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.

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 with students and teachers during recess and break’. 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 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. The leadership functions identified by the study have important implications for schools and policy-makers, as well as for teacher training and professional development.

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.’

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.’

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 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, while more frequently influencing those who need more support. They are more likely to improve their practice, improve student achievement, and experience increasing morale.’

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