improve student achievement, and experience increasing morale.'

The study finds that community learning can help to reduce the conflict between autonomy and accountability, safeguarding accountability while supporting teacher autonomy in two ways. Firstly, interdependent autonomous action occurs when groups of teachers co-create improvement goals. The goals require collective commitment, but teachers have the autonomy to deliver them as they choose. Moreover, principals can facilitate and support this co-created planning with members of their team. Secondly, community learning is a conduit for accountable cultural action – action that occurs when two or more people do something that alters the community's culture. These groups account over time for the impact of

their action. If the outcome is negative, the community protects the actors from punitive shaming, using what they learn to make appropriate changes. If it is positive, the whole community

celebrates, and may extend the change effort in relevant ways. Community learning offers a structural and social channel to embody both concepts with principals as influential facilitators.

The leadership functions identified by the study have important implications for schools and policy-makers, as well as for teacher training and professional development. Grant argues that community learning in particular can help to address learning inequality. As he concludes, 'Community learning offers empirically proven practices which may be progressively used to narrow learning gaps until every student has the same hope and choice.'



Behind the Research

Professor David Grant

E: David_grant@redlands.edu **T:** +1 909 560 7601 [linkedin.com/in/david-grant-phd-redlands](https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-grant-phd-redlands)
W: www.redlands.edu/study/schools-and-centers/school-of-education/academics/graduate-department-of-leadership-and-highereducation/master-of-arts-in-educational-administration

Research Objectives

Professor Grant reimagines instructional leadership by integrating leadership styles to predict and improve teacher effectiveness and teacher morale.

Detail

Bio

Professor David Grant coordinates the school and district leadership programme and teaches educational leadership at the University of Redlands in California, USA. Before working in higher education, Grant was a principal in two California middle schools. His research focuses on equity leadership to ensure high-quality education for all students.

Collaborators

Dr David E Drew, PhD (co-author). Drew is a professor of Education and holds the Joseph B Platt Chair in the Management of Technology at Claremont Graduate University in California, USA.



References

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Personal Response

Your research specifically focused on principal practices with regard to teachers. Aside from the important finding that community learning also addresses learning inequality, did the results identify other practices that directly impact student achievement?

One of the challenges principals face is enacting influence directly. Teachers are the most significant direct influence on student learning at the school level. Many studies support the role of the principal working on organisational processes to support teachers indirectly. However, principals may also directly influence teachers in positive or negative ways. The optimal influence is realised when principals exercise discretion, wisely choosing if, when, with whom, and how to provide direct support. Simultaneously these leaders practice 'responsivity,' frequent and timely support to teachers' needs. Therefore, we cannot suggest that principals directly impact student achievement. Principals indirectly impact students by influencing teachers and exercising wisdom in this process. In addition, principals indirectly influence teachers through community learning and organisational support.

