Fall 2009

Theories of Practice: Understanding the Practice of Educational Leadership

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Recommended Citation
Houchens, G. W., & Keedy, J. L. (2009). Theories of practice: Understanding the practice of educational leadership. Journal of Thought 44, 49-61.

Theories of Practice:
Understanding the Practice of Educational Leadership

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Introduction

Argyris and Schön (1974) first articulated the concept of *theories of practice*, and elements of the concept have become standard vocabulary in literature on organizational learning. Relatively few empirical studies, however, have explored the legitimacy of this concept for understanding how educators approach problems in their professional practice (Lipshitz, 2000). As accountability pressures for school improvement mount, the imperative for understanding effective school leadership behaviors makes the concept of theories of practice more appealing. The purpose of this article is to examine the structure of theories of practice as understood by Argyris and Schön and the implications for understanding the cognitive processes and behaviors that constitute effective instructional leadership in schools. The authors discuss a recent case study of successful school principals that mapped the principals' theories of practice of instructional leadership. The study illustrates the usefulness of the theory of practice framework for both research and improving professional practice (Houchens, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

Argyris and Schön's book, *Theories in Practice* (1974), explored the concept of organizational learning by articulating a rather elaborate framework that explained the cognitive structure and processes of problem solving that all people—not just professional practitioners— engage

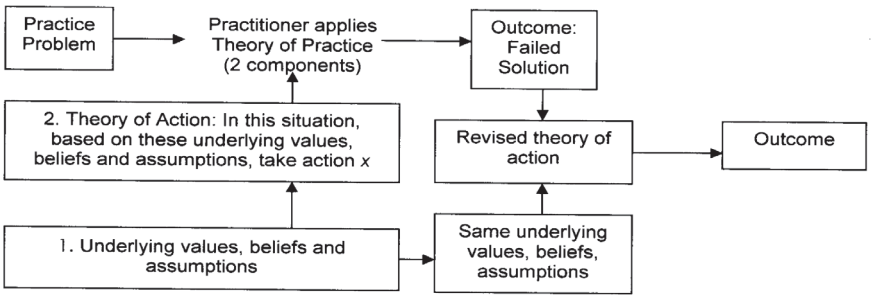
in. According to Argyris and Schön, *theories* are "vehicles for explanation, prediction, or control" (p. 5). All humans, whether they are conscious of it or not, operate according to thousands of theories to explain their experience, predict future events, and control outcomes in various situations. All theories are situational, and based on an underlying set of values, beliefs and assumptions that frame an individual's perception of the world, which include assumptions about desirable outcomes for a variety of situations. Theories appear in an "if . . . then" format: if the individual faces a particular situation, then based on the individual's core assumptions about this situation, the individual should take a particular action to either explain, predict or control the situation or outcome. Argyris and Schön called this if-then formulation a *theory of action*. "A full schema of a theory of action, then, would be as follows: in situation *S*, if you want to achieve consequence *C*, under assumptions *a1 . . . an*, do *A*" (p. 6).

Argyris and Schön went on to define *theories of practice* as "special cases" of theories of action that are rooted in problems arising in a professional's specific work context. Theories of practice describe routines, procedures and specific practices for dealing with problems common to the practice environment. "A practice is a sequence of actions undertaken by a person to serve others, who are considered clients. Each action in the sequence of actions repeats some aspect of other actions in the sequence, but each action is in some way unique. In medicine, for example, a typical sequence would be a diagnostic work-up, treatment of acute illness, a well-baby visit, chronic care, and consultation" (p. 6). A theory of practice consists of a set of interrelated theories of action that specify for the situations of practice the actions that will, based on relevant assumptions, yield intended consequences.

In addition to the basic theory of practice framework, Argyris and Schön identified models of how effective and ineffective learning takes place within individuals and groups. Because theories in use are (a) so deeply entrenched in the individual psyche, (b) usually subconscious to the individual, and (c) often at odds with espoused theories of action (how we say we behave to others or how we rationalize our behavior to others), they deeply affect the way individuals learn. Argyris and Schön (1978) described the typical, reflexive way we learn as *single-loop learning*, in which the individual sees that his or her behavior has not successfully resolved a problem. In single-loop learning, the individual then adjusts the action strategy to achieve a different outcome without ever questioning the underlying assumptions about the situation (see Figure 1).

In *double-loop learning*, on the other hand, the failure of a particular action to achieve the desired result will lead not only to a re-evaluation of the action strategy itself, but also the values, principles and assumptions

Figure 1.
Single-loop learning, reflecting a revised theory of action based on the original set of underlying values, beliefs and assumptions.

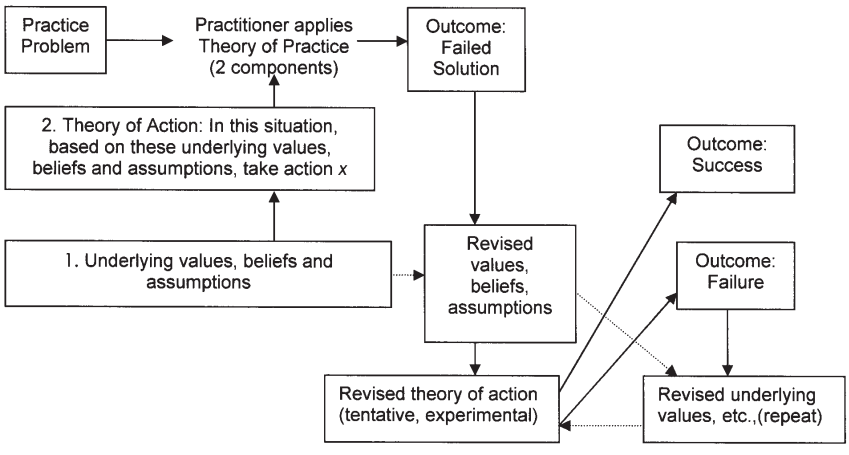


the person possesses that affect the way action strategies are developed in the first place. They found double-loop learning to be superior in that it allows far more creativity and flexibility in developing new strategies to address the ever-changing problems presented by constantly-shifting contexts and circumstances (see Figure 2).

Using Theories of Practice to Study School Leadership

Argyris and Schön's (1974, 1978) framework for theories of practice offers an intriguing approach for understanding the critically important work of school principals in this era of government-mandated school

Figure 2.
Double-loop learning, where a new theory of action is developed based a revised set of values, beliefs and assumptions (the Reflective Practitioner).

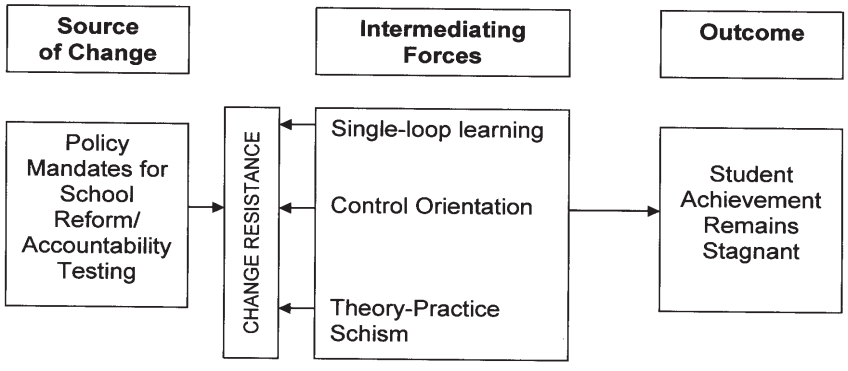


reform. Thus far, state and federal mega-policy efforts to improve schools have resulted in limited impact on student achievement (Howard, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). Many of these mega-policy reforms have involved both standardization of curriculum, instruction and assessment, but also decentralization of power and decision-making authority. Even these decentralizing efforts, such as the implementation of Site-Based Decision-Making Councils, have done little to change the overall business of schools and have led to few improvements in student learning (Björk & Keedy, 2002; Din, 1997; Klecker, Austin, & Burns, 1999; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998).

The explanation for this change-resistance of schools also points the way to some possible solutions. The historic schism between theory and practice on the part of professional educators has left relationships among teachers marked by isolation, independence, mistrust and competition (Keedy, 2005; Keedy & Achilles, 1997). Principals have been victim of this gap between theory and practice as players in the culture of isolation, and their work is characterized primarily by a focus on control of the school (Cusick, 1992). It is no wonder, under these circumstances, that schools remain resistant to change (see Figure 3).

It is incumbent upon the principal, however, to use his or her personal and positional power to alter norms of behavior and relationships within schools to address these issues. Research indicates that principals can indeed have a positive if indirect effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003), and these effects are mediated through the principal's ability to shape relationships among school staff and the

Figure 3.
How policy mandates for school reform have failed to lead to higher levels of student achievement.



attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of teachers (Anderson, 2004; Basom & Frase, 2004; Blase & Blase, 1999; Short, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Keedy & Simpson, 2001; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). By fostering relationships of caring, trust, collaboration, experimentation, inquiry and risk-taking, schools can potentially become centers of inquiry, rather than targets of change, and have far greater capacity for increasing student achievement (Sirotnik, 1989).

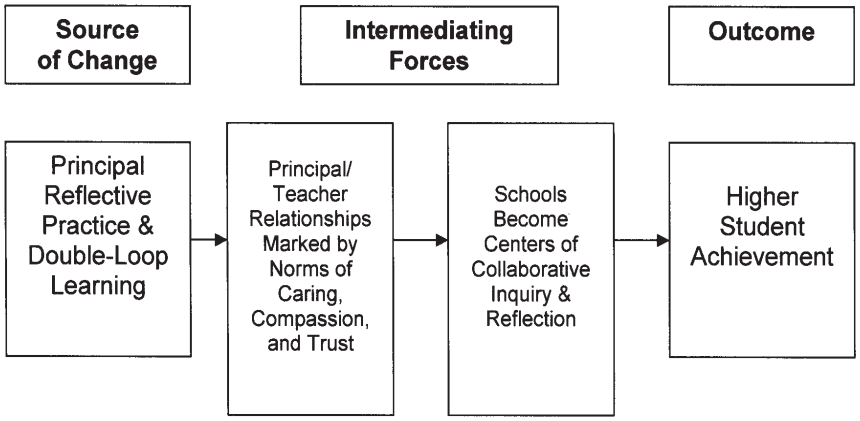
Inspired by Argyris and Schön (1974), Keedy and Achilles (1997) and Keedy (2005) suggested principal-developed theories of practice as a means of creating new norms of behavior within schools. Initial empirical studies have bolstered Argyris and Schön's framework for theories of practice, and have promise for improving the effectiveness of principals (Erlandson, 1994; Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998; Kirby & Teddlie, 1989; Kirby & Paradise, 1992; Polite, 2000; Tsangaridou & O'Sullivan, 2003). Principals ostensibly operate according to a wide variety of theories of practice in their work, including such common issues as scheduling, staffing, budgets and financing and facilities operations. It is in the role of instructional leader that principals have the greatest impact on student achievement, mediated through their affective influence on teachers (Blase & Blase, 1999).

Principal-developed theories of practice for instructional leadership would be one initial step toward the kind of methodology that Sirotnik (1989) suggested can increase the change-capacity of schools and heal the gap between theory/research and the actual work life of educators. Spillane and Thompson (1997) conducted research on a number of school districts engaged in adopting new instructional strategies and found that the most important variable on the reform effort's success was the willingness of school leaders to support and be actively involved in the changes. Especially important was leader support for an environment of trust and collaboration that nurtures the process of teacher learning itself:

> That is, the leaders do not learn everything they need to know and then teach their colleagues. In fact, much of the leaders' learning seems to occur in the context of their efforts to help others learn. (Spillane & Thompson, 1997, p. 199)

If school principals and district administrators have the greatest role to play in moving schools to become centers of inquiry, they must themselves be willing to engage in self-reflection. Principals might use theories of practice to unearth the underlying values that influence their decisions as leaders and educators, and experiment with new norms and assumptions in their schools and districts, testing these new theories of action (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.
How principal reflective practice and double-loop learning may contribute to higher levels of student achievement.



This process does not happen in a vacuum, but must, by definition, be carried out in a group context:

> The [leader] should expose his [sic] goal for himself and the participants [his or her co-workers] to design environments that produce learning of the model-II concepts and behavior and encourage continual confrontation of the model—II concepts. (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 111)

Continual confrontation is risky and challenging but ultimately transformative. As the entire work community becomes involved in this new approach to learning, relationships begin to change. Keedy and Achilles (1997) argued that this shift toward a more collaborative, power-sharing model of inquiry and discovery was the best measure for whether normative thinking is actually changing in the school.

> New assumptions about how their organizations should work grounds a staff's shared meanings about revitalized student-teacher-principal relationships (normative consensus)…In sum, teachers and principals theorize that taking actions through changing norms maximizes a reasonable likelihood of improving school relationships through changing the norms. (Keedy & Achilles, 1997, p. 8)

Spillane and Thompson's study (1997) confirmed that effective leadership for building change capacity emerged from work relationships marked by collaboration and especially by trust:

> Trust was crucial because it facilitated conversations about instructional reform. Trust was also essential for genuine collaboration among educa-

> tors, enabling them to work together to develop a shared understanding of the reforms. Moreover, trust created an environment in which local educators were comfortable discussing their understandings of and reservations about new instructional approaches, conversations that were essential for reconstructive learning. (Spillane & Thompson, 1997, p. 195)

Leaders may then begin to measure the impact of their theories of practice, at least in part, by their impact on student achievement, and especially on the power relationships among teachers, students, parents and their administrators. Such a change in relationships is fundamental to Sirotnik's (1989) idea of schools as the centers of change/centers of inquiry, and by Keedy and Achilles's (1997) estimation, the best measure of a genuine shift in normative thinking among educators.

Principal Theories of Practice: An Example

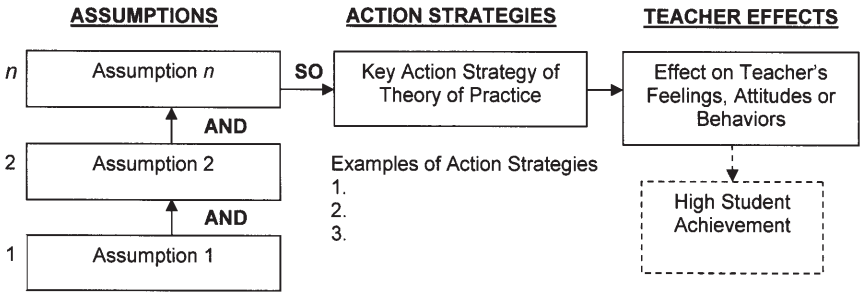
A recent doctoral dissertation (Houchens, 2008) used Argyris and Schön's theory of practice framework (1974) to explore the theories of practice for instructional leadership of four successful Kentucky school principals. The multi-case study used a naturalistic design based on interviews with principals and teachers, observations, and a principal self-reflective written exercise (Ruff & Shoho, 2005). Case study participants were chosen based on a nomination process and a series of screening interviews conducted by the researcher. The state of Kentucky was an early pioneer in comprehensive school reform efforts, and its criterion-based standardized testing system measures student progress toward proficiency in a wide variety of curricular standards. The participant principals had occupied their current positions for at least five years and had presided over at least four years of steady academic improvements as measured by the state testing system.

School principals ostensibly utilize a wide variety of theories of practice in their work, but Houchens (2008) chose to focus specifically on the principals' theories of practice of instructional leadership because it is within this capacity that principals directly and indirectly affect student achievement. DeBevoise (1982) offered an early definition of instructional leadership as "those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to promote growth in student learning" (p. 14). A wide variety of behaviors fall within this definition, and Cuban (1984) acknowledged the difficulty in identifying specific instructional leadership behaviors as opposed to non-instructional behaviors on the part of principals. Wildy and Dimmock (1993) clarified the definition of instructional leadership to six specific sets of principal activities:

(a) defining the purpose of schooling; (b) setting school-wide goals, (c) providing the resources needed for learning to occur, (d) supervising and evaluating teachers, (e) coordinating staff development, and (f) creating collegial relationships with and among teachers. Blase and Blase (1998) identified a shift in thinking about instructional leadership over the last few decades from one of instructional supervision, which implied more autocratic, top-down approaches to decision-making, to more open and collaborative approaches which promoted self-reflection and a desire for professional growth on the part of teachers. Based on these descriptions of instructional leadership, Houchens defined instructional leadership as principal behaviors which were meant to promote higher levels of student achievement through the principal's interactions with teachers.

Based on Keedy and Achilles's argument (1997) that principal theories of practice have their greatest impact in terms of their influence on the relationships among teachers, Houchens (2008) connected the cognitive maps of principal instructional leadership theories of practice to specific effects on teacher attitudes and behavior. Houchens used a visual model to map the underlying principal assumptions, specific theories of action, and teacher effects (Figure 5). Finally, Houchens investigated whether participant principals engaged in double-loop learning or reflective practice, which would be important if the theory of practice framework has potential for healing the historical schism between theory and practice in the work of educators, as Keedy (2005) suggested.

Figure 5.
Visual representation for the presentation of each principal theory of practice, including the principal's core assumptions about instructional leadership, and the action strategies that logically emerge from those assumptions, and impacts on teacher attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. A tacit assumption of all instructional leadership theories of practice is that these action strategies will indirectly result in higher student achievement, though this link is not explored in the Houchens study (indicated by dashed lines in the figure).



While this present article will not attempt to report the complete outcome of Houchens' study, results do suggest the theory of practice framework holds promise for providing a more comprehensive understanding of school leadership behaviors.

Eight commonalities emerged as theories of practice or were embedded as assumptions or action strategies within a theory of practice for all four principals. Inviting teacher input was a key dimension of instructional leadership, making it the most widely used theory of practice. Based on assumptions that the challenges of increasing student achievement were too complex for the principal alone to make all instructional decisions, the participants actively solicited teacher feedback and invited teachers to participate in school governance. The principals also understood that inviting teacher input played a utilitarian role in promoting higher levels of teacher motivation and job satisfaction. Other key principal instructional leadership theories of practice included nurturing positive personal relationships with staff, promoting on-going professional learning, and providing feedback.

Houchens (2008) found the principals' theories of practice led to eight effects on teachers. Many of these effects were common to three or more of the principals, and sometimes corresponded with multiple theories of action. The most consistent effect reported by teachers in all four schools was a personal sense of responsibility for student learning outcomes. Other key effects on teachers included feeling valued and affirmed as professionals and persons, a strong sense of identification with their individual school, and confidence that their opinions within the school are valued.

Houchens's (2008) results are consistent with previous research indicating effective principals influence student achievement by their impact on school culture and climate variables (Heck, 1993; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995; Snyder & Ebmeir, 1993; Witziers, et al., 2003). The study participants focused their instructional leadership efforts on productive interactions with teachers. Their theories of practice featured action strategies that paralleled behaviors proven in earlier literature to impact teachers in positive ways (Blase & Blase, 1994, 1999; Blase & Kirby, 2000; Blase, Blase, Anderson, & Dungan, 1995; Freidkin & Slater, 1994; Short, 1994). Houchens shed new light on effective principal behavior, however, by using the theory of practice framework, which identifies not only actions but also the underlying assumptions that shape those actions and their intended effects. By exploring principal assumptions as well as behaviors, the theory of practice framework provides a richer insight into effective school leadership practice.

Keedy (2005) argued that theories of practice could be used to enhance principal effectiveness by providing a method of self-reflection that bridged the traditional theory-practice schism in education. Despite the promising results of Houchens's study (2008) for examining school leadership behaviors, data did not reveal strong examples of principal self-reflection. While there were many examples of principals altering their action strategies to achieve different outcomes (the more common "single-loop learning"), study participants struggled to identify instances in which they had actively questioned their own underlying assumptions, or experimented with new action strategies based on revised assumptions. There may be abundant explanations for this lack of reflection, including principals' focus on managerial (rather than instructional) issues of school leadership, the test-driven nature of school accountability which may limit the scope of professional problem-solving, and the nature and culture of schools themselves, which remain largely devoid of collective inquiry and professional dialogue. At any rate, Houchens's study (2008) did not investigate the causes or contributing factors for the lack of principal self-reflection, so at this point it can simply be concluded that there was little evidence for this behavior among study participants. The theory of practice framework upon which Houchens's study was built nevertheless provides a solid starting point for future studies of principal leadership that might further explore these dimensions.

Conclusion

As school accountability pressures mount, understanding effective school leadership—both as a cognitive and behavioral phenomenon—becomes increasingly important. Argyris and Schön's theory of practice framework provides a rich structure for understanding school leadership because it uncovers the underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape and explain leadership behaviors. A new stream of research literature may yet emerge that extends the study of instructional leadership beyond its cognitive structure and effects and into the realm of refinement and improvement of effective practices based on intentional self-reflection and analysis of critical assumptions of school leadership.

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