

Developing Academic Leadership in Schools: Guidelines and Implications for University Preparation Programs and Administrators

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Since the 1990s, we have witnessed increased emphasis on site-level governance of schools as well as the emergence of numerous approaches to school reform. Indeed, administrators, teachers, and parents have redoubled efforts to work collaboratively to make decisions and develop policies, procedures, and strategies to address the need of schools and students (Lieberman, 1995), and educators have been directly called upon to develop professional learning communities (PLCs) characterized by continuous learning, reflective dialogue, collaboration, and a focus on improving student outcomes (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994). Du Four and Eaker (1998) have noted, “There is growing evidence that the best hope for significant school improvement is transforming schools into professional learning communities” (p. 17).

In this article we examine the principles of professional learning communities derived from recent research on school reform and restructuring efforts to determine what educators can do to foster school improvement. We also link research about school attributes, readiness levels, and principals’ behaviors associated with successful professional learning communities with findings (Blase & Blase, 2004) about effective instructional leadership to reveal commonalities as well as informative insights. Finally, we present an approach to the meta-goal of developing academic leadership in schools and university administrator preparation programs derived from the foregoing research.

Developing a Professional Learning Community

Building a professional learning community requires the reculturing of a school, and that reculturing goes beyond issues of school governance, decision-making, scheduling, and programming; it represents a profound shift in teachers’ work, from the old order to new conditions of work (Miller, 1998). Old order conditions include norms of isolation, a focus on teaching, use of a techniques tool-box, control, assembly-line work, and a focus on the classroom. New order conditions include norms of a professional community (e.g., openness, collegiality), a focus on learning, systematic inquiry, measuring student progress, and a focus on mission accomplishment. Interestingly, Miller’s examination of successfully recultured schools highlighted several key elements that mirror those of established professional learning communities. Miller found that educators in such schools viewed change not as a process, but rather as an event (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991). In addition, such schools (a) had principals who

demonstrated courage for innovation and action, a willingness to admit to needed changes, energy and commitment to complete work, and confidence that changes were in the best interest of students and the teachers who guide them; (b) maintained a long-term perspective (e.g., based on persistence, diligence, perseverance); (c) had teachers who had highly developed, effective teaching practices and the capacity to assume leadership among their peers; (d) had teachers and principals who involved themselves in inquiry and reflection about instructional practice, student learning, and assessment; (e) extended beyond its boundaries to include regional school/university partnerships and networks with other educators; (f) focused on student learning (i.e., focused not on what teachers do but on how students learn); and (g) attended to teacher development and learning (e.g., teacher research, collegial reviews of practice (Wilson & Daviss, 1994).

Broadly speaking, reculturing a school as a professional learning community requires both an effective school principal as well as the staff's commitment to maintaining a whole-school focus, expanding teachers' leadership responsibilities, developing standards and accountability measures, maintaining a continuous focus on inquiry, and placing learning before teaching.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Findings from Research

We now discuss the attributes, readiness factors, and principal maintenance behaviors associated with schools that have been recultured as professional learning communities and compare those findings with our own findings about successful instructional leaders.

Attributes of Professional Learning Communities

From the work of several researchers (e.g., Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1997; Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 1996), Hord (1997a, 1997b) we have identified five attributes of schools with successful professional learning communities. These attributes include supportive and shared leadership, in which principals democratically shared power, authority, and decision making with teachers. The second attribute was shared values and vision, where principals and teachers developed an inspiring yet realistic picture of a school based on common values and beliefs. The third attribute involved collective learning and application of learning; with this practice principals and teachers studied together, used data to develop programs, focused teaching strategies on student needs and teacher leadership. Another important attribute of PLCs was supportive conditions; supportive conditions implies that teachers had time to talk, plan, solve problems, and influence decisions; teachers developed collaborative roles and responsibilities; principals and teachers maintained an academic focus; principals and teachers developed norms that supported ongoing learning; principals and teachers engaged others in decision making; and principals were comfortable with relinquishing power). The final attribute of successful PLCs involved the sharing of personal practices, where teachers held regular, structured, peer reviews of colleagues' instructional practice, and teachers accepted challenges and risks.

These attributes of professional learning communities are consistent with the behaviors of principals identified as successful instructional leaders in our recent study as well as with the outcomes of their behaviors. Leaders empowered teachers, fostered collaboration and collegiality, supported risk-taking and innovation, helped teachers become inquiry oriented, and provided resources and time for professional growth. However, although we found that principals encouraged teachers to coach their peers, such collaborative instructional efforts were limited; collaboration was not institutionalized nor was it central to the principals' approach to instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Readiness Factors Related to Developing a Professional Learning Community

In their synthesis of a five-year study, Pankake and Moller (2002) described school readiness for the development of a professional learning community. They noted that high-readiness schools had high levels of trust and communication, were proactive, had a plan for improvement, were following a plan, and had needed resources. In contrast, low readiness schools were low on one or more of these variables. Further, low readiness schools did not consistently attend to supportive conditions (e.g., some schools occasionally neglected to develop human relationships and effective staff development programs, neglected to provide time for collaboration and learning, and neglected to provide time to discuss how to develop supportive conditions). Low readiness schools limited the teachers' sharing of personal practices (e.g., sharing tended to be infrequent, informal, and unfocused; little mentoring occurred; materials were rarely shared; and class visitations were limited and infrequent activities).

Pankake and Moller (2002) also revealed that although some PLCs engaged in limited shared personal practice, none were significantly engaged in peer review and feedback designed to enhance educators' professional relationships and instructional effectiveness in support of the professional learning community. In essence, shared personal practice in schools with different levels of readiness was the least developed of Hord's (1997a, 1997b) five dimensions of a professional learning community.

Other studies have characterized school staffs with high levels of readiness (in contrast to low levels of readiness) for the development of a PLC. Huffman, Hipp, Moller, and Pankake (2000) and Moller, Pankake, Huffman, Hipp, Cowan, and Oliver (2000) identified common themes associated with high levels of school readiness. First, proactive principals built strong cultures of collaboration by encouraging a variety of collective learning structures, securing fiscal and human resources, developing trust and respect, listening, promoting high expectations, giving recognition, and encouraging teacher leadership (e.g., teacher leaders shared a school vision, initiated and facilitated change strategies, and utilized teachers' expertise as needed). Second, principals nurtured a common vision, supported a shared vision related to student learning, balanced individual and organizational needs, developed cross-level and cross-program communication,

proactively brought the right people together to solve problems, and encouraged ever-changing decision making arrangements according to needs. Thus, decision making was purposeful. Third, staff development programs flowed from student data, teachers were advisors for student performance concerns, teachers led school study groups, and staff development initiatives were connected to on-going school initiatives. In this way, staff development was job-embedded.

The behaviors of successful instructional leaders described in our study (Blase & Blase, 2004) were generally consistent with the readiness criteria described above for building a professional learning community. We found, for example, that principals who were successful instructional leaders strongly emphasized group development: they built trust, fostered collaboration, and acknowledged teachers' accomplishments. At the same time, such principals did not encourage extensive one-on-one, peer collaboration among teachers to improve instruction, nor did they work vigorously to ensure communication among teachers of different subjects and levels to develop teacher leaders in their schools.

Principal Maintenance Behaviors Associated with a Professional Learning Community

Morrissey and Cowan (2000) analyzed teachers' perceptions of actions taken by principals who were effective instructional leaders in creating and maintaining a professional learning community. They found that principals in professional learning communities, for example, had positive perceptions of teachers' capabilities; balanced the delicate interaction between support and pressure by letting go of traditional role expectations and also by encouraging teachers to take on new roles; developed shared values and vision through shared decision making; and engaged all teachers and administrators in collaborative reflection, inquiry, problem solving, learning, and teaching.

By comparison, our findings (Blase & Blase, 2004) about principals who were effective instructional leaders indicate that their behaviors were fundamentally consistent with the behaviors of principals involved in developing a professional learning community. For instance, the principals described in our study fostered group development, teachers' professional growth, and teacher reflection. Such efforts notwithstanding, these principals did not mirror the PLC principals' leadership skill of maintaining a delicate balance between supporting and encouraging teachers and gently pressuring them to collaborate regularly to address the interests of teachers, students, and school improvement; this was something that instructional leaders in our study only did indirectly. Further comparisons revealed that the successful instructional leaders we studied emphasized personal assistance to teachers as well as group development; leaders in PLCs also included peer teachers in teacher observation and feedback and in leadership and decision making roles. In essence, in schools that were PLCs, leadership and faculty development were devolved to teachers in varying degrees, a finding consistent with our studies of empowering school principals.

How Instructional Leaders Develop a Professional Learning Community

A comparison of our findings about successful instructional leadership with findings about successful approaches to the development of a PLC suggests that educators who concentrate on the following five elements: peer collaboration, teacher leadership, access to resources, empowerment, and constructivist learning and leadership, are very likely to develop a viable professional learning community.

1. Utilize the Power of Peer Collaboration. First, to utilize the power of peer collaboration, we recommend that educators engage in the following actions.

Teachers should learn from each other. According to our findings, many of teachers' most helpful lessons about teaching (how to plan for teaching, how to motivate students, how to use technology for learning, how to engage students, how to provide hands-on learning experiences, and how to measure learning) came from other teachers, as individuals and as members of groups.

Teachers should be models for each other. Teachers we studied reported that their peers provided positive teaching models to emulate; they also clarified why certain teacher behaviors had negative effects and were potentially damaging to students.

Teachers should share their motivation and inspiration with each other. Peer teachers, our data point out, were a major source of innovation in the classroom. This created a cross-fertilization of strategies, materials, and approaches that teachers felt should be part of the school's professional development program.

Teachers should help each other learn how to deal with students. We found that peer teachers helped one another learn how to handle class management problems (how to be clear, fair, and consistent) as well as how to involve students in classroom decision-making.

Teachers should consider reflection, discussion, debate with, and support from other teachers invaluable. Our data indicate that teachers who lack such opportunities are more likely to leave teaching.

Teachers should learn about cognition and learning from each other. Teachers reported that they discovered that learning is complex, and that it is essential to contextually diversify and integrate learning to meet diverse student needs.

Peer collaboration can also include shared professional learning experiences; that is, reading pairs, forums for solving instructional problems, and peer observation and reflection. It can provide a base for "parallel leadership...a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity" (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Haan, 2002, p. 38); such collaborative work is characterized by mutualism (i.e., teachers and principals share trust and respect and are thereby interdependent in designing and

implementing innovation); a sense of shared purpose by which the school's vision and approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment foster a positive school culture; and individual expression (i.e., staff members can accommodate each other's values, thereby encouraging both individual expression and action as well as collaboration).

2. *Develop Teacher Leadership.* Second, the development of a PLC can be achieved through careful attention to the assumptions for implementation of teacher leadership and efforts to overcome related obstacles. By viewing all teachers as reflective practitioners instead of technicians and by increasing teachers' opportunities for common time, a principal can reduce teacher isolation and increase teachers' sense of efficacy and participation in decision making related to instructional matters. In doing so, the goals of teacher leadership (e.g., professionalization of teaching to attract and retain high quality teachers, reduction of teacher isolation, increase in teacher participation in decision making, tapping teacher expertise, and bringing teachers together to solve classroom problems and enhance instruction [Sabatini, 2002]) can be attained and the school community can realize a range of benefits (e.g., teacher efficacy, retention of excellent teachers, overcoming resistance to change, career enhancement, improving teacher performance, influencing other teachers, and accountability for results (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001)).

3. *Access Useful Materials.* Third, a wealth of books and other materials can be utilized in shared professional development learning sessions, group conversations, and for conversations among educators to expand instructional leadership and facilitate the development of a professional learning community (see Appendix A for a list of relevant books). Such materials can also be used to inform educators about a constructivist approach to learning and leading as well as the constellation of behaviors, skills, and attitudes that comprise "academic leadership" (i.e., developing a collaborative, motivated community of learner-leaders that promotes equity and school improvement). Other materials, including libraries of videos and CD-ROMs of teaching, supervision, and peer assistance are available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Alexandria, VA) and Corwin Press (Thousand Oaks, CA).

4. *Promote Teacher Empowerment.* Fourth, to develop a PLC, educators must determine the degree to which their school is empowering for teachers. Bolin (1989) asserts that teacher empowerment requires "investing in teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and the right to exercise professional judgment about the content of the curriculum and means of instruction" (p.83). Bolin assumes that teaching is fundamentally a value-based activity that requires professional expertise to engage in thoughtful conversations and to participate meaningfully in decision making processes.

Much research has demonstrated that teachers desire more formal power and freedom to use professional discretion as they work with colleagues (e.g., Maeroff, 1988). From several of our studies of empowerment in schools, we

have concluded that:

Principals who embrace these concepts rather than merely expecting teachers to implement other people's visions for schools will accord teachers respect and dignity and will help them to be more fully responsible for work-related decisions. This combination of respect and dignity is the essence of empowerment. (Blase & Blase, 2001, p. 3)

We now believe more than ever that such respect and dignity must be afforded all educators, students, and parents. We have also described democratic empowerment and shared governance as the heart of all successful principals' practice. We have stressed that teacher empowerment is significantly enhanced by specific actions on the part of principals. These actions include modeling, building, and persistently supporting an environment of trust among teachers, whom they consider professionals and experts. Systematically structuring the school to encourage authentic collaboration by establishing readiness and common goals and by responding to the school's unique characteristics is also important to teacher empowerment. Furthermore, principals should maintain a focus on teaching and learning. They should support teacher experimentation and innovation, grant professional autonomy, and view failure as an opportunity to learn. Other important actions by principals include encouraging risk taking, minimizing threats, and reducing constraints on teacher freedom and growth. Finally, the principal is responsible for setting the stage for discussing and solving the problems of a school through effective communication, openness and trust, action research, group participation in decision making, and effective procedural methods for solving problems (Blase & Blase, 2001).

5. *Assess Your School as a Center of Constructivist Learning and Leading.* Fifth, to augment efforts to develop a PLC, educators should assess their school as a center of constructivist learning and leading. Over time, perspectives of learning have evolved, from a traditional approach (memorization of unchanging knowledge; teacher as source of knowledge; lack of student experience with democratic processes) to a behavioral approach. In this approach, knowledge is separated into its critical elements; students are rewarded for successes; student behavior is measured, diagnosed, and predicted; aim is to achieve specific objectives. Learning then evolved into a grouping/tracking approach in which similar students are given the same treatment, and teaching strategies and learning activities are varied according to student ability levels. This evolution then moved to a learning/school effectiveness approach where high expectations are the norm, there is a press for performance, esteem is enhanced by outcomes, and a belief that all students can learn is prevalent. From there learning moved to a community of learners approach, involving cooperative learning, an emphasis on the process of learning, and an interdependence among students and teacher. Most recently, the approach to learning has focused on a constructivist approach, one in which emphasis is placed on the development of personal schemas and the ability to

reflect on one's experiences as well as on the social nature of learning; in this paradigm students construct meaning from values, beliefs, and experiences, and multiple outcomes are expected) (Lambert et al., 1995).

In similar fashion, perspectives of the nature of leadership have also evolved over time. For instance, in contrast to earlier views of leadership, Lambert et al. (1995) define constructivist leadership as "the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling" (p. 29). Lambert et al. argue that constructivist leadership incorporate[s] criteria that involve all adults in the learning and leading processes, create[s] a culture in which reflective and interactive learning can take place, involve[s] structures that allow for conversations from which meaning and knowledge can be constructed, and encourage[s] professionals to seek collective meaning and collective purpose grounded in their practice. (p. 27)

Emphasizing that anyone in the educational community—teachers, administrators, parents, and students--can lead, the authors state, Full participation leads to acts of leadership; being fully engaged in meaning-making activates one's drive toward purpose and community. One cannot help but lead; one is compelled to do so by the self-directed drive toward self-renewal and interdependency. Responsibility toward self and others surfaces as an essential developmental process. (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 50)

How does constructivist leadership differ from instructional leadership and leadership in a community of learners (which is rooted in several theoretical constructs, including human relations theory, systems theory, and ecological thought)? According to Lambert et al. (1995), in an instructional leadership approach, the principal carries out key instructional functions, including monitoring student progress and serving as a visible presence on campus. Time spent observing in classrooms, participating in staff development, and providing resources for teachers influences both teacher and student growth as well as overall school improvement. (p. 7) In the communities of leaders approach, leadership is viewed as a shared process among educators—principals and teachers. The principal is seen as a 'leader among leaders,' one who facilitates the growth of others. Thus the organizational structure is flattened and integrated, and participants share common values and purposes. The interactive nature of a community promotes continuous improvement, with assessment integral to the work of the community. (p. 8)

Constructivist leading, in contrast, is viewed as a reciprocal process among the adults in the school. Purposes and goals develop from among the participants, based upon values, beliefs, and individual and shared experiences. The school functions as a community that is self-motivating and one that views

the growth of its members as fundamental. There is an emphasis on language as a means for shaping the school culture, conveying the commonality of experience, and articulating a joint vision. Shared inquiry is an important activity in problem identification and resolution; participants conduct action research and share findings as a way of improving practice. (Lambert et al., 1995, pp. 7-9)

Lambert et al.'s (1995) theoretical discussion as well as our own studies of instructional leadership and teacher empowerment (Blase & Blase, 1998, 2001, 2004) demonstrate that effective educational leaders do not maintain meaningless traditions; direct others who have little authority; focus solely on efficiency concerns; and manipulate human behavior to achieve organizational goals through exchanges, rewards and sanctions. In fact, these are traditional, behavioral, and situational approaches to educational leadership, and the successful leaders we have studied over the last decade and one-half go far beyond such limited approaches. The instructional leaders described throughout our work and in studies of constructivist leaders participate fully in instructional and school improvement, to develop a collaborative, democratic, trusting community of leader-learners; and to involve all others from the school community in participative, inquiry-oriented, constructivist decision making. Such leaders determine ways to expand their basic instructional leadership skills, develop a professional learning community, and ensure that schools become centers of constructivist leading and learning. We call this constellation of behaviors, skills, and attitudes academic leadership (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Every school is a complex organization, and school leaders, principals and teachers, must understand the school's people, children and adults, as well as its programs. School leaders further require theoretical, practical, and technical knowledge about leadership. By developing cognitive knowledge about teaching and learning, practicing their leadership skills, and developing self-understanding, we posit that all educators can become academic leaders who challenge others to develop a collaborative, innovative community; assist in the development of a sense of mission and purpose; facilitate democratic, participative decision-making processes; motivate others to achieve the school's goals and to achieve their individual potentials; and promote equity and social justice.

How can principals help educators become academic leaders? In the following section we describe a professional development forum suitable for schools as well as for university preparation programs that addresses the field's urgent need to redesign professional educator development that focuses on learning and capitalizes on teacher expertise.

Redesigning Administrator and Teacher Preparation and Development

The message from national, state, and local levels is clear: teacher development is central to school improvement, educational reform, and the attainment of high levels of student achievement. Thus, we must educate a new cadre of instructional leaders, both administrators and teachers, who have the

ability, skill, and knowledge to create and sustain school environments, foster the learning and well being of both children and adults, and work effectively together. To attain these goals, the field of education should

1. view teacher preparation and development as lifelong learning for preservice, beginning, inservice, and veteran teachers;
2. maintain high standards of student performance and a focus on effective practices linked to student learning; and
3. utilize teacher expertise and teacher leadership at all educational levels.

We propose the creation of academic leadership programs that link teacher and administrator preparation as (1) university course sequences or programs and as (2) school or district's professional development efforts. More specifically, such programs would be open to aspiring principals who wish to define and implement goals to guide schools, groups of teachers, and non-profit agencies in the support of high standards and levels of academic and social accomplishment for children (usually leading to a principal's certificate); aspiring educational leaders who wish to lead in school/educational change efforts in charter schools, nonprofit educational organizations, and private schools or in businesses (a teacher leadership focus); practicing classroom teachers who wish to embrace additional leadership responsibilities and roles, but who do not want to leave the classroom in order to do so (school development focus); and aspiring teachers who have successfully completed several years of teacher preparation coursework and who are interested in school improvement could also be included in the program. All participants **should** be exceptional teachers and recommended by their teacher preparation program advisor or building principal.

Participants in academic leadership programs should study the relationship between effective leadership and student learning and achievement. Such programs would focus on the development of skills to create a context of mutual support and trust, shared problem solving, and reflection. Participants would have opportunities to share experiences, concerns, problems, and achievements. Through, for example, small- and large-group discussions, case studies, writing exercises, and practical activities, participants could explore instructional leadership, learning communities, and school improvement. Self-assessments would help participants to identify and reflect on their values, beliefs, priorities, and commitments. Among other things, an academic leadership programs should address the following fundamental questions:

1. What school leadership behaviors, values, and attitudes foster school improvement?
2. How do educators develop inquiry approaches that foster student achievement?
3. How do educators promote the essential reflective dialogue about instruction to enhance teacher development and student learning and achievement?

Topics for exploration and discussion may include communication, decision making, conflict reduction, problem solving, planning, interpersonal and adult development, teacher leadership, leadership capacity/density, development of a learning community, peer coaching, study groups, mentoring, peer collaboration, professional development, equity and diversity issues, inquiry and assessment, data analysis, action research, diagnosis of school needs, democratic teaching and learning, constructivist learning and leading, classroom processes and school effectiveness, instructional observation and shared reflection, standards, and technology.

What Do Academic Leaders Do?

The work of academic leaders includes fostering collaboration and developing school goals, providing opportunities for educators to gain needed professional knowledge and self-understanding, and encouraging attention to diversity and equity issues (see Figure 1). Such work, shared among empowered instructional leaders, both teachers and administrators alike, should reflect the knowledge, skills, and attitudes addressed in an academic leadership forum. We emphasize that if your district or local university does not provide programs to develop academic leadership abilities jointly among aspiring and practicing administrators and teachers, your school can begin this work by establishing its own academic leadership forum, using local talent, proven approaches, and materials described herein.

More to Learn: A Final Word

The study of the development of a professional learning community and instructional leadership is but one tile, albeit a significant one, in the complex and ever-changing mosaic of leadership. We have not yet achieved a full understanding of the myriad related issues such as adult growth, career development, reflective thinking, power elements of interaction among educators, coaching, constructivist leading and learning, and development of professional learning communities. Refreshingly, the continuing study of instructional leadership and learning communities is testament to the essence of all who work in our field, as teachers, leaders, and researchers: It is a matter of lifelong learning, understanding, and collaboration.

Collaboration

- Develop stronger connections among educators, communities and families, universities, the private sector, and government.
- Develop and nurture collaboration, and help others to appreciate the importance of establishing policies and procedures that encourage and support such connections. In particular, develop collegial relationships among teachers, and help them understand the interactions among professional experience, inquiry, and critical reflection.

Goal Development

- Define curricular, pedagogical, and organizational goals collaboratively.

Self Understanding

- Encourage all to describe personal and professional beliefs regarding human growth and development in organizations and to develop guidelines for respectful interaction. In particular, encourage personal and career growth and development of teachers as adult learners.
- Enable all to learn about and master interpersonal, organizational, technical and conceptual skills needed to facilitate the work of the school (e.g., study the tools and techniques of successful instructional leadership, peer collaboration, organizational leadership, assessment, and learning).
- Reflect on the challenges facing new school leaders and support them as they learn to lead and develop specific leadership, interpersonal, and decision-making skills.

Knowledge

- Study issues of reform, the forces impinging on education, and instruction (e.g., the powerful interaction between theory and practice that informs effective teaching).
- Develop the conditions that encourage effective teaching and continuous learning (e.g., provide collegial assistance to teachers for improving their classroom skills).
- Teach the skills of practical, classroom-based action research.
- Develop an understanding of curriculum design and review.

Diversity and Equity

- Foster conversations and support of multicultural efforts and organizations that encourage mutual respect and productive communication, sensitivity to differences across gender, ethnicity/language, race, exceptionalities, religious beliefs, national origin, and sexual orientation.

Figure 1. Dimensions of the Work of Academic Leaders

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APPENDIX A

Developing Academic Leadership through
 Collaboration, Teacher Leadership, and Learning Communities:
 Media, Books, and Readings for Teachers and Principals