

Supporting principal supervisors: what really matters?

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supervisors

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445

Abstract

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Purpose – Districts across the country are calling on their principal supervisors to shift from mainly focusing on operations and compliance to dedicating their time to help principals grow as instructional leaders. Learning theory elaborates that such support for principals demands that supervisors take a teaching-and-learning approach – which the authors define as consistently using particular strategies that are characteristic of high quality teachers and mentors across various apprenticeship settings – to their work with principals on their instructional leadership. Prior research on leadership supports these shifts but does not examine the conditions under which principal supervisors are able to persist and grow in taking a teaching-and-learning approach specifically. What are those conditions? The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper addresses that question through a re-examination of data from two studies with socio-cultural learning theory as the conceptual framework. The authors primarily use observation data (approximately 760 hours), supplemented by 344 interviews and reviews of hundreds of documents.

Findings – Contrary to extant research the authors did not associate high quality outside coaching with the positive cases of principal supervision. Nor did hiring principal supervisors with requisite prior knowledge explain why some principal supervisors regressed and grew. Findings underscore the importance of supervisors of principal supervisors (SPSs) being principal supervisors' main mentors and principal supervisors not over-relying on others for assistance but actively leading their own learning, especially through work with colleagues and protecting their time themselves.

Originality/value – This analysis distinguishes conditions that support principal supervisors in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to their work with principals. The authors elaborate key roles for chief academic officers and others who supervise principal supervisors typically overlooked in policy and research on district leadership. Findings reinforce the importance of mentoring to learning and also district leaders serving as main mentors for each other, rather than relying on outside coaching.

Keywords Central office, Principal supervisor, Socio-cultural learning theory

Paper type Research paper

In school districts of varying stripes, leaders are fundamentally changing the work of their principal supervisors – the central office leaders to whom school principals report – to focus centrally on teaching and learning improvement (Corcoran *et al.*, 2013; Goldring *et al.*, 2018; Honig *et al.*, 2010). These changes call on principal supervisors to shed their traditional emphasis on evaluating principals' performance, monitoring schools' compliance with various mandates, and working with other central office units to resolve operational issues such as facility repairs. Instead, principal supervisors must dedicate their time to helping their principals grow in their capacity to ensure excellent teaching and learning in each of their classrooms, especially for students of color, English Language Learners, those living in low-income households, and other students historically underserved in public school systems.

These shifts in principal supervision bode well for realizing such results. Education research over at least the past two decades has identified principals' "instructional leadership," variously defined, as a contributor to improved classroom teaching and, in some cases, student achievement (e.g. Branch *et al.*, 2012; Grissom *et al.*, 2013; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Murphy and Hallinger, 1987, 1988). Research also reflects a consensus that principals who take such a focus tend to benefit from intensive on-the-job-support from an experienced coach (Celoria and Roberson, 2015; Daresh, 2007; Leithwood *et al.*, 1996). Our own studies and a growing number of others identify principal supervisors as key agents of such job-embedded coaching support (Goldring *et al.*, 2018; Grissom *et al.*, 2017; Honig *et al.*, 2010; Honig *et al.*, 2017). But this shift is a far cry from traditional principal supervision and



many principal supervisors report needing support to make the shift (Corcoran *et al.*, 2013). Extant research does not yet sufficiently distinguish which supports specifically help them grow in making such shifts and persist in doing so.

This paper addresses that knowledge gap by exploring the following questions: What do principal supervisors do when they work with principals in ways that support principals' growth as instructional leaders? What conditions support principal supervisors in doing so? We addressed these questions in two broader investigations into central office leadership for districtwide teaching-and-learning improvement (Honig, 2012; Honig and Rainey, 2014; Honig *et al.*, 2010, 2017) involving approximately 760 hours of observations, 344 interviews and hundreds of documents. Ideas from socio-cultural learning theory helped us to: distinguish that principal supervisors who took a teaching-and-learning approach – which we define as consistently using particular strategies that are characteristic of high quality teachers and mentors across various apprenticeship settings – to their work with principals were associated with positive results for principals such as principals' increased time spent on instructional matters at their schools; and explore conditions that likely helped principal supervisors grow in taking a teaching-and-learning approach and persist over time doing so.

Contrary to prior research, we did not associate high quality outside coaching for principal supervisors with any of the growth cases. Instead, our findings underscore the importance of supervisors of principal supervisors (SPSs) taking a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting principal supervisors and shifting principal supervision as part of a broader central office transformation process. Findings also reinforce the importance of individual agency to learning – in this case, of principal supervisors actively leading their own learning and protecting their time to work with principals. This paper concludes with implications for the practice and research of educational leadership.

Background

Research on the school principalship reflects a growing consensus that principals' engagement in instructional leadership can help teachers improve their classroom instruction in ways that matter for various student learning results (Blase and Blase, 1999; Davis *et al.*, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Louis *et al.*, 2010; Waters *et al.*, 2003). For example, Grissom *et al.* (2013) associated increased student test scores with principals' engagement in certain instructional leadership practices, including providing feedback and coaching to teachers on their instruction. Other leadership moves commonly associated with instructional leadership include managing the school's curriculum and program (Davis *et al.*, 2005; Sebastian and Allensworth, 2012), arranging professional learning opportunities for teachers (Sebastian and Allensworth, 2012), developing teacher leaders (Carraway and Young, 2015; Klar, 2012; Neumerski, 2013) and using data to daylight systemic biases against students of color (Ishimaru and Galloway, 2014; Gooden and Dantley, 2012; Khalifa *et al.*, 2016; Paris, 2012).

However defined, instructional leadership takes support and practice. Sustained, job-embedded professional learning opportunities – those provided while principals are leading their schools in real time, rather than in off-site workshops – are fundamental to helping principals grow as instructional leaders (Blase and Blase, 1999; Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2006; Croft *et al.*, 2010; Davis *et al.*, 2005; Fink and Resnick, 2001; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Zepeda *et al.*, 2014). For example, one study found that district-provided professional development, which was almost always job-embedded, had a statistically significant relationship with principals' time spent on instructional leadership tasks (Augustine *et al.*, 2009).

Our own previous publications provide some of the first empirical evidence that principal supervisors can be important supports for principals' growth as instructional leaders (Honig, 2012; Honig and Rainey, 2014; Honig *et al.*, 2010, 2017). Our study districts varied in size and staffing of their principal supervisory function – from a dedicated group of principal

supervisors in larger districts to smaller districts where the superintendent supervised principals – but all operated from a similar theory of action: If principal supervisors focus on helping principals grow as instructional leaders, then principals will do so, teaching quality will improve, and, ultimately, each student will realize excellent outcomes.

We associated positive results, such as principals' increased time spent on progressively more ambitious instructional leadership tasks, with their principal supervisor taking a "teaching-and-learning approach" rather than a traditional supervisory approach. When principal supervisors took this approach, they used particular strategies characteristic of high quality classroom teachers and mentors in various apprenticeship settings[1], including differentiating how they worked with their principals both one-on-one and in learning communities of other principals.

By contrast, some principals did not engage in progressively more challenging instructional leadership tasks and did not increase their time spent on instructional leadership. These principals had supervisors who generally did not shift to a teaching-and-learning approach and instead, continued to monitor principals' compliance with various policies and help them with operational matters. What conditions may explain these differences?

In our prior publications, we provided some guidance on this question, but not as the main focus of our analyses and the results across cases were somewhat contradictory, suggesting the importance of further analysis. For instance, in our first investigation, prior experience seemed consequential to how principal supervisors worked with their principals (Honig, 2012; Honig *et al.*, 2010; Honig and Rainey, 2014), but our second investigation revealed that even principal supervisors with no prior experience can grow to take such an approach (Honig *et al.*, 2017).

A handful of other publications address principal supervision but provide little empirical evidence about conditions that help principal supervisors take a teaching-and-learning approach specifically. For example, principal supervisors in San Diego City Schools lacked the instructional knowledge to support school principals' leadership of a literacy initiative (Hubbard *et al.*, 2006). Several reports list conditions that principal supervisors say matter to their work in general but not to their taking a teaching-and-learning approach specifically (Corcoran *et al.*, 2013; Rainey and Honig, 2015). An evaluation of the Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative (Goldring *et al.*, 2018) investigated districtwide conditions that support principal supervision, such as shrinking the number of principals with whom each supervisor worked. But these reports do not yet account for within-district differences in how principal supervisors actually worked with their principals.

In sum, extant research highlights the importance of principals' instructional leadership and principal supervisors taking a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting such results. This review raised questions about conditions that support principal supervisors in working with principals in those ways a motivated us to synthesize our findings across studies about the variations in how principal supervisors worked with their principals and use those variations to anchor a deeper exploration into the research question:

RQ1. What conditions support principal supervisors in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to helping principals grow as instructional leaders?

Conceptual framework

We used ideas about assistance relationships and communities of practice from socio-cultural theories of learning to anchor this analysis because they describe robust, observable markers of growth in professional practice and conditions that support such growth (e.g. Collins *et al.*, 2003; Lave, 1998; Rogoff *et al.*, 1995; Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2003; Sharp and Gallimore, 1988; Wenger, 1998). We posited that these ideas would help us

distinguish: principals' and principal supervisors' level of engagement in instructional leadership and teaching-and-learning approaches, respectively; and conditions that relate to such levels of practice.

Markers of learning

Socio-cultural theories of learning characterize growth as the progression from novice to more expert practice (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). This progression has common markers that we used to distinguish principals' growth as instructional leaders and the extent to which principal supervisors engaged specific teaching-and-learning moves.

Novices tend to demonstrate a lack of understanding of what the new target practices are and not engage in them to any degree. As they begin to grow, novices tend to say they are engaging in the practices but not actually do so – a dynamic Grossman *et al.* (1999) call “appropriating a label.” Continuing with their labels, as learners progress, they enter a stage of “appropriation surface features” where they begin to understand what the new practices involve and why to engage in them. They will also occasionally demonstrate them in their daily work. Over time, a learner's performance may reflect that they are “appropriating conceptual underpinnings” – increasing their understanding of the new practices and making them more central to their core work. And after many years of practice in various contexts, learners may reach “mastery” – a phase of development where they have deepened their understanding of the new ideas to such a degree that they create new ways of working to improve the practice itself.

Supportive conditions

Various conditions can support a learner's progression from novice to expert. First, learners' prior knowledge can mediate their progress. Learners with prior knowledge relevant to the new practices already have a developing mental model of the practices to guide their learning and require progressively less outside help over time (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Accordingly, we paid attention to the extent to which principal supervisors started out with prior knowledge consistent with taking a teaching-and-learning approach to principal supervision and the extent to which their level of prior knowledge related to their actual practice over time.

Even with relevant prior knowledge, learners benefit from particular kinds of assistance relationships (Tharp and Galimore, 1988) or apprenticeship opportunities (Brown and Campione, 1994) – those in which mentors make particular teaching moves including those that reinforce the new practices as joint work as well as modeling, challenging talk, and brokering and moves that reinforce learners' agency over their own learning. First, mentors who support learning make what we call joint work moves. Such moves reinforce the value of the new practices to the broader community and organization (Rogoff, *et al.*, 1995; Lave, 1998; Wenger, 1998) and, in so doing, help sustain learners' engagement in those practices in ways essential to their learning, since learners are more likely to participate in challenging practices if they see doing so as a collective responsibility. When taking a joint work approach, mentors work from a clear definition of the target practices and work alongside learners in real time to grow together, reinforcing that the learners' growth is their shared responsibility.

Mentors also may support professionals' engagement in new work practices when they model or demonstrate those practices rather than, for example, talking about them or directing people to participate in them (Brown and Campione, 1994; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Models help learners conceptualize the target task before engaging in it and 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” (Brown, *et al.*, 1989, p. 2, see also, Collins *et al.*, 2003).

Models are particularly powerful learning resources when mentors use metacognitive strategies to make thinking “visible” (Collins *et al.*, 2003, p. 3), by calling attention to the practices they are demonstrating and engaging others in dialogue about the rationale for those practices. In so doing, mentors increase the chances that learners will notice, understand and develop mental models of the demonstrations.

Certain kinds of talk support learners’ progress from novice to expert (Horn and Little, 2010). Through such talk, individuals grapple with the meaning of new information – such as information about new practices being modeled – and how to integrate it into their own thinking and actions. When participants challenge each other’s understandings of situations and offer competing theories about underlying problems and potential solutions, they increase the individual and collective knowledge they bring to bear on situations (Holland *et al.*, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Mentors also assist with learning through brokering or boundary spanning. Such activities include “bridging” or bringing new ideas, understandings, and other resources into the mentoring relationship to advance learning. Bridging can be particularly effective when a mentor actively tailors, translates or otherwise curates the resources to ensure they support the learning of particular learners in specific settings. Mentors also “buffer” relationships from potentially unproductive external interference (Wenger, 1998).

Agency is fundamental to learning as mentors use modeling and other moves to help learners progressively lead more of their own learning (Chao, 1997; Holland *et al.*, 2001; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). When learners do not expand their agency over their own learning, they tend not to develop mental models or self-regulating behaviors that help them persist in their learning when the mentor is not present – a form of engaging in the practice as a compliance exercise not a learning opportunity. Mentors help learners exercise agency over their own learning by supporting learners’ self-assessments, development of self-directed learning plans, and monitoring of their own progress (Croft *et al.*, 2010; Holland *et al.*, 2001).

Methods

This conceptual framework anchored our reexamination of data from two investigations in districts that, as part of their broader central office change initiatives, aimed to recast the principal supervisor role from evaluation, compliance and operations to supporting principals’ growth as instructional leaders using a teaching-and-learning approach. Given the centrality of these role shifts to the districts’ improvement efforts and their investment of resources in supporting them, these districts promised to provide strategic cases for this investigation – places where we would be especially likely to see principal supervisors working in ways consistent with their new charge in likely supportive conditions.

These districts also differed in ways that offered contrasts essential to detecting how context matters to implementation (Merton, 1987; Patton, 2002). Per Table I, the districts ranged in size from a sub-district within New York City Public Schools that included 200,000 students, to four districts with fewer than 5,000 students. The larger districts had more than one person in a principal supervisor role. In the smaller systems, the superintendent typically served as principal supervisor. Mitigating concerns about sample bias, we invited all principal supervisors in each district to participate in the study and almost all (37/40) agreed.

We collected data in each district between 2007–2008 and 2011–2012, each for 18 months. These extended data collection periods allowed us to observe changes in principal supervisors’ practice and compare their work with various supports over time. Though we collected data for Study 1 several years prior to Study 2, the strong similarities in district goals for principal supervision mitigated concerns about outdated data. Also, these data still address key gaps in extant research and promise to generate new knowledge for the field.

To tap practice over time, data collection for both studies primarily involved extensive observations – 264.5 hours in Study 1 and 499.25 hours in Study 2 – for a total of 763.75

Table I.
Study sites

District	Approximate number of students during study period	Number of principal supervisors in study/total number of principal supervisors
<i>Study 1 2007-08</i>		
1A	200,000	14/15
1B	55,000	5/5
1C	40,000	6/8
<i>Study 2 2011-12</i>		
2A	50,000	6/6
2B	19,000	2/2
2C	2,000	1/1
2D	5,000	1/1
2E	5,000	1/1
2F	3,000	1/1

observation hours. For this analysis, we focused specifically on approximately 75 percent of our data that addressed principal supervision including cabinet meetings, professional development sessions for principal supervisors, and interactions between principal supervisors and principals in group meetings or one-on-one. During formal meetings, we took verbatim notes to help ensure we captured as much of principal supervisors’ actual work as possible. Where relevant, we also created low-inference descriptions of other aspects of meetings such as late arrivals, facial expressions, and tone of talk. When shadowing principal supervisors as they worked with individual principals, we audio recorded talk and took hand-written notes from which we created an electronic record for later coding.

We supplemented the observations with semi-structured interviews with principal supervisors, other central office administrators, school principals and outside coaches. In all, we conducted 124 interviews in Study 1 and 220 interviews in Study 2, for a total of 340, all of which addressed the principal supervisor role in whole or in part. We interviewed most respondents at multiple points in time to track any changes in their responses as implementation progressed. During the interviews, we probed specifically for concrete examples of principal supervisors’ practice and their perceptions of supports for their work.

We collected hundreds of documents from each district that revealed how principal supervisors went about their work. Documents included calendars/journals, suggesting time principal supervisors spent with principals, as well as iterations of principal supervisors’ job descriptions, their e-mail communications with principals, and meeting agendas.

We conducted a sub-analysis of the data on principal supervisors in several phases using NVivo software. First, we aligned our data across studies around consistent distinctions between principal supervisors’ practice. Specifically, for Study 2 we had made finer distinctions in principal supervisors’ practice than in Study 1 and, in this phase, we applied such distinctions to the cases in Study 1 (see Table II for these distinctions).

In phase 2, we went back to the data we had originally coded as “conditions” and used higher-inference concepts from our conceptual framework to further sort the data. For instance, we coded information about principal supervisors’ professional background as “prior knowledge.” We identified individuals who seemed to be mentoring principal supervisors and coded how they worked with principal supervisors using such labels as “joint work moves,” “modeling,” “talk moves,” “brokering,” and “fostering agency.”

To ensure construct validity and coder reliability in this phase, we first had the team member who collected the data do initial coding, since understanding individual data points sometimes required deeper contextual knowledge not fully available to others. We met as a team to code samples of data from each other’s sites to check for consistency. We continued these reliability checks until we realized almost perfect alignment in coding. The Principal

Table II.
Distribution
of principal
supervisor cases

District	Number of principal supervisors			
	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
	Low stasis	Regression	High stasis	High growth
	Traditional approach No to low growth Persisted	Teaching-and- learning approach Low growth Did not persist	Teaching-and- learning approach Low growth Persisted	From traditional to teaching- and- learning approach High growth Did not persist
1A	3		15	
1B	1	2	2	
1C	2	2	2	
2A	3		2	
2B	2			
2C	1			
2D			1	
2E				1
2F				1

Investigator also examined all coded data across each site and study for an extra validity and reliability check.

In Phase 3, we arrayed the conditions by principal supervisor practice to explore any consistencies between the conditions and the practice using constant comparative methods. We did not report a condition as mattering to principal supervision unless we had multiple sources of evidence linking that condition with all the cases of principal supervision in the type.

Despite the rigor we brought to this analysis, our study has a key limitation: our methods do not allow us to claim that certain conditions caused particular outcomes. However, the consistency of our findings across contexts and with theory supports the associations we draw between particular conditions and principal supervisors' practice. We use the term "associated" to refer to the relationship between principal supervisors' practice and conditions to underscore this distinction.

Findings

Across all nine districts, we found that principal supervisors' practice fell into one of four categories based on the extent to which they persisted and grew in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders[2]. As noted in Table II, most principal supervisors persisted in their practice – whether they started out taking ($n=22$) or not taking ($n=15$) – a teaching-and-learning approach. Across two districts, four principal supervisors regressed. In two districts, two principal supervisors grew significantly.

In Type 1, "low stasis," principal supervisors engaged in traditional forms of their role, including checking for compliance with central office directives, responding to principal requests for help with operational matters, and conducting principal evaluations. These principal supervisors also persisted, demonstrating no growth toward a teaching-and-learning approach.

The principal supervisors in Type 2, "regression," took a teaching-and-learning approach at the outset of our study period, but, by spring, reverted to a traditional approach. For example, by spring two Type 2 principal supervisors displaced the instructional focus of their principal meetings with time to complete budget and other paperwork.

In Type 3, "high stasis," principal supervisors started the year engaging in a teaching-and-learning approach with their principals and they continued to do so throughout the duration of the study. These principal supervisors consistently demonstrated a relatively deep understanding of the importance of taking a teaching-and-learning approach to their work with principals. For instance, one explained, "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 [...] Ultimately when I leave I want them to know how to do it.” Another described, “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.”

The Type 4, “high growth,” cases began by taking a traditional approach to principal supervision but grew to take a teaching-and-learning approach at progressively deeper levels. These principal supervisors were the superintendents of distinct districts but were part of the same regional service district, much like a county office of education, which facilitated their professional learning opportunities.

In the next section we address the following question: What conditions were consistent with these patterns and may help explain why some principal supervisors persisted in positive or negative ways and why a few regressed or grew?

Prior knowledge

Per our conceptual framework, first, we looked for the extent to which principal supervisors’ prior knowledge – or how they described their experiences and expertise leading up to their principal supervisor role – was consistent with how we categorized each principal supervisor’s practice. As noted in Table II, most principal supervisors persisted in their approach to working with principals (Types 1 and 3), and these approaches mirrored their prior knowledge. For example, many of the principal supervisors in the high-stasis cases reported long tenures as instructionally focused school principal coaches in other settings. Those in the low-stasis cases reported that they believed they had secured the principal supervisor position because they had extensive prior experience leading other central office staff and that the principal supervisor role was an obvious next-step toward the superintendency.

However, prior knowledge alone did not account for why the Type 3 principal supervisors were able to persist with a teaching-and-learning approach while others in the same districts and with similar prior knowledge regressed. Nor does prior knowledge help account for the growth we observed in the Type 4 cases, both superintendents who were long-standing educational leaders that stood out at the start of our study for their self-reported lack of knowledge of around supporting teaching and learning.

Intermediary organization coaches as mentors

All the districts contracted with intermediary organizations known for supporting adult learning. However, contrary to extant research, we did not find a clear positive relationship between the quality of the outside support and principal supervisors’ growth or persistence in taking a teaching-and-learning approach with their principals.

To elaborate, in three districts (1A, 1B and 1C), outside support providers conducted formal professional development sessions with principal supervisors. However, they rarely used assistance moves consistent with our conceptual framework. Not surprisingly, in those districts, we did not find any growth cases and all four of the regression cases. For example, in District 1A, an intermediary director with over 20 years of experience coaching school principals convened principal supervisors about twice a month at the district headquarters to discuss written cases of principals’ leadership[3]. The cases came from real situations that principal supervisors were facing, suggesting some consistency with learning through an authentic task. Typically, the coach asked principal supervisors to share how they would approach each case, but did not push them to consider the positives and negatives of different approaches or which ideas might be most consistent with a teaching-and-learning approach; principal supervisors reported that the meetings confirmed their own views even when those views varied significantly.

In District 1B, with half the regression cases, intermediary coaches typically had principal supervisors bring data from a specific school and had them discuss what the

principal should do to improve their data. But, across nearly 100 hours of meetings, these discussions rarely focused on how the principal supervisor would help the principal lead for those improvements.

By contrast, the assistance providers in Districts 2A and 2B frequently worked with principal supervisors, as a whole group and one-on-one, using mentoring moves we categorized as highly consistent with our conceptual framework. Many principal supervisors offered positive reviews of the intermediary coach. One said, “I can see the concrete changes that happen in my regional [principal] meetings as a result of that [coach’s] feedback.” However, we did not find any growth cases in these districts.

As an example of consistency with the assistance moves in our conceptual framework, an intermediary coach met with District 2A’s principal supervisors once or twice a month for professional development sessions and mentored principal supervisors on the job, in pairs, and as a whole group. These sessions typically took place in school sites specifically selected to help advance the principal supervisors’ learning. In one instance, a coach convened all the principal supervisors at a school for an entire day to learn how to teach principals to observe the quality of classroom teaching. Consistent with joint work moves, the coach began by engaging supervisors in an intensive hour-long discussion about how and why to use an explicit, formal definition of high quality teaching to anchor the classroom observations. Then, the coach made metacognitive comments that they were going to model for participants how to have an extended conversation with principals about what they are seeing in classrooms. The coach said that often, supervisors simply ask principals to brainstorm what they would look for as evidence of particular teaching standards but leave the suggestions unchecked; by contrast, when supervisors press for an explicit connection between look-fors and standards, learners truly deepen their understanding of what the standards mean.

The coach then modeled how to probe for such connections. First, the coach asked the principal supervisors for one aspect of the classroom they expect to see related to “student engagement.” The conversation then proceeded in the following manner:

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR A: Checks of understanding. Thumbs up, thumbs down.

[Note taker clarification: Meaning that one way to check for student engagement is to look for teachers’ use of strategies to check understanding such as asking students to indicate their level of understanding with their thumbs.]

COACH: How do you relate that to student engagement?

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR A: It gives all kids an easy way to say whether they are getting it.

COACH: Can you calibrate with the [instructional framework] tightly?

The coach then asked other participants to reflect in their own words on how such probing for connections and understanding might help the observer understand the quality of teaching and learning in that setting and support others in the group in stretching their thinking.

Despite the consistency of this intermediary coaches’ work with our conceptual framework, we found no cases of growth among the principal supervisors with whom they worked, regardless of their prior knowledge. Surprisingly, we found the high growth cases in districts working with intermediary coaches who provided coaching rarely consistent with our conceptual framework.

As an example of the latter, three coaches opened a professional development session for Districts 2C-F with moves potentially consistent with meta-cognitive strategies. For instance, one coach explained the rationale for each segment of the meeting and how they designed the segments to help participants realize the learning targets. But the three coaches then talked to the group in lecture mode for significant stretches of the meeting in ways that prompted principal supervisors to disengage.

In one segment, a coach posed a question ostensibly to encourage participants to deepen their understanding of how to use a particular protocol for classroom observations. The coach solicited two comments, did not respond to those comments, and then talked to the group for approximately 15 minutes with only the other two coaches chiming in, followed by a 7-minute video and about five more minutes of instructions from one of the coaches. Only then did the coaches ask the district teams to engage in small group discussion about the materials. During the small group discussions, many participants did not start the activity or follow the prompts.

These coaches also tended to introduce more ideas and protocols than participants could follow. For instance, one coach opened another meeting by taking over 15 minutes to list multiple meeting goals, including “aligning to research,” “use of tools,” “principals’ instructional leadership” and “cycle of inquiry.” The coach then posed broad questions not obviously tied to the framing comments and directed meeting participants to discuss the questions in their teams. At that point, one principal supervisor commented to a colleague, “I lost her. When she asked us to review those four questions, I started to read them and then she interrupted and from then on I just got scrambled.” Another commented, “I’m having a hard time keeping up because the conversation keeps jumping around.” A third said, “I need to feel a sense of closure before we jump into the next topic.”

District leaders as mentors

Our data suggest that the SPSs – Chief Academic Officers or Superintendents in larger districts and the school boards in smaller districts where the superintendent is the principal supervisor – matter to principal supervisors’ persistence and regression, though not to the growth of the principal supervisors from a traditional to teaching-and-learning approach. To elaborate, we first looked at Districts 1A-1C and 2A and 2B, since those districts had the same formal configuration to supervise principal supervisors – with a chief academic officer or superintendent serving as the SPS. We were especially interested in the practice of the SPS in District 1A where there were so many Type 3 cases and that of the SPS in Districts 1B and 1C where we found cases of regression.

Consistent with the concept of joint work, the SPS in District 1A reinforced the value of the shift in principal supervision through various strategies. For one, the SPS did not simply rewrite the long-standing job description for the regional school district superintendents who supervised principals; they eliminated that position which also included oversight for programs, services and staff serving that region. In its place, the SPS created a new principal supervisor position whose sole responsibility was coaching principals in their growth as instructional leaders.

This SPS also dedicated their own time to helping principal supervisors engage in the new work and took a teaching-and-learning approach in the process – frequently modeling ways to think about challenging situations, bridging principal supervisors to additional resources for their work with their principals, and buffering them from distractions. In one typical meeting, a principal supervisor asked for the SPS’s advice about how to work with a principal on a series of parent complaints the principal had asked the principal supervisor to handle. The SPS said that when such situations come up, they ask themselves questions such as, “Will you taking on this complaint help the principal engage in instructional leadership?” The SPS and the principal supervisor then role-played that internal reflection with the SPS asking the reflective questions they wanted the principal supervisor to internalize and the SPS offering responses—a form of modeling. Through this dialogue, the principal supervisor sorted the complaints on their own into those: to turn back to the principal (a form of buffering themselves); to handle themselves (a form of buffering the principal); and other central office leaders could address (a form of bridging principal supervisors to additional resources to support their instructional focus).

In Districts 1B, 1C and 2A, in which we found no growth and all four cases of regression, the SPSs did not consistently reinforce the value of the shift in principal supervision. For instance, these SPSs did rewrite their principal supervisor job descriptions and restaffed those positions through national searches and required previous supervisors to reapply. However, they typically added supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders on to the previous job description, which in one case included 24 other job responsibilities. Nor did these job descriptions say principal supervisors should take a teaching-and-learning approach.

The SPSs in these districts talked about their role as supporting principal supervisors, often in terms consistent with providing them with feedback on their practice and buffering them from distractions from their instructional focus with principals. For instance, one said, "I know I make a special effort when [principal supervisors] 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." The SPSs in one of these districts had created "black out days," or dedicated days of each week when no one in the central office could place demands on principal supervisors or their principals that threatened their focus on principals' instructional leadership.

But their execution of these supports was not consistent with the kinds of moves our conceptual framework suggested would support principal supervisors' persistence and growth. For example, District 1B's two SPSs occasionally observed their principal supervisors while working with their principals and provided feedback. However, the principal supervisors generally reported that the SPSs did not have much experience with principal supervision themselves and rarely provided useful feedback. Principal supervisors in this district also reported sometimes having to actively buffer themselves from their SPSs taking time away from principals, even in the district with the blackout days.

We then looked at the smaller districts (2C-F) where the superintendent served as the principal supervisor and the school board operated as their SPS. We did not find a clear pattern connecting school board support with persistence or growth. The one Type 3 High Stasis superintendent reported that their board was not particularly supportive of their teaching-and-learning stance to principal supervision, in part because their predecessors largely focused on operations and community relations and that they otherwise were unfamiliar with this new stance. They said they spent significant amounts of time trying to teach their board members why they were spending so much time coaching principals in their schools. The Type 4 superintendents who demonstrated high growth reported that their school boards supported them generally, but, at school board meetings and during their engagement with individual board members, they typically did not address teaching and learning matters let alone their supervision of principals.

We then asked why all the Type 3 principal supervisors in Districts 1B and 1C did not regress, given the lack of clarity in their job descriptions coupled with weak support from their SPSs? Why did the Type 4 principal supervisors in Districts 2E and 2F grow in taking a teaching-and-learning approach, despite limited prior knowledge and weak support from their intermediary coaches and SPSs?

Principal supervisors leading their own learning

Consistent with socio-cultural learning theory's emphasis on agency for learning we found that principal supervisors' efforts to lead their own learning appeared consistent with the patterns of principal supervision. To elaborate, the principal supervisors in Districts 1A and 1B who did not regress regularly worked with their colleagues to grow in their own ability to take a teaching-and-learning stance. For example, a principal supervisor in District 1A reported that they get together with "like-minded" colleagues to share their experiences and get advice. As one participant described, these meetings "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 District 1B, principal supervisors in Type 3 reported that they tried to sit with particular colleagues during the whole-group case-based coaching sessions and to meet with those colleagues at other times because those colleagues engaged with their principals in similar ways and provided the most useful feedback.

The two principal supervisors in the high growth cases, by the second half of the study, also reported that they sought out opportunities to lead their own learning and also that limiting their time with intermediary coaches helped them do so. In the words of one, “I don’t think you want to let it [outside coaching] go on too long. Because the bottom line is whether it’s [name] as the coach or somebody else, they’re only here X amount of days per year.” This principal supervisor went on to describe how they developed learning communities with their principals to increase their collective knowledge of high quality classroom teaching and learning and principal instructional leadership.

The Type 3 and 4 principal supervisors also frequently buffered themselves from interferences with their taking teaching-and-learning approach. As one explained, even in a district with the formal block out days:

Last year I got completely awash in that logistical kind of side-tracking stuff. And so we as [principal supervisors] 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 non-instructional 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.

As another of these principal supervisors explained, “You have to have the courage to say, ‘I can’t serve on that committee, can’t go to that meeting, can’t do that right now. Sorry. Tied up in a school doing my business.’”

Many of these principal supervisors did not simply say no to outside requests but used them as opportunities to teach others in the central office about the nature of their new role – a form of buffering. For instance, we reviewed a series of emails that began with the central office security staff telling a principal supervisor that one of their principals had moved a cone in the parking lot and that the principal supervisor should tell the principal not to do that anymore. The principal supervisor responded over a series of emails, explaining their role was to help principals support their teachers, not to communicate messages from the central office. They encouraged the security staff to contact the principal directly or consider letting the matter go.

By contrast, as noted above, two of the principal supervisors in the regression cases reported – and we observed them – becoming overwhelmed with outside pressures to support principals with operational issues that they stopped buffering themselves from such demands. Two of them turned over entire meetings with their principals to presentations by other central office staff not particularly supportive of principals’ growth as instructional leaders and to the completion of compliance-oriented paperwork.

Summary, discussion and implications

This paper started from the premise that district initiatives to shift traditional principal supervision bode well for strengthening principal leadership in service of high quality classroom teaching and learning districtwide. From there, this paper examined the extent to which principal supervisors persist and grow in taking a teaching-and-learning approach in their work with principals and the conditions that support them in doing so. Extant research shows that principals grow when they have access to on-the-job supports, such as mentoring that takes a teaching-and-learning approach – and that the central office and principal supervisors specifically can be important providers of such support. Our prior publications and a growing number of others have begun to substantiate that claim but

have not yet sufficiently focused on the conditions that help principal supervisors themselves grow to take a teaching-and-learning approach and persist in doing so.

We show that certain conditions may help some principal supervisors persist and grow in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to their work supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders. For one, perhaps not surprisingly, hiring principal supervisors with prior knowledge of the new roles seems important, especially given the large numbers of principal supervisors placed in the new roles without prior knowledge who did not demonstrate any growth. However, prior knowledge may be important, but not sufficient for those results since some hired with prior knowledge regressed and two with no prior knowledge – and deep experience with the more traditional approach – grew significantly.

In a departure from some extant research (e.g. Coburn and Stein, 2010; Honig, 2004), we did not associate high quality outside coaching with any of the growth cases. And the two growth cases worked with what our conceptual framework suggested was ineffective outside support. Such findings suggest that long-standing modes of professional development for schools, such as outside expert coaching, may not be sufficient supports for central office practice changes.

Our findings do suggest that SPSs have important support roles to play, especially when they themselves take a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting principal supervisors. SPSs can proactively reinforce the value of the role shifts by creating job descriptions that center principals' growth as instructional leaders and dedicate their own time to supporting them. SPSs may productively model ways of thinking and acting consistent with the new role and buffer principal supervisors from distractions to their new focus.

Also, consistent with socio-cultural learning theory's emphasis on agency in learning, principal supervisors themselves may be important supports for their own persistence and growth. The principal supervisors in the positive cases created opportunities to learn with colleagues and protected their own time for working with principals. Such findings appear even more significant given that principal supervisors continued to face a myriad of demands for their time more consistent with their traditional role.

This analysis raises several questions that district leaders would do well to consider in their efforts to support similar shifts in principal supervision in their own settings. First, how can they ensure that they hire principal supervisors with demonstrated experience in taking a teaching-and-learning approach? A fundamentally redesigned job description – one in which leading the learning of principals from a teaching-and-learning approach as the clear main if not sole responsibility of principal supervisors – may help guide such a process. In smaller districts, school boards might ensure that their superintendent job description includes principal supervision as a main emphasis and that they hire a superintendent with significant prior knowledge of helping principals grow as instructional leaders and a demonstrated ability to lead their own learning in that area.

In the process, districts leaders might also consider how to screen for principal supervisor candidates with demonstrated capacity for leading their own learning. Not all professionals take an active lead in their own growth and their ability to do so may be an important selection criteria for principal supervisors in districts that want to make the shifts described here. SPSs and others might foster such agency by helping principal supervisors develop and implement their own learning plans and continuously reflect on evidence of their progress.

This analysis cautions districts against over-relying on outside coaches as a main source of support for principal supervisors, regardless of the coaches' demonstrated ability to take a teaching-and-learning approach to their own work. Our findings suggest that, especially in districts with access to the latter, district leaders may turn over too much of the coaching to the outside organization rather than enhance principal supervisors' internal support from the SPS and other principal supervisors. How might district leaders ensure that their work

with outside coaches helps them lessen their reliance on the external assistance over time, in part by helping them build their own capacity to lead the work themselves?

As we discuss in other publications and above, districts implementing these new principal supervisor roles did so in the context of central offices that were redesigning other central office functions to support principal instructional leadership and equitable teaching and learning districtwide. Many of these changes aimed to align Human Resources and Teaching and Learning or Curriculum and Instruction units alongside the creation of principal supervisors' new roles. Even so, principal supervisors had to actively resist unproductive interference by those and other central office units not yet aligned with their new focus. The findings from this paper, albeit mainly by negative example, further reinforce the importance of district leaders pursuing the new form of principal supervision in the context of a broader central office redesign effort.

Our analysis also suggests several ways researchers can expand and improve existing knowledge about principal supervision and the conditions that support principal supervisors in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to helping principals grow as instructional leaders. First, we strongly suggest that researchers not rely on interviews and other self-reports for understanding what principal supervisors do and conditions that support them. The research on expertise that partially informs our conceptual framework suggests that learners may talk about their roles in new ways before they actually engage in their roles in those ways. This paper and others from this research program demonstrate how observational techniques, anchored in robust explanatory frameworks, can help researchers generate more reliable knowledge for practice.

Researchers will build a more robust and relevant empirical base if they do not simply explore conditions that may matter to principal supervision in general but particular kinds of principal supervision specifically. Our findings about supportive conditions may differ from those from recent surveys and evaluations (e.g. Corcoran *et al.*, 2013) in part because we were looking at conditions that seemed to matter to principal supervisors taking a teaching-and-learning stance. Conditions such as "span of control" or the number of principals that report to a principal supervisor may matter to how much time a principal supervisor spends with each principal, but likely does not sufficiently account for the practice of principal supervisors when they do work with their principals, however frequently (Goldring *et al.*, 2018).

The limitations of this analysis also suggest important future directions for research. For one, since we collected data for this investigation, national standards for principals have expanded to clarify that principals' equity-focused instructional leadership moves beyond a general emphasis on improved teaching and learning for all students. Such leadership includes specific anti-racist leadership practices that specifically aim to address historical institutional barriers to educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color, English Language Learners, and others traditionally underserved in public school systems. (See for example, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015). Principal supervision to support principals' instructional leadership, so defined, may involve different practices than those surfaced in prior work, which may be supported by conditions other than what we share in this paper.

In addition, this paper notes, but does not fully explore, that who fulfills the role of principal supervisor influences how they go about their work and the conditions that support them in taking a teaching-and-learning approach. The larger districts in our study had dedicated staff serve in that role. These districts also conducted national searches for their principal supervisor candidates. In smaller systems, superintendents were the principal supervisors and came from regional pools of candidates. Given that the recent reports on principal supervisors focus on large urban districts and that those districts are the minority of school districts nationwide, researchers should consider focusing more attention on the more common cases of superintendents serving as principal supervisors.

Researchers also would do well to consider other differences in who serves as principal supervisor to how they go about their work. For instance, research from a critical race perspective has begun to amplify how leaders' intersectional identities may provide them with different opportunities to challenge the status quo in the ways that the new forms of principal supervision demand. This scholarship and our experiences raises such questions as, "How might the experiences of African American women as principal supervisors differ from that of white men?" and "How might race- and gender-based differences matter to which conditions are more or less supportive of their work?"

This analysis also suggests that investigations into the role of outside coaches or intermediary organizations should consider the extent to which such organizations do not just deliver support services at a high level of quality but build district capacity in ways that lessen their reliance on the outside assistance. Such capacity-building roles for outside coaches may be especially important in school district central offices where the efforts of leaders may send particularly powerful messages about the value of particularly reforms when they dedicate their own time to supporting those reforms rather than mainly outsourcing for support.

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Notes

1. To derive these findings we primarily relied on observation of principal supervisors as they engaged in their work with principals supplemented with calendar reviews, probing for examples in interviews, and triangulating across data types. For a full discussion of our methods (see Honig *et al.*, 2010, 2017).
2. For an elaboration of the findings that substantiate these categorizations (please see Honig *et al.*, 2017).
3. In this section we chose to refer to the individual intermediaries as "coaches" and not as "mentors" for two main reasons. First, most of the intermediaries refer to themselves as coaches. Second, as noted throughout this section, many of the coaches did not completely fulfill the description of a mentor as described in our conceptual framework.

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Further reading

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