

1

The Challenge of Leading in the Middle Space

BEYOND INTENTIONAL INTERRUPTION

In our previous book, *Intentional Interruption: Breaking Down Learning Barriers to Transform Professional Practice* (Katz & Dack, 2013), we articulate the links among professional learning, high-quality classroom practice, and improved student achievement. We explain that new professional learning—real learning—is hard work. We describe how human beings have a natural (but unconscious) propensity either to avoid new learning or to turn something novel into something familiar. That is, we transform the world to fit what’s already in our minds. But what we are really after—real learning—involves changing our mental structures to fit new information that we encounter. New learning is about thinking, knowing, and understanding differently than we did before. In *Intentional Interruption*, we explain that if we are going to

2 The Intelligent, Responsive Leader

facilitate *real* professional learning—what we call deep conceptual change—then it’s important to understand what gets in the way. We suggest that successful school improvement is about intentional interruption—an intentional interruption of the subtle supports that work to preserve the status quo and impede new learning. And we outline what it means to intentionally interrupt the status quo of professional learning in order to enable *real* new learning that takes the form of permanent changes in thinking and practice.

Since the publication of *Intentional Interruption*, we have been part of many school districts’ efforts to put the book’s ideas into practice as a core part of their school improvement efforts and, in particular, their leadership development efforts. With much of the recent research on school leadership pointing to the impact and importance of instructional leadership (e.g., Hattie, 2015), the ability of leaders to lead real professional learning through intentional interruption has taken center stage. As we’ve said before, student success follows from high-quality classroom practice. High-quality classroom practice follows from real professional learning. Impactful school leaders know how to create the conditions for teachers to learn what they need to learn, so that teachers in turn can create the conditions for students to learn what they need to learn.

As we’ve joined many school (and district) leaders on their respective journeys to lead learning and improve schools, we’ve encountered a ubiquitous leadership problem of professional practice. Specifically, school leaders often find themselves situated between a set of top-down, district-level directives that prescribe expectations and a set of bottom-up, practitioner-driven preferences that favor experiential professional judgment. This duality seems to present often as an incompatibility, with the school leader caught in the middle. What does it mean to “lead” within that space? What does it mean to be a “learning organization” in that space? In this book we take up these questions by putting forth the notion of a school as a learning organization in which prescribed expectations and experiential

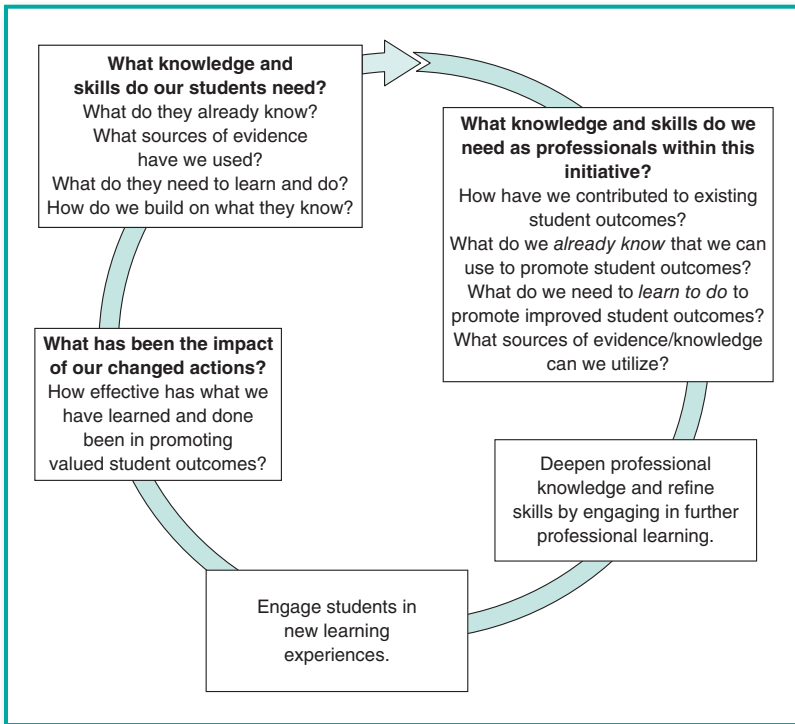
professional judgment aren't oppositional and incompatible. We refer to this particular type of learning organization as an *intelligent, responsive school*.

Our goal in this book is to unpack what it means to effectively lead an intelligent, responsive school. Before we can do that, however, we need to do a couple of things fairly quickly: first, we need to revisit and reiterate the centrality of professional learning to the school improvement agenda, because it's at the heart of what impactful instructional leaders seek to influence; and second, we need to engage in the one practice that the literature on expertise suggests unites all experts regardless of domain—an in-depth understanding of the nature of the problem or challenge that we are up against. This chapter does both of those things.

THE CENTRALITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

We consider professional learning to be at the heart of all school improvement processes because it's at the heart of impactful practice. Professional learning that allows educators to grapple with complex challenges of practice, which grow out of student learning needs, has the best possibility of leading to different and effective ways of thinking and doing in schools. As we explain in *Intentional Interruption*, teacher practice is the single biggest predictor of student outcomes. If teacher practice doesn't change in classrooms where students are struggling to achieve, it's unlikely that student learning will improve. Real professional learning needs to drive this change. Real professional learning is much more than teachers planning lessons together, engaging in a book study, or even talking about the different challenges they face each day in their classrooms. The kind of professional learning that we are talking about here is that which is directed by a clear, needs-based focus and follows a professional learning cycle in a disciplined way. Figure 1.1 illustrates and explicates this process.

Figure 1.1 The Professional Learning Cycle



Source: Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2008).

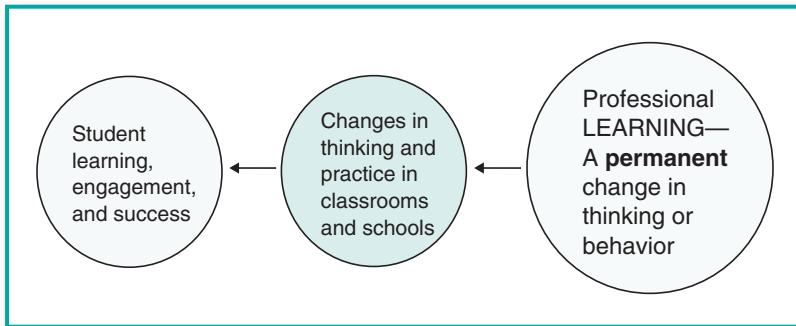
Most teachers that we know work hard each and every day to provide the best opportunities for their students. They utilize all the strategies that they know to make a difference for the children in their care. Teachers don't purposefully hold back. If they know what to do to ensure that each student is achieving in their classrooms, they do it. They don't "save their best" for when students are more deserving! Research tells us that many teachers are good at knowing where students are struggling (Katz, Earl, & Ben Jaafar, 2009). The challenge is in knowing what to do for each student in the face of these learning gaps. We know that more of the same—even slower, louder, and a few more times—isn't likely to yield a different result. This is why professional learning matters so much. There are only two options for change: new students or

new teaching practices. The former usually isn't possible. Parents aren't keeping the good students at home. They're sending the best they've got. So if teachers are teaching the best way they know how but there are still learning gaps for students, we need to think about changing teaching practice. That's where professional learning comes in.

The research-based theory of action that we explicate in *Intentional Interruption* (reproduced here in Figure 1.2) shows how positive impacts on student learning, achievement, and well-being are dependent on high-quality classroom practice, which, in turn, is dependent on impactful professional learning. The challenge, as we have explained, is that most professional learning doesn't result in changed thinking and practice in schools and classrooms because the new learning doesn't reach the requisite threshold for "permanence." *Permanence* refers to the extent to which the status quo of believing, thinking, and acting is changed forever. It doesn't prohibit continuing to grow and move forward, but it does preclude going "back" to previous patterns of knowing and doing. Richard Elmore's book title *I Used to Think . . . and Now I Think . . .* (2011) succinctly captures what we are getting at here. The details behind the what, how, and who of "real" or "permanent" professional learning are spelled out in *Intentional Interruption*, and we won't recapitulate them here. Suffice it to say, the necessary evidence-based professional learning focus and the requisite professional learning methodology that we refer to as "collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice" are essential enablers of professional learning. School leaders—as instructional leaders—play a key role in creating the conditions for these things.

LEADING IN THE MIDDLE SPACE

Principals, as instructional leaders, play a significant role in creating the conditions for learning for both students and staff (see, e.g., Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). As they work collaboratively with their colleagues to learn about creating

Figure 1.2 The Path of School Improvement

Source: Katz and Dack (2013).

effective conditions for teaching and learning, they also find themselves in the challenging position of supporting each and every teacher in their schools while responding to the many expectations that come from their communities, their school districts, and state or provincial bodies. Being a principal is challenging; on the worst days, it feels like there is little escape from the “pressures from above” and “blame from below.” Leithwood and Azah (2014) have examined this phenomenon from a “workload” perspective, exploring the cognitive and emotional dimensions of workload pressures that principals feel while living in this space. But it is exactly in this “middle space” that principals do exercise their leadership, as they are the key link between the district’s central office and the classroom. And as we know from the research, principal leadership is second only to teacher practice when it comes to influencing student learning and achievement (Leithwood, 2012). The middle space is challenging but important.

There are many examples to illustrate the challenges principals experience while leading in this middle space. Principals attend meetings where they learn about effective practice and hear expectations about school improvement efforts. They have opportunities to learn about what research says about good instruction and about the experiences of other colleagues in terms of their improvement efforts, and they are

exposed to a myriad of initiatives (and resources) that have been created at the system level that are intended to assist them (even though they don't always experience the initiatives as such). These principals also have many responsibilities at their schools in terms of managing day-to-day operations, meeting with parents, mediating various conflicts involving students, and administering different procedures. Principals walk a very fine line because they are expected to be visible and public co-learners alongside their staffs (Robinson et al., 2009) while at the same time maintaining supervisory responsibilities over their staffs. Negotiating this power dynamic is not easy. Principals are dealing with individual teachers, their interests and needs; they are dealing with the collective staff and the culture of that staff; they are working closely with their district leaders, and maybe even a learning team of principals; and they are expected to fulfill the expectations that come not only from their districts but also from the state/provincial level. Our observations across many school districts tell us that for principals, leading in this middle space often feels more frenetic and reactive than intentional. And without the "intentional," there is no "intentional interruption" of the status quo (in the service of the kind of professional learning that results in improved teaching practice).

AN IMAGE TO HOLD IN MIND

To illustrate the challenging dynamic we are describing, consider the experience of one principal in a school that we know well. It's an elementary school of approximately six hundred students and thirty teachers, in a socioeconomically challenged urban community. For many years the prevailing narrative within the school was that the social and emotional challenges that the students experience precluded the school's meeting their learning and achievement needs. Over the previous decade, whenever

(Continued)

(Continued)

principals or vice principals tried to bring about a change in student learning outcomes, their efforts were met with the kind of resistance that implied that these administrators did not truly understand the plight of the students that the school was serving. The teachers in the school were very committed to their students, and they worked tirelessly in the community and in the school on efforts that we would describe as serving a “culture of care.” They defined their work—hard work—around important things like early-morning breakfast programs and winter coat drives, but it was difficult to see evidence of the kind of professional work focused on learning and teaching that might change learning outcomes for students. Furthermore, without intending to use a deficit lens when talking about their students, educators in this school did not seem to really *believe* that their students could attain higher levels of achievement. A culture of high expectations was absent. The teachers in the school were collegial with one another, but they did not believe that they had the collective capability to change life chances for their students. Most of the time, when students were not achieving, educators in the school reminded formal leaders that the social barriers were too great for them to actually make the kind of difference that the leaders were expecting. And this perpetuated a self-fulfilling cycle of what looked a lot like “learned helplessness” at a school level. Students performed at a low level, educators attributed the performance to a challenging and uncontrollable socioeconomic context while believing they were doing all they could given the circumstances, students continued to struggle, the prevailing educator beliefs were thus reinforced and classroom practice remained the same, and so on and so on. The school garnered a fair number of external resources from the district, but these resources were not focused on teacher professional learning in the service of improved classroom practice. The resources included things like social workers, child and youth counselors, education assistants, a psychologist, community outreach workers, and nutrition assistants, to name just a few.

Recently, a new principal was assigned to the school. His early experiences were similar to those of previous principals. Teachers

felt that he needed to understand that this particular school was very unique in light of the challenges the students faced. The principal met very dedicated teachers who wanted to make a positive impact on the lives of their students, but who were clear in their beliefs that the prevailing socioeconomic and mental health challenges that students experienced meant that the grade-level academic expectations were unrealistic and not attainable. The teachers were kind, compassionate, and well-intentioned. When the principal asked questions in order to gain insight into the school, the students, and their learning, the teachers politely worked to “educate” the new principal about “how different things are here.” The teachers felt that it was necessary to help him understand the importance of making sure that students were fed each morning and at lunch, for example. They believed that he would soon understand that the challenges students and their families experienced would become the focus of his day. He would come to see that the school did not have enough social work and psychological support to assist these children. And finally, the teachers believed that the principal would soon realize that catering to the very real social needs of students on this scale is a full-time job.

Though the new principal agreed that the challenges in this particular school were real and prevalent, he was not willing to lower his expectations for high-quality teaching practice in each and every classroom. He understood that he would need to spend some of his time ensuring that the social and emotional needs of students were met, but not at the expense of effective instructional practice and enhanced student achievement. The school's lagging student achievement results also meant that it was a primary concern for the area superintendent. The superintendent visited the school often, always with suggestions for how the principal and teachers should help the students achieve. She wanted the principal to act with urgency. She felt that the school had been underperforming for far too long and wanted to know what the principal was going to do about it. And she wanted to know what the principal was going to do to “get” positive student achievement results *quickly*.

(Continued)

(Continued)

The principal understood these expectations and their urgency, but he also knew that he had to develop relationships in the school in order to be able to motivate, guide, facilitate, and support teachers effectively to bring about these positive results. In other words, the urgency for student achievement required time for the principal to work effectively with the teachers. And this temporal tension was wrapped up in the bigger challenge of the prevailing culture of care coming at the expense of a culture of learning. The culture of care wasn't just experienced; it was written down and formalized in the school improvement goal that was guiding the professional learning of staff. The teachers' professional learning efforts were explicitly focused on responding to the social and emotional needs of the children. This isn't a focus that one could (or even should) argue with. The unintended consequence, however, was that the impetus for changing and improving classroom practice was absent. The school improvement goal made no mention about changing instructional practice. But the principal knew that without changes to instruction in classrooms, there would be no improved student learning outcomes. He also understood the importance of focus and alignment in the school, such that any resources that he and the teachers were given to improve instruction would need to be the right ones. He found himself occupying a space in which he needed (and wanted) to build positive relationships with the staff that he had just met, while appreciating the urgent expectations of the superintendent. We'll return to this concrete illustration later. For now, let's zoom back out to the bigger picture as we continue to understand the challenge of leading in the middle space.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AT THE NEXUS OF PRESSURES AND SUPPORTS

Let's look a little more closely at this implementation "challenge of practice" that principals face. Principals are expected to lead, and are responsible for, student achievement in their schools. The days of the principal's role being

defined exclusively in operational and managerial terms are well behind us in improving school systems (Hattie, 2015; Robinson et al., 2009). Central office personnel are often assigned to support the principal and the school staff in their improvement efforts. Teachers spend most of their day working with their students, and the typical structure of the school day means that large blocks of uninterrupted time for teachers to be working with each other and with the principal are elusive. Even when teachers desire to be very collaborative and look forward to opportunities that will allow them to enhance their practice and extend their learning, the default nature of the day is one that continues to promote a solitary existence.

We know from the research that one of the best ways for a school community to improve student learning is for teachers to de-privatize practice and open their classrooms and their minds to new and varied understandings, perspectives, and behaviors (Katz et al., 2009). Principals play a large part in creating these kinds of professional learning cultures. They know that cultures of professional learning change practices in the service of improved student learning and achievement. At the same time, however, the realities of our current age of (external) accountability mean that central office personnel are simultaneously communicating expectations to schools about how to enhance improvement efforts. Sometimes government resource personnel are sent to some schools and some districts, especially when improvement efforts seem to be particularly challenged. And added to this mix, of course, are teachers who have their own opinions, beliefs, and ideas about how to improve their students' learning; they too bring plenty of experience and expertise into the conversation. The principals' implementation challenge of practice includes coordinating and making sense out of all these differing supports or ideas, especially when coherence among them isn't obvious and the experience is perceived as "clutter" (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Principals find themselves living (and working) at the nexus of a range of pressures and supports, some internal and some external.

AN IMAGE TO HOLD IN MIND

Let's return to our concrete illustration. After many years of low scores on standardized tests, the school we are talking about had been placed on an official government list of schools that needed to improve. The school district also saw this school as one of its lowest-performing schools. The new principal felt a tension every time he met with his area superintendent because he was given clear direction that improvements needed to be more evident. Further, when centrally assigned instructional coaches worked in the school, they attempted to provide teachers with many different resources and programs that they might use to help their students learn, but without ongoing opportunities to consolidate learning, these interventions did not take hold. Teachers began to feel less confident about their practices, some grew angry in response to this experience, and others grew discouraged and even withdrawn.

The school was a hotbed of activity, and the teachers were always busy. They were busy planning their lessons, supported by various coaches and consultants. They were busy filling out reports and templates about what they were attempting to do in the classroom and how well their students were doing in light of their programs and interventions. They were expected to measure their students' progress in numerous ways, and to report the results to central authorities. They were expected to engage in workshops, meetings, and professional discussions intended to help them improve. They went to book studies, they tried to visit each other's classrooms, and they were expected to bring student work to the table in order to diagnose where students were in terms of their learning, decide on different strategies and interventions that could be used, or determine the impacts that previous decisions were having on students. The principal stood in the middle of all these activities, which he perceived and experienced as pressures. Being on a government list that indicates your school is underperforming is a pressure. Being visited often by central office staff who arrive with their own agendas for improvement is a pressure. Managing the emotional complexities that teachers are experiencing in light of this expectation to improve is a pressure. And working to balance

the professional judgment that each individual teacher brings to the conversation while holding firm to the importance of collaborative professional learning can also be a significant pressure. The principal in the elementary school that we have been describing felt all of these pressures.

INITIATIVITIS AND LITERAL LEADERSHIP

Few ideas resonate as much with the principals we work with as the concept we have referred to as “initiativitis” (Katz et al., 2009). Initiativitis is the disease of the initiative. Among the more than 3,500 principals in Leithwood and Azah’s (2014) study, number one on their list of recommendations for reducing workload pressures was to significantly reduce the number of new initiatives. These initiatives tend to be described as prescribed programs, interventions, resources, or processes that come with implementation and accountability expectations in the school. Instead of being perceived as helpful to the improvement process, these intended supports (usually put in place by well-intentioned people) are often accused of distracting schools and their staffs from their improvement work. Teachers sometimes complain that they do not have enough time to teach because they are too busy implementing other people’s programs. And they may grow frustrated that their professional judgment is not being honored or that their contextual experience is not being considered in the steadfast pursuit of fidelity to the “initiatives.” In this environment, *prescription* and *professional judgment* are cast as competitors, with very different cultural connotations. The former manifests in a culture of compliance and surveillance, while the latter becomes about professional freedom and autonomy. And especially germane to the point we have been making here, the principal is caught right in the middle.

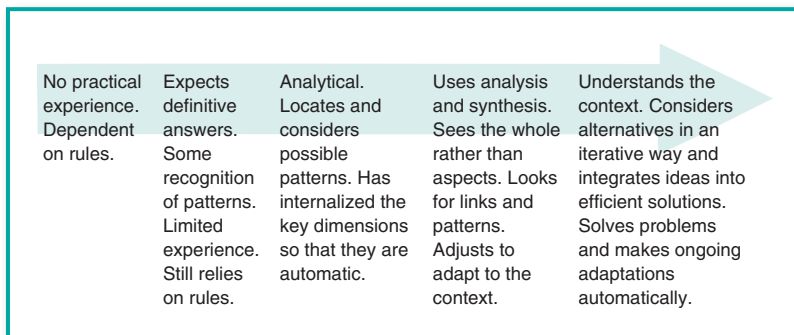
In our experience, new principals are especially prone to contagion when it comes to initiativitis because of what might

be called “literal leadership.” Literal leadership is what happens when principals engage with the above-mentioned external expectations “to the letter” rather than “in the spirit.” In many jurisdictions, there are large numbers of new principals. New principals practice literal leadership when they expect teachers in their schools to implement programs they themselves might not really understand, in a rather algorithmic way. An example of literal leadership can often be observed when new principals attend a system meeting with their school superintendent. These principals are trying to learn many complex facets of their role at one time. They listen closely to everything the superintendent says, and in the absence of prior experience, they believe that they have to implement everything they hear, because that’s a typical assumption within a hierarchical organization. The meeting with the superintendent usually includes multiple agenda items. These items may include instructional topics in literacy and numeracy, operational issues such as the rollout of a student information system, and a guest speaker talking about how to improve the learning culture in each school. These principals then return to their schools, and at their next staff meetings they replicate this superintendent agenda without necessarily taking into consideration the context of the school and the improvement work that is already happening. Through this literal leadership practice, the information from the central meeting might stifle or overtake the work at the school rather than support it.

In *Intentional Interruption*, we describe the cognitive bias that results in our tendency and desire to present the strongest version of ourselves to the outside world (Katz & Dack, 2013). When we take on new responsibilities, as new principals do, we often have a heightened and anxious desire to show those around us that we are capable of fulfilling those responsibilities effectively, that we deserve to be where we’ve recently landed. This desire, often subconscious, to show others (and sometimes ourselves) that that we are capable of fulfilling the

expectations of the new role, coupled with a lack of experience around the complexities of managing implementation expectations, might influence a new principal to push rule-based compliance in a way that is not helpful. Through experience, principals come to understand the importance of mediating various expectations, buffering their staff from “activity traps” (Katz et al., 2009) that would harm their efforts, and brokering relationships with external sources to learn how best to proceed in the school with a healthy respect for the local context. In other words, over the course of their careers and with the right kinds of experiences, principals move along the continuum from “emergent” to “proficient” in their understandings and practices. Figure 1.3 outlines this sequence. Note the heavy emphasis on “rules” in the early stages; it is this reliance on rules that manifests as literal leadership. Over time, as school leaders move closer to the proficient end of the continuum, they can learn how to fulfill system expectations without being too literal. That is, they can learn how to reconcile local and central positions and move beyond the either/or statements, or perceived polemics (a set of seemingly incompatible alternatives), that characterize much of education.

Figure 1.3 Stages in Growth From Emergent to Proficient



Source: Earl and Katz (2006b).

POLEMICS IN THE MIDDLE SPACE

In this chapter we have described an implementation challenge of practice for school leaders who are charged with leading school improvement efforts by creating the conditions for impactful professional learning. These leaders occupy a space between the decentralized realities of classroom teachers looking to exercise (and learn through) *bottom-up* professional judgment processes and the centralized efforts of *top-down* prescription. Though both are typically well intentioned, the result is an experiential tension for school leaders. They are pulled between what we call “the knower” (what one already “knows” from one’s own beliefs and experiences; in this case, the bottom-up professional judgment) and “the known” (codified knowledge from theory and research; in this case, the top-down prescription) of professional learning and become mired in polemics (Katz, 2000, 2002). In the next chapter, we outline our concept of the intelligent, responsive school as a way of moving beyond the polemics that come from leading in the middle space.

TIME FOR REFLECTION

1. What impact do “top-down” and “bottom-up” pressures have on you, your staff, and your school?
2. Professional learning is at the heart of all school improvement processes. How effective is professional learning in your school, and how do you know?
3. Describe the culture of expectations in your school and the impact this culture has on staff practice and student outcomes.