



RESEARCH  
BRIEF

# Bounded & Intertwined

## Professional Learning and Instructional Leadership During COVID-19

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Educational leaders have a responsibility to continuously learn innovative ways to address instructional gaps. This responsibility has been heightened due to the COVID-19 crisis.

One way to address instructional gaps is to improve the way adults learn about and interact around instruction. The level of collaboration and the nature of interaction is a key indicator of the learning community’s ability to address instructional challenges (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Each member’s involvement contributes to the practice developed overtime within overlapping communities in a school district.

However, a gap in research exists that attends to the practice of educators across a district. Professional learning tends to focus on teachers to the exclusion of others within the organization and lacks attention to the practice of educators across multiple layers of a district. In addition, professional learning often goes awry due to its complexity.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how adult learning is connected to instructional leadership at multiple levels within an organization during a time of crisis.

Thus, we aimed to answer:

- During a time of crisis, what do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district?
- How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?

We defined **professional learning** as learning that contributes to practice developed over time. We used research on professional development, adult learning theory, and social learning theory to define professional learning.

**Instructional leadership** plays a big role in framing our study. Hallinger (2010), when describing how leadership impacts learning, calls attention to three avenues: vision, academic structures that enhance classroom practice, and building capacity of people.

Demands on school and district leadership expand exponentially during a **crisis** and school leaders need to adapt rapidly to meet evolving demands (Smith & Riley, 2012). We also know that the quality and nature of the social context before the crisis defines how the community handles it during and after. Both of these points related to crises helped us frame the global pandemic within our study.



Our research team utilized **Communities of Practice** (CoP) as a tool for analyzing how a district made sense of professional learning and instructional leadership during a time of crisis. Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice as a group of people who share a common purpose and learn to pursue this purpose from one another. CoPs exist in overlapping networks, and individuals within these networks learn not only within but also across CoPs (Wenger, 1998; Scanlan, 2012).

CoPs have three dimensions:

- *Joint Enterprise* results from a collective understanding of purpose and direction.
- *Mutual Engagement* emerges through a kind of social capital generated by relationships that describes how each member participates in the community and engages in the learning.
- *Shared Repertoire* results when members share tools, histories, procedures, or a common language to make sense of the learning.

Individual members of our team drew upon nuanced aspects of mutual engagement in their individual studies including boundaries and brokering, and the four learning capabilities: citizenship, power, partnership, and governance.



This single-site qualitative case study utilized rich descriptions to capture the lived experiences of respondents. Over six months, our research team conducted 22 semi-structured interviews (teachers, middle-level instructional leaders, principals, a district administrator, and the superintendent); completed five observations at the school and district level; and reviewed public and internal documents.

Findings

During a time of crisis, what do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership?

- Vision
- Structures
- People

These three avenues affect educators at all levels in a district and they help us describe what instructional leadership looked like.

Vision

First, with respect to vision, the data revealed that the vision for instructional leadership in the district was established very clearly at the superintendent level and then passed down to principals; middle-level instructional leaders (MILs); and teachers. For example, all educators in the district were expected to align their goals with the district’s goals as expressed in their strategic plan. That said, there were fissures in that tight instructional vision. Over the course of the three school years of the pandemic, principals had varying levels of control over their goals and vision for instructional leadership at the school level. Most of the evidence showed that during this time of crisis the district's strategic plan drove goals for professional learning and instructional leadership. However, one MIL had a very specific impact on the district’s implementation of *Blended Learning*.

Structures

Second, with respect to structures, the data revealed a tension between district-driven structures and school-driven structures. For example, data from teacher interviews revealed that the structure most impactful for teachers and their instructional practices was the

pacing map. However, principals talked about adjusting the pacing maps based on the needs of their schools. One principal stated, "I find myself giving people permission. It’s okay if you’ve run into your science block and you need to extend the ELA a little longer. ...having that compassion for folks and giving them grace when they need it.” In this way, principals using “grace” to make daily choices about how much to push teachers and how much to buffer expediency.

***“I find myself giving people permission. It’s okay if you’ve run into your science block and you need to extend the ELA a little longer. ...having that compassion for folks and giving them grace when they need it.”***

- Principal

Data demonstrated that MILs highlighted coaching as an important structure for their work and for the advancement of teachers’ instructional practices. However, although the district has invested significantly in coaching, coaches' roles and practice varied widely based on school needs. Finally, many principals described the *Blending Learning* initiative as limiting, not enhancing, their ability to support teachers.

People

Third, with respect to people, the data revealed many commonalities among educators' learning experiences at different levels in the district, both in what supported and in what failed to support their learning. Central to all educators’ learning during the pandemic was the need to adjust instructional expectations because of students' social emotional needs. Similarly, educators at all levels in the district also emphasized the role of innovation and reflection in their learning during this period of crisis. Principals and teachers found that the district’s structured professional development experiences had a limited influence on their learning. Finally, MILs had varying opinions on the effect of structured professional learning opportunities. Not all MILs had access to formal learning opportunities, and MILs expressed a desire for more formal opportunities to collaborate with their peers.

Implications

During crisis, educational leaders must be aware of three needs that emerge within CoPs: social emotional well-being, innovation, and professional learning. In order for adult learning to be effective, districts must balance the tensions that exist within each of these three areas.

These tensions always exist, yet data from this study suggests crisis demands a recalibration to respond to changed circumstances. Represented below by the visual of a seesaw, the implication is not that the two extremes need to be equal, rather that a fluctuation in one necessitates a change in the other.

Social Emotional Well-Being

The first tension relates to social emotional well-being. School and district leaders must manage the push and pull between compassion, or grace, and high expectations, or a sense of urgency.

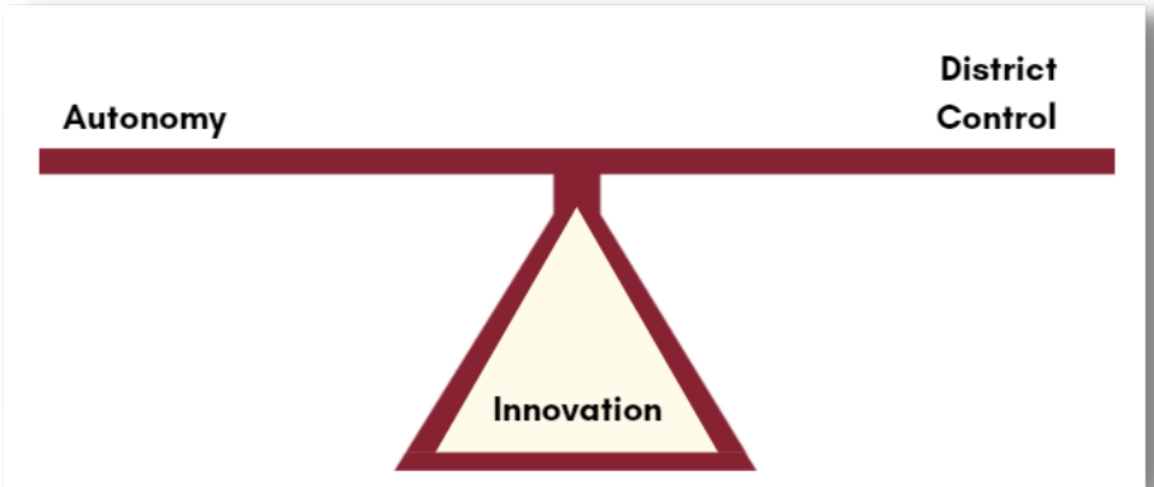
Districts that serve historically marginalized students always feel a sense of urgency to close opportunity gaps; however, crisis calls for compassion and an awareness that relationships are key to learning, for both students and adults.



Innovation

The second tension relates to innovation and the relationship between autonomy and district control. During the crisis, the district benefited from principals and other leaders who innovated in real time to respond effectively to unknown circumstances. Throughout the nation, unprecedented times became a familiar phrase during the pandemic. As the district entered the third year of the pandemic, expectations became more centralized. Going forward, in order to

continue to allow space for innovation, districts should consider how to balance district control and autonomy.



Designing for Professional Learning

The third and final tension relates to the design for professional learning. Here, the district must be strategic when determining the appropriate mix between independent and collaborative learning. Differentiation calls for opportunities to learn that meet the needs of adults with varied experiences and skills, which can be achieved through independent learning modules; however, we also know that learning is a social endeavor that should include experiences to learn, to reflect, and to grow together. Leaders must be intentional and balance independent learning with collaborative structures so educators learn with and through each other and develop best practices in and across CoPs over time.



Implications for Future Research

Building off the visual metaphor of balancing tensions on a seesaw, future research could consider the "warning signs" of disequilibrium that are created when one end of the seesaw is emphasized to the detriment of the other. ■



# Principals' Organizational Commitment

An individual study by Meredith Erickson

COVID-19 has added immense pressure on school districts and leaders to adjust to the loss of both academic and structural supports for students. While we don't yet know the long-term effects on student learning, the crisis has intensified the demand for districts to set goals that respond to students' social emotional and academic needs.

Superintendents have always led the constellation of executive activities related to district improvements. In order to actualize these goals, districts must foster collaboration between central office and principals to increase the probability of success. However, crisis accentuates the pressures principals already face. Thus challenging the superintendent to increase principal commitment to the district's improvement efforts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how a superintendent worked to increase principals' sense of investment in instructional leadership and district goals, amidst crisis.

### Research Question

During a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership? To answer this question, organizational commitment is defined as an employee's individual attachment to an organization; affective organizational commitment (AOC) specifically describes how an employee *wants* to be involved in and belong to the organization. AOC is a predictor of an employee's willingness to accomplish goal-oriented activities (Meyer et al., 2002; Chun et al., 2013).

### Findings

Strengthening principals' AOC during this time of crisis was the result of superintendent actions in three areas: supervisor support, perceived autonomy, and alignment of personal and district goals.

#### Supervisor Support

The superintendent supported principals through connection, candor, and capacity. To cultivate **connection**, principals described how the superintendent had taken time to build relationships with

each principal individually. Principals also spoke about the superintendent's credibility and accessibility, describing how he was always available through his "open-door policy," Principals felt a greater connection to the district because the superintendent developed leadership team cohesion that evoked a sense of "family spirit." The superintendent also provided ample opportunity for principals to contribute and be recognized for their contributions. In developing a culture of **candor**, the superintendent would solicit principal feedback in a psychologically-safe environment that valued input. Principals were able to share an honest appraisal of how to improve the organization. The superintendent allowed principals to build their **capacity** through professional learning and mentoring opportunities.

#### Perceived Autonomy

Autonomy signaled to principals that the superintendent had trust in their abilities as instructional leaders. Many principals described autonomy to solve problems as a way the district shared power, increasing AOC. The superintendent acknowledged that having a psychologically-safe culture invited innovation and increased principal investment.

#### Alignment of Personal and District Goals

The superintendent facilitated the development of a multi-year strategic plan prior to COVID, which informed annual district goals. Subsequently, the superintendent enacted a process by which all principals align their personal goals to the district's goals, through what was described as a "thread" or "perceptible link." With more alignment of goals, there was less ambiguity about where the district was moving; this lightened district control and allowed for more varied approaches by principals to achieve goals based on the unique needs of their school, which increased principal AOC.

#### Implications

Superintendents can consider how the alignment of goals can foster increased autonomy for principals where a "one-size fits all" solution does not meet the needs of each school. Explicitly soliciting principals' input to co-construct post-pandemic plans can strengthen organizational commitment, which will be essential in districts' recovery efforts. ■

Principals are key to a school's success. Consequently, a number of recent school reform efforts have centered on increasing principal autonomy. Yet that autonomy has been simultaneously diminished in the last twenty years by the accountability movement, as principal agency is constrained by external performance guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic increased this tension between pressures to expand and pressures to curtail principal autonomy. External control from districts increased at the very time when we had a greater need for principal initiative and creativity.

Understanding how principals' work is most effectively organized and controlled is thus particularly important during and after the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to contribute to that understanding. Prior research has established that principals often experience autonomy as a complex process of negotiation rather than something they are simply granted or denied. This study sought to detail that process of negotiation in the unique context of a global pandemic.

## Research Question

During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction?

## Findings

- All seven principals reported that logistical hurdles of the crisis impinged upon their capacity to do what they saw as the more important parts of their job as instructional leaders.
- All seven principals also described how the pandemic exacerbated existing student social emotional needs and brought on new ones that required an adjustment to instructional priorities.
- Principals presented instructional leadership during the crisis as an ongoing process of calibration. They described adjusting to changing instructional modes (from remote, to hybrid, to in-person learning); to unanticipated logistical challenges;

and to changing instructional needs. Principals further represented that the calibration grew more difficult over the course of the pandemic.

- When asked to describe how they learned to be instructional leaders during COVID-19, principals most commonly responded that their personal learning process during the crisis was the result of improvising, reflecting with others in the school CoP, and adapting. Principals also talked about experimenting with new structures to support instruction during the crisis.
- Some evidence indicated that the district supported principal learning for instructional leadership during the pandemic by framing the work; offering timely, formative feedback; and providing meaningful, structured professional development experiences.
- The data suggested that over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, principals learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction with shifting degrees of autonomy. Participants described the spring of 2020 as a swing towards principal autonomy; in contrast, both district administrators and principals described 2021-2022 as a swing towards district control.

## Implications

- The district relied to a certain extent on principals who had prior experience with autonomy to innovate, particularly at the onset of the crisis. These findings may suggest that to prepare for a crisis, the district should consider scaffolding principal autonomy by explicitly creating opportunities for principals to have that experience.
- Research suggests that the organization of a district has a direct impact on the roles of autonomy. It is possible that fully supporting principal autonomy would require fundamental changes to the district organization. ■



The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for all educators to devote time to personal growth and learning.

However, when it comes to the learning of Middle-level Instructional Leaders (MILs), they are rarely afforded with the range of professional development opportunities that teachers and principals receive. MILs are underrepresented in professional literature and have been described as “a wasted educational resource” and “the forgotten man.”

The focus on the learning of MILs is especially timely now as superintendents and principals are pulled in multiple directions to solve immediate crises and MILs assume greater responsibilities related to instructional leadership.

Therefore, the purpose of my study is to fill an important gap missing in educational leadership research by understanding how the learning of MILs is connected to instructional leadership during the COVID-19 crisis.

Research Question

How do MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis?

Findings

MILs include both district-and school-based positions that have formal responsibilities to improve instructional leadership. Of all the instructional leaders within the district, including principals and the superintendent, approximately 4 out of 5 are MILs, representing a large majority of human capital designated to improve teaching and learning.

Vision and Goals

- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is an external factor that impacts the direction in which Frederick seeks to move. Frederick’s priorities are closely aligned to the indicators assessed by DESE, including achievement, growth, and English language proficiency.
- Internal factors that impact the vision of district and school-based MILs include the executive cabinet and principals.

- Although traditional accountability structures influence the vision and goals MILs seek to pursue, individual MILs may innovatively invest in and seek a different direction in instructional leadership, fostering governance that is emergent.

Academic Structures that Enhance Classroom Practice

- District- and school-based MILs described their partnership differently, representing a lack of joint enterprise and mutual engagement between district- and school-based MILs. This represented a key missing academic structure to shape or enhance the practice of teachers.
- Blended Learning and rigorous instruction have been stewarded across Frederick as key academic structures to enhance teacher practice, while social emotional well-being became an emergent and at times conflicting priority.
- While a significant investment in coaching has been made in Frederick, the practices and responsibilities of coaches vary, and non-evaluative horizontal coaching structures are not accessible to secondary teachers, thus diminishing its effectiveness.

Building Capacity

- Workplace experiences, including district partnerships like Lynch Leadership Micro Academy, and informal partnerships, impacted the learning of MILs.
- Variance in both role expectations and practice complicates the ability to improve the practice of MILs because the ambiguity clouds expectations for practice in how each role should be improving student learning.

Implications

- Flesh out each district goal by outlining the specific responsibilities MILs have in actualizing said goals.
- District-level MILs should have a responsibility to establish horizontal accountability structures for school-based MILs that extend beyond one school. This will cultivate and calibrate effective practices by restructuring the way district and school-based MILs mutually engage in joint enterprise.
- Further research should explore how to capitalize on individual investment of MILs. ■



Teaching and learning are hard work and require ongoing development so that teachers, schools, and districts can meet the needs of their diverse learners. Each year district and school leaders invest a tremendous amount of resources - financial, human and time - into professional learning opportunities for staff development. However, these opportunities often fall short. Frequently, they do not lead to the intended changes in practice, and in the worst cases, they are deemed a total waste of time.

The purpose of this study was to support school and district leaders to design for professional learning that results in teacher learning and best instructional practices.

Research Questions

During a time of crisis,

- 1.What influences teacher professional learning and instructional practices?
- 2.What role do principals play in creating the conditions for this learning?

Findings

For research question one, what impacts teacher learning and instructional practices, there were four key impacts.

Learning by Doing

- Because of the COVID-19 crisis, instruction changed overnight. Teachers found themselves learning by doing, essentially through trial and error. The majority of teacher learning during the crisis was done in isolation.

Social Emotional Needs of Students

- During the crisis, teachers' awareness of meeting students' social emotional needs increased significantly. In order for students to access academics, teachers prioritized relationships. One teacher reflected, "Last year we really slowed down and focused on relationships and making sure our kids were okay, and everything came after that. And I saw it so clearly that we were so much more productive when we did that than when we just rushed through."

Pacing Maps

- Through observation and interviews, pacing maps were found to have the most impact on teacher practice. There was a significant emphasis on what would be taught when and for how long.

Collaboration

- Even though most learning for teachers happened in isolation, collaboration did have an impact, mainly between and among teachers who worked with the same students.

For research question two, how do principals create the conditions for teacher learning, there were two main findings.

Management vs. Instructional Leadership

- Due to the increased managerial demands of the COVID-19 crisis, like access to technology and safety protocols, principals engaged with less instructional leadership, thus reducing their ability to create the conditions for teacher learning.

District Impact

- As a result of principals needing to meet logistical demands, Blended Learning as a professional learning initiative, and the prominence of the pacing maps, the district had a larger impact on teacher practice than did the principals.

**“Last year we really slowed down and focused on relationships and making sure our kids were okay, and everything came after that. And I saw it so clearly that we were so much more productive when we did that than when we just rushed through.”**

- Teacher

Implications

- Learning in isolation does not maximize the benefits of CoP membership. As a result, there should be a balance between independent and collaborative professional learning opportunities for teachers.
- In order to impact teacher learning and practice, principals need to continue to prioritize instructional leadership.
- In order for professional learning to be effective, school and district leaders need to provide differentiated professional learning opportunities. ■



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