

# CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

**W**hat does it take to create the conditions required to provide high-quality instruction every day to every student in our nation's classrooms? These conditions include knowing the strengths, interests, and needs of each student, having strong subject-area content knowledge, and knowing how to teach that content to individual students so they learn important concepts and disciplinary skills. They also include having the requisite instructional materials to support teaching and learning, knowing how to use those materials effectively, and having a workplace culture where educators are supported and expected to learn with and from each other so that they make sure all students learn to a high standard. I call this constellation of conditions *instructional capacity*. Exploring how to build such instructional capacity within a teacher team, among a school faculty, and within a school district is the subject of this book. Specifically, this book examines how to create the conditions for learning among three different groups of educators: teachers in schools, principals within a district, and a team of district administrators responsible for a group of schools.

## **PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**

The purpose of this book is to develop our conceptual and practical understanding of how to create the conditions for adult learning in schools

and districts so that as educators we can do a better job of providing meaningful learning opportunities for all of our students. Many scholars have examined specific conditions that are needed to improve student learning. Some have focused on teachers and the qualities of excellent teaching; others have studied the role of the principal and the culture of the school; and still others have examined the role of the district office. Some research has called attention to the curriculum or to professional development; other studies have focused on professional community or the data-use practices of educators.

Each of these aspects of the educational milieu, as well as many others, contributes to creating conditions that are conducive to learning in schools. However, even though quite a bit has been written about what conditions are necessary for continuous instructional improvement, relatively little has been written about *how* to develop these conditions. One reason may be that the work entailed—such as creating organizational routines that help educators to collectively examine and adjust their practice—is complicated, messy, and not well understood. A contributing factor is the variability among districts and schools and the teams that work inside them. Because the workplace context affects and interacts with any change that is introduced into it—and no two educational settings are quite the same—there is no such thing as a foolproof recipe or prescribed steps for creating conditions that can ensure learning will occur.

One more complication is the inevitable interplay among various elements (i.e., teachers, administrators, students, curriculum, school culture, assessment practices, opportunities for collaboration, district expectations, and so on) that occurs when a change is introduced to a setting. Furthermore, the interplay may be hidden from view. Understanding the concept of instructional capacity can help elucidate this interplay and reveal the particular elements in the setting that are contributing to (or hindering) learning. Because these various elements are also often mutually influencing, it is difficult to know which action(s) to take, when, and under what conditions, as well as how to assess the effects of the actions taken. Given the complexity of creating the conditions for learning, I begin by offering a set of ideas and organizing principles about how to

proceed. These ideas are linked together in a conceptual framework I call the instructional capacity building (ICB) framework.

## **FRAMING A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT HOW TO CREATE THESE CONDITIONS**

First, a theory about the way a complex phenomenon works can be helpful. As Kurt Lewin famously remarked, “Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory.”<sup>1</sup> I offer how to build instructional capacity as one such practical theory. This theory specifies what instructional capacity is and defines four types of instructional resources. As a concept, instructional capacity can be understood in terms of the instructional resources that are either available or can be generated in a particular context to achieve a particular learning goal as well as the knowledge needed to use these resources purposefully. Thus, instructional capacity is specific to each situation. The explication of instructional capacity, which I argue is a particular type of capacity, is useful since calls for “more capacity” have become commonplace in educational settings without really defining what this means. For instance, policy makers often bandy about the terms *capacity* and *capacity-building efforts* without precisely naming what is meant by capacity.

In addition to defining instructional capacity, this theory provides both a conceptual and a practical way to think about how to improve teaching and learning within schools, including which context features to pay attention to. The concepts that explain how instructional capacity is created provide us with handles to help us disentangle some of the complexity that exists in the nested learning environments in our schools and districts. The theory also describes in concrete terms what leaders can do to grow this capacity in the workplace.

## **HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED**

This book has two main parts. The first (chapters 1 and 2) offers a conceptual discussion of instructional capacity and introduces the ICB framework, which provides a way to think about how to build this capacity. Chapter 1 introduces the concepts of instructional capacity and

instructional resources. I define four types of instructional resources—instructional knowledge, instructional technology, instructional relationships, and organizational structures—and explain how each type is an asset for teaching and learning. I then discuss how the process by which instructional resources get identified and used in a particular context can promote or constrain the growth of instructional capacity. Chapter 2 describes how instructional resources get used in specific settings and to what effect. Here I also explain how using specific resources for a particular purpose can begin to generate additional instructional resources.

Part 2 (chapters 3–7) provides a close-up look at practice, using the ideas from the ICB framework to study several real-life examples of how educators try to create the conditions for learning in their workplace. Each chapter examines the use of instructional resources at a different level of the system and considers the various actions and practices that affect the growth of instructional capacity.

Chapter 3 describes the school-based conditions that affect whether teachers will use new instructional methods and tools in their teaching when provided with these tools. It also introduces the use of a handy conceptual tool that defines resource use along a spectrum. The specific examples of teachers, schools, and professional development programs described in chapters 3 and 4 are taken from a study I conducted to understand the conditions that enable professional development resources to get used by teachers. All names of people, places, and organizations in this book are pseudonyms, with the exception of the professional development program Reading Apprenticeship.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 4 describes how instructional capacity grows by comparing two similar schools and examining the subtle, but significant, differences in leadership that led them to develop different levels of instructional capacity. At one school (Liberty Middle School), we see how the well-intentioned actions of a principal to accumulate resources for instructional improvement resulted in minimal creation of instructional capacity when the use of those resources was not given sufficient support. The story of the other school (Cedar Bridge Middle School) shows how instructional capacity grew through the intentional identification and use

of instructional resources for the explicit purpose of strengthening the quality of student learning.

Chapter 5 focuses on how district supervisors can build principals' instructional leadership capacity and help them learn to lead instructional improvement. It tells the story of how a group of central office administrators in the Coopersville Union School District redesigned the purpose of principal meetings from simply communicating information to learning. The examples of principal and district leader learning experiences discussed in chapters 4–6 are drawn from various studies that I conducted in the Coopersville district over a period of five years.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 6 discusses the new work that district administrators must undertake to support principal learning. It explores the various challenges that the team of district administrators confronted as they sought to reshape the form and function of district principal meetings. The conditions within the central office are described as are the sort of resources central offices need to have in order to increase instructional capacity district-wide.

Chapter 7 describes how researchers can help administrators expand their district's capacity for instructional leadership by facilitating opportunities for them to learn in and from their leadership work. I recount the role a research-practice partnership played in helping the Coopersville district team develop its instructional leadership capacity. (I led this research team.)

The concluding chapter ties the conceptual and practical discussions together and offers suggestions for what educators can do to develop instructional capacity across the entire system.

## **WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?**

This book is written for educators who are interested in improving the quality of learning—the learning opportunities that teachers provide for their students, that principals and school coaches provide for teachers, and that district administrators provide for principals as well as the learning opportunities that district leaders must provide for themselves.

Leaders who are responsible for instructional improvement at either the district or school level will find conceptual and practical ideas in this

book that they can use. Specific examples taken from the field and viewed through the instructional capacity building framework help to answer questions like these:

- Under what conditions do instructional strategies introduced in professional development get taken up and used by teachers in their classrooms?
- What can principals do to improve the quality of teacher collaboration in their schools?
- How can district administrators help principals become more effective instructional leaders?

As an educator who has had many different roles (e.g., teacher, administrator, professional developer, school board member) and a researcher who has spent thousands of hours observing and working alongside those who are trying hard to offer high-quality instruction, I am sensitive to the various perspectives that can influence our understanding of how change is experienced as well as how we account for its various effects in the environment. The ICB framework helps illuminate the different dimensions of building instructional capacity and the various vantages from which to view a school's efforts to strengthen instruction and improve students' opportunities to learn. The examples offer specific guidance to educators within schools and in the central office about how to create the conditions for the meaningful use of instructional resources—which is the key to building instructional capacity.