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Robinson, V. M. J. & Le Fevre, D. (2011). Principals' capability in challenging conversations: The case of parental complaints. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49 (3), 227-255. doi: 10.1108/09578231111129046

Principals' capability in challenging conversations: the case of parental complaints

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This research was supported by funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Education. The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of David Eddy, Claire Lloyd and the FTP programme staff with recruiting participants and organizing data collection.

Principals' capability

in challenging conversations: the case of parental complaints

Abstract

Purpose – Positively engaging parents who have concerns about their children's schooling is a key part of effective educational leadership. The purpose of this paper is to use empirical research on complaint interactions and interpersonal effectiveness to develop and trial an assessment of principals' interpersonal effectiveness in challenging conversations with parents. The paper presents descriptive data about principals' level of skill in one such type of conversation.

Design/methodology/approach – A complaint scenario was written and an actor trained to play the role of the parent during a videotaped conversation with each of 30 newly appointed principals. The tapes were transcribed and assessed on six dimensions of interpersonal effectiveness. A code book was written which included definitions of each dimension, a five-step progression on each dimension, coding rules and examples. The actor also provided ratings of the effectiveness of each principal.

Findings – The findings indicated that the principals were, on average, more skilled in advocating their own position than in deeply inquiring into and checking their understanding of the views of the parent. Many had difficulty respectfully challenging the parent's assumptions about the situation and reaching a shared understanding of what to do next.

Originality/value – The paper provides rarely obtained behavioural data about the interpersonal skills of school leaders and provides a strongly grounded theoretical framework for analysing these skills. Detailed suggestions are made about how further research can contribute to both the evaluation and development of the interpersonal skills required to achieve positive outcomes from challenging conversations.

Keywords: New Zealand, Schools, Principals, Parents, Conversation, Problem solving

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Creating positive educationally focussed relationships with parents and caregivers is recognised in many leadership standards and leadership development frameworks as a critical task for school leaders. For example, one of the standards for school leadership promoted by the Interstate School Leaders' Licensure Consortium in the USA (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) describes how an effective educational leader "promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members [...]". The equivalent standards for head teachers in England include a similar specification (Department for Education and Science, 2004).

There are strong educational justifications for the importance of this aspect of the principal's role. First, the relationships between teachers, leaders, parents and students influence whether children attend school and sustain their efforts to learn. Students in schools with strong levels of trust between parents, teachers and leaders make greater

academic progress than students in similar schools with lower levels of trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Second, schools which actively involve parents in the teaching programme are likely to achieve better student outcomes than schools which do not treat families as partners in the education of their children (Fan and Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Sheldon and Epstein, 2005). At primary school level, educational partnerships are more likely to be effective, especially for parents who are unfamiliar with the language and curriculum of school, if teachers show parents how to support the learning of their children in particular curriculum areas (Sheldon and Epstein, 2005). In the spirit of a true partnership, however, the learning is not just one way. Some of the most powerful home-school interventions involve reciprocal learning where teachers learn how to include students' and families' cultural resources into the teaching programme (Kyriakides, 2005; Lipka *et al.*, 2005).

The main message from this body of work seems to be that family involvement is more likely to deliver positive benefits for students if it is focused on educational activities and the interaction between teachers and families is characterized by relationships of mutual trust. Whatever the type of family involvement, it is unlikely to succeed if parents feel uncomfortable engaging with teachers. They need to trust that they will be accepted, regardless of their educational and cultural background and regardless of their familiarity with the language and culture of schooling.

Trust is built through the quality of daily interactions more than through special events or activities:

Relational trust thus is not something that can be achieved simply through some workshop, retreat or form of sensitivity training although all of these can be helpful. Rather relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges. Through their actions, school participants articulate their sense of obligations towards others [...] Trust grows over time through exchanges where the expectations of others are validated in action (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, p. 136-7).

Some of those daily interactions can be characterized as high risk, because they pose a real possibility of reducing rather than strengthening the quality of the relational bonds between the participants. Interactions between school leaders and parents that are triggered by a parental complaint about a teacher are high-risk interactions because a parental complaint usually signals a loss of confidence that the teacher will act in the best interest of the child.

Handling parental complaints is typically the responsibility of the principal especially in primary schools (Goldring, 1990). In some larger high schools, it may be delegated to another senior leader but some parents will still insist on meeting with the principal. There are publications describing the challenge such encounters pose for administrators and offering them practical advice about how to interact with parents with complaints (Holko and Trenta, 2004; Kosmoski and Pollack, 2005; McEwan, 1998). There is little empirical research available, however, about how principals do respond to such complaints and even less offering a theoretical and empirical base for evaluating the effectiveness of those responses.

The purpose of this paper is first, to review relevant literature to identify the interpersonal skills involved in effectively responding to parental complaints and second, to assess how well principals employ those skills when meeting with a parent who brings a serious complaint about her child's teacher. We begin our literature review by discussing research on parental complaints about teachers. Since this literature

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provides little descriptive or evaluative evidence about principal-parent interactions we supplement our search for effective interpersonal skills with additional research drawn from non-educational contexts.

Research on parental complaints in schools

Responding to parental complaints is part of the boundary-spanning role of the principal – a role that involves adapting to the school environment in ways that enable the school to survive and flourish (Goldring, 1990). The challenge in such roles is to balance protecting the organization from unnecessary and disruptive intrusion into its core activities and being responsive to the environment to ensure continued access to critical resources (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992). In the context of parental complaints, this means being open to parental feedback and influence so that the school learns what the community values for its children, and the community develops and sustains its confidence in the school. At the same time, leaders need to temper openness by limiting the demands on teachers for change and filtering out influence attempts that are vexatious, or educationally undesirable.

The challenges of this boundary-spanning role are particularly strong when parents complain about teachers because principals have to navigate between appropriate respect for their staff and responsiveness to the complaining parent. Using case study data from Chicago schools, Kochanek (2005) reports that teachers want to be assured that when handling parental complaints, their principal will treat them as professionals who have children's best interests at heart. When teachers sense this background reassurance, they are more likely to accommodate parental views and requests, without fearing that their integrity and competence is being questioned.

Achieving an appropriate balance between the interests of teachers and parents can be particularly challenging for school leaders in areas where the community feels alienated from its local schools. Writing from an English context, MacBeath (2009) argues that the principal's role in handling parental complaints is becoming increasingly difficult. In his view, today's parents are less likely than those of previous generations to accept teachers' versions of events and to be supportive of teachers' sanctions against their children. In schools in high-poverty areas, complaints may be expressed more aggressively and with less open-mindedness than seems warranted by the specific incident, because parents bring high-background levels of frustration and stress into the complaint situation.

Some evidence about the frequency of teacher-parent conflict is found in an interview study of 113 primary school principals in the Chicago area (Goldring, 1990). Over 70 percent of the sample reported conflict between parents and teachers and over 60 percent reported spending more time managing this type of conflict than any other type. While reports of parent-teacher conflict are not the same as parent-teacher complaints, these data suggest that learning how to handle such complaints effectively is an important challenge for all principals. Indeed, some of the participants in the study claimed that learning these skills was essential to survival in the job.

The Chicago principals in the Goldring (1990) study typically handled complaints about teachers by mediating between the parties, either in joint or separate meetings. In addition to this direct mediation role, principals often took further steps to buffer their school and their own reputation from the damage that could ensue when parental complaints reached the central office.

Parental complaints are one possible response to a failure of a teacher or school to meet expectations. These expectations are likely to have been shaped by how parents are positioned within the relevant educational system. School systems and school types vary in their degree of accountability to parents and in the extent to which parents can choose where to enrol their children. These contextual variables are likely to influence the probability of the expression of a complaint and the organizational response to it (Hirschman, 1990). For example, Norwegian data about parental disillusionment with and complaints about their local children's school (Westergard, 2007; Westergard and Galloway, 2004) need to be understood in terms of policy and legislation requiring schools to take the initiative in building a stronger partnership between teachers and parents. The principals involved in Goldring's (1990) Chicago study knew that parents had direct access to their central office, so, for them, effective management of complaints involved not only responding effectively to the parent but also managing the risk to their own career if the complaint was escalated to the central office.

While different systems provide different formal levers of influence for parents, an equally important contextual factor is the type of relationship that is established between the school and its parents. In a study of 13 urban high schools serving students from minority and low-income communities, Bauch and Goldring (1996) reported that relationships between parents and teachers in the five Catholic high schools could be described as a partnership, whereas the relationship in the four single focus public schools operated on more formal bureaucratic lines. The five public magnet schools on the other hand reflected a more consumerist teacher-parent relationship with activist parents demanding more say if they were dissatisfied or, if satisfied, being content to leave considerable power with the professionals. While the authors did not investigate how parental complaints were handled in each school type, it is likely that these different types of parent-school relationships are associated with different expectations about how to express and handle parental complaints.

In summary, the research literature on parental complaints has indicated the challenge they pose for school leaders, located the management of such complaints within the boundary-spanning role of school principals, suggested the importance of how parents are positioned in the wider school community and provided broad self-reported descriptions of how principals attempt to mediate parental complaints about teachers. One of the obvious gaps in this educational literature is empirical evidence about how school leaders actually interact with parents in complaint contexts.

Research on complaint interactions

Since the development and application of a normative framework for complaint interactions is central to the purpose of our paper, we turned to a wider research literature to supplement the insights gained from educational research on parental complaints. In the next two subsections, we discuss relevant aspects of two additional bodies of evidence. The first body of evidence is found in research on interpersonal conflict and negotiation. We attended particularly to evidence about complaints and conflicts in organizational rather than family contexts and to studies that provided evidence about actual or reported interactions. Second, we drew some important theoretical insights from research on leaders' interpersonal effectiveness in conversations involving dilemmas, challenge and problem solving. Following a brief discussion of relevant aspects of these two literatures, we propose a framework for evaluating principals' interpersonal

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effectiveness in conversations with parents who have complaints. We justify each of the six component skills in the framework with reference to the research literature.

Research on interpersonal conflict and negotiation in non-educational contexts Complaints are communicated expressions of dissatisfaction (Garrett *et al.*, 1991). While there is an extensive complaints literature in business and marketing, there has been little focus on complaints interaction and even less on questions about the effectiveness of such interactions. A few such studies were located, however, in the research literature on organizational conflict. These studies used the theory of “conglomerated conflict behaviour” to describe how people typically employ multiple strategies during a conflict episode rather than relying on a single-dominant strategy (Euwema *et al.*, 2003). Such strategies include forcing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, problem solving and process controlling. Experimental and field research using this theory has tested the unique and combined effects of these various strategies on the effectiveness of conflict outcomes. Effectiveness is typically defined as the extent to which “the components of conflict behaviour produce desired outcomes for the conflicting individuals together, by mitigating or overcoming the conflict issues, by improving the mutual relationship or both” (Euwema *et al.*, 2003, p. 122).

On the whole, negative contributions to effectiveness are associated with more extensive use of forcing and confronting, non-significant contributions are associated with compromising and avoiding, and positive contributions with problem solving and process controlling (Euwema *et al.*, 2003). Problem solving is defined as “reconciling the parties’ basic interests” and “process controlling” as “dominating the procedures to one’s own advantage” (p. 121). More recent research on conglomerated conflict behaviour has differentiated between relational and substantive outcomes and examined the relative contribution of each strategy to the quality of the relationship between the parties and to progress on the substantive problem. By separating out relational and substantive effectiveness, the research has highlighted the challenges involved in meeting both types of outcome. For example, confronting, which is defined as “demanding attention to the conflict issue”, can have major negative relational impacts if it is done in an emotional and blaming manner. Yet confronting is required for problem solving and is strongly correlated with it. Leaders must tackle the cognitive conflict while simultaneously limiting the relational harm from doing so.

Further insight into effective conflict and negotiation behaviours was gained from research on the role of open-mindedness in complaint interactions (Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999). Openness to a diversity of possible solutions and to minority views can improve the quality of decisions. Open-mindedness is communicated by such behaviours as: understanding the other’s goals; considering the other’s ideas carefully; putting together the best of the ideas and working for mutual benefit. In short, it involves direct and respectful engagement with opposing views, rather than avoidance of disagreement. More open-minded interactions produce better outcomes because “open direct discussion induces an epistemic curiosity that leads to a search for more information and an understanding of the opposing view” (p. 48). Once a differing view is recognised, the listener takes a more tentative stance towards their own views and is motivated to explore the opposing arguments.

It is important at this point to recognise the conditions under which such open-mindedness is more likely to occur, for there is also considerable evidence

that people are more likely to ignore than to engage with information that is not congenial to their existing position (Hart *et al.*, 2009). A major trigger to such engagement is perceptions of goal cooperation rather than goal competition (Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999). Goals are cooperative when the parties perceive that the achievement of each of their goals promotes the achievement of the other party's; they are competitive when the parties believe that the other's success will inhibit their own.

In an interview study of how supervisors and employees interacted in 68 complaint incidents in the Canadian saw milling industry, the perception of cooperative goals was associated with more open-minded interaction (Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999). More open-minded communication strategies were, in turn, predictive of integrative solutions and a more efficient solution process. This line of research has shown that "conflicts will be more successfully resolved to the extent that cooperative interests dominate over competitive ones" (p. 60). In the context of a parental complaint about a teacher, the common interest might, broadly speaking, be the desire to work together in the interests of the student, or to resolve what both parties agree to be a very unsatisfactory situation. It seems as if such common ground provides the relational glue that holds parties together while they work through their substantive disagreements.

In summary, research on interpersonal conflict and complaints has identified some of the behaviours which are associated with more and less effective outcomes. On the whole, forcing and confrontation are associated with less effective outcomes and problem solving and process controlling with more effective ones. Further effective strategies have been suggested by research on the use and consequences of open-minded communication behaviours. While broadly consistent with the findings employed from the studies of conglomerated conflict we have already discussed, this research also shows the importance of inquiry into differing views and pursuit of integrative solutions. This literature highlights the challenge of achieving both relational and substantive effectiveness, with some types of conflict behaviour, at least as defined by Euwema *et al.* (2003) seeming to set up an opposition between the two.

We turn next to the empirical and theoretical literature on leaders' interpersonal effectiveness, especially in contexts, which pose dilemmas and challenges, to learn more about the interpersonal behaviours that enable achievement of both relational and substantive effectiveness.

Research on leaders' interpersonal effectiveness

We have seen how complaint conversations pose considerable challenges in terms of simultaneously achieving both relational and substantive goals. As part of the development of our effectiveness framework, we sought answers to three questions about the dilemmas participants frequently experience in meeting both these goals. Our questions were about the causes of such dilemmas, whether they were inevitable, and how they could be overcome. Some insights were found in the theoretical and empirical writing of Argyris and Schon on interpersonal effectiveness (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1996; Robinson, 2001). To foreshadow, we argue that such dilemmas are not inevitable – they arise or at least are exacerbated by the theory-in-use, which is typically employed in conversations that hold the possibility of threat or embarrassment for either party. In the context of a parental complaint, the principal may anticipate, for example, that challenging or even questioning the parent's account of the problem will exacerbate the anger and upset the parent already expresses. Such anticipation may create a dilemma

for the principal about how to progress the task (substantive goal) while avoiding upsetting the parent (relational goal).

A theory-in-use is a highly tacit and taken for granted set of rules about how to behave under given conditions to achieve important goals and values. Argyris' s (1982) descriptive evidence from thousands of male and female members of both public and private sector organizations, including educational organizations, shows that when people anticipate that their messages will be unwelcome, they typically use a theory in use, which he calls Model 1. The essence of Model 1 is that it involves unilateral control of both the process and content of the conversation in the interest of both "winning" and doing so while generating as little negative emotion as possible.

The behavioural moves associated with such control can involve subtle "soft sell" strategies such as leading the person to one' s own conclusions through a series of questions, partially rather than fully disclosing one' s views, or minimizing them when they are disclosed. Alternatively, if frustration levels are high, relationships maybe sacrificed with a more forthright "hard sell" approach. Both strategies are controlling because in each case the controller' s views are assumed to be valid and are protected from challenge. In the soft-sell version of Model 1, they are protected because they are not fully disclosed; in the hard-sell version they are protected because the force and power of their expression inhibits their rational scrutiny.

The dilemma between relationship and task outcomes is exacerbated, if not created, in Model 1 because seeking to persuade others of the validity of one' s views without exploring difference and disagreement is disrespectful of the other. The soft-sell strategy does not provide a solution to the dilemma because while the relationship may be protected, the quality of thinking about the task is sacrificed when the leader does not put his or her own views on the table. The hard-sell strategy does not provide a solution either, because it sacrifices the relationship and may also not contribute much to the substantive goal, because genuine inquiry is stifled by unilateral assertions of the "truth" .

The dilemma is avoided by changing the taken for granted assumption that one' s own views are correct and replacing it with a genuine commitment to involving the other person in inquiring into the validity of all the competing views. This involves adopting an alternative pattern of interaction which Argyris and Schön (1974) call Model 2. While widely espoused, this pattern of interaction is rarely evident in difficult conversations without interventions involving coaching and feedback designed to overcome the defensive patterns of reasoning that are characteristic of Model 1 (Argyris, 1990).

Underpinning Model 2 conversations are three guiding values and their associated behavioural strategies. First, they are characterized by the pursuit of valid information so that decisions are based on the best possible information and reasoning. In many ways, Model 2 involves translating the values of science into everyday life, so that even though formal procedures of testing and experimentation are not applicable in on-the-run conversations, informal equivalents, such as seeking disconfirming examples, are practised (Popper and Lipshitz, 1998).

The second value of respect implies an essential equality between the parties in the conversation so that others' views are treated with the same care as one' s own and there are opportunities for reciprocal influence. The third value is internal commitment. This value is a consequence of the previous two. When parties have sought good quality information, tested the adequacy of their reasoning and canvassed the possible

consequences of their choices, they should feel internally committed to their decision. The use of Model 2 in complaint conversations should avoid, or at least reduce the strength of the relationship-task dilemma because when conflicting views are expressed as possibilities rather than certainties, and both parties work together to check their validity, they pose far less threat to the relationship.

Problem solving is another aspect of complaint interaction (Euwema *et al.*, 2003; Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999). While not conducted in a complaint context, there is some research on principals' problem solving that is suggestive of more and less effective approaches. In a study, comparing how expert and typical principals led a staff meeting devoted to resolution of an important school problem, Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) identified important differences between the skills used by principals in each group. Those principals designated as experts were more open to alternative formulations of the problem, as evidenced by their ability to test their own assumptions about the problem and seek out the interpretations of others. Rather than treating problems in isolation, they linked the problem to wider school goals and to important values. In addition, the expert principals were more active in their facilitation of staff discussion and more concerned than the typical group to reach a shared solution. Although Leithwood and Steinbach's findings are derived from a very limited study, and a comparison of the problem solving of expert and typical principals does not provide direct evidence about the skills involved in effective problem solving, the skills that differentiated the experts from the comparison group are consistent with those identified by the research on effective conflict resolution and open mindedness.

A framework for effective interaction between school leaders and parents with complaints

In this final section of our literature review, we bring together these different strands of research to identify the main skills involved in effective complaint interaction. Each skill is broadly defined and a rationale for its inclusion provided. Our focus here is on the most advanced expression of the skill. We give more detail about how we measured the progressions associated with each skill in the subsequent methodology section.

Skill 1: expressing a grounded point of view

Much of the research on managing conflict emphasizes the importance of finding an integrative solution – that is of finding a way forward that addresses the legitimate interests of both parties (Euwema *et al.*, 2003). Such interests cannot be taken into account if they are not expressed. One of the skills that differentiated expert principals in Leithwood and Steinbach's (1995) problem-solving research was that, unlike the typical group, expert principals were more likely to give clear statements of their own interpretation of the problem and to provide reasons for that interpretation. The reference to a "grounded" point of view anchors the skill in the value of promoting valid information (Argyris and Schon, 1974). When points of view are expressed along with the reasons, examples or evidence that give rise to them, one party has the opportunity to better understand where the other party is coming from and to examine the validity of the claims being made. In short, this skill assessed the ability of the principal to promote an integrative solution by explaining what they believed to be important and why.

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Skill 2: seeking deeper understanding of the other's point of view

Careful listening in response to complaints holds the promise of restoring trust and of learning how to prevent or resolve similar situations. Listening means attending to what is said, taking others' views into account in some way and thus providing opportunities to exercise influence (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Listening, in the context of complaints, involves not only learning about the facts of the matter, but also about how the reported facts are interpreted. It is these sense-making processes that hold the key to a deeper understanding of the complaint and its emotional content (Stone *et al.*, 1999). Genuine listening, like all the skills we propose, is more than a surface feature of conversation. Epistemic curiosity signals deep respect for the other person's ideas and concerns, reduces the vulnerability of the other person and builds an affiliation between the parties (Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999).

Skill 3: checking understanding of the other's point of view

Interactions that are emotionally laden and conflict-prone provide considerable opportunity for mutual misunderstanding. Careful checking that one has correctly understood the other's point of view signals respect for the other and for the validity of the information that is brought to the conversation. Such checking signals openness to the possibility that one's reactions to the other are based on faulty inferences about his or her meaning and intentions. The empirical evidence on effective conflict resolution and complaint interactions tends to include this skill as part of listening. We separated it out because Argyris' work on Models 1 and 2, shows that faulty inferences about others' intentions and meanings are seldom recognised, and interruption of such taken-for-granted assumptions is required in order to make the shift from more Model 1 to more Model 2 forms of interpersonal communication.

Skill 4: helping the parent consider alternate points of view/Skill 5: openly examining own assumptions

These two skills are considered together because they differ only in that in Skill 4 the focus is on helping the other person to consider alternative points of view and in Skill 5 the focus is on examining one's own thinking. Several sources of evidence suggest that open-minded consideration of different points of view promotes learning and integrative problem solving (Tjosvold, 2008; Tjosvold *et al.*, 1999). Such consideration improves substantive outcomes by decreasing certainty about initial positions and promoting a more tentative and flexible search for solutions. Tjosvold argues that there is a reciprocal dynamic set up when one party begins to doubt the completeness of their own position. The doubt triggers more inquiry into alternatives, and this, in turn, encourages the other person to take a more flexible stance to their own position.

Skill 6: agreeing on what to do next

Although there are elements of problem solving in every one of the five skills discussed so far, Skill 6 most directly assesses the extent to which the principal works towards an integrative solution. The grounds for including this skill in our framework come from the evidence that searching for an integrative solution is associated with more effective conflict and complaint resolutions. Indirect evidence also comes from the research of Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) which showed that expert principals are more concerned than typical ones with finding solutions that satisfy the goals of all parties.

Some of the literature we reviewed discussed the importance of a skill which we called “establishing common ground”. By this we mean the ability of the leader to establish a shared purpose for the conversation that binds both parties together in seeking a way through their remaining differences (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Kochanek, 2005). In our pilot work, we attempted to assess this skill but were unable to specify it in ways that were sufficiently distinguishable from other skills and that reached a high enough level of inter-coder agreement.

While these six skills and their associated values have a lot in common with Argyris and Schon’s theory of interpersonal effectiveness, which they call Model 2, they have also been shaped by the wider empirical literature on handling complaints and conflict. For this reason, we distinguish our framework from Model 2 by calling it an open to learning conversation (OLC).

Method

Our main research questions were:

RQ1. What is the level of interpersonal effectiveness of newly appointed principals?

RQ2. What is their relative effectiveness in the six component skills of an OLC?

RQ3. What is the relationship between principals’ skill level and the reaction of the parent bringing the complaint?

Three imperatives shaped the methods we used to address these questions. First, the gap between the values and strategies people report they employ in such situations (espoused theory) and the values and strategies they actually employ (theory-in-use) led us to assess skill use in actual rather than reported conversations.

Second, even though we focused on behavioural evidence, we needed to ensure that such evidence was indicative of the deeper value base of our framework and not just of its surface features. It is the value base of OLC that distinguishes it from closed to learning conversations and frequency counts of surface features of conversation will not adequately capture these differences. This imperative led us to develop an indicator system that combined careful identification of theoretically aligned behavioural strategies with holistic judgments of effectiveness.

Third, it was important to develop indicators that reflected a progression of competence in each of the six skills. Without such a progression, we could not adequately describe either the range of competence in our sample or the impact of any interventions intended to improve these skills.

Context

The participants were drawn from newly appointed New Zealand school principals enrolled in a voluntary 18-month programme known as the “First-Time Principals” (FTP) programme (Robinson *et al.*, 2006). This programme, which was first delivered in 2002, is offered to all principals in New Zealand schools who are in their first year of appointment to a principal’s position. It is designed to promote effective leadership of learning and teaching through residential courses, mentoring, on-line learning and research and evaluation. The programme caters for principals of all school types including primary, middle and high schools. Although the programme is voluntary, approximately 96 percent of eligible principals choose to participate.

Participants

In 2006/2007, the FTP programme had a cohort of 170 principals. A representative random sample of 30 principals was drawn from those enrolled. The sample was representative of the larger group on the basis of gender and school type (i.e. small primary, large primary and secondary school). Of the initial 30 principals randomly selected and invited to participate in the research, 25 accepted. A further five were randomly selected to establish a representative sample of 30 principals, all of whom were within their first nine months of appointment as a new principal. Table I describes

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	18	60.0
Male	12	40.0
<i>Age</i>		
31-40	10	33.3
41-50	13	43.3
51 þ	7	23.3
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
NZ European	22	73.3
Māori	4	13.3
Other	4	13.3
<i>Educational attainment</i>		
Below degree level	10	33.3
Bachelor' s degree	14	46.7
Graduate/post grad diploma	4	13.3
Masters degree or higher	2	6.7
<i>Years of teaching experience</i>		
1-5	3	10.0
6-10	2	6.7
11-15	11	36.7
16-20	5	16.7
21 þ	9	30.0
<i>Years of senior management experience</i>		
None	7	23.3
1-3	9	30.0
4-6	6	20.0
7-9	5	16.7
10 þ	3	10.0
<i>School size</i>		
200 or fewer	21	70.0
201 þ	9	30.0
<i>School type</i>		
Primary	22	73.3
Middle	2	6.7
Secondary	6	20.0
<i>SES classification of school</i>		
Low	7	23.3
Middle	15	50.0
High	8	26.7

Note: *n* ¼ 30

Table I.
Demographic information
about the principals and
their schools

characteristics of the principals and their schools. The data were collected before the participants had any exposure to the theory and practice of interpersonal effectiveness which informed the study.

Measures of interpersonal effectiveness

Two measures were developed to examine the interpersonal effectiveness of the FTP when engaged in a difficult conversation. The first involved behaviourally based ratings of the principals' use of the six OLC skills when encountering a parent (played by an actor) with a serious complaint about her daughter's teacher. The second measure involved the reactions of the actor who played the part of the parent.

Development of OLC skills coding book

A 20-page coding book was developed by the authors to guide the assessment of the interpersonal effectiveness of each principal in the conversation with the parent. The definitions of the six skills, along with the five behavioural indicators which describe a progression of effectiveness for each skill, are provided in the Appendix. The scale associated with the indicators ranged from 1, representing an absent or very basic level of the skill to 5 representing complex and competent use of the skill. The total scores of each principal could range from 5-30 points.

For each skill, the coding book included an operational definition of the skill, the theoretical basis for each skill, behavioural descriptions of the five points on each scale, extracts of conversation transcripts illustrating the indicators, instructions for deciding on a holistic rating for the skill, and additional notes for coders. In addition, instructions were provided regarding the multiple coding of excerpts of the transcript data.

Excerpts of the transcribed conversations that were relevant to a given skill were placed in a coding table associated with each skill. Each excerpt was located under a single skill except those judged as relevant to Skill 1. Some of these utterances were also coded under Skills 4, 5, or 6. For example, points of view about what to do next were coded both as Skill 1 (the principal expresses a grounded point of view) and Skill 6 (the principal and parent agree on what to do next). Skill 1 was the only skill where double coding was admissible. When all the principal's speech had been assigned to the skills, the material in each of the six coding tables was reviewed in preparation for making a holistic judgment about which of the five behavioural indicators best described the principal's level of skill. The collation of relevant evidence in each coding table made it easier to examine the match of the extracts to the various indicators and thus to make more reliable holistic judgments.

Intercoder agreement

Once the two coders (authors) were familiar with the procedures, they independently coded a randomly selected sample of six (20 percent) of the transcripts. Krippendorff's (2004) alpha was used to calculate the degree of agreement on the 36 data points generated by each coder. The resulting alpha of 0.63 shows marginally acceptable agreement, but is likely to be a conservative estimate given the small sample size, and the high number of categories. There was an exact match of ratings on the five-point scale for 23 of the 36 pairs of data. Nine ratings differed by one point and four by two points. There were no disagreements larger than two points on the five-point scale. The degree

Author copy - submitted and accepted version of the following publication:

Robinson, V. M. J. & Le Fevre, D. (2011). Principals' capability in challenging conversations: The case of parental complaints. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49 (3), 227-255. doi: 10.1108/09578231111129046

of disagreement was greatest on Skill 3, so particular caution is needed in interpreting this set of findings.

After the degree of intercoder agreement had been identified, coding disagreements were analyzed and any discrepancies in the ratings were resolved through checking entries in the coding table and the rationale for the ratings. Final agreed coding ratings were used for all analysis purposes.

Parent's perceptions of the principal

Following completion of data collection, the parent (actor) viewed the video recording of each of the 30 conversations and answered three questions:

- (1) How respectful was the principal towards you?
- (2) How satisfied were you with the outcome of this conversation?
- (3) How effective was this principal?

Ratings were made on a five-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to extremely (5). The parent (actor) was given no information about this research other than that conveyed in her initial briefing.

Procedures

A standardized scenario was written which involved a meeting between the principal and a parent who made a serious complaint about her daughter's teacher. Drafts of the scenario were checked with principals to ensure that the final version was judged as realistic by principals from different school types. The role of the parent was played by the same actor who was herself an experienced teacher and a parent. This background enabled her to respond authentically to the differing school contexts which principals came from. The actor was trained, through practice conversations, to be as consistent in her story as possible. The transcripts revealed that she played the role of the parent very consistently.

Data collection took place over three days. Principals were scheduled for individual appointments and given five minutes to read the following scenario before they met with the parent:

A parent is upset and angry that a teacher (Mr Jones) is picking on her daughter (Jamie). She is always singled out for alleged misbehaviour while other students are allowed to get away with things. Also, the teacher never asks her questions and when she puts her hand for help, the teacher ignores her. The final straw is that the teacher has accused her of cheating in a test. The parent is now considering writing to the board to complain. The parent has accepted your offer of a meeting. You are hoping you will be able to listen to the parent and come to some agreement on how to deal with these concerns.

Principals were told that the conversation would be timed for seven minutes. This timing matched the sort of time busy principals typically have for initial urgent conversations. All conversations were videotaped by a professional videographer. When seven minutes was up the camera was turned off even if the conversation was mid-sentence. All of the seven-minute conversations were transcribed.

Consistent with university ethical guidelines, all participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the procedures for the conversation and the use of the data. Consent was gained in writing from all participants prior to any research being undertaken.

Findings

The findings are presented in four sections. In the first, we describe the structure and coherence of the instrument used to assess principals' skills in handling the parental complaint. In the second, we report descriptive statistics about the pattern of scores on the six skills and their inter-correlations. Analyses of the relationships between total scores and demographic characteristics of the sample are also discussed in this section. Third, we report the distribution of scores against the progression for each skill and use extensive quotes from the transcripts to illustrate what behaviours contributed to higher and lower scores. In the final section, we report on the parent' s ratings of each principal and the relationship between those ratings and the ratings of interpersonal effectiveness given to each principal by the authors.

Scale reliability and structure

The coherence of the indicators of the six skills was checked through calculation of a Cronbach' s alpha. The scale score of 0.64 falls just short of an acceptable alpha value of 0.7-0.8 (Field, 2005). In interpreting this alpha statistic, we need to take into account that interpersonal effectiveness is a complex psychological construct with multiple facets. In addition, Cronbach' s alpha is very sensitive to the number of items on the scale. The combination of few items, limited number of subjects and high complexity means that the result is probably acceptable, but as is discussed later, further work is needed on the behavioural measurement of complaint interactions.

To explore the structure of the tool further, a principal components analysis with oblique rotation was used (Leech *et al.*, 2005). While the sample size is small and caution is therefore needed in interpreting the results, after rotation 37 percent of the variance was accounted for by the first component and 18.7 percent by the second. Table II displays the loadings of the six interpersonal skills onto these two components. The correlation between the two components is 0.22.

The first component, which we call advocacy, involves communication of one' s own point of view. This component loads most strongly on Skills 1, 4 and 5. The first two of these skills assesses the principals' ability to express and explain their points of view. It is not immediately clear why Skill 5, which assesses openness to examination of one' s assumptions, coheres with these two advocacy skills. The reason might be that in an interpersonal context, such openness requires prior disclosure of one' s point of view. The more one provides the detail of one' s thinking, the more one is providing opportunity for its critical examination. Transparency implies non-defensiveness and such a stance may also be linked to learning from the views of others. Support for this interpretation comes from a recent meta-analysis of 91 studies investigating reactions to information that

Table II.
Principal component
analysis for six
interpersonal skills

Skill	Component	
	Advocacy	Inquiry
4. The principal helps the parent consider alternate points of view	0.77	20.02
1. The principal expresses a grounded point of view	0.75	20.05
5. The principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions	0.55	0.04
2. The principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent' s point of view	2 0.29	0.84
6. The principal and parent agree on what to do next	0.33	0.62
3. The principal checks his/her understanding of the parent' s point of view	0.36	0.61

confirmed or disconfirmed prior views. One of the authors' conclusions was that people who are not confident in their own views are less likely to expose themselves to contrary views (Hart *et al.*, 2009).

The second component loads most strongly onto Skills 2, 3 and 6. We interpret this component as skills of inquiry and engagement with the other, through seeking deeper understanding of the other's viewpoint, checking understanding and working towards agreement about what to do next. The principal component analysis suggests that our sample of principals tended to be skilled in either advocacy or inquiry and had difficulty in integrating these two broad skill sets.

Skill scores and their interrelationships

On average, principals demonstrated modest levels of effectiveness on each of the six interpersonal skills used to evaluate how they interacted with the parent (Table III). They scored highest on the skill assessing their ability to express their point of view (Skill 1, $M = 3.27$). This result is interesting given that the scenario was dominated by the parent's agenda and perspectives. Despite this, the principals were relatively skilful at giving their views and in providing supporting reasons and evidence.

The lowest mean score was given for how the principals checked their understanding of the parent's point of view (Skill 3, $M = 2.17$). This score indicates that, on average, principals used limited checking strategies, mostly involving checking discrete items of information, rather than their understanding of more complex ideas and themes. One might have predicted that a scenario involving a loquacious parent, complaining about the teaching of her daughter, would invite careful checking of the parent's viewpoint in order to establish a working relationship and a basis for joint problem solving. Instead, the principals appeared to be considerably stronger in sharing their own viewpoints than in doing such checking.

Table IV shows the pattern of correlations between the six interpersonal skills. All six are correlated with the total score at the 0.05 level or greater. The statistically significant correlation between Skills 1 and 4 ($r = 0.48$) indicates that the more skillfully principals stated their point of view, the more likely they were to engage the parent in consideration of alternative views. There is a relationship, in other words, between the more general skill of expressing one's views and the particular type of advocacy that involves challenging others' thinking.

Skill	<i>M</i>	SD
<i>Advocacy</i>		
1. The principal expresses a grounded point of view	3.27	1.05
4. The principal helps the parent consider alternate points of view	2.37	1.10
5. The principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions	3.03	0.89
Skills 1, 4 and 5 (advocacy)	2.89	0.78
<i>Inquiry</i>		
2. The principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view	2.53	0.94
3. The principal checks his/her understanding of the parent's point of view	2.17	0.99
6. The principal and parent agree on what to do next	2.73	1.53
Skills 2, 3 and 6 (inquiry)	2.48	0.87
All skills	2.68	0.66

Note: $n = 30$

Table III.
Principals' scores on six
interpersonal skills

Skill	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. The principal expresses a grounded point of view	-	0.13	0.06	0.48**	0.25	0.33	0.62**
2. The principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view		-	0.24	0.00	0.20	0.25	0.41*
3. The principal checks his/her understanding of the parent's point of view			-	0.42*	0.35	0.47**	0.69**
4. The principal helps the parent consider alternate points of view				-	0.09	0.20	0.61**
5. The principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions					-	0.24	0.48**
6. The principal and parent agree on what to do next						-	0.75**
7. Total score							-

Table IV.
Intercorrelations between six interpersonal skills

Note: Significance at: * $p > 0.05$ and ** $p > 0.01$

The significant correlation between Skills 3 and 6 ($r = 0.47$) suggests that the more effectively principals checked their understanding of the parents' point of view, the more effective they were in reaching agreement on how to progress their problem solving. Although this is a correlational relationship, we might speculate that the respect that is conveyed through careful checking increases the chance of reaching a mutually satisfactory outcome, even under considerable time pressure.

Careful checking was also associated with involving the parent in active consideration of alternative possibilities. Perhaps, checking increases the trust between the parties and that fosters a more flexible and open-minded stance. The skill of checking understanding was particularly important in this scenario as the parent was convinced of the validity of her daughter's explanations and wanted the teacher dealt with accordingly. Unless principals could engage the parent in the possibility of alternative interpretations, the principal would have difficulty engaging the parent in checking the validity of her interpretations.

The pattern of correlations in Table IV suggests, as did the factor analysis, that there are distinct skills involved in advocacy of own and inquiry into others' points of view, and that there is only a weak relationship between the two. For example, skillful expression of one's point of view (Skill 1) was weakly correlated ($r = 0.13$) with inquiry into the parent's point of view (Skill 2) and even less strongly correlated ($r = 0.06$) with checking understanding of the parent's point of view (Skill 3). Similarly, engaging the parent in consideration of alternatives (Skill 4), a more specific type of advocacy, bore no relation ($r = 0.00$) to inquiry into the parent's point of view (Skill 2).

There were few statistically significant relationships between the background variables in Table I and the principals' total scores. Interestingly, the statistical relationships between effectiveness, tertiary qualifications and years of senior management experience were all non-significant. There was also no significant difference between the total effectiveness scores of the male and female principals ($t = 0.71$, $p = 0.48$).

There was a statistically significant relationship, however, between the total scores and the socioeconomic status (SES) of the school to which the principals had been appointed ($r = 0.40$, $p > 0.05$). The more skilled the principal, the more likely they were to be leading a school serving a higher SES community.

Principals' effectiveness on six interpersonal skills

In this section, we use both quantitative and qualitative data to describe and illustrate principals' effectiveness on each of the six skills in our framework. We also focus on the reaction of the parent to the principals' inquiries and disclosures.

Skill 1: the principal expresses a grounded point of view

The mean score of 3.27 on this skill indicates that the typical principal expressed an extensive point of view which was partially rather than fully supported with relevant evidence, examples or reasons. Seven principals were scored as expressing limited points of view with either limited or adequate grounds, 21 with expressing an extensive point of view and two showed the ability to consistently provide grounds for their key claims.

The great majority of principals' views were about the steps they believed needed to be taken to further investigate the complaint. These included speaking to the student (Jamie) and her friends, speaking to the classroom teacher (Mr Jones) and observing in Mr Jones' s class. In contrast to the high proportion of procedural suggestions, substantive points of view were less frequently expressed. By substantive, we mean points of view about the nature and possible causes of the problem. One reason for the limited number of such disclosures might be that principals did not feel confident that they could express their views about what might be going on without risking further upsetting the parent. We also discuss the limited consideration of alternatives under Skill 4.

Skill 2: the principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view

The average score on this scale of 2.53 indicates that this skill was among the least effective. Three principals used no or only introductory inquiries, such as "Would you like to tell me what has been happening?" 13 principals limited their inquiry to requests for factual information through such open questions as "Can you tell me who it is you have talked to?" or more closed questions such as "Have you spoken to Mr Jones?" Given the parent gave an extensive and highly judgmental account of what had happened, such questions were needed to begin to understand the basis of the parent' s interpretations.

Ten principals went beyond perceptions of facts to inquire into discrete aspects of the parent' s interpretations, preferences and emotions. For example, rather than taking at face value that the daughter is being picked on, one principal asked "So what are the indicators for that problem?" and "Can you give me any real reasons as to why you think that she would be picked on? Is she saying anything about why she thinks she' s being picked on?"

Three principals were scored as inquiring into the broader logic of the parent' s views through such questions as "[...] so when you say second best [option] what are you thinking?" or "Why is it you would think that would happen?" Some of the deeper inquiry involved seeking the parent' s wishes. One principal asked "So what things do you think that would help?" Such inquiry creates the possibility of establishing common ground through shared goals for the conversation.

In short, the principals had little difficulty probing for factual information, but were much less likely to inquire into the basis of emotionally laden and strongly expressed assumptions about the nature and causes of the problem.

Skill 3: the principal checks his/her understanding of the parent's point of view

Principals scored lowest on this skill ($M = 2.17$), with seven principals using no checks at all and the great majority (16) only checking their understanding of discrete items of information (e.g. "you explained before that you are keen to go to the board"). None of the principals were able to provide integrative summaries of the conversation as it progressed, although two did summarize chunks of conversation and a further five gained the parent's confirmation of the accuracy of their summary. In the following quote, the summary of one of these five principals earns a heartfelt confirmation from the parent:

Principal: So, what I'm taking from this, Mrs Duncan, that Jamie's been coming home and she's told you that she feels she's been picked on, she feels she's been highlighted in the class. That other children get away with other bits and pieces [...]

Parent: Yep. Absolutely.

Occasionally, principals did provide summaries but did not pause long enough to check their accuracy with the parent. There was also a tendency for principals to use checking words without genuinely inquiring into the accuracy of their understanding. For example, when one principal claims "Well alright, I can see where you're coming from" she is making an unsubstantiated assertion of her own understanding. This controlling rather than open-to-learning stance is also evident in the phrase "I hear what you are saying", when it is not accompanied by illustrations of what is claimed to have been heard.

The low score on this skill is surprising, because the behaviour of paraphrasing and summarizing is not in itself a difficult one. Given that this skill is likely to be in the principals' repertoire, the puzzle is why they did not use it. Although we did not ask our sample this question, we do have relevant anecdotal evidence from workshops on OLC for educational leaders delivered by the first author. The same pattern of not checking understanding has been evident in those workshops, and when participants are asked why they do not do so, they provide two main reasons – they are too busy thinking what to say next and so are unable to accurately recall what the other person has said, or their emotional and judgmental reactions to what they hear prevent them from formulating a summary. These findings are a reminder that the challenge in learning to engage in an open-to-learning conversations lies not so much in mastering the surface level skills – such as paraphrasing and checking – but in changing the controlling values that trigger the judgmental and emotional reactions that prevent people from deeply listening.

Skill 4: the principal helps the parent consider an alternative point of view

We have already noted that an OLC requires that all views be treated as hypotheses to be tested rather than as certainties to be imposed on others. In this conversation, one way of fostering such openness was by communicating alternative possible interpretations and engaging the parent in their evaluation. The measure of this skill assessed the extent to which each principal provided such alternatives and the extent to which they were considered by the parent.

The mean score of 2.37 on this skill suggests the relative difficulty of these skills. Seven of the 30 principals offered no challenge or alternative to the parent's views. In these cases, the problem-solving process was driven by the views of one party rather than being responsive to the views and interests of both parties. A further 12 principals proposed views which challenged a discrete claim but their challenge was either ignored or rebutted by the parent. The typical principal reaction to such rebuttals was to drop

the subject and move on. Perhaps, principals saw the risk of conflict as too great, but another possibility is that they could not formulate an on-the-spot response to the rebuttal. The ability to reason on the spot and to communicate those reasons seemed to be a challenge for some of the principals.

For four principals, the parent did consider the discrete challenge and for the remaining seven the parent considered a challenge to their wider view of the problem. In the following extract, the parent has just finished providing a detailed account of how her daughter is not asked to answer the teacher's question, despite being the only child with her hand up. She is convinced that this is one way in which the teacher is picking on her child. The principal ventures an alternative interpretation of Mr Jones's behaviour:

Principal: It is interesting. I have to say it is probably something I've done before too. It's not necessarily [...]

Parent: What? Picked on somebody's kid?

Principal: No, not necessarily. Well, perhaps that can be viewed that way, because there are always two sides to every story. And both sides have a truth and each truth is their own. Your truth comes from your daughter. What I'd like to know is have you made any contact with Mr Jones?

Parent: I've not gone near Mr Jones.

This extract illustrates a challenge to a wider view or interpretation because what is being challenged is the parent's construction of the teacher's behaviour as that of "picking on" her child. The suggestion that it is not necessarily "picking on" meets an immediate rejection from the parent before the principal can even finish explaining her alternative view. The principal then makes an abstract appeal to a relativist epistemology, inviting the parent to consider the possibility of multiple "truths". Rather than follow up with a more direct explanation of her alternative, she gives up and abruptly changes the topic by asking another factual question about whether the parent has contacted the teacher.

There were only a couple of cases in which principals managed to engage the parent in a discussion of the alternative interpretations they had put forward. In the following extract, the principal provides an alternative explanation of the teacher's motivation in not choosing Jamie to respond to his questions:

Principal: She's very good at math.

Parent: Well up until now, but he is doing his best to destroy her because you know she is always like kind of first with her hand up and he refuses to choose her to let her give an answer. Right up to the fact that a couple of days ago she put her hand up, this happened before actually, she put her hand up, she was the only child with her hand up, and he went to a child who didn't have their hand up and said: "Would you like to try and give me an answer?" So that he didn't have to choose Jamie.

Principal: [...] the last time I was in his class doing his appraisal, we talked about the question and answering skills. He was saying that one of the math students, because she is the brightest in the class, he tries not to choose her because he is trying to give the other kids a chance to give him the answers. Generally she is right.

Parent: OK, but it's not up to Jamie to give them the opportunity to improve their math so that she doesn't get anywhere with her [...] It's destroying her self confidence.

Principal: OK, well we didn't realize that.

Parent: Well he should, he's meant to be a professional, and he's working for me, for goodness sake. He's got a responsibility to my child.

Principal: I agree. Would you be interested in meeting with him?

The parent claims to hear (OK) this alternative point of view, but then dismisses it by stating that it is not her daughter's responsibility to provide opportunities for other students to learn. Rather than giving up, the principal continues by first acknowledging the school was not aware of the consequences for Jamie and then asking if the parent would like to meet with the teacher. The latter step runs the risk of a further rejection, however, as the principal has not disclosed and negotiated her reasons for suggesting the meeting.

Skill 5: The principal is open to examination of his/her assumptions

While Skill 4 assessed the extent to which the principal facilitated the openness of the parent, this skill assessed the reciprocal – that is the openness of the principal to critical examination of his or her own assumptions. The mean score of 3.03 indicates that, on average, principals responded to differing views by restating, clarifying and elaborating their own views. The progression for this skill involved moving from mostly not responding to the parent's challenges (three principals) to straight acceptance or rejection of the parent's challenge without giving reasons (1) to a response that involved providing more explanation for one's initially expressed point of view. This was by far the most common score (19). Six principals responded by seeking to understand more about the alternative view – that is, they demonstrated the ability to focus on the alternative perspective rather than just explaining or defending their own. One principal gave evidence of the highest skill level on this skill by discussing the relative merits of the original and alternative points of view.

The following quotes illustrate the different type of interaction involved in these responses to challenge. In the first, the principal ignores the parent's objection to talking to the teacher:

Principal: Have you talked to Mr Jones yourself?

Parent: I wouldn't go anywhere near him after having heard how he behaves in the classroom. That would make it worse for Jamie. I think he would take it out on her even worse and I wouldn't want to take that risk.

Principal: And so how is Jamie feeling now?

Parent: Not great – that is why I'm here.

The principal appears to hold the assumption that it would be beneficial for the parent to meet with Mr Jones. The parent directly challenges this assumption, and claims that meeting with Mr Jones would be damaging to her daughter. The principal does not respond to the parent's challenge and changes the topic to a discussion of how Jamie is feeling now.

At the other end of the spectrum, one principal responds by explicitly considering the relative merit of the parent's different point of view:

Principal 7: Well, I think the [assistant principal] has got a good overview of all the pastoral and discipline side, so if there's an issue in the class between the teacher and the student, it's good

that he has an input and a background, because it's a big school and, as you'll appreciate, I can't manage all the little disciplinary problems that may or may not come up, or the conflicts between teachers and students.

Parent: Sure. it might be little to you, but it's huge to Jamie, and to me.

Principal 7: I mean little in terms of [...]

Parent: I'm taking an hour off work here, and I've got to work an hour back.

Principal 7: I guess "little" is not a good word. I guess it's every individual case I should say.

Parent: Yes, that's right. So tell me, depending on what happens, is there a possibility that Jamie could change math classes, because I'm not prepared to have her marks slip and for her to lose interest?

In this conversation the principal responds to the parent's differing point of view that this is not a "little" problem. The impact of his explicit consideration of the parent's perspective, acknowledgement of his assumption, and agreement with her perspective then set the stage for further negotiation and problem solving to take place.

Skill 6: the principal and parent agree on what to do next

This skill assessed the extent to which the principal and the parent suggested next steps, considered their relative merit, and came to some explicit agreement over what to do next. The mean score of 2.73 indicates that while the typical principal reached agreement on some next steps, they were not fully discussed and some disagreements remained. The scores on this skill were distributed around the extreme ends of the progression with 11 principals scoring at the most basic level because they reached no explicit agreement on any next steps. Five others scored at the most advanced level, indicating that after considerable discussion of its merit, agreement was reached on a clear plan.

One could argue that the high number of principals who scored at the lowest level was an artifact of the time limit on the conversation, but the fact that five principals developed a clear plan based on considerable discussion of merit suggests these data reflect a range of capability rather than just the time limit. Indeed, short conversations are a significant part of the work of principals and thus the ability to be effective under time pressure is important in principal development. The principals who ran out of time had difficulty building agreement throughout the conversation, tended to drop rather than address and resolve differences and these differences reemerged when decisions had to be made about next steps.

Many principals scored badly on this skill because they were anxious to jump to planning and made suggestions for future action before getting sufficient information from the parent. This usually resulted in the parent challenging the principals' suggested next steps and insisting on providing further information to ensure that they had the full picture. The strong correlation ($r = 0.47, p < 0.01$) between checking understanding of the parent's point of view (Skill 3) and agreeing on next steps (Skill 6) supports this explanation. In short, if the principal was not effective in checking his or her understanding of the parent, the parent kept talking in an effort to ensure the principal got her message, and this used up the time the parties needed to reach agreement on the next steps.

Principals who attained higher scores on this skill engaged throughout the conversation in considerable discussion of the merit of different options.

They also sought the parent's reactions to their ideas, thus providing room for negotiation and reciprocal influence. For example, Principal 8 says, "I'd like to perhaps chat to a couple of her friends", "Now what sort of timeframe have you got? I realize that you've got work, you've got time off work today and you're going to [...] it's difficult for you."

In summary, the six skills fell into two discrete sets which we called advocacy and inquiry, with principals, on average, being stronger on the former than the latter. The behavioural indicators of progressively more effective use of each of the six skills showed that the principals, while moderately effective on most skills, had difficulty engaging the parent as a partner in exploring the validity of key assumptions, in respectfully exploring differences, and in agreeing on a clear plan for the next steps.

Parent's perceptions of the principal

We turn now to the three ratings made by the actor who played the role of the parent. She rated the principal's degree of respect for her as "considerable" ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.57$). Her level of satisfaction with the outcome of the conversation was moderate ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.74$) and the effectiveness of the principals was also judged as moderate ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.94$). In summary, she was most positive about the degree to which she was respected, less positive about the effectiveness of the principal and least positive about the outcome of the conversation.

The correlation matrix (Table V) between the score for each skill (rated by the authors) and the three ratings made by the parent shows that the two key skills influencing parental ratings were Skill 2 (the principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view) and Skill 5 (the principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions). The more the principal inquired into the perspectives of the parent the higher the parent rated the principal in terms of both respect ($r = 0.47$) and satisfaction with outcome ($r = 0.41$). The more open the principal to critical examination of his/her own assumptions (Skill 5) the more effective the parent judged the principal to be ($r = 0.55$) and the higher the parent's overall satisfaction with the outcome of the conversation ($r = 0.39$).

Skill	Respect	Satisfaction	Effectiveness
<i>Advocacy</i>			
1. The principal expresses a grounded point of view	0.07	0.16	0.27
4. The principal helps the parent consider alternate points of view	20.03	0.10	0.09
5. The principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions	20.02	0.39*	0.55**
<i>Inquiry</i>			
2. The principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view	0.47**	0.41*	0.19
3. The principal checks his/her understanding of the parent's point of view	0.24	0.32	0.24
6. The principal and parent agree on what to do next	20.08	0.31	0.29
Note: Significance at: * $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)			

Table V.
Intercorrelations between principals' interpersonal skills and parent's ratings

These findings suggest that the parent appreciated conversations in which the principal expressed a point of view, was willing to examine its validity, and listened deeply to the parent's own story.

Discussion

Research on interactions involving complaints, grievances and conflict suggests that a major challenge in such conversations is how to progress the problem or issue without damaging the relationship. Strategies that are more effective in meeting this challenge involve open-minded consideration of differing points of view and integrative problem solving. Our data show that many of our sample of newly appointed principals had difficulty meeting this challenge when talking with a parent who was laying a complaint about her daughter's teacher.

The behavioural indicators we developed for each of six interpersonal skills enabled us to describe principal's typical pattern of responding and to suggest why the integration of task and relationship was so difficult for them. On average, the strength of the principals in this complaint interaction was in saying what they thought and why. In contrast, they were less skilled in both inquiring into the parent's point of view and engaging them in a discussion of alternative possibilities. When they did inquire, they sought information about factual matters and were less likely to probe the parent's deeper reasoning and feelings. They seldom checked their understanding of what the parent had told them. When challenged, they tended to respond with more explanations of their own point of view rather than, in addition, asking about the basis of the challenge. The result, for about half the principals, was little or no agreement about what to do next to address the situation.

The integration of task and relationship concerns requires the demonstration of respect for the other, through various types of inquiry, collaborative consideration of alternatives and pursuit of integrative solutions. The scores on each skill progression suggest that many principals were more oriented to persuading the parent to their point of view than to deeply listening and engaging the parent in collaborative evaluation of alternative perspectives about the nature of the problem and its solution. Principals' tendency to persuade, rather than to learn and co-construct a solution is likely to have exacerbated the tension between progressing the task and avoiding further negative emotion. To the extent that principals did demonstrate a deeper level of listening and engagement, the parent was more likely to rate them as respectful.

After scoring all the transcripts, the authors reviewed those of the highest and lowest scoring principals to obtain a more holistic picture of the difference between them. Two features of the high scoring transcripts stood out. First, the principals who made the greatest progress in terms of agreeing on what to do next (Skill 6) tended to explicitly confront the issue of it being difficult to know exactly what was going on in the classroom. They explained that since people often make different interpretations of the same situation, there was a need to have further discussions with everyone involved. For example, one principal said:

But we don't see it as [...] there's different levels of perspective that we can look at things. If we were to take a video camera and see what was happening in the classroom, we, both of us could see totally different things. And what we probably need to do is to sit down and talk about this with Mr Jones so we get a picture of what is going on in his head when he sees these things happening.

While such explanations were not always immediately convincing to the parent, they provided a rationale for why the parent's "solutions" could not be actioned immediately and implicitly invited the parent to move from a complaints mentality into a problem-solving process.

A second feature of high scoring conversations was their tight focus. Principals often achieved this by interrupting the lengthy narratives of the parent with a paraphrase or summary to check their understanding. This check assured the parent she had been understood and allowed the conversation to move on. At other times, these principals focused the conversation by explicitly bringing it back to what they had in common – the best interests of Jamie. Both of these moves integrated progress on the task with respect for the person. Interruption was essential in order to progress the problem solving, but it was done in order to check and communicate understanding, rather than to persuade to one's own point of view. The redirection of the conversation back to the student addressed the interest of both parties and reinforced their common ground.

Complaint interactions are private events which are difficult to access for research purposes. In this study, we addressed this difficulty by asking principals to interact with an actor who portrayed the same parental complaint with each of the 30 principals. By using a standardized scenario, rather than a real complaint drawn from each principal's own school, we avoided confounding our assessment of each principal's skill level with variation in task difficulty. The tradeoff, however, was some loss of authenticity in our measures of the outcomes of the conversation. The emotional investment of an actor is not the same as that of a parent making a similar real complaint about their child's teacher. This means that caution is needed in generalizing the skill-outcome relationships found in this research to the relationship that might be found parents with real complaints about their own children. While many principals spontaneously commented on the authenticity of the scenario, they entered the conversation without the historical and emotional baggage they may have brought to a conversation about a real complaint in their school. One might predict, therefore, that demonstrating skill in such conversations might be harder than in this scenario.

This study was conducted with principals newly appointed to their first position. One obvious question is whether the same pattern and level of skill would be evident in more experienced principals. Our findings about the lack of correlation between years of senior leadership experience and interpersonal skill level suggest that average levels of skill in more experienced principals may not be significantly different from those found in our novice sample.

The lack of any significant difference between the total effectiveness scores of male and female principals is somewhat surprising, given the literature about gender differences in leadership style (Coleman, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1993). Close examination of this literature shows, however, that the basis of the alleged difference is often self reported leadership behaviour or identification with stereotypical masculine or feminine qualities. Such sources of evidence do not tell us about actual leadership behaviour, nor provide grounds for claiming differences in interpersonal effectiveness. In addition, the notion of an essentially feminine or masculine leadership style has been criticised as an essentialist concept that ignores the multi-faceted and contextually fluid nature of leadership (Reay and Ball, 2000). It remains the case, however, that this study was conducted with a female actor and a male actor may have elicited different patterns of interaction.

Ultimately, questions about the generalization of our findings to different samples of principals, different real or standardized complaint scenarios, and conversations in which the principal expresses rather than receives a complaint, must be answered by additional research.

Data on principals' cognitions as well as their speech would have made this research stronger. In his analysis of video records of teaching practice, Erickson (1986) suggests that valuable information about intention and meaning lies in understanding the thought processes of those portrayed in the video records. Argyris and Schon have argued that learning Model 2 behaviour involves a shift in underlying values and assumptions as well as a shift in the surface features of conversation (Argyris and Schon, 1974, 1996). They employ a type of "think aloud" protocol to access the unexpressed thoughts and feelings that participants experience during the actual conversation. These thoughts and feelings provide a window into the theory-in-use values of participants and it is these values and assumptions that may need to change in order for more effective skills to emerge. Data from such "think-aloud" protocols would provide more insight into the cognitive and emotional challenges involved in remaining open and respectful in challenging conversations.

Further studies are needed of the predictive and concurrent validity of the assessment tool developed for this study. These studies could examine the extent to which experts in negotiation, conflict resolution and grievance handling score highly on this measure. Studies are also needed of the concurrent and predictive validity of the measure, especially of the extent to which scores on one type of simulated or real conversation predict scores on a range of other types. Do, for example, principals' scores on how they handle another person's complaint predict their scores on how they communicate their own concern about the performance of a teacher? The seminal work of Bridges (1992) on how principals and superintendents deal with concerns about teacher performance suggests that similar dilemmas arise between progressing the problem and managing the relationship.

These findings have implications for principal development in building trust and in interpersonal skills more generally. Engaging with parents who have concerns and complaints is not only important for the education of the affected children, but is also a critical source of feedback about the fit between the school and its community. If leaders handle complaints well, they build trust and detect areas for improvement. Handling them effectively requires the ability to inquire deeply into the complaint while communicating the perspective of the school and engaging the parent in a search for an integrative solution. Our findings suggest that principals tended to be more skilled at communicating the perspective of the school rather than inquiring deeply into the parent's view and engaging her in collaborative problem solving. These findings offer an agenda for future research and development with both newly appointed and experienced principals.

This study is one of the first to describe complaint interactions in an educational context. It has linked the limited educational literature on complaints to a broader research base in organizational and communication studies on interpersonal interaction in contexts of negotiation, conflict, complaints and grievances. The findings of this study, particularly those related to the difficulty of engaging the other party in finding an integrative solution, are consistent with this non-educational body of evidence. This study adds to this knowledge base by identifying the specific skills which are more or less likely to be used effectively and offering an explanation of why they are so difficult to employ.

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Appendix

Skill 1: the principal expresses a grounded point of view

This skill assesses the extent to which the principals express their point of view about the situation and the extent to which that point of view is grounded in evidence, examples or reasons:

- (1) Principal provides limited point of view with no or limited grounds.
- (2) Principal provides limited point of view with adequate grounds.
- (3) Principal provides a more extensive point of view with limited grounds.
- (4) Principal provides a more extensive point of view with adequate grounds.
- (5) For key claims principal's reasoning is clear and transparent throughout the conversation.

Skill 2: the principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's point of view

This skill reflects the value of respect through inquiry into the perceptions, interpretations and reasoning of the other person:

- (1) Principal uses no or only introductory probes (e.g. "tell me what happened").
- (2) Principal seeks only additional factual information (e.g. about what happened).
- (3) Principal seeks additional factual and other relevant information (e.g. ideas, feelings and judgments).
- (4) Principal seeks deeper understanding of the parent's broader reasoning, interpretations of and attitudes towards the problem – what are their views?
- (5) Principal demonstrates sustained inquiry into the basis of parental attitudes and understandings – why do they hold the views that they do?

Skill 3: the principal checks his/her understanding of the parent's point of view

This skill assesses both the type of checking and the extent to which the other party confirms the accuracy of the understanding. Such checking is likely to increase the validity of the information the parties use in their decision making:

- (1) Principal does not use any strategies (e.g. paraphrase or summary plus checking) to check his/her understanding of the parent.
- (2) Principal only checks understanding of discrete items of information provided by parent.
- (3) Principal checks discrete items of information and checks at least two large chunks of conversation.
- (4) Principal checks discrete items of information and at least two large chunks of conversation and obtains at least two explicit confirmations throughout the conversation that he/she has understood the parent's point of view.
- (5) As the conversation progresses, the principal provides summaries and overviews of the whole conversation to check for a shared understanding of the main issues.

Skill 4: the principal helps the parent consider alternate points of view

Skill 4 focuses on the role of the principal in challenging the parent to consider interpretations and explanations of behaviour that may differ from those which are initially proposed:

- (1) Principal offers no challenge to any aspect of parent's point of view.
- (2) Principal challenges particular claim/claims but minimal or no consideration from parent.
- (3) Principal challenges discrete claims and the challenge is considered.

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- (4) Principal challenges parents wider view of the situation and the challenge is considered.
 - (5) Principal challenges parents wider view of the situation and both parties discuss the alternatives.

Skill 5: the principal is open to examination of his/her own assumptions

This skill is the reciprocal of Skill 4, for it assesses the extent to which the principal is open to learning about the validity of his or her point of view by inquiry into and engagement with challenges raised by the parent:

- (1) Principal does not respond to different points of view.
- (2) Principal reacts by accepting or rejecting differing point of view without explaining why.
- (3) Principal reacts by explaining more about own point of view (restates, elaborates).
- (4) Principal responds by reflecting/discussing/probing the differing point of view.
- (5) Principal responds by explicitly considering the relative merit of the differing points of view.

Skill 6: the principal and parent agree on what to do next

This skill assesses the extent to which the parties agree on and discuss the merit of a plan about what to do next:

- (1) No next steps are suggested, or some next steps are suggested but there is no explicit agreement.
- (2) Some next steps are agreed with little discussion of their merit. Important differences are not discussed.
- (3) Some next steps are agreed after considerable discussion of their merit but some important differences remain unresolved.
- (4) Some next steps are suggested and their merit is discussed and there is considerable agreement about next steps. Important differences have been resolved.
- (5) A clear plan based on considerable discussion of merit is explicitly summarized and agreed on by both parties.

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