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# District Central Office Leadership as Teaching: How Central Office Administrators Support Principals' Development as Instructional Leaders

## Meredith I. Honig[1]

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Research on educational leadership underscores the importance of principals operating as instructional leaders and intensive job-embedded supports for such work; this research also identifies central office staff as key support providers. However, it teaches little about what central office staff do when they provide such support and how to distinguish what they do as more or less supportive of principals' development as instructional leaders. This article addresses that gap with findings from an in-depth comparative case study of the work practices of executive-level central office staff in three districts dedicated to providing instructional leadership support to principals. **Research Design:** The conceptual framework drawn from sociocultural and cognitive learning theories identifies practices that deepen professional practice in authentic work settings. Data came from 283 interviews and approximately 265 observation hours and 200 documents.

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**Findings:** Departing from other studies that do not empirically elaborate central office work practices or that call generally for central office leadership, this analysis identified specific practices of central office administrators consistent with helping principals learn to strengthen their instructional leadership. These practices anchor a conception of central office staff in these roles as teachers of principals' instructional leadership. Key mediators of their work included their own conceptions of their roles and their opportunities to consult with colleagues, among other conditions. **Conclusions:** Advancing such work in practice and building knowledge about it in research will require significant shifts throughout school district systems and new approaches to the study of educational leadership.

Over the past 10 years, a growing handful of urban school districts have launched ambitious reforms of their central offices to help improve teaching and learning in all schools. At the heart of several of these reforms, central offices move away from occasional professional development for principals to prioritizing ongoing, intensive, job-embedded support to school principals to help them improve classroom instruction—roles for principals sometimes called "instructional leadership." Instead of relegating responsibility for such principal support to coaches or mentors located within other central office units, executive-level staff—those reporting directly to superintendents, deputy superintendents, or the equivalent—work intensively with principals to strengthen their instructional leadership. For example, in two districts, all central office units, from curriculum and instruction to facilities and maintenance, have been shifting their focus from business and compliance to supporting district-wide teaching and learning improvement. As part of these strategies, the position of area superintendent has been radically rewritten to focus not on running a regionally based segment of the central office but on working with small groups of principals individually and in networks to develop their capacity for instructional leadership.

Research on educational leadership has underscored the importance of principals operating as instructional leaders, the value of intensive job-embedded professional development to help them build their capacity for such work, and support from central offices as integral to the process. The

assignment of executive-level staff to provide such support suggests these districts value such work in ways that bode well for its success. However, research and experience also suggest that districts likely will not implement these strategies well. After all, school district central offices were originally established and have historically operated to carry out a limited range of largely regulatory and basic business functions—not to support teaching and learning improvement, let alone provide intensive supports for principals' instructional leadership. To what extent are central office administrators overcoming such trends and supporting principals' development as instructional leaders? What conditions help or hinder them in the process?

We addressed these questions with an in-depth analysis of the work practices of executive-level central office administrators in three urban districts engaged in these new relationships with school principals to support their instructional leadership. Our data came from a broader study of the districts' efforts to transform their central offices organizations focused on teaching and learning support (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, 2010). For this article, we drew on ideas from sociocultural and cognitive learning theories that identify practices associated with deepening professional practice in authentic work settings (as opposed to, for example, in university classroom or other pre-service settings). Our data sources included 283 interviews, almost 265 observation hours, and over 200 documents.

In a departure from other central office studies that do not provide direct empirical support for particular forms of central office work or that call generally for central office leadership, we identified specific practices of central office administrators that were consistent with the ideas from sociocultural theory and that multiple respondents reported supported principals' development as instructional leaders. These practices anchor a conception of central office staff in these roles as teachers—teachers of principals' instructional leadership. We also found that staff varied in their engagement in these practices. We identify key mediators of their work, some of which may explain that variation. These findings suggest that new learning support partnerships between central office staff and school principals represent a promising direction for educational leadership. Advancing such work in practice and building knowledge about it in research will require new approaches to the study of educational leadership and certain significant shifts in school systems.

## Background

The efforts of school district central office leaders to support principals' instructional leadership reflect several specific developments in research and

practice that suggest the promise of these efforts for strengthening systems of support for improved classroom instruction and ultimately, results for students. Those developments include mounting evidence underscoring the importance of: "instructional leadership" as at least a part of principals' work; intensive, job-embedded supports for helping principals develop their capacity for such leadership; and central offices as key providers of such supports. However, research also offers central office administrators few guides for how to provide such support and suggests they will face significant challenges in moving in this direction.

To elaborate, educational research over at least the past decade has identified principals' instructional leadership as an important contributor to improved teaching and, in some studies, student achievement gains (Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Murphy, 1990; Murphy & Hallinger, 1987, 1988; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009). While definitions of instructional leadership vary, scholars generally agree that such leadership involves principals working intensively and continuously with teachers to examine evidence of the quality of their teaching and to use that evidence to improve how they teach (Blase & Blase, 1999; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Heck, 1992; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marsh et al., 2005; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Principals sometimes engage in such work directly. For example, Blase and Blase (1999) described how principals contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching in their schools by observing classrooms and giving teachers feedback and praise, modeling instruction, and using inquiry-based approaches that fostered teachers' and principals' reflections on their practice. Principals also lead teams of teachers or bring in outside coaches to engage in such work (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holzman, 2009; Mangin, 2007; Marsh et al., 2005; Portin et al., 2009; Supovitz et al. 2009).

Sustained, job-embedded supports may be fundamental to helping principals build their capacity for instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 1999; Davis et al., 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Peterson, 2002). For example, a recent study found that district-provided professional development, which was almost always job-embedded, had a statistically significant relationship with principals' time spent on such instructional leadership tasks as observing classroom instruction and engaging with teachers outside the classroom to improve instruction (Augustine et al., 2009). Such studies reinforce that principals' instructional leadership is not a content principals are likely to learn well in traditional pre-service or workshop formats. Rather, instructional leadership represents a set of work practices that

principals come to integrate into their ongoing work through sustained support for such integration over time; arrangements such as on-site coaches and other professional development that takes place in schools as part of principals' regular day seem fundamental to principals learning such practices (Gallucci & Swanson, 2006).

Studies sometimes conclude that central office administrators should provide such support for principal learning (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). However, most of this research draws its conclusions from cases in which district central office administrators do not provide such support, with negative results, rather than direct examples in which they do with positive results. For example, central office administrators in San Diego aimed to help principals develop their instructional leadership capacity; based on their general failure to do so, researchers concluded that central office supports are important (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Such reasoning can lead to useful hypotheses but itself does not provide direct empirical support for those conclusions. In an exception, Augustine and colleagues (2009) found that central office administrators provided much of the job-embedded professional development they associated with principals' engagement in instructional leadership; however, the findings did not adequately specify what central office staff did that made a difference in this regard.

The broader research literature on the relationship between central offices and teaching and learning improvement also points to the importance of central office participation in such efforts but does not yet elaborate what such participation entails. For instance, studies of so called "effective schools" (Purkey & Smith, 1985), teacher professional learning communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), and comprehensive school reform designs (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002), among others, revealed in part how such reform efforts plateaued, lumbered, or outright failed absent central office administrators' support for implementation. These studies underscore the central role of central offices in teaching and learning improvement but identify what central offices should not do rather than how they participate in such efforts in positive ways. Some studies conclude that central offices should engage in broad activities such as strong "superintendent leadership" around instruction or increasing "policy coherence" (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). However, others have shown that even in districts with such conditions, central offices may not support school improvement absent substantial shifts in how central office staff go about their daily work (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Hubbard et al., 2006; see also Honig, 2003, 2009).

These shortcomings of the literature stem in part from methodological limitations. Many of the studies about central offices rely on one-time interviews with a small handful of central office administrators or school principals' reports about central office performance. These evidence sources, while potentially important, hardly reveal the daily practices of central office administrators, which generally unfold over time and beyond the purview of school principals.

This research does suggest that central office administrators likely struggle to help principals improve their instructional leadership. For example, attempts in San Diego to focus central office administrators on instructional rather than operational issues ran up against long-standing institutional patterns of practice to the contrary and central office administrators' overall lack of capacity for their new instructional support roles (Hubbard et al., 2006). Honig (2006) found that central office administrators who aimed to remake their work and relationships with schools over time tended to fall back on traditional central office practices and school relationships that impeded implementation, even in the cases of administrators who were new central office employees hired to infuse the central office with nontraditional ways of doing business.

These critiques reinforced the importance of our focusing on central office administrators providing job-embedded supports to help principals learn how to strengthen their instructional leadership in districts where such work was a high priority. The research also underscored that we should aim to deeply examine how central office administrators go about that work and conditions that mediate their work. Specifically we asked: What do central office administrators do in their work with principals to strengthen principals' instructional leadership? To what extent do their practices seem consistent with helping principals learn how to strengthen their instructional leadership? What conditions seem to mediate their engagement in those practices?

## Conceptual Framework

To ground our investigation, we turned to complementary ideas about assistance relationships from sociocultural learning theory and cognitive theories of learning (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 2003; J. S. Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1998; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacas, & Goldsmith, 1995; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These relationships have been associated with deepening and improving people's work across settings. We hypothesized that practices involved in those relationships would help us define and distinguish how

central office staff work with principals. We focused our data collection and analysis on the extent to which central office administrators engaged in the following practices.

## Focus on Joint Work

Participants in assistance relationships (e.g., central office administrators) help deepen others' participation in particular work practices (e.g., principals' engagement in instructional leadership) when they focus that participation on "joint work," or specific activities of value to community members in the present and over time (J. S. Brown et al., 1989; Rogoff et al., 1995; Smagorinsky et al., 2003; Wenger, 1998). By intentionally helping learners come to see the value of those activities, participants sustain learners' engagement in them in ways essential to their learning since learners are more likely to participate deeply in activities they view as important or whose importance is reinforced by their social or cultural contexts. "Joint work" stands in sharp contrast to some traditional supervisory or "assessment relationships" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). In the latter, the central office might require principals to improve their instructional leadership and mainly monitor and evaluate principals' progress. But if they took a joint work approach, central office staff would work alongside principals in such efforts and view such improvements as their own as well as principals' responsibility.

## Model

Participants in assistance relationships help deepen others' engagement in particular work practices by modeling or demonstrating those practices rather than, for example, just talking about them or directing people to participate in them (A. Brown & Campione, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). By observing models in action, learners may develop "a conceptual model of the target task prior to attempting to execute it" (Collins et al., 2003, p. 2). Such conceptual models provide "an interpretive structure for making sense of the feedback, hints, and connections from the master" and an "internalized guide for the period when the apprentice is engaged in relatively independent practice" (J. S. Brown et al., 1989). Models are particularly powerful learning resources when those modeling use *metacognitive strategies* of making thinking "visible" (Collins et al., 2003, p. 3; Lee & Smith, 1995), such as by calling attention to the practices they are demonstrating and engaging others in dialogue about the rationale for those practices. In so doing, those engaged

in modeling increase the chances that learners will notice the demonstrations; without a clear understanding of the underlying rationale for certain activities, learners tend not to deepen their engagement in them.

## Develop and Use Tools

Tools are particular materials that represent or "reify" new ideas learners are trying to integrate into their practice (Wenger, 1998). Tools focus learning by specifying what individuals should and should not do (Barley, 1986; Weick, 1998). At the same time, these materials operate as jumping-off points for individuals to define new conceptions of acceptable conduct (Barley, 1986). As such, tools "trigger" negotiations among individuals about which actions might contribute to particular goals rather than prescribe action (Barley, 1986; J. A. Brown et al., 1989; Smagorinsky et al., 2003). For example, classroom observation protocols in some districts engage principals and teachers in learning how to collect evidence of teaching practice and understand the extent to which it reflects their district's definition of high-quality teaching.

## Broker

Assistance relationships involve some participants operating as brokers or boundary spanners. These individuals help bring in new ideas, understandings, and other resources that might advance the learning in the relationships—activities sometimes called bridging. They also buffer those relationships from potentially unproductive external interference (Wenger, 1998). In so doing, those participants increase and protect the resources available to support learning.

## Create and Sustain Social Engagement

Social engagement is fundamental to the strength of the practices outlined previously. Through social engagement, such as conversations with others, individuals grapple with the meaning of new information (e.g., what practices are being modeled and captured in tools) and how to integrate it into their own actions and thinking—processes essential to changes in people's actual work practices. Participants may challenge each others' understandings and offer competing theories about underlying problems and potential solutions (Argyris & Schön, 1996; J. A. Brown & Duguid, 1991). In so doing, individuals increase the individual and collective knowledge they

bring to bear on situations (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

## Research Design and Method

These concepts anchored our comparative, qualitative case study of three urban school districts. We focused on central office staff specifically dedicated to work with principals one on one[1] to strengthen their capacity for instructional leadership. While their actual titles varied, we call these staff as a group, Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs). With this title we intend to reinforce that these staff were not like principal mentors or coaches occasionally found in some central office curriculum and instructional units. Rather, these staff reported directly to the superintendent's cabinet or equivalent, reflecting the elevation of instructional leadership on the districts' improvement agendas. The ILDs' assignments ranged from 9 and 28 principals; most ILDs in Atlanta and New York had approximately 20 principals each and Oakland 13 on average.[2]

We analyzed their work as part of a broader examination of how the three central offices were attempting to transform work practices across the central office to support teaching and learning improvement (Honig et al., 2010). Qualitative comparative methods seemed particularly appropriate for this investigation given our focus on indentifying the daily practices of professionals, which requires in-depth observations, and given the importance of having multiple cases in different contexts that when contrasted with each other could reveal patterns in work practices that might otherwise be hard to detect (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1989).

Three urban school districts provided strategic research sites for our inquiry: Atlanta Public Schools (GA), New York City Public Schools/ Empowerment Schools Organization (NYC/ESO),[3] and Oakland Unified School District (CA). Strategic research sites support conditions that promise to help researchers observe little-understood phenomena, in this case, executive-level central office staff engaged in intensive assistance relationships with school principals around their instructional leadership. Findings from strategic cases are not generalizable to populations but may inform theory that can guide ongoing practice and research (Merton, 1987). These districts represented strategic sites for this inquiry because they intentionally aimed to make job-embedded professional support for principals' instructional leadership not a service they contracted out for but a main work responsibility of a cadre of executive-level central office staff. The appointment of executive-level staff to these posts suggested that those staff might have the resources,

including autonomy and authority, important to their success. The high levels of political and fiscal backing for central office transformation in both districts suggested that they might not be hampered by these predictable implementation impediments (Honig et al., 2010).

Our data sources for this analysis included interviews, observations, and document reviews conducted mainly during the 2007-2008 academic year.[4] We completed 283 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 162 central office administrators, school principals, and representatives from outside organizations involved in or otherwise in a position to comment on the assistance relationships. We invited all ILDs to participate in the study and, based on acceptance rates, ended up including all but 3 ILDs across the three districts: all 5 ILDs from Atlanta, 6 of the 8 in Oakland, and 14[5] in New York. We interviewed most of the ILDs three times for 60 to 90 minutes each. (One of the ILDs only agreed to participate in two interviews and we had access to five interviews from two other ILDs who participated in a companion research project whose data we were able to access.) Our interview protocols tapped respondents' perceptions of how ILDs worked with school principals, outcomes respondents associated with their participation, and conditions that mediated their work. Given the limitations of self-report data for understanding people's actual practice, we took several steps during interviews to strengthen this source of evidence about ILDs' practice. These strategies included: probing high-inference comments intensively for detailed examples of practice, using ILDs' work calendars as jumping-off points for distinguishing between perceived versus actual use of time, juxtaposing other respondents' claims against ILDs' reports, and asking consistent questions about practice over time.

We triangulated interview findings with extensive observations. We observed 264.5 hours of events in real time that promised to reveal how ILDs worked with principals and conditions that mediated their work. Our observation strategies varied by the opportunities available in each site and included shadowing and meeting observations. While shadowing, we recorded ILDs on tape thinking aloud about student work, documented how ILDs and school principals together observed classroom practice, and captured dialog from school-based meetings among ILDs, school principals, classroom teachers, and others. In two districts, on-site field researchers took verbatim transcripts at nearly all the twice monthly meetings of ILDs and other central office staff. In one district, we took verbatim notes at regular meetings between ILDs and their groups of principals. In addition, we analyzed over 250 documents such as policy reports related to the change strategies in each district as well as the "tools" the ILDs used with principals.

We coded our data using NVIVO8 software in several phases to help us triangulate our findings and track ILD practice over time. First, we coded all data by type of data source and date to help us track developments over time. We used a set of relatively low-inference codes derived from our conceptual framework to distinguish evidence about how central office administrators worked with principals, outcomes related to principals' work, and conditions that seemed to help or hinder both. We also inductively developed additional codes when certain data points did not fit the original codes. Second, we scrutinized the data within each of our original codes for its fit with the given construct and we recoded those data using higher inference categories. For example, during the first phase we had coded various data that seemed to demonstrate central office administrators modeling instructional leadership for school principals. During the second phase we reread these data to confirm that they represented modeling as defined in our conceptual framework and that they reflected the higher inference concept, metacognition. Also for example, during the first phase we coded various data under joint work that we later distinguished as reflecting differentiation, a category consistent with but not specified by our conceptual framework.

Third, we collapsed redundant categories and eliminated those whose points we could not substantiate with at least three different data sources (either a combination of interviews, observations, and documents or self-reports of at least three different respondents). In this phase we distinguished among ILDs' practices first by sorting ILD practices consistent and inconsistent with those in our theoretical framework. We viewed the highly consistent practices as likely supports for principals' development as instructional leaders and those as negligible or not consistent as not likely supportive of such results. We viewed these methods as a high standard for analysis given the deep research base supporting those practices as learning supports. We then analyzed the data to pinpoint any patterns in ILD practice over time and found certain ILDs were more likely than others to appear in the highly consistent versus the negligible/inconsistent examples. We triangulated those findings with principals' and other central office administrators' reports of the value their ILD added to principals' instructional leadership. Those ILDs who received consistently positive reports by at least three different respondents were also those who appeared most often in the examples consistent with our conceptual framework and vice versa. We report that pattern in Table 1 and in our main findings section and claim that those in the highly consistent category were providing supports consistent with helping principals strengthen their instructional leadership.

In this phase, we identified conditions that helped or hindered the ILDs' work by triangulating data collected over time from ILDs' and principals' reports and our observations. We selected to report those conditions that: (a) the literature from which we derived our conceptual framework identifies as particularly important to how adults engage in assistance relationships, (b) appeared most frequently across three data sources and all three districts, (c) were most proximate to the work practices identified previously as opposed to other aspects of the central office reform, and (d) that clearly differed between ILDs who consistently engaged in the practices highlighted previously and those that did not.

Our methods do not allow us to claim that the ILDs' work with their principals *caused* actual changes in instructional leadership practice. Nor did we have metrics of each principal's instructional leadership against which to precisely measure changes. Such measurement was beyond the scope of our study, particularly given that it would have required the development of growth measures (to help us account for different principal starting places) not available at the time of our study. Nor did our study districts have a principal evaluation system at the time that could provide quantitative measure of principal growth. Appropriate to these limitations, in our report of findings we do not claim a causal relationship between ILD practices and growth in principals' instructional leadership. Instead, we claim consistency in the extent to which ILDs engaged in practices described in sociocultural learning theory as supportive of professional growth and corroborated by respondent reports. We address these limitations in our concluding section.

## Findings

With remarkable consistency, respondents reported that the ILDs' main charge was to help an assigned group of principals strengthen their "instructional leadership." At the time of our study, none of the districts had a formal definition of principal instructional leadership. Our analysis of interview responses suggested that the ILDs across districts were working with a consistent albeit broad definition of such leadership as working intensively with teachers inside and outside the classroom to improve the quality of their teaching. As one ILD described his or her work,

> Taking a principal who has not spent time in classrooms and getting them to shift their focus takes a lot of intentional work. And then maintain that focus in a culture where teachers are used to . . . keeping you

in your office to deal with this one student all day. That's a whole other level of work. And then helping people prioritize their time on the core.

An ILD in another district similarly described to colleagues in a meeting that they help principals prioritize matters related to instructional leadership. This ILD said that they all know principals

who get sucked into their office and never leave. How much time are they in classrooms and are they meeting with teachers? The [office] work is never done. I could stay in the office 24 hours a day and not get everything done. Look at all the detractors. I help with how do they think about their day, their week?

While all of the ILDs in our study sought to develop principals' instructional leadership, the ILDs differed in how they actually worked with their principals, especially over the course of the academic year. I summarize those differences in Table 1 and elaborate on them in the following section. In sum, we found that across the three districts, those ILDs whose practices consistently reflected those in our conceptual framework were also those typically identified by their principals and other central office administrators as a support for principals' instructional leadership. These ILDs also consistently differentiated supports for principals focused on their development as instructional leaders. Those ILDs whose engagement with principals generally ran counter to the practices in our conceptual framework and differentiation, either throughout the academic year or increasingly as the year wore on, were also those whose principals and other central office staff reported did not support principals' development as instructional leaders. We did not pick up between-district differences in this regard, so we report on ILD practices across the three systems. As noted earlier, we cannot make causal claims from these data that certain ILD practices cause improvements in principals' instructional leadership. However, our theoretical framework and carefully triangulated data lend strong support for our claims about which ILD practices seem to provide stronger or weaker supports for principals' instructional leadership.

## Engaging in Instructional Leadership as "Joint Work"

While all the ILDs unanimously reported that they focused on supporting principals' development as instructional leaders, they did not all consistently take a joint work approach to that support. Those that did made intentional

**Table 1.** Variations in Instructional Leadership Directors' (ILDs) Practice

| Support for Principals' Instructional Leadership | Consistent | Inconsistent/Negligible |
|---|---|---|
| **Practices** | | |
| Joint work | • Focused on building principals' instructional leadership capacity<br>• Intentionally worked to help all principals value instructional leadership by starting with principals' questions or jointly negotiated problems of practice<br>• Reinforced the joint nature of the work through talk moves and actions that underscored both principals and ILD were working on principals' instructional leadership | • Focused on building principals' instructional leadership capacity<br>• Supervised rather than jointly engaged<br>• Most/all one-on-one engagement waned over the year |
| Differentiation | • Differentiated support for some principals consistently over the entire academic year<br>• Struggled in some cases to support all principals (rather than mainly new principals) | • Differentiated support for some principals early in the academic year but engagement with principals waned over the year<br>• Struggled to support all principals (rather than mainly new principals) |
| Modeling | • Frequently modeled thinking and action<br>• Always or frequently used metacognitive strategies<br>• Resisted pressures to substitute for principals | • Occasionally modeled thinking and action<br>• Seldom or never used metacognitive strategies<br>• Missed opportunities to model by directing or substituting |
| Tools | • Anchored the use of tools in an explicit definition of high-quality instruction | • Did not anchor the use of tools in an explicit definition of high-quality instruction |

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

| Support for Principals' Instructional Leadership | Consistent | Inconsistent/Negligible |
|---|---|---|
|  | • Used tools as the basis for challenging conversations with principals strengthening their instructional leadership practice | • Did not use tools as the basis for challenging conversations about strengthening practice |
| Brokering | • Bridged principals to instructional and operational supports from the central office and external sources<br>• Managed tensions in buffering | • Bridged principals to instructional and operational supports from the central office and external sources<br>• Faced challenges in managing tensions |

moves to help principals come to value their own development as instructional leaders, rather than to engage in instructional leadership work such as classroom observations as a matter of compliance. As one ILD reported, "I help principals realize that the more they're in classrooms, the easier their job gets." Another ILD described:

> I spend time helping the principals focus their work. Working on the quality of teaching and learning, looking at the student work, looking at the rigor, looking at best practices, giving them feedback. Or that it's not going to pay out in dividends in student achievement.

One strategy these ILDs commonly used to help principals come to value their development as instructional leaders involved, in one ILD's words, "starting from principals' questions" or a specific problem of practice that they jointly negotiated with principals. By starting with the principals' priorities, be they in the form of questions or problems, the ILDs aimed to help their principals make a connection between what they already valued and their deeper engagement in instructional leadership. As one ILD put it:

> From an adult learning perspective we can't bite off a thousand things. I look for strategies to make my work with principals focused and make it about instruction. A focus that proves that that's the most

important thing that we do. If either of them [i.e., two principals] get good at that cycle of inquiry or how they look at new data in enhancing staff skills about instruction, and we go really deep into that, then those systems and that discipline will have larger effects into the rest of their work. Just like you have a school pick a single instructional focus for a year knowing that you get deep and good at that, that has impacts on . . . other aspects of the school.

These ILDs further reinforced the *joint* nature of the work by underscoring for principals through their communications and their actions that strengthening principals' instructional leadership was the main work for the principal as well as for them. As noted earlier, such practices contrast with some traditional supervisory relationships in which central office staff mainly monitor principals' work but do not engage in the work themselves. For example, these ILDs typically concluded meetings with principals by identifying next steps for both the principal and themselves in helping the principal focus on improving instruction. Several ILDs wrote these next steps in e-mails that they viewed as formal agreements between themselves and their principals about how each of them would participate in helping the principal realize his or her short-term learning goals.

By contrast, some ILDs at least occasionally took more of a supervisory stance with their principals, casting instructional leadership development as work for principals that the ILDs monitored rather than directly participated in jointly with principals. For instance, the school visits of several of these ILDs typically involved them observing classrooms (with or without the principal), writing reports detailing next steps for the principals and teachers but not themselves, and monitoring principals' compliance with their directions on subsequent visits.

We also considered counterexamples of focusing on joint work those in which the ILDs did not spend time with their principals on instructional leadership, particularly since their doing so seemed to signal to principals that their ILDs did not value their development as instructional leaders at least relative to their other demands. As one principal reported, meetings with the ILD decreased from monthly in the first semester to just one meeting in the second semester; though this principle reached out to the ILD, "I rarely got responses." When asked to explain the decrease, the principal reported, "I think it's just like most things, particularly in education. You get too many fires to put out, too many other priorities. And so I just got the sense that [my ILD] had other priorities to deal with other than working directly with me or [my school]." These counterexamples mainly surfaced in the second half of

the academic year when, as some ILDs themselves readily admitted, other demands such as personnel hearings consumed their time. Some argued that their participation in such matters helped protect principals' time for work with teachers on improving instruction. However, the net result was that some ILDs spent less time supporting their school principals' instructional leadership compared to their counterparts who also faced similar demands.

## Differentiation

All ILDs described in detail how they differentiated or strategically individualized supports for at least some of their principals, depending on principals' needs and strengths as instructional leaders, much like a classroom teacher might differentiate instruction for students. For instance, ILDs elaborated how they collected specific evidence about the instructional leadership capacity of their principals and how they used that evidence to support each principal differently, according to their needs and strengths. As one ILD described the range of work with different principals:

> It may be about sitting with their professional development team, listening to what they're trying to put together, and then asking questions to help them through that. It could be in terms of an initiative that the school may have and they want to see how the instruction is going, or it could be because they want a different lens on a teacher that they feel is not performing up to par and they just want my input on that. It could be a parent meeting where they're having to explain the data and how to look at the data. It could be around having conversations with some principals that may be stressed and overwhelmed and talking crazy, like "I'm quitting."

Our shadowing observations confirmed these claims for all ILDs early in the academic year and some ILDs over the course of the entire academic year. For instance, we observed an ILD working with a principal that was identified as having a "steep learning curve" in terms of his or her ability to identify high-quality instruction. During visits to classrooms, the ILD stayed physically close to the principal and frequently engaged the principal in conversation about evidence from the classrooms and the extent to which it fit the standards of high-quality teaching outlined in an observation rubric. In a separate conversation to debrief the observations, the ILD walked the principal point-by-point through the rubric and challenged the principal to link evidence from the observation to the rubric. The meeting concluded with the

ILD suggesting how the principal could practice such observations on his or her own before the ILD's next visit. By contrast, on a visit with another principal whom the ILD identified as more expert in the area of classroom observations, the ILD and the principal observed classrooms with the same rubric but with little to no dialog among them. During the debrief conversation, the ILD and principal compared evidence, finding only a few discrepancies. The principal led most of the debrief, asking the ILD for advice on particular teachers. The meeting concluded with the principal sharing next steps for teacher development.

Principals' reports reinforced that their ILDs differentiated how they worked with them. For instance, one principal reflected there are

> principals who have less experience than I do. . . . So, I think that they understand that and I think it directly impacts the way that they work with us. . . . It's pretty analogous to having a class full of heterogeneous students where people need very, very different things. So, I think they have largely done a pretty damn good job of juggling the whole thing and trying to meet everyone's needs.

However, as we noted previously, the extent to which some ILDs engaged with principals waned over the course of the academic year, necessarily meaning that they did not differentiate supports for principals over that time period. Additionally, all the ILDs reported that due to the high numbers of principals for whom they were responsible, they could not allocate all the time to supporting each principal that such work demanded. Instead, they spent time where they reported the need was, in their words, "greatest" or "most urgent." Such prioritization could indicate differentiation if the ILDs used evidence about principals' instructional leadership practice to make strategic decisions about how to allocate their time across their principals. However, some ILDs generally indicated that they focused on schools with low student achievement scores or new school principals, not necessarily principals who were weak in their instructional leadership. Conversely, these ILDs tended to spend less time with principals in schools with high test scores even if evidence suggested that the principals did not have deep instructional leadership capacity. Because these choices did not reflect the strategic deployment of time and other resources based on evidence of principals' instructional leadership practice, we did not consider them examples of differentiation of supports for principals' instructional leadership.

## *Modeling*

Some ILDs across all three districts explicitly modeled or demonstrated how to act like an instructional leader as a strategy for strengthening principals' instructional leadership. One ILD explained that some principals were "stumped" by how to improve teaching quality and that many "need to see a model in action" to understand how to lead for such results. In another ILD's words, "I recognize that there's a delicate balance between what I know and what they need to know. And so *telling* them is really not an effective method." This person continued, "Ultimately when I leave I want them to know how to do it," and simply telling them what to do will not achieve that result.

In the vast majority of examples we captured, ILDs modeled how principals could have what we call "challenging conversations" with their teachers, conversations in which principals used "talk moves" (Horn & Warren Little, 2010) and other strategies to help teachers grapple with the quality of their instruction and how to improve it, as opposed to, for example, mainly delivering evaluation results. In one such example, an ILD met with a principal in advance of a teacher staff meeting to talk through the principal's meeting goals and what specific moves the ILD would demonstrate during the meeting to engage teachers in seriously considering evidence of their teaching quality. During the meeting, the principal observed and documented the ILD's practice. After the meeting the principal and ILD debriefed the meeting and then made plans for the principal to run a subsequent meeting with the ILD observing and providing feedback.

In another example, an ILD explained that at one of the low-performing schools, "everyone's friendly" during conversations about student learning and teachers do not otherwise meaningfully confront their school's low performance or its possible root causes. As the ILD put it, "It's okay to get friendly, but you got to get down to business." The ILD subsequently modeled how to have conversations with teachers that challenged them to rethink their practice, first in conversations with the principal about the implications of the data for the principal's practice; the ILD then helped the principal reflect on similar moves the principal could use with his or her teachers to influence their practice.

While all the ILDs at least occasionally engaged in modeling, not all of them frequently used metacognitive strategies of bringing thinking to the surface—highlighting for principals the particular ways of acting and thinking they were demonstrating and their underlying rationales for why those demonstrations were consistent with instructional leadership. Those who frequently used metacognitive strategies were those we associated with positive

reports. As one of these ILDs explained, "If I'm going to have any impact at all on these schools, I have to teach them and teach them *why* we're doing what we're doing and what makes a difference and help them to become instructional leaders." This ILD elaborated that unless the principals understood the underlying rationale for certain practices, then in his or her experience the principals were more likely to perceive their ILD as directive and evaluative rather than supportive and therefore resist them.

The ILDs in the inconsistent or negligible examples of modeling frequently directed principals to engage in certain work rather than demonstrated the work and occasionally or routinely stepped in and did work on the principals' behalf without allowing the principals to observe or otherwise learn from them. For example, when asked how he or she helped a principal fund a particular academic program, an ILD described making budget adjustments himself or herself:

> And another way I get money for programs like this—I've done it in the past—is by recapturing money when we have teaching vacancies that don't fill. So I go back into their budgets with the fiscal analyst and I find out how much money they've recaptured by having the sub in the position that had the full cost of a teacher encumbered, and I recapture it and use it for something else.

When asked directly how, if at all, the principal participated in that process, this ILD responded that some issues were too "high-stakes" to take time to involve the principals. In another example, an ILD reported that several of the ILD's principals were not using school-based coaches in effective ways. The ILD went directly to the coaches and reassigned them to different classrooms, a responsibility formally within the principals' purview. This ILD explained that it was more efficient to just make this change rather than engage the principal in the process. By contrast, the ILDs in the positive examples explained that modeling required them to actively resist the temptation and also the occasional pressure from some school principals to step in and do the work for their principals. As one ILD reported, one of his or her principals typically told the ILD, "I get a lot of suggestions, but nobody does it for me." The ILD reportedly responded, "We can't do it for you. We cannot come in and address your staff. Your staff needs to see you as the leader. Your staff needs to see *you* giving the feedback about what they're not doing right. Not us."

## *Developing and Using Tools*

All the ILDs developed and used various print materials in their work with principals. Certain materials—sometimes called "rubrics," "worksheets," and "self-evaluation tools"—functioned as what learning research distinguishes as "tools"—materials intentionally designed and used to engage learners in new ways of thinking and acting consistent with particular practices. For instance, one ILD walked us through documents that he or she called a "curriculum" that included an "entry plan" that addressed

> What does a principal need to know to survive? We work through 10 cycles across the year. For each I create a protocol. My goals are to support the agendas of the principals. Help them find a voice, and facilitate the learning of their staff. It begins with us giving stuff [i.e., tools] to them.

ILDs across at least two of our districts commonly used classroom observation, cycle-of-inquiry, or data-based protocols as tools[6] for helping principals strengthen their instructional leadership. For instance, while their details varied, the classroom observation protocols prompted principals and ILDs together to observe classroom teaching and use evidence from their observations to identify supports to help the teachers and the principals improve the quality of instruction.[7]

We found two variations in how ILDs used these tools. First, those ILDs we identified as consistently supporting principals' instructional leadership used classroom observation protocols, cycle-of-inquiry materials, and the other tools in tandem with an explicit definition of the kind of teaching practice they were working with principals to support. In New York and Oakland, which did not have a formal systems definition of high-quality teaching, ILDs sometimes developed that definition in the moment. As one described when using a classroom observation protocol:

> We'll pick a focus of a grade and we'll say what are you doing in your units of study presently? Take me to a class and we go there and we'll talk generally before about what will I expect to see. If you're studying characterization, what will I expect to see when I'm looking over the children's writing? What will I expect to see in the classroom? What resources will I expect to see that the teachers will have to support their unit of study?

The ILDs in Atlanta used the "26 Best Practices" tool, which defined high-quality teaching practices across grades and content areas, to ground the

classroom observation protocols and how they used the protocols with principals. In a comment typical of the Atlanta principals, one said that use of this tool as the basis for classroom observations helped the principal provide "relevant" instructional feedback to teachers by "measuring their performance to a standard—to a real rubric they can see."

The ILDs in New York and Oakland we identified as inconsistently or negligibly supporting principals' instructional leadership tended not to anchor their use of tools in an explicit definition of high-quality teaching. For instance, one of these ILDs described to colleagues in a meeting how his or her classroom observation protocol asked principals to simply identify "wows" or positive aspects of a given classroom and "wonders" or questions about the classroom. The evidence that principals generated with these prompts, in the ILD's own words, were "all about climate," such as whether students are "happy and listening" and not about how the students were not "given grade-level stuff to do" or asked questions that probed for their understanding. This ILD reported and demonstrated in observations that he or she struggled to help principals focus their classroom observations on teaching quality.

The ILDs also varied in the extent to which they used the classroom observation protocols to ground challenging conversations with principals—again, conversations that prompted principals to grapple with the quality of their practice and how to improve it. Such conversations typically involved the ILDs asking principals to produce evidence that they were shifting their practice in ways consistent with instructional leadership or juxtaposing classroom observation data alongside other data. In a typical example of the latter that we captured across multiple ILDs, one ILD described how through use of his or her classroom observation protocol at one school the ILD found poor quality classroom teaching, consistent with the school's low state performance assessment results but inconsistent with the principal's positive evaluations of those teachers. This ILD recounted looking across the evidence gathered with the observation protocol, teacher ratings, and student test scores:

> I had hard conversations in their one-on-ones. I had one principal, every one of the teachers got 100% on their performance evaluations. They only have about 57% of their kids meeting or exceeding the state standards. A third of their kids didn't pass the [state test]. When every one of the teachers got 100% on their performance evaluation, I said "Who's 100%? You? Who? How does everybody get 100%?"

Another ILD reported that as a result of such conversations, one principal told the ILD, "'You have forced me to really understand this and take a look at it and really see. I get it.' Because what incentive do teachers have to improve if they're already a 95 and they don't get outcomes with kids? Why should they change their behavior?"

By contrast, some principals reported that their ILDs occasionally or routinely used their classroom observation tools on their own, conducting classroom observations without them and otherwise engaging principals in limited dialog about the observations. As one described, his or her ILD would walk into classrooms:

> stand at the back, take some notes, walk away, and send me an e-mail a couple of days later and say how horrible the observation was. If it's really that bad then you should have been compelled to have a conversation with that teacher or at least a conversation with me "Hey [principal name], this is what I just saw. Let's go into the class together this next period, observe it together, and find out where we can help support this teacher and improve his instruction."

## Brokering

All the ILDs frequently engaged in "brokering"—strategically bridging principals to or buffering them from resources and influences outside their one-on-one assistance relationship in ways that promised to support principals' engagement in instructional leadership. However, the ILDs varied in how they managed trade-offs inherent with buffering in ways that seemed consequential to their support for principals' instructional leadership.

*Bridging*. All the ILDs bridged or linked principals to other central office personnel to enhance the instructional support services available to their schools. In two districts those other personnel were their own staff. In NYC, each ILD had two instructional staff members that they deployed to work with teachers to complement principals' own efforts to strengthen instruction. Because they had far more principals than they could support one-on-one, most NYC ILDs divided their principals among their four team members, each of whom supported a subset of their principals. In Atlanta, we documented countless instances of ILDs assigning their staff of between 8 and 14 Master Teacher Leaders (MTLs), teachers with instructional expertise in various subject areas, to work directly with teachers to provide added support to principals. MTLs also occasionally modeled for principals how to support high-quality instruction by, for example, facilitating school leadership team

meetings around issues of teaching and learning (rather than mainly governance or operations) and how to provide meaningful feedback to classroom teachers. As one described the intensity of this instructional resource for principals, one principal was having trouble pinpointing the root causes of persistent low growth in student achievement, so:

> The first week of September we did a school kind of blitz site visit and spent about 2 and a half hours in there going into classrooms looking for evidence of teaching and learning. Gave the principal some feedback. Went back about 3 weeks later. . . . I told everybody on the team that I expect everybody to go into that school once a week and visit classrooms, observe instruction, give feedback, provide support to teachers. So they've [the school staff have] seen every member of my team all throughout the school year.

In Oakland, ILDs did not have such assigned staff but some similarly bridged principals to coaches within the central office's Instructional Services unit. As one coach described:

> We'll go in. We'll observe. We'll see what we see, and we'll provide a report for you [the ILDs], give you some options and you can decide what you want to do. I saw that as exactly the role that we should be playing. So I had all the managers there. I spent a full morning walking class to class with the principal.

Principal reports confirmed the value of these resources. As one described, other central office staff brokered by the principal's ILD "saved me countless number of hours" organizing data and figuring out how to engage teachers with the data.

The ILDs across all three districts also occasionally bridged principals to other principals or to resources outside the district for instructional support. As one ILD described, he or she looks for resources for the principals "anywhere." Another described:

> Right now I have several schools that have some deficits in literacy and we're looking at some literacy things that we can put in place and they're going to combine their money to do training together so that the funding doesn't become a barrier to them getting what they need.

All the ILDs also bridged their principals to central office staff who worked on operational issues to help minimize principals' time spent on such matters at the expense of instruction; when ILDs demonstrated that such bridging activities aimed to support principals' engagement in instructional leadership or actually increased the time principals spent on instruction, we considered those examples as consistent with supporting principals' instructional leadership. Many examples of the ILDs bridging principals to the central office for noninstructional issues involved the ILDs mediating situations in which other central office departments did not respond to principals in a timely manner. As one ILD described, "If a school is having a problem with maintenance, the maintenance person has a problem with me." In NYC, the ILDs frequently connected their principals to the two operations staff on their staff team. One principal described that he or she had been a principal for many years and understood the complexities of school construction, but, in the principal's words, "there are so many rules and regs and I got into a situation where I could not find a vendor" to help with a particular renovation. The principal described how one of the ILD's operational staff identified a vendor and finalized the contract, thereby saving the principal countless hours.

*Buffering*. All the ILDs across districts at least occasionally buffered or shielded principals from demands that interfered with their time spent on instruction by working on those issues for principals or excusing principals from certain activities. These instances differed from bridging in that they did not involve the ILDs helping to connect principals to operational staff but rather excusing principals from dealing with certain matters, doing other central office administrators' work, or translating external demands—all in service of supporting principals' engagement in instructional leadership. One ILD described his or her responsibilities specifically in these terms: "We take away those distracters. Then they don't have those time consuming things that stop them from really focusing in on instruction."

In one example of excusing principals from requirements, an ILD in the principal's words, "exempted" his or her school from different assessments in an effort to help the principal focus his or her own time on instructional improvement. The principal elaborated, "All the schools are supposed to do all of these 10,000 assessments throughout the year, which are completely invalid for [name of school, i.e., given our demographics]. [My ILD] exempted us and talked Assessment through that." As one principal summed up such work, "I say '[ILD name], do I really have to do this? This is stupid.' And [ILD name] is like 'Oh you're right, that is stupid; I'll get back to you.'"

The ILDs also buffered principals specifically from the nonresponsiveness of various central office units by standing in for and doing the work of

those units. As one ILD described, "When a principal or an AP [assistant principal] reports a problem to me or to my office, it is *our job* to take care of that. I take care of it." Principals generally confirmed these reports. As one reported, when he or she needs a response from the central office, "[My ILD's] who I call. Period."

A main buffering strategy many of the ILDs used involved changing the nature of the demands that principals faced—what elsewhere I call "translating external demands"—so principals experienced them in a form that they could either manage quickly if they were noninstructional or that they could use in service of their instructional work (Honig, 2009). As one ILD described these translation activities:

> I'm a buffer and a translator. I take mandates, expectations, and re-frame them in such a way that they are meaningful and relevant and manageable for principals. That's my job. And to break it down for them and to simplify and tell them stuff that, especially for my new principals, everything is not equally important, but . . . "Don't drop the ball on this."

Several ILDs in all three districts typically translated or mediated how principals participated in periodic assessments. Across examples, these ILDs helped principals not simply to collect and look at their assessment data but to engage in a deeper inquiry process of reflecting on how the student performance results on the period assessments related to other evidence of teaching quality and how to use both sources of data and other resources to develop professional development plans for individual teachers.

Translation also involved streamlining communications between the central office and schools, often repackaging information from the central office to help principals understand and address it. As one principal described, "[ILD name] has this summary e-mail of all the things we need to do that week, but then [he/she] forwards on all the other e-mails that I've already gotten but [ILD name] just like puts [his/her] little spin on it, like 'You really should read this.'" Some principals reported that they specifically relied on their ILD to streamline such information. As one explained, "Whenever you work in a large district the rumor mill just runs rampant. So my basic philosophy: Until I get it in writing from [ILD name], it is not going to happen."

*Tensions in buffering.* Buffering activities presented tensions or trade-offs when it came to supporting principals' instructional leadership, and ILDs varied in how well they managed them. For one, when ILDs stood in for other central office units to take care of operational issues for principals, they freed

up principals' time for instructional matters but also limited their own time for working with principals on instructional leadership. On the flipside, when they did not take on those operational issues, principals sometimes became consumed with those issues also at the expense of attention to their instructional leadership. The ILDs we identified as inconsistently or negligibly supporting instructional leadership, over time, almost exclusively took on the operational issues. In one such example, an ILD reported spending no time during the spring semester visiting schools because of various personnel disciplinary hearings that he or she chose to participate in on behalf of several of the ILD's schools. In this ILD's words, "The last three weeks I spent one entire full week in hearings from 8 to 5 for a teacher. . . . So the entire week my time was spent just at the hearings, not to mention the amount of time spent with the attorneys to prepare for the hearings." Another ILD reported cancelling virtually all his or her school visits in the spring because the ILD's time was consumed by a school's facility issue that had upset both the school and neighborhood community. The ILDs in these and related examples generally argued that by making these choices they buffered principals from spending their own time on such matters. However, the vast majority of other ILDs both buffered principals and continued their one-on-one work with principals throughout the academic year. Accordingly, we considered the choices in the previous examples a mismanagement of this trade-off by these ILDs.

Also, the ILDs faced a trade-off related to their translation of central office demands and information for schools. On the one hand, ILDs described the importance of such demands and information going through them rather than directly to schools to give them an opportunity to frame or otherwise translate the information in ways that promised to keep the principals focused on instruction. But serving as the main point of information sometimes put the ILDs in a position of passing on information they could not translate and that did not promise to help them advance their instructional focus. Some ILDs lamented being, in the words of one, "the messenger" for accountability demands they did not necessarily agree with and that frustrated their principals. The ILDs we identified as inconsistently or negligibly supporting principals' instructional leadership appeared most frequently in the examples of ILDs struggling with this tension with various negative results. In one such instance, an ILD described visiting a school to convey the results of a facilities decision that ran counter to the community's requests: "So I went. And sure enough, did I ever get blasted." ILD and principal reports confirmed that this occasion damaged the ILD's relationship with the school.

## *Helps and Hindrances*

Specific conditions emerged as particularly prominent mediators of ILDs' work. Some of these conditions varied by ILD, suggesting they may help explain the differences in how ILDs worked with principals. Those conditions included: the ILDs' conceptions of their role and the extent to which certain role conceptions were reinforced by colleagues. Other conditions appeared to mediate the ILDs' work across districts but, due to their universality, did not seem to explain differences in ILDs' practices. Those conditions included: the ILDs' hierarchical position as executive-level central office staff, the ratio of principals to ILDs, efforts to protect ILDs' time, and principals' readiness to partner with them.

First, the research from which we derived our conceptual framework, consistent with institutional theories of decision making more commonly used in research on leadership (March, 1994), underscores the importance of participants' orientations to their work—such as how they frame or understand the fundamental nature of their role—as consequential to how they engage in assistance relationships. Such frames are especially important when the work involved is at least partly improvisational (Miner et al., 2001). Those frames may be informed by prior knowledge and experience but also other influences. The ILDs we identified as increasing supports for principals' instructional leadership consistently described their approach to their work as "teaching." Their histories included work with other adults as learners either as coaches for principals or others or as principals who focused on teacher learning. Those who typically appeared in the inconsistent or negligible examples generally framed their ILD roles as consistent with their past experiences outside education or who saw themselves as traditional area superintendents. The latter visibly struggled with the inconsistency between their expectation of the position as involving management of a regional unit of the central office, including handling various operational issues for principals, and the focus of the ILD position on strengthening principal instructional leadership.

The absence of a formal common conception of ILD work likely amplified the extent to which ILDs relied on their past experiences as guides for their practice (Barley, 1986). As noted earlier, in all three districts we found remarkable consistency in respondents' reports that ILDs were to focus on principals' instructional leadership, but in none of the districts during the time of our study did we find an explicit definition of how ILDs should go about that work or what specifically the work of principals' instructional leadership involved. In one district where we observed almost 100 hours of

meetings among ILDs focused in part on their professional development, facilitators occasionally asked ILDs to discuss with each other how they would handle particular situations with principals. In none of those discussions did the facilitator aim to bring the ILDs to consensus about what their work should be. In another district, where we observed almost as many hours of such meetings, discussions about ILDs' work typically focused on root causes of student achievement at particular schools; ILDs addressed next steps for principals in improving achievement but very seldom their own role in principal support. Neither meetings obviously interrupted or reinforced ideas about their role that ILDs individually brought to the work.

The ILDs also varied in the extent to which their *networks of colleagues* reinforced certain conceptions of their roles, which likely influenced how they went about their work. As one ILD argued, meetings with small groups of other ILDs "have contributed to how we operate and understand the role that I'm performing now. We were looking at being facilitators but we were also being looked at as being knowledgeable educators to influence decisions of principals." In all the groupings we were able to document, the ILDs who frequently appeared in positive examples participated in the same peer groups while those who did not either did not seem to have a regular peer group or met with others who also appeared in the inconsistent or negligible examples.

Other conditions, due to their universality, do not help explain differences in ILDs' practices but appeared important to how much time ILDs had available to work with each principal and other aspects of their work. For one, sociocultural theories of learning and theories of social cognition suggest that formal structures such as organizational positions, work demands, and schedules shape people's participation in assistance relationships. Per the previous examples, the ILDs' *position as executive-level central office staff* (as opposed to those deep within a professional development unit) seemed to help all the ILDs bridge principals to central office resources and buffer them from unresponsive central office staff. Some ILDs suggested their positions signaled the priority the district placed on their development as instructional leaders, which reinforced the value of instructional leadership as their joint work.

The *number of principals* the ILDs had to support meant that the ILDs could have face-to-face meetings with only some of their principals each week. ILDs had various kinds of interactions with school principals often well beyond regular business hours, including e-mail exchanges, phone calls, and brief visits, but ILDs engaged in the practices identified previously on school sites with principals. Based on our observations and document reviews, we estimated that a typical school visit involving the practices

described earlier took approximately 3 hours. Reviews of the ILDs' calendars revealed that at most they could accomplish two such visits each day and that they had no more than 3 days worth of time each week to conduct such visits. Accordingly, an ILD typically could conduct six to eight such principal visits each week. Consistent with that estimate, most ILDs reported that they met with each principal at most only once every 2½ weeks. Several ILDs showed us schedules they used to help them visit each principal at least that often. However, when they had to reschedule meetings with principals or when work with some principals required more frequent visits, the ILDs were sometimes hard pressed to find the time.

In all three districts, various people *protected ILDs' time* for working with principals in ways that appeared important to ILDs' availability of time for such work. One district established 1½ days as "blackout days." In the words of one ILD:

> And the blackout means that you don't pull principals, you don't pull [ILDs] because people are in schools working. And the [ILDs] asked for that time to be increased and it was increased to two and a half. And basically our position was it's a very poor commentary if this is our core business and we are only having blackout for less than half of the time. And so [a senior staff person] was like, "You're absolutely right. Two and a half days."

As this quote suggests, senior central office staff were particularly instrumental in protecting ILDs' time. Many did so by responding quickly to ILDs' request for assistance. As one such person reported, "I know I make a special effort when [ILDs] call me . . . I try to make sure they get what they need as quickly as they can, because the bottom line is providing service to schools. That's it. That's it." Their counterpart in another district similarly reported that when ILDs run up against barriers "and when they've exhausted everything, they come to me and I take care of it."

ILDs were also important protectors of their own time, especially when principals' demands fell beyond the ILDs' instructional leadership support roles. In a comment typical across districts, an ILD described that several principals tended to ask for help with parent complaints about teachers that fell within the principals' responsibilities, in some cases in an effort to avoid making hard personnel decisions themselves and in other cases to lessen their own workloads. ILDs generally protected their own time by saying no to such demands. In one's words:

Last year I got completely awash in that logistical kind of side-tracking stuff. And so we as [ILDs] made a commitment to 24 hours in schools focused on instruction every week. And so what I'm doing is I'm starting to ignore the noninstructional stuff. . . . And I don't feel bad about it because I'm really getting feedback, too, from the principals that our time in the schools are truly making a difference for their instructional focus and what they're doing for instruction.

Sociocultural learning theory also underscores that learners' expertise with target tasks significantly shapes assistance relationships. Consistent with this idea, ILDs often pointed to *principal readiness* to engage in instructional leadership and partnerships with their ILDs as a main contributor to the challenges they faced in actually improving principals' instructional leadership. As one Oakland ILD described the significance of principal readiness, most of his or her principals have been in the district for at least 5 years and in that time:

There was no discussion about instruction. There wasn't any! And they'll all tell you that. None of them were evaluated so they didn't get feedback. And so this is pretty new to them. To have someone asking questions and they certainly aren't used to someone contacting them at least once a week and interacting with someone at least once a week— not around instruction. There might have been someone calling and saying where is your latest check-off sheet or something, but definitely not instruction.

In New York, a focus on instruction was hardly new, but some principals reported that they had chosen the Empowerment Schools Organization in part to limit their engagement with the central office, not to work intensively with ILDs. We did not find significant evidence in Atlanta that the ILDs faced such challenges, possibly because the reform had been underway for almost a decade by the time our data collection began, suggesting that principals by then may have been familiar with the ILDs' role as support to their instructional leadership and system expectations that they engage in such leadership. Also, in the preceding years, according to Atlanta Public Schools, 70 of 85 (88.2%) of all Atlanta school principals resigned, retired, or were removed from the principalship. Most respondents in Atlanta reported that principal candidates were hired in part based on their readiness for instructional leadership and that those who did not perform in that regard were rapidly removed.

Research on districts and reform also reinforced our data on the importance of *the performance of other central office units* to the ILDs' work with principals (Honig, 2009). As noted earlier, the ILDs sometimes stood in for other units that did not respond to principals in a timely or efficient manner and such time in some cases significantly detracted from their work with their principals. Some central office units were in the process of redesigning how they worked to align with the ILDs' instructional focus and address inefficiencies (Honig et al., 2010). Where implementation of these efforts was well underway and other staff were already working at a higher level of quality, ILDs' reports and our observations suggested ILDs had more time available to focus on principals' instructional leadership.

## Conclusions and Implications

This article elaborates how central offices in some districts are trying to shift not simply their organizational charts and stated priorities but their actual day-to-day work to provide job-embedded supports for principals' development as instructional leaders. These districts did so by elevating such principal support to an executive-level responsibility. Previous work in educational leadership has barely explored job-embedded professional supports for school principals' learning, let alone how executive-level central office staff might participate as main agents in that work. We took a deep look at those staff as they worked with their principals. We show that sociocultural learning theory helps define particular ILD practices consistent with those researchers have found deepen learners' engagement in challenging work in other arenas. Our findings lend support for a conception of certain forms of central office leadership as teaching.

### *Implications for Research*

This article has several implications for research on educational leadership. First, this study suggests that learning partnerships between executive-level central office staff and school principals merit further exploration. Researchers would deepen knowledge in this area by focusing specifically on the *work practices* involved in these relationships. Practice-focused explorations move beyond analysis of simple surface structures such as whether or not central office staff conduct classroom observations to probe what moves they make in their work that may be more or less productive for realizing results. The field of teacher education has made great advances in building knowledge about successful teaching by elaborating teaching practices—the moves

teachers make with their own learners within the context of various activities—that strengthen their students' learning. This article suggests that the field of leadership would do well to take a similar approach.

Sociocultural learning theory and theories of social cognition offer useful theoretical lenses for such analyses precisely because they focus on practices as the unit of analysis and, specifically, the practices involved in teaching other professionals how to deepen their own work. Leadership scholars have used other strands of learning theory to reveal other dimensions educational leadership and organizations. For example, studies using organizational learning theory uncover the broad evidence-use processes involved in continuous improvement efforts (e.g., Louis, 1998) or highlight different types of organizational change (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). By contrast, the learning theories used here focus on professional learning in authentic settings and the practices that support it. In so doing, these theories call researchers' attention to particular aspects of district context that may matter to educational improvement such as cognitive dimensions otherwise invisible in studies mainly focused at the organizational level of analysis.

The findings from this study provide researchers with important starting points for such next work. At the beginning of our study we did not have research available that demonstrated what the sometimes complex constructs from our conceptual framework look like in leadership practice. Our findings suggest ways researchers might operationalize those constructs. For instance, theory defines joint work generally as culturally relevant practices. Our study elaborates a focus on joint work in district contexts as involving intentional steps by people, such as ILDs, to help others, like principals, come to value certain kinds of work. With those specific practices as anchors, researchers will be on more solid ground when investigating the relationship between specific central office practices and actual shifts in principals' instructional leadership practice.

Such analyses demand that researchers conduct in-depth examinations of how central office administrators go about their work day-to-day and how they engage with school principals. Traditional methods for studying central offices such as interviews with principals, one-time interviews with central office staff, and surveys of superintendents barely scratch the surface of such work practices. Researchers interested in understanding central office administrators' practice in partnership with principals may need to expand their methodological repertoire and commit time and other resources to intensive observations of central office leaders' work practices over time, much like scholars of teaching practice live in classrooms in intensive ways. Unlike the practice of classroom teachers, which arguably unfolds mainly in classrooms

and schools, the practice of central office administrators stretches across multiple arenas, including school visits, office work, meetings, phone calls, and e-mails. Researchers of central office *practice* will need to figure out how to productively sample within and across central office administrators' day. Shadowing over time and ongoing meeting observations seem particularly appropriate to this type of scholarship.

Our analysis also suggests that research moving forward should seek to explore the conditions that help and hinder ILDs' work and in particular how ILDs manage the role conflicts that certain conditions seem to create. As noted earlier, excessive numbers of principals, demands by some principals to focus on operational instead of instructional issues, and encroachments on their time by other central office administrators, among other circumstances, meant that ILDs ran into various potential roadblocks to taking a teaching focus with their principals and to working with principals in any manner. Previously I presented how the ILDs responded to these conflicts differently, largely depending on their orientations to their roles. However, because we did not focus specifically on these dynamics, we left unexplored key questions about them, including: How do ILDs make sense of the conflicts? Do certain conflicts pose greater barriers than others to ILDs' work? By what process do ILDs negotiate those conflicts? A deeper understanding of these and related questions can shine important light on conditions that might help ILDs manage those conflicts and work in ways consistent with their new roles.

Future research might also accelerate knowledge building in the field by choosing research sites where practitioners are actively using our research findings and related knowledge to strengthen their work with principals. As noted previously, our findings come from sites where central office administrators had a common charge to focus on principals' instructional leadership but were essentially left to their own devices to invent their actual work practices on the job. But what if ILDs worked from a common research-based conception of the deeper work practices likely to help them realize their goals? And what if ILDs were hired with a clear orientation to the work as teaching? With those supports in place, what would researchers then learn about what's possible in central office–principal learning partnerships?

Ultimately, the work of ILDs is truly successful when it produces demonstrable and lasting improvements in principals' instructional leadership practice that in turn strengthens teaching practice and student learning. Future research would significantly strengthen knowledge in this area by using robust and relevant measures of such outcomes and systematically modeling

relationships among leadership practices and performance outcomes at various levels of district systems.

## *Implications for Practice*

This analysis suggests the promise of central offices not contracting out to support principals' instructional leadership or assigning frontline staff to such work but of elevating it to an executive-level responsibility. Doing so and understanding the work as involving teaching represent fundamental shifts in the role of some central offices from mainly management, monitoring, or other hands-off principal support roles to central offices operating as main agents of principal learning. Leaders interested in such an approach should pay close attention to the fundamental shifts in central office roles that ILDs represent and conditions that support such work with principals.

In particular, who should engage in the learning-focused partnerships with principals? This analysis suggests that districts should take care to assign or hire staff with a ready orientation to the work of principal support as teaching rather than monitoring and directing or those interested in traditional area superintendencies. As districts clarify their definitions of principal instructional leadership, knowledge of those behaviors would be obvious prerequisites for ILD candidates. After all, one reason certain ILDs did not engage in much modeling could be because they did not understand their work with principals as teaching. Or, perhaps they may have lacked knowledge of the instructional leadership behaviors they might have modeled. Larger districts (i.e., those with multiple central office departments) may have the staff positions to create a cadre of ILDs like those in our study. Smaller districts, such as those with a handful of central office staff, might consider who in their central offices, including their superintendents, might be appropriate to engage in the learning relationships with principals. Regardless of their district's size, leaders should consider the likely value of dedicating staff full-time to this work and whether or not their assigned staff could engage in this work at the right level of intensity if they also manage various other responsibilities.

Second, how can leaders reinforce certain conceptions of the ILDs' role consistent with supporting principal learning? Leaders might pay attention to the social networks that their ILDs form and the extent to which those networks reinforce the right practices. This analysis indicated, albeit by negative example, that professional development for ILDs might more intentionally aim to bring ILDs to clearer consensus about the nature of their role with principals and support them in engaging in particular work practices likely to

realize results for principals. Just as clear conception of the target practice provides an important anchor for professional development in other arenas, so too might systems strengthen professional development for ILDs if they organized that professional support at least at the outset around the practices we identified as potentially high leverage for strengthening principals' instructional leadership.

Additionally, how might leaders limit the ratio of ILDs to principals so ILDs can dedicate the necessary time to principal learning? In the process, how might leaders proactively protect ILDs' time—and help the ILDs protect their own time—to focus on principals' instructional leadership? Protection also may result from changes in other central office units to lessen the time ILDs spend managing their poor performance. As we suggest here, if districts implement new ILD positions without also aligning the work of other units with their instructional leadership focus, then ILDs will likely encounter difficulties in maintaining that focus, such as pressures to stand in for other central office units (see also, Honig et al., 2010).

Since our data collection, accountability demands on principals have increased markedly with the spread of principal evaluation systems, some of which reward or sanction principals for performance. Perhaps due to their nascence in some of our study districts during our data collection period, accountability systems did not emerge as a consistent significant mediator of ILDs' work across all three districts. But given the growth of such systems, they likely now provide a main context for ILDs' work that district leaders should attend to as they consider their support for ILDs.

Our data provide some indication of how accountability systems may matter. For example, a distinct subgroup of New York ILDs questioned the compatibility of their work to support principal learning with the district's increasingly high-stakes accountability system; they generally argued that because they did not also evaluate principals, principals were more likely to make their practice visible to them in the ways that their work demanded than if the ILDs were also principals' evaluators. But in Atlanta and Oakland, where ILDs did also evaluate principals, ILDs were comparably adamant that if they were not principal evaluators they would not have had the authority necessary for the intensive work of supporting principal learning. In light of these reports, district leaders might consider: In the context of our district, to what extent would assigning our ILDs to both support principal learning *and* evaluate principal performance help us realize our goals of improving principal instructional leadership and ultimately school performance; would we better support such results by separating principal support and evaluation?

Careful consideration of how accountability systems may matter to ILD work also seems important in light of recent allegations of principal and teacher cheating on standardized tests in some urban districts, most notably Atlanta but also others. A full exploration of the dynamics of cheating was beyond the scope of this analysis, which focused on central office work practices to support principal learning and which substantiated those practice across three districts. Nonetheless, the pressures of high-stakes testing are clearly a prominent context of the principalship in some districts. District leaders would likely do well to carefully consider the extent to which ILDs can help reinforce principals' focus on building capacity for improvement. They might also explore the extent to which the high stakes of certain accountability systems and reliance on student standardized test scores as main measures of progress may frustrate such a focus.

## Author's Note

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. In one district these staff were also formally charged with convening principals in networks or principal learning communities and in the two other districts the Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs) occasionally convened principals as well as worked with them one-on-one. Due to space limitations, we report on

their work to convene those group learning opportunities in a separate publication (Honig & Rainey, 2012).

2. We explore the implications of number of principals in the section on helps and hindrances and in the conclusion.

3. As part of their broader central office reform effort, New York City (NYC) leaders disbanded their geographically based central offices and replaced them with 12 School Support Organizations (SSO). Resource limitations precluded us from examining the whole NYC system. However, the Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) and the other SSOs essentially functioned as quasi-independent school districts, albeit all within the NYC Public School System, so we treated it as its own distinct school district central office. We chose the ESO rather than other SSOs in part because during our period of study, the ESO served approximate one third of the city's schools and therefore represented a major unit of the overall system vis-à-vis schools. Also, the ESO, unlike some of the other SSOs, had been working for several years on a pilot basis (formerly under the title *Autonomy Zone*) to reimagine relationships between central office and school leaders, suggesting it represented a part of the NYC system particularly likely to demonstrate the new learning support relationships with principals.

4. Thanks to early negotiations with New York City Public Schools, we began our data collection in that district in the spring of 2007.

5. During the 2007-2008 academic year NYC had 14 ILDs, 13 of whom agreed to participate in our study. The total number of ILDs more than doubled in the 2008-2009 school year. During that year, 2 of the ILDs in our original sample took on new positions and we added 3 other ILDs to our sample for a final total of 14 ILDs in NYC.

6. Honig and Ikemoto (2008) distinguish these tools as "organizational tools," which are materials available for use throughout the organization. By contrast, practitioners may develop "local tools" that they use to anchor particular learning opportunities in particular contexts. Local tools may become organizational tools. Likewise, practitioners frequently adapt organizational tools to local circumstances.

7. In the interest of brevity, in this subsection I emphasize our data related to ILDs' use of classroom observation protocols as illustrative of the overall patterns in our data about tools.

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## Bio

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