Leadership Practices of Middle School Principals that Promote Collective Teacher Efficacy

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Abstract

This case study investigates the leadership practices of middle school principals in schools with high Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE). The research aims to understand how specific leadership actions contribute to the enabling conditions that foster CTE. Using a qualitative approach, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with three middle school principals and focus groups with teachers from their schools in a large urban district in Alberta, Canada. The findings reveal four central themes: building and distributing leadership capacity, engaging the school community, driving school improvement, and the significance of principal deportment. Principals prioritized building teacher capacity through strategic alignment with the School Development Plan (SDP) and by fostering collaboration within Professional Learning Communities. They engaged in distributed leadership practices, creating environments where teachers felt empowered and supported. In terms of school improvement, principals used the SDP as a tool to guide instructional enhancements and align district mandates with school priorities. Notably, principal deportment emerged as a critical factor. The deportment of principals—how they carried themselves and embodied their leadership roles—played a pivotal role in building trust and enhancing the overall school climate. Principal deportment was not only crucial for fostering a positive school environment but is also integral to the creation and sustainability of CTE, demonstrating that effective leadership practices can intentionally cultivate this essential construct.

Keywords: collective teacher efficacy, middle school principals, school leadership, principal deportment

Introduction

Researchers have demonstrated that high collective teacher efficacy (CTE) benefits student learning and achievement, as well as teacher instructional practices and well-being (Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo, 2021; Bandura 1997; Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo et al., 2018; Eells, 2011; Hattie, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Hattie (2015) identified CTE as the second highest influence on student achievement, but following Eells' (2011) meta-analysis, he revised his ranking to place CTE as the top predictor of student achievement. Eells' (2011) meta-analysis reinforced this finding, showing CTE as a critical predictor of student outcomes across multiple studies.

Donohoo (2017) details a variety of benefits linked to high teacher collective efficacy. Staff in schools with high CTE maintain school environments in which students feel good about themselves and engage in more productive behaviours that support positive student outcomes. High CTE encourages teaching behaviors and learning environments characterized by greater teacher effort and persistence, especially with struggling learners, openness to new pedagogical approaches, high expectations, learner autonomy through student-centered practices, minimized disruptions through engagement, and increased parental involvement (Bandura, 1997; Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). In schools with high CTE, teachers are willing to be more persistent in supporting students, especially those who may be struggling. Teachers feel supported by their colleagues to continue to persist and find success with all their students; brainstorming and collectively finding alternate strategies and solutions (Donohoo, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). As well, individual teachers are more likely to approach new teaching strategies and approaches that are pedagogically sound and are also more likely to take on more challenging tasks and try new ideas (Donohoo, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

Staff with high CTE tend to be more committed, seem better able to understand their responsibility to their students, and thrive professionally and personally (Donohoo, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). High CTE is positively related to increased job satisfaction and reduced levels of burnout for educators (Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo et al., 2018). Teachers who are part of a highly efficacious staff tend to have high expectations of themselves and hence their students (Donohoo, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). They believe students are capable and support them in finding success. These teachers are more confident in their abilities to support student learning and are more open to student voice and choice in their learning, which leads to a more student-centred approach in the classroom which in turn increases student engagement (Donohoo, 2017). Increased student engagement also leads to a decrease in behavioural issues. When students find success, they become more focused on the learning task and become less likely to engage in negative attention seeking behaviours. Students receive greater support in their learning and teachers tend to be less critical of student errors, and offer support, compassion, and encouragement (Donohoo, 2017). Donohoo (2017) also highlights the Pygmalion Effect explaining that a teacher's beliefs about a student's ability to achieve becomes a significant predictor of student success. Finally, staff with high CTE also tend to be better able to manage student behaviour and tend to foster positive behaviours in their students. Teachers are more likely to have a uniform approach to address behaviours and have common expectations for all students (Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Moreover, parental involvement is higher amongst teaching staff with high CTE as these teachers are more likely to reach out to parents on a regular basis due to increased confidence in their own abilities (Donohoo, 2017).

Donohoo (2018) urged all educational leaders to make increasing CTE their first priority. When school leaders are faced with rolling out a new initiative or facilitating change of any kind,

being in a school with high CTE is beneficial. The more cohesive a staff, the more likely they are to understand each other's needs and challenges (Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo 2021; Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo et al. 2020). Staff with high CTE tend to be more cohesive, hence they are more in tune with each other and better able to support each other through necessary changes (Donohoo, 2018). The higher the CTE, the more involvement staff have had with decision-making and therefore they are better positioned to more readily accept changes of which they have had a voice in deciding (Donohoo, 2018). Goddard (2001) surfaced the important role of leadership in supporting the group to set and achieve collective performance goals. Building on this work, Goddard and Hoy (2004) explored how collective efficacy operates as an emergent property of organizational interactions, highlighting its impact on student achievement. Goddard (2001) explained that collective efficacy is an organizational characteristic and highlighted collective efficacy as a school construct that can be leveraged to increase pedagogical mastery leading to increased student achievement. Hoogsteen (2020) expanded on Goddard's (2001) conceptualization of collective efficacy, offering additional insights into its reciprocal relationship with student achievement. Hoogsteen (2020) offered an alternative conceptualization focusing on the reciprocal relationship between CTE and student achievement. He identified collective efficacy as the by-product of leadership practices that involve goal setting, collaboration, goal monitoring, and celebration which leads to pedagogical mastery and increased collective efficacy.

Whether CTE is the catalyst that drives school improvement, or the by-product of school improvement practices, research studies do, overwhelmingly, highlight the benefits associated within schools with high CTE and their correlation on student achievement and teaching practices (Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo, 2021; Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo, 2018; Donohoo et al., 2018; Donohoo et al., 2020; Eells, 2011; Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Hoogsteen, 2020). A

number of these studies provide suggestions on how to achieve higher CTE, but few to none, outline the specific practices and actions of school-based leaders within schools with high collective teacher efficacy. This research study focused on understanding the leadership practices of school-based leaders in middle schools with high collective efficacy.

Research Question

Given the above issues surrounding CTE, the overarching question guiding this study was:

- What are the leadership practices of middle school principals within schools with high collective efficacy?

  The secondary question was:

- What actions do middle school principals take to provide supportive leadership, establish goal consensus, empower teachers, support cohesive teacher knowledge, and promote reflective instructional practices?

This foundation underscores the importance of understanding leadership practices within high-CTE schools, which this study explored.

Literature

The concept of CTE is deeply intertwined with the broader body of literature on educational leadership and its impact on school outcomes. Understanding the dynamics of CTE requires examining the foundational elements of leadership practices that foster collective action and shared beliefs. The following sections explore these elements, beginning with an overview of school-based leadership and its pivotal role in shaping the conditions for high teacher efficacy.

School-Based Leadership

Educational researchers have extensively explored how school leadership impacts student learning, demonstrating that leadership influences outcomes, even indirectly. Leadership's

primary purpose was to improve teaching practices, thereby supporting student learning (Day et al., 2011; Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020; Robinson, 2011). Various studies identify common leadership dimensions, such as setting direction, building relationships, and improving instructional programs (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Robinson & Gray, 2019). The consensus is that effective leadership supports high-quality teaching and fosters environments where teaching and learning thrive.

Hallinger (2005, 2011) emphasized that successful leaders adapt their strategies to fit school-specific conditions, highlighting the importance of context. Similarly, Bendikson et al. (2012) differentiate between direct and indirect instructional leadership, highlighting context's role in determining which approach is more effective. Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) advocate for distributed leadership, where decision-making and improvement efforts are shared among educators, correlating with higher student achievement (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Robinson and Gray (2019) contend the need for leaders to build relationships with staff while remaining focused on student well-being and learning. Whereas, Leithwood et al. (2020) reaffirm the significance of leadership in influencing staff motivation, ability, and working conditions. They propose a theory of action, including the Four Paths Model, which outlines leadership practices that can indirectly support student learning (Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020). This model includes rational, emotional, organizational, and family paths, each with variables that leaders can leverage to enhance student outcomes.

Common themes among these studies emphasize the necessity of school leaders engaging with staff to enhance instructional practices that serve student learning and achievement (Day et al., 2011; Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020; Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Gray, 2019). These researchers consistently stress the need for leaders to create environments that

support effective teaching practices, which, in turn, foster high student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Robinson, 2011). This involves paying close attention to specific school contexts and developing a shared leadership perspective that supports teacher professional learning (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012).

The review of the selected literature identified six key leadership dimensions as essential for effective school leadership:

1. Setting Direction: Establishing a common vision, developing goals, and setting expectations to ensure that all members of the learning community have a shared purpose (Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020; Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Gray, 2019).

2. Fostering Relationships: Building a culture of relational trust, which is crucial for effective collaboration. Trust often emerges as a product of working together (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

3. Developing People: Ensuring high-quality teaching by focusing on the professional development of teachers. This includes providing the necessary tools, resources, and opportunities for professional growth (Day et al., 2011; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012).

4. Improving Instructional Programs: Continuously refining instructional practices to meet the learning needs of students (Hallinger, 2005, 2011).

5. Refining the Organization: Ensuring that the necessary resources, including human resources, are in place to achieve the school's goals. This also involves keeping a pulse on stakeholders' perspectives to maintain alignment with the school's vision (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012).

6. Ensuring a Safe Environment: Creating a safe, caring, and orderly learning environment is paramount, as students need to feel secure to learn effectively (Robinson, 2011).

These perspectives on school leadership inform the relationship between school leadership and CTE. Understanding how leadership practices can support the development of CTE or vice versa provided a foundation for this research study.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory posits that human behaviour is influenced by the interaction of personal factors, behaviour, and the environment (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Central to Social Cognitive Theory is the concept of agency—the capacity to act intentionally to influence outcomes. Self-efficacy, a core construct within Social Cognitive Theory, refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to succeed in specific tasks. These beliefs are shaped by four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experiences, the most influential source, arise from successfully completing tasks. Vicarious experiences involve learning by observing others. Verbal persuasion includes encouragement from others, and physiological states refer to emotional and physical conditions influencing self-efficacy. Collective efficacy extends these principles to groups, reflecting their shared belief in achieving common goals.

Self-Efficacy and Collective Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve desired outcomes through their actions (Bandura, 1997). These beliefs influence how people approach challenges, with high self-efficacy leading to greater persistence and resilience (Bandura, 1993, 1997). Self-efficacy is shaped by four main sources: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states, with mastery experiences being the most influential

(Bandura, 1986, 1997). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in tasks and persist in the face of challenges, while those with low self-efficacy may avoid tasks and lack commitment (Bandura, 1993).

Collective efficacy extends the concept of self-efficacy to groups, defined as a group's shared belief in its collective ability to achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). Hoy and colleagues (2006) emphasized the role of school leadership in shaping collective efficacy, particularly through fostering shared goals and supportive organizational climates. It is not merely the sum of individual beliefs but an emergent property of group interaction and coordination (Bandura, 1997). Effective collective efficacy depends on group dynamics, including leadership, member interactions, and the organization of tasks (Bandura, 1997). In schools, collective teacher efficacy (CTE) reflects the collective belief of teachers that they can positively influence student outcomes (Donohoo, 2018; Goddard et al., 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

Collective Teacher Efficacy

CTE is crucial for student achievement, as it drives teachers' motivation and persistence, particularly in challenging contexts (Donohoo et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Tschannen-Moran and Barr's (2004) model further elucidates the interplay between school climate and CTE, offering a framework for understanding how teacher collaboration fosters high expectations and shared responsibility. Schools with high CTE report better climates, collaborative cultures, and higher expectations for students (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Teachers in such environments often try new strategies, engage in professional learning, and support one another, thereby enhancing student learning (Donohoo, 2017). CTE also contributes to teacher job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and a greater sense of collective responsibility for student success (Donohoo, 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

Measuring Teacher Efficacy

While numerous tools have been developed to measure teacher efficacy, including those by RAND and Bandura (1997), no single tool is universally accepted (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The Enabling Conditions for Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (EC-CTES) by Donohoo et al. (2020) offers a method to assess the conditions that foster CTE within schools, focusing on factors such as empowered teachers and supportive leadership. While acknowledging that measuring CTE remains a complex challenge requiring further research, we ultized the EC-CTES instrument.

Research Design and Analysis

Methodology

For this study we employed a case study approach, as outlined by Merriam (1998) and Yin (2018), to explore specific practices by middle school principals that lead to high CTE within a bounded context. This approach was chosen because case study was particularly useful for understanding phenomena in depth, offering detailed, rich insights from the perspectives of those being studied (Merriam, 1998). The research sought to discover and interpret the processes that middle school principals used to create a culture of high CTE within their schools. The case was bound within the context of middle school leadership practices in schools that scored high on the EC-CTES instrument in a large urban public school district in Alberta, Canada. This aligns with Merriam's (1998) emphasis on case study as a methodology aimed at gaining insight, discovery, and understanding. We sought to produce a holistic and descriptive analysis to inform leadership practices in similar educational settings.

Participants

      We employed purposeful sampling to select middle school principals from a large urban public school district in Alberta, Canada, focusing on schools with diverse student populations and varying programming offerings. Principals from five middle schools agreed to complete the EC-CTES instrument. From these five, the three schools scoring the highest levels of enabling conditions for CTE according to the EC-CTES results were selected. Each of these three schools had a 73% or higher completion rate on the survey, which is administered to the principal and teachers. We conducted interviews with each of the three principals, aiming to understand how they enabled CTE. The interview questions asked principals to describe their practices in providing supportive leadership, ensuring goal consensus, empowering teachers, fostering cohesive teacher knowledge, and supporting reflective practices, following the model identified by Arzonetti Hite and Donohoo (2021). Each of the principals had held that position in the school for three years or more. Focus groups were held with four to five teachers within each school to gain teacher perspective on the leadership practices within their school in relation to CTE.

      Three middle school principals participated in the study, each bringing varied yet substantial experiences to their roles, which contributed to a rich data set reflecting diverse leadership practices. Principal Aisling had 43 years of experience in education, with 23 of those years spent within their current jurisdiction. Over their 10 years as an administrator, Aisling had served in both junior high and middle school settings. At the time of the interview, they were in their fourth year as principal of a middle school with approximately 700 students and a teaching staff of 36 members. Aisling's leadership was deeply rooted in building strong relationships with staff and students, and they emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and cohesive school environment. Principal Melville brought 23 years of educational experience, with 17 years

in administrative roles within the same jurisdiction. Melville had been a principal for 11 years and was currently in their third year at a middle school serving 650 students. A focus on instructional leadership and the strategic development of teacher capacity characterized their leadership style. Melville also had experience in system-level leadership, which informed their comprehensive approach to school management and improvement. Principal Robin had 28 years of experience in education, including eight years in administrative roles. Robin was in their third year as principal of a middle school with a grade configuration of 5-9, serving around 700 students. Robin's leadership was centred on fostering continuous improvement and aligning school practices with the broader district goals while maintaining a focus on the unique needs of the school community.

Teachers from each principal's school participated in focus groups, providing additional insights into the schools' leadership practices. The focus groups included 13 teachers, seven of whom were teacher leaders, and participants represented a range of teaching experiences and roles. Hummingbird Middle School had a focus group of four teachers with experience ranging from 6 to 23 years. The group included both new and long-serving members of the school, providing a broad perspective on the school's collaborative practices. The participants held roles in science, student services, humanities, and English language learning, reflecting the diverse academic environment of the school. Northern Creek Middle School also had four teachers in its focus group, with experience ranging from 9 to 20 years. This school was dual-track, offering both regular and early French immersion programs. The group's participants included teachers in French immersion, physical education, math, science, humanities, and student services, highlighting the school's multifaceted instructional approach. Ridgeside Middle School had a focus group of five teachers, one of whom had to leave early. Their experience ranged from 5 to 23 years, and their roles included math, science, physical education, music, band, humanities, and Indigenous studies.

The group provided insights into the school's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning and cultural inclusivity.

Analysis

We employed a systematic coding process for both principal interviews and focus group data, utilizing NVivo software for efficient data management. Each interview was transcribed, reviewed, and subjected to three cycles of coding: initial pre-coding to note significant elements, descriptive coding to assign specific codes, and a final cycle to categorize these codes into themes, reflecting patterns within the data (Merriam, 1998; Saldaña, 2016). A thematic chart was then developed to organize these themes, which were further refined and consolidated. To enhance the validity of these findings, we triangulated the interview data with research journal entries and analyzed documents provided by one principal to substantiate their claims made during interviews.

Findings

In this case study, we sought to answer the primary research question, "What are the leadership practices of middle school principals within schools with high collective efficacy (CTE)?" Through principal interviews, teacher focus groups, and document analysis, we identified several key practices that characterize leadership in high-CTE schools. Principals in these settings prioritized building teacher capacity, distributing leadership roles, engaging the school community, focusing on school improvement, and exhibiting a supportive leadership style that emphasizes relational trust and transparency. Their approach to leadership utilized a strategic use of collaborative school development planning processes to establish and achieve school improvement goals, ensuring alignment between district mandates and school priorities. Principals maintained a relentless focus on improving teaching practices, driven by a commitment to student learning and well-being. Their commitment was reflected in their deportment, which emphasized

visibility, trust-building, and a consistent alignment between words and actions. Together, these leadership practices created an environment where CTE naturally emerged as an outcome of effective leadership, contributing to the development and sustainability of collective efficacy within the school.

Building and Distributing Leadership Capacity

We found that principals in schools with high CTE prioritize building teacher capacity by aligning their efforts closely with the School Development Plan (SDP). The SDP served as a central tool in guiding the development and execution of strategies aimed at improving instructional practices. As Principal Robin explained,

> *The Look Fors were created by the staff… so if I walked in and I was looking*
>
> *specifically for word walls for the first part of the year... I would say, 'Well, I*
>
> *see you have a beautiful word wall. How are you using it in your practice?'*

This example illustrates how the SDP was not just an administrative exercise but a living part of the school's strategy to enhance teaching and learning.

To further support teacher development, principals structured Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to enhance collaboration among teachers, focusing on improving instructional practices in alignment with the SDP goals. A participant from Northern Creek Middle School shared, "It's been very impactful and supportive for my own practice... just the sharing of the resources and the reviews of what we have done," highlighting how these PLCs facilitated reflective practice and shared learning. Similarly, a participant from Ridgeside Middle School noted, "It's incredibly valuable to have a team of teachers that come together and just try to focus on how we can improve student well-being in the building," emphasizing the collaborative effort in professional development.

Principals were intentional in designing school structures that enabled and supported this collaboration. For instance, Principal Robin noted, "Creating those opportunities... has been a huge change in what people know about each other's practice," underscoring the deliberate efforts to foster an environment where teachers could collaborate effectively. At Hummingbird Middle School, a focus group participant emphasized the importance of common planning time, stating, "Having that built in has been huge... it brings forth all those informal things that we talked about," which allowed for organic, yet crucial, professional conversations that enriched teaching practices.

Staffing decisions were also strategic, aimed at creating effective teams and identifying the right leaders for key roles. Principal Aisling reflected on this process, saying, "With the right people together... they feed each other, and they're hungry to talk and have that time." This strategic placement of staff ensured that collaboration was not only encouraged but also productive, fostering a culture where professional growth was a shared priority. As a participant at Hummingbird Middle School noted, "Intentional team building created trust and allowed for better collaboration in classroom management, task design, and assessment." This statement was echoed by participants in the other two schools as well, emphasizing how strategic staffing leads to a more cohesive and effective educational environment to further support the schools' overall goals.

Leadership roles were distributed intentionally, with principals creating both formal and informal opportunities for teachers to lead. Principal Melville emphasized this by stating, "We knew that we needed to get the right people in the right seats on the bus." This was reinforced by focus group participants who noted that the principals were deliberate in identifying and appointing leaders who had the passion and skills needed to advance school-wide teaching practices. This

distributive approach fostered a culture where leadership was shared, allowing teachers to contribute their expertise to the overall development of teaching practices.

Principals also utilized a variety of strategies to develop the capacity of teacher leaders. This included mentoring, providing authentic leadership experiences, and exemplifying effective team development. Principal Melville highlighted the importance of "digging in with [their] team of teachers to help them do a better job," and illustrating new protocols to build confidence among learning leaders (LLs). This hands-on approach was complemented by a reciprocal mentoring process, where principals learned from their LLs, as Principal Aisling pointed out, "I check in with them regularly, and we learn from each other."

The effectiveness of these strategies was evident in the experiences shared by focus group participants. A participant from Hummingbird Middle School described leading the integration of disciplinary literacy into science instruction, stating, "I led this initiative by collaborating with colleagues from other subject areas, and it really expanded our collective understanding." Another participant from Northern Creek Middle School School emphasized the growth gained from attending jurisdictional meetings, which enhanced their capacity to support school-wide development processes. These experiences not only built leadership capacity but also increased the self-efficacy of LLs as they observed the positive impact of their leadership on teaching practices.

We found that principals built and distributed leadership capacity by aligning teacher development efforts with the SPD, fostering collaboration through PLCs, and making intentional staffing decisions to create effective teams. They provided both formal and informal leadership opportunities, empowering teachers and fostering a shared sense of responsibility for school improvement. Additionally, principals employed mentoring and reciprocal learning strategies to

develop teacher leaders, which enhanced their confidence and effectiveness. These actions created a school environment where collaboration, trust, and professional growth were prioritized, directly supporting the development and sustainability of CTE.

Engaging the School Community and Demonstrating Leadership

Principals in high CTE schools actively engaged the broader learning community, seeking feedback on school operations and decisions. For example, Principal Aisling emphasized the importance of reconnecting with families after the pandemic, organizing a welcome-back BBQ to build informal connections and a sense of belonging, stating, "It's important. We have not been together as a community in all this time." This event served as a bridge to rebuild relationships and trust within the school community, reflecting the principals' commitment to creating a welcoming environment.

Similarly, Principal Melville focused on enhancing communication and creating a welcoming environment to rebuild trust between the school and parents. They worked diligently to ensure every visitor and inquiry was acknowledged, with the aim of demonstrating that "they are cared for and that they are valued." Focus group participants highlighted Principal Melville's personal approach, noting, "They know every kid's name, their parents' names, and their life history... they just have a knack for connecting with people." This personal connection showed Principal Melville's commitment to building strong relationships within the school community.

In addition to community engagement, the three principals employed collaborative decision-making processes, which actively involved teachers in school-wide decisions. At Northern Creek Middle School School, focus group participants described the culture as "very collaborative. There is really a culture that welcomes questions." Focus group participants from Ridgeside Middle School School echoed this sentiment, stating, "There's room for questioning

and it's welcomed," which underscored the collaborative approach used by principals across various contexts, from leadership team decisions to whole-staff discussions.

Transparency in decision-making was another key aspect highlighted by participants. Participants from Northern Middle Creek School participant indicated they valued the openness, stating, "Full transparency, which I think is just so important when making decisions with your staff." This transparency helped to foster trust and understanding among teachers, making them more supportive of decisions even when they were challenging or required significant changes in practice.

However, we also found that principals were willing to make unilateral decisions when they believed student learning was at risk or when they had strong convictions that required challenging the status quo. For instance, Principal Melville implemented an "Away for the Day" cell phone policy without staff consultation based on research indicating that cell phones negatively impacted student learning and well-being. A participant from Ridgeside Middle School School noted, "It was something they truly believed in and said, 'This is what we are doing,'" demonstrating the principal's commitment to making unilateral decisions when they believed student learning was at risk.

Similarly, Principal Robin made a significant change in the instructional model for grade five students, despite initial resistance. The significant change involved transitioning from a departmentalized instructional model to a more interdisciplinary, homeroom-based model. This shift aimed to enhance student-teacher relationships and provide consistent support for younger students. Despite initial resistance, the change resulted in increased parental satisfaction, with 90% expressing a preference for the new approach.

They explained their rationale to staff, saying, "Let's give it a try... there's nothing that's set in stone, so let's be vulnerable." The change ultimately proved successful, with 90% of parents later expressing a preference for the new model, leading to continued implementation in grade six. Robin's willingness to challenge the status quo, even in the face of resistance, highlights the importance of leadership courage in driving school improvement.

We found that principals in high CTE schools engaged the school community and demonstrated leadership by fostering strong relationships with families and staff, prioritizing transparent and collaborative decision-making, and, when necessary, making unilateral decisions to ensure student learning was prioritized. They actively sought feedback, created welcoming environments, and rebuilt trust through personal connections and community events. Additionally, their transparent and inclusive approach to decision-making fostered trust among staff, while their willingness to challenge the status quo underscored their commitment to improving student outcomes. These actions collectively strengthened the school community and reinforced the principals' leadership roles.

Driving School Improvement

In high CTE schools, a collaborative school development planning process, involving teachers in setting and achieving goals, drove school improvement. The SDP process was deeply collaborative, with teachers playing a significant role in data analysis and goal setting. As Principal Robin described, "In June... we pull the data for them, so they don't have to go mining for it," allowing teachers to focus on interpreting the data and planning for the following year.

This process was mirrored in Principal Melville's approach, where the leadership team was engaged in interpreting data trends and writing the SDP, which included specific instructional actions, resources, and measures to assess progress. Teachers appreciated the clear targets and the

support provided by principals. Hummingbird Middle School focus group participants noted, "We develop our school development plan pretty collaboratively across the school... and then we used that PLC time to work together and implement that in the most effective way possible." This collaborative approach reinforced the ways in which the principals fostered a sense of shared commitment to achieving the schools' goals through structured and supportive practices.

The alignment of PLC work with SDP goals was consistently mentioned by focus group participants. Participants from Northern Creek Middle School shared, "I feel like the students are more confident with their strategies, with their reading comprehension. And the way that I'm teaching it, I've become more confident in that as well," reflecting the direct impact of the SDP on both teaching practices and student outcomes. Participants from the two other schools highlighted the flexibility within the instructional actions, noting that while teachers could tailor strategies to their students' needs, they were still accountable for meeting the school-wide goals.

Principals strategically staffed their schools by creating balanced teams and appointing teacher leaders aligned with school priorities. Principal Robin emphasized the importance of adding value, stating, "We have to do the school development plan... what's in it for staff and students, and how will people see the work we're doing as value added, not another thing to do." This approach ensured that mandates were integrated in a way that supported, rather than detracted from, the school's existing efforts to improve student learning.

At times, principals would delay the implementation of certain district mandates if they did not immediately align with schools' priorities. As Principal Aisling admitted, "I drag my feet on certain initiatives, taking the time to see how these mandates could be valuable within our context." This careful consideration and strategic pacing ensured that teachers were not overwhelmed and that mandates were only implemented when they could genuinely support the schools' goals.

Overall, principals in this study were deliberate in managing district mandates, ensuring that they did not overwhelm teachers or detract from the core work of teaching and learning. They sought to find meaningful purposes for mandates within their school contexts, making them more easily adoptable by staff. Of all district mandates, the SDP was the most naturally integrated and valued, seen not as an extra task but as a crucial tool for improving student learning through instructional practices.

We found that principals in high CTE schools drove school improvement by actively engaging teachers in a collaborative school development planning (SDP) process. This process involved teachers in data analysis, goal setting, and the creation of specific instructional actions. Principals like Robin and Melville ensured that the SDP was not just an administrative task but a living document that guided instructional practices and student outcomes. Focus group participants from various schools highlighted the alignment of PLC work with SDP goals, which fostered a shared commitment to achieving school-wide objectives. Additionally, principals were strategic in staffing and managing district mandates, ensuring that these aligned with school priorities and did not overwhelm teachers. This deliberate and thoughtful approach to school improvement reinforced the principals' leadership roles and supported the overall goal of enhancing student learning.

Principal Deportment

The deportment of principals—how they carried themselves and embodied their leadership roles—was central to creating an environment where student learning and teacher development were prioritized. Principals consistently modeled their core beliefs and values through their actions, setting a tone that emphasized the importance of student well-being and learning. Principal Robin, for instance, stated, "Everything I do… how I behave, what I say, what I do, how I work

with kids... demonstrated my beliefs and values." This alignment between words and actions not only communicated expectations to staff but also reinforced the principals' commitment to their educational mission. By being visible, engaged, and consistently upholding their values, these principals fostered a school culture where their priorities were clear, and their leadership was respected and trusted by both staff and students.

Moreover, the principal's approach to communication and relationships played a significant role in building trust and creating a supportive environment for both teachers and students. They were deeply committed to supporting their teachers, recognizing the importance of personal interactions in fostering a positive school climate. For example, Principal Melville emphasized, "My job really has been to say yes to things... and supporting the things I can," showing a genuine commitment to valuing teacher input and supporting their professional growth. Similarly, Principal Aisling highlighted the need to be "in tune with their energy" throughout the year, understanding the balance teachers needed between professional responsibilities and personal well-being. This supportive approach, coupled with their visible presence and engagement with the school community, helped build a foundation of mutual trust and respect, enabling a school culture where CTE could thrive and where both teachers and students felt valued and supported.

We found that principals in high CTE schools fostered a positive school climate by consistently aligning their actions with their core beliefs and values, thereby creating an environment where student learning and teacher development were prioritized. Through visible and engaged leadership, principals like Principal Robin, Principal Melville, and Principal Aisling built trust and respect among staff and students. Their commitment to supporting teachers, understanding their needs, and maintaining a balanced school environment reinforced the

importance of CTE. This approach not only strengthened the overall school culture but also ensured that both teachers and students felt valued and supported.

Summary of Findings

The findings highlight the key actions middle school principals in high-CTE schools take to provide supportive leadership, establish goal consensus, empower teachers, support cohesive teacher knowledge, and promote reflective instructional practices. Principals demonstrated supportive leadership by being visible, approachable, and actively involved in daily school activities. They fostered trust through transparent communication, genuinely cared about their staff and students, and encouraged risk-taking and innovation. Through collaborative processes like the School Development Plan (SDP), principals involved teachers in setting school improvement goals, leading to a shared sense of purpose and commitment. This involvement increased teacher investment and ownership, which was critical to achieving their SDP goals. The three principals empowered teachers by distributing leadership roles, involving them in decision-making processes, and providing opportunities for professional growth. They created leadership roles that aligned with teachers' strengths and school priorities, fostering a sense of agency and efficacy among teachers. Furthermore, the principals supported cohesive teacher knowledge through structured collaboration, such as PLCs, creating environments where teachers could share best practices and reflect on their instructional strategies. Reflective practices were embedded in the school culture, driven by the SDP and PLCs, ensuring continuous improvement in instructional practices. The leadership practices and actions of middle school principals in schools with high CTE were centred on creating an environment that supported teacher collaboration, empowered educators, and prioritized student learning, all of which contributed to the development and sustainability of collective efficacy.

Discussion

Building teacher capacity emerged as a critical theme, with principals identifying themselves as instructional leaders focused on ensuring quality learning through teacher development. This emphasis on teacher capacity aligns with extensive educational leadership research, which suggests that developing teachers' professional skills significantly impacts student learning and achievement (Day et al., 2011; Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Gray, 2018). Principals leveraged the SDP as a strategic tool to establish improvement goals and align PLCs with these objectives. The PLCs were instrumental in fostering collaborative learning and reflective practices, which are critical for CTE (Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo, 2021; Timperley, 2015).

Collaboration played a key role in developing teacher capacity, as principals intentionally designed school structures, including PLCs, to support this effort. This finding is consistent with Leithwood et al. (2020). These structures facilitated reflective professional learning, common task design, and collaborative problem-solving, aligning with the principles of collaborative professionalism as described by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018). The strategic design of meeting schedules and timetables maximized time for collaboration, providing embedded professional learning opportunities crucial for enhancing instructional practices and enabling CTE as noted by Donohoo et al. (2020) and Leithwood et al. (2020).

In addition to collaboration, principals were strategic in staffing, creating balanced teams and appointing teacher leaders aligned with school priorities. This strategic staffing fostered a collaborative culture and supported teacher professional growth, consistent with research on effective school leadership (Day et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020). By deeply understanding their teachers' skills and aspirations, principals could assign roles that maximized instructional

improvement and leadership development, further enabling the conditions for CTE. Our study highlights the specific practices of principals in high CTE schools to strategically staff and build leadership capacity, suggesting areas for further research on the impact of these practices on teacher development and student success (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Donohoo & Velasco, 2016).

We found that principals distributed and developed leadership among staff through specific practices. They created school-based leadership frameworks that shared responsibilities and employed strategies to build the capacity of teacher leaders. These practices align with existing research indicating that distributed leadership, which values contributions from various formal and informal leaders, supports CTE by flattening the leadership hierarchy and empowering teachers (Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo, 2021; Day et al., 2011; Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Leadership teams composed of teacher leaders were instrumental in guiding school improvement efforts and supporting instructional practices, reflecting the idea that leadership is effectively "stretched over people" (Diamond & Spillane, 2016).

Distributed leadership frameworks involved teacher leaders in school-wide decision-making and empowered them with authority in their leadership areas, fostering a sense of efficacy and trust (Seashore Louis et al., 2010; Smylie et al., 2007). Trust emerged as a crucial component in the success of these leadership frameworks, with principals expressing deep respect for their leadership teams, reinforcing the relationship between distributed leadership and trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). We suggest that the practices employed by principals in distributing and sharing leadership responsibilities contribute significantly to the high levels of CTE observed in the schools that participated in this study.

In developing leadership capacity, principals invested considerable effort in supporting teacher leaders through coaching, mentoring, and providing authentic leadership experiences.

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These actions extended opportunities for informal leadership, enabling teachers to engage in meaningful school operations, which empowered them and supported cohesive teacher knowledge (Leithwood et al., 2003; Arzonetti Hite & Donohoo, 2021). Principals also fostered a culture of risk-taking by encouraging teachers to lead initiatives they felt capable of, recognizing that growth often comes from stepping outside one's comfort zone (Bandura, 1998). This culture of growth and improvement was central to developing leadership capacity, ultimately contributing to the schools' overall CTE.

Principals valued the engagement of the broader learning community and actively sought feedback from parents and other stakeholders to inform school decisions. They recognized the importance of a strong home-school connection for student success, aligning with research that emphasizes parental involvement as critical to educational outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Leithwood et al., 2010, 2020). Principals implemented practices that encouraged parental involvement, designed inclusive engagement opportunities, and adjusted school structures to accommodate families' needs, demonstrating a commitment to fostering a welcoming and supportive school environment.

In decision-making processes, principals preferred collaborative approaches, involving teachers. This collaborative approach involved actively seeking their feedback. This aligns with distributed leadership models, where decision-making is shared among staff, empowering teachers and fostering a collective responsibility for student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). We found that when teachers were involved in setting school improvement goals, as in the SDP process, they felt a greater sense of agency and ownership over their professional growth, contributing to higher levels of CTE which is also noted by Donohoo (2017). Furthermore, principals maintained an

"open-door" policy, encouraging ongoing dialogue and feedback, which built relational trust and reduced resistance to change (Robinson, 2011).

While collaborative decision-making was the norm, principals were also willing to make unilateral decisions when they believed student learning or well-being was at risk, challenging the status quo when necessary. This practice, though less discussed in the literature, suggests that in schools with high CTE, principals may sometimes act independently to protect student interests. This finding indicates that principals in high CTE schools find a balance between collaboration and decisive leadership. Our finding contributes to the understanding of when and why principals might choose unilateral action, offering new insights into leadership practices in high CTE schools.

Principals' approaches to school improvement, involving teachers in the process, were important in identifying principals' practices and actions in high CTE schools. The findings revealed that principals used collaborative SDP processes to achieve school improvement goals, aligning with extensive literature that emphasizes the importance of setting direction and goals as a primary dimension of school leadership (Day et al., 2011; Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). The SDP process was identified as the primary vehicle for driving school improvement through supporting teacher professional learning, with both principals and teachers collectively determining school improvement goals and designing action plans. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of ownership among teachers, enhancing their commitment to achieving the goals and increasing CTE.

PLCs were integral to the SDP process, serving as platforms for instructional growth where teachers engaged in reflective practices, monitored student progress, and aligned instructional strategies. The consistent focus on the SDP process as the driver of school improvement underscored its importance in maintaining a steadfast commitment to identified priorities and goals

(Leithwood et al., 2020b; Donohoo, 2017). Teachers' engagement in the SDP process not only enhanced their professional development but also allowed them to directly contribute to student learning, thereby increasing their sense of efficacy and reinforcing CTE (Goddard et al., 2004).

The deportment of principals, or their way of being within their leadership roles, emerged as a critical factor in the success of their leadership and the creation of a supportive school environment. The study found that principals in schools with high CTE prioritized people and student learning, supported teacher development, and created conditions for a safe and caring learning environment. This was achieved through practices such as sharing and enacting beliefs, being visible within the school, demonstrating vulnerability, and building trust. Aspects of deportment are noted by Day et al. (2011) and Robinson (2011). The deportment of principals was not just about their actions but the way they carried out these actions, which communicated their values and priorities, thereby fostering a culture of trust and mutual respect.

Principals communicated their priorities through their everyday interactions, aligning their words with their actions, which reinforced their credibility and established clear expectations for teachers. The findings highlighted that when principals "walked the talk," participating in the daily life of the school, they not only emulated the expected behaviours but also validated their leadership through their visible and active presence (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020). This deep involvement went beyond mere visibility, as principals engaged directly in classroom activities, providing support and reassurance, which contributed to a positive school climate and a sense of security among staff and students.

In fostering a culture of risk-taking and improvement, principals demonstrated vulnerability and encouraged teachers to take risks without fear of repercussions. This approach, supported by Day et al. (2011), promoted a culture of growth and innovation, essential for

developing CTE. We also found that trust was a cornerstone of this culture, with principals fostering relational trust through transparent decision-making processes and by showing genuine care for their staff and students. This trust was crucial in enabling collaborative environments where teachers felt valued and supported, aligning with the findings of Bryk and Schneider (2003) on the importance of relational trust in school settings.

To conclude our discussion, we highlight the pivotal role that school principals play in shaping and sustaining CTE through their leadership practices and, crucially, through their deportment. While existing research has extensively documented the importance of distributed leadership, collaborative processes, and strategic planning in fostering a positive school environment, findings from this study contribute a new dimension by emphasizing the significance of deportment to how these leadership practices are enacted.

The finding that stands out as the most significant contribution to knowledge is the critical role of principal deportment. Findings from this study reveal that the way principals carry out their leadership duties—how they embody their values, build relational trust, and maintain visibility and vulnerability—profoundly impacts both teacher efficacy and the overall school climate. The emphasis on deportment provides a deeper understanding of the interpersonal dynamics at play in effective school leadership, suggesting that the *how* of leadership is as crucial as the *what*.

This insight has important implications for the development of school leaders, highlighting the need for professional development programs that focus not only on the acquisition of leadership skills but also on the cultivation of relational and reflective practices. By prioritizing these aspects of leadership, schools can create environments where collective efficacy thrives, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and more resilient educational communities.

Conclusion

In this study, we provided evidence that principals' leadership actions and practices in schools with high CTE inherently support the enabling conditions for CTE, even if they did not explicitly intend to cultivate it. Rather, their efforts appeared primarily directed at enhancing student learning through improved teaching practices. This finding aligns with Hoogsteen's (2021) assertion that CTE is often a byproduct of general leadership efforts rather than a deliberate focus of school leadership.

A key aspect of the principals' leadership that emerged from this study is their deportment—the way they embodied their leadership roles and communicated their values through actions. This deportment was central to creating an environment that prioritized student learning, supported teacher development, and fostered relational trust within the school community. The alignment between their words and actions, their visibility, and their genuine care for staff and students all contributed significantly to the overall efficacy of the school environment.

In the study, we illuminated how school leadership dimensions are operationalized through specific practices, suggesting that while CTE can indeed result from effective leadership, it can also serve as a guiding construct if intentionally prioritized. The alignment of the findings with the enabling conditions for CTE identified by Arzonetti Hite and Donohoo (2021) and Donohoo et al. (2020) highlights the potential for principals to purposefully leverage these conditions to enhance student learning by improving teaching practices.

In conclusion, CTE can function both as an outcome of effective leadership practices and as a construct that can guide leadership when intentionally cultivated. The significance of principal deportment in fostering an environment conducive to CTE and overall school success underscores the importance of further research into the intentionality behind leadership actions and the intricate

relationship between CTE and student achievement. Understanding these dynamics more deeply could offer valuable insights for developing leadership practices that both directly and indirectly bolster CTE, ultimately leading to stronger educational outcomes.

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Biographies

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Dr. Nancy Lisi is a principal with the Calgary Board of Education in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She has 27 years of experience in education, including 17 in administrative roles. She has served as principal in a variety of school settings at the middle, junior, and senior levels, and has also held leadership roles at the system level. Dr. Lisi holds an EdD in Educational Leadership from the University of Calgary, where her research focused on the leadership practices of middle school principals that foster collective teacher efficacy (CTE). Her research highlights CTE as a key driver of student success, emphasizing the role of leadership in supporting teachers to build efficacy both individually and collectively. Additionally, Nancy is a sessional instructor at the University of Calgary, where she teaches courses graduate courses on educational leadership and leading professional learning, areas closely aligned with her research on CTE. Her scholarly focus extends to identifying effective leadership practices that support teachers amid increasing classroom demands. Her work is grounded in the belief that empowering teachers to thrive is central to improving student achievement and that effective leadership is essential to both student success and the broader success of school communities.

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