

School Leadership Review

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 6

2015

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Ahmet F. Cetinkaya
Lamar University

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Recommended Citation

Cetinkaya, Ahmet F. (2015) "A Phenomenological Narrative Study: Elementary Charter Principals' Role as an Instructional Leader," *School Leadership Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol10/iss2/6>

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A Phenomenological Narrative Study: Elementary Charter Principals' Role as an Instructional Leader

Ahmet F. Cetinkayaⁱ
Lamar University

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) (2013) defined charter schools on the company website as “independent public schools allowed freedom to be more innovative, while being held accountable for improved student achievement” (p.1). Although there might be differences in their structures depending on state charter school laws and agreement between their authorizers, charter schools have been shown to have more flexibility in their educational programs and management styles in comparison with traditional public schools.

The first charter school law, chapter 265 article 9 section 3, was passed in Minnesota in 1991 (Minnesota Legislative Reference Library [MLRL], 2012). Since then, charter schools have been serving increasingly more students in K-12 settings. According to the Public Charter Schools Dashboard provided by the NAPCS (2013), there were 5,997 charter schools in operation during the 2012-2013 academic year, serving 2,278,388 students. Charter schools became 6.3% of all the public schools across the country while serving 4.6% of students nationwide. Each year, there has been a growing demand for charter schools' selection as the school of choice by parents. Charter school growth was calculated as showing a 6.7% yearly increase for the 2012-13 school year, including newly approved and closed charter schools.

The charter school movement which has been linked to educational reform has become the focus of intense interest stemming primarily from academic-oriented parents (Knaak & Knaak, 2013; Walberg, 2007). Charter schools which have been promoted as being innovators in schooling leading to improved student achievement, offer an academic choice for parents (NAPCS, 2013). Thus, the purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore elementary charter school principals' perceptions of their role as an instructional leader.

Literature Review

Principals' roles in schools have been investigated and studied based on contemporary schools' needs to address the complex demands of high stakes accountability (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Fetters, 2012; Germeten, 2011). There are seven specific roles of principals which include: personnel management, student management, government and public relations, external development management, finance management, long term planning for promoting schools' mission and instructional leader (Hess & Kelley, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Portin, 2004).

Grissom, Loeb, and Master (2013) examined the associations between leadership behaviors and student achievement gains. Although the researchers found “no relationship between overall time spent on instructional activities and schools' effectiveness” (p. 440), they noted positive associations between school improvement and time spent for several instructional elements such as a school's education program, teacher evaluation, and direct teacher coaching. There also has

ⁱ Ahmet F. Cetinkaya can be reached at afc523@gmail.com.

been some suggestion that principals were aware of their responsibility to build and support an effective learning environment (Cisler & Bruce, 2013).

Leana (2011) discussed principal leadership efforts in relation to school reform and summarized the beliefs of such efforts. For example, Leana found that public school principals have typically been placed at the center of instructional practice in schools and were often multitasking and dealing with many unplanned activities each day. Leana suggested that principals recorded more than 60 different tasks in a given week. Further, principals spent 57% of their time in managerial tasks like facility management and paperwork, 25% in instructional tasks, such as monitoring teachers, and 14% of their time engaged in external relations, such as parent meetings and community outreach activities. In addition, increased time that principals spent mentoring and monitoring teachers tended to have no effect on student achievement. As a result of these outcomes, Leana defined an effective school leader as the one who becomes a facilitator of teacher success rather than using the term of instructional leader. In essence, principals should provide teachers with resources to enhance collaboration among the teachers, principals' roles were critical in building social capital in schools, and there is great importance inherent in supporting teachers.

There have been studies focused on charter schools and the roles of school leaders. For example, Cravens, Goldring, and Penaloza (2012) argued that charter school principals were significantly more likely than traditional public school principals to focus on traditional school tasks, such as managing the school building and staff and monitoring instructional improvement and instruction. Stephens (2008) compared high and low performing charter schools and pointed out evidences of high academic achievement tied to the principal's ability to enforce accountability and high expectations within the school. Stoll (2004) noted that charter school principals reported fewer positive outcomes in administrative support, reinforcement, role clarification, and compliance issues.

Methodology

The current study was a qualitative study utilizing a phenomenological narrative research design to investigate the instructional leadership role of elementary charter school principals. Creswell (2013) defined narrative research as collecting "stories from individuals about individuals' lived and told experiences" (p.71). In this study exploration of a single phenomenon, principals' roles as an instructional leader was explored while focusing more on the description of experiences of participants rather than interpretations of the researcher.

Participants were six purposefully selected elementary charter school principals in Texas who have previously worked as traditional public school principals. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to identify participants. Creswell (2011) suggested that convenience sampling be used when the participants were available and willing to participate in the study, and defined snowball sampling as asking participants to recruit new participants for the study.

Criteria for inclusion in the study included that participants must have possessed a minimum of one year of experience in a charter school setting as well as past experience in a traditional public school serving similar grade levels. Qualifying participants could be removed from the

traditional public school setting no more than 10 years in order to foster a better understanding of the contemporary roles of principals. Kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5) or kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) schools were classified as elementary schools for the purpose of this study.

An email invitation was sent to elementary charter school principals who met the participation criteria. After identifying the first principal, he or she was asked to help recruit other participants among acquaintances until the expected number of participants had been reached. Names and e-mail addresses of the target population were obtained from the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) website and charter school websites. Six elementary charter school principals, three males and three females, participated in this study. Five of the principals were White and one was Black. All schools were located in an urban area and enrollment ranged from prekindergarten to 8th grade. Additionally, all schools were rated as Met Standard in 2013 based on the Texas accountability system. Principals had one to five years of experience as charter school principals and from two to 14 years as principals in traditional public schools. Collective demographic information of the schools which had participating principals is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used for each principal.

Table 1
Collective information of charter schools

Principal's Name	Grade	Enrollment	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Two or more Races	Econ. Disadv.
Mr. James	PK-6	440	17.7%	16.4%	61.6%	2.5%	1.8%	55.9%
Mr. Carter	K-8	271	6.6%	18.1%	64.2%	6.3%	4.4%	16.2%
Ms. Hopkins	K-5	435	11.1%	85.6%	2.2%	0.8%	-	97%
Ms. Jackson	PK-8	658	0.2%	97.9%	1.2%	0.8%	-	98.6%
Dr. Marshall	PK-8	617	82.8%	16.5%	0.3%	-	-	65.2%
Dr. Spears	K-7	153	36.6%	27.5%	18.3%	15.7%	-	40.5%

The data were gathered through face-to-face or telephone interviews. The interview prompt included questions which addressed specific research questions. Open ended interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during the interview. Although interviewing was the main data collection tool, artifacts, documents, and field notes were also gathered to enhance data collection procedures. The content gleaned from the interviews was transcribed and the resulting data were analyzed by identifying emerging themes. The stories of the participants were revealed, retold, and rewritten in a chronological sequence to thematically analyze their content for textual and structural descriptions based on a thematic approach. To demonstrate credibility, the researcher triangulated data sources, implemented peer review, conducted member checking, and wrote in thick, rich, detailed description.

Findings

This study investigated leadership practices of charter school principals regarding instructional leadership. Findings suggested that charter school principals perceived their role as instructional

leaders as being actively involved with instruction, providing professional development, and wearing different hats.

Being Actively Involved with Instruction

All elementary charter school principals noted the importance of being actively involved in instruction. They put teachers at the focus of instruction and talked about their practices to support good instruction. The participants specifically emphasized practices which included the following: scheduling time for vertical team and data meetings, supporting teacher morale, focusing on student learning, and providing a viable curriculum.

Scheduling time for vertical team and data meetings

Spending time with teachers and scheduling vertical teaming within departments was reported as a necessity. For example Mr. James explained his practice:

We certainly try to get teachers very, very involved in instruction and so my practice as a leader is to spend a lot of time with teachers. We do vertical teaming ... for example we all meet with all the math teachers at elementary level or all science teachers at the elementary level. We have a schedule to do that. We will sit and we will talk about, you know, good instruction.

Holding data meetings are important. For example, Ms. Jackson defined herself as “data driven.” She said, “I am very much data driven, I feel like data tells us where we are, what our strengths are.” At her school, they use student data folders that include report card grades and special education information. Teachers review these student data folders on an ongoing basis. The teachers conduct meetings with parents and students to let them know about their data. She found data interpretation important for teachers in driving their instruction.

Another principal, Ms. Jackson and her administrative team check the data to determine the deficits and what to strengthen within the charter school. She said, “What we noticed, since we have a higher population of Hispanic children and they are mostly second language learners; we definitely have to strengthen our bilingual and ESL programs.” So their campus plan included employing qualified teachers to address the deficits for all students to be successful.

Supporting teacher morale

Several of the principals indicated the importance of supporting teacher morale. Principals believed that teachers would much more likely deliver instruction in such an environment for students to be successful. For example, Mr. Carter believed that the teacher is the key in instruction and it is the principal’s role to shape the environment for the teachers for them to deliver instruction successfully. He said:

It’s what the students are learning. So teacher is the key. Typically based upon my past experience, keep the teachers happy and provide with the tools they need, sharpen their tools that they need and then they deliver to do. Much more likely that they deliver what students need to be successful.

Focusing on student learning

The principals emphasized that in elementary charter schools, a principal's focus must be on student learning. For example, Ms. Hopkins emphasized the following:

You know, they talk a lot about importance of instructional leadership and focusing on student learning in all schools but in a charter school it's particularly critical because if that is not the principal's focus, it's not going to happen. There's no other people around that really force that issue. It's really important for a charter school principal to have a focus on instruction and be able to participate in that.

Another principal, Dr. Marshall focused on "building the capacity" of his administrative team within the building to assure that "quality of instruction is at a high standard." He tied building the capacity and quality of instruction to professional learning communities within his charter school where they were constantly looking at data to make better instructional decisions.

Providing viable curriculum

Existence of a viable curriculum was identified as a necessity for quality instruction with high standards. Elementary charter school principals were very specific when they mentioned their curricula such as project based learning, New Tech curriculum, and dual language programs.

Dr. Marshall listed the components of a good instruction starting with having a viable curriculum. He noted:

We do variety of things that I do for student learning. One of the things that we try to focus on is making sure that we have, what it is called a viable curriculum. And by doing that I believe in building the capacity of my leaders within the building to assure that my quality of instruction is at a high standard. And that goes, comes through professional learning communities. And within the professional learning communities, we are constantly looking at data to determine what kind of instructional practices that accrued within the building.

Dr. Spears also talked about her curriculum and explained the details of the different components of the curriculum. She specifically emphasized a project based learning initiative, dual language program, and New Tech curriculum. Dr. Spears mentioned that project based learning has been an initiative for 6th and 7th grade students as a part of New Tech program. She added that her 6th and 7th grades have been 100% project based learning (PBL) and the charter school has provided every student a laptop for their school work. She has been purchasing laptops continually. She noted that project based learning has been hard for teachers and that it has taken three to five years for them to be good at it.

Dr. Spears's school also has a special emphasis on "dual language." The school offers three languages, English, Spanish and Chinese, for all students starting the first day of school. Social studies and science have been taught in Spanish for students to retain language. Her yearly

expense for dual language programs has been around \$50,000 to \$75,000 for books and professional development.

Providing Professional Development

Three charter school principals noted that they have been using a traditional model of the professional development and appraisal system in teacher supervision, known as Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS). Mr. Carter mentioned that PDAS is “pretty common and widely used by most of the districts” and he said that teachers were aware of it. Mr. James has been also using PDAS in the evaluation process of teachers. Through use of PDAS, Mr. James and his administrative team visited classrooms to observe and evaluate instruction as to whether or not it was aligned with what was expected such as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) based instruction, by using lessons provided as an extension of professional development (PD) initiatives. Mr. James added that the PDAS evaluation system was a part of a teacher’s contract.

Besides using PDAS, which includes preset guidelines and forms, Mr. Carter has used five to ten minute walkthroughs to monitor instruction in the classrooms. He summarized his role as a supervisor as walking into the classrooms and spending time monitoring instruction. He listed the areas he was looking for in teachers’ instructional practices as building skills that promote higher level thinking and positive student interest towards the lessons. For instance, he emphasized he wanted the lessons in his school to be interesting. Although he did not often make corrections to the teachers’ teaching methods, he said that he often asked his teachers “What if” questions to trigger their thinking processes toward deeper understanding in building good instructional practices. More specifically, he typically asked his teachers, “What if you were to ask your students more higher-level thinking questions?”

Mr. James was very happy with the Texas Charter Schools Association’s (TCSA) efforts during the past couple of years in providing professional development for teachers to support instruction. He has taken advantage of these TCSA professional development opportunities by making sure that his teachers benefit in order to be involved in good instructional practices. He believed that good quality professional development would improve instruction. He listed several large training initiatives his school was implementing, such as the National Math and Science training initiative, also known as “Laying the Foundation,” and a writing training initiative which was called “Writing Academy.”

In explaining the efforts to provide better professional development opportunities, Ms. Jackson talked about various mandatory trainings offered, such as reporting child abuse and blood-borne pathogens. They have been using one of the Texas regional service centers as the professional development provider extensively. She was specifically enthusiastic about professional learning communities training and trainings addressing “how to develop higher order thinking questions, how to utilize strategies that help students who are coming from a diverse backgrounds especially with those language and reading deficits.” She plans to focus more on professional learning communities and mentoring program to support teacher growth since many of the teachers at her school are inexperienced.

Dr. Marshall implemented “Saturday institutes” that had taken place during the first semester of the school year. “Saturday institutes” were professional development days for staff. He has also organized new teacher orientation and all staff orientation prior to school starting at the charter school. They have monthly meetings called “instructional PDs.” In those meetings the charter school has been using Khan Academy videos which is a free online educational platform.

Dr. Spears has been very ambitious with professional development. She brought teachers in two weeks prior to the beginning of school for professional development. Besides the mandated compliance related topics such as handbook, team building, and insurance, there have been topics directly related to instruction such as PBL and differentiation training. Last year Buck Institute trained the teachers for three days on PBL. During those two weeks Dr. Spears scheduled orientation for new incoming students where the students spent a week at school to be introduced to the school culture before the school started.

In addition, Dr. Spears discussed the culture of Safety Trust Respect and Responsibility (STRR) training. She has shaped her school culture around STRR concepts and said:

We talked a lot about how to model the STRR cultural in classroom and how to treat kids with respect, how to talk to children in a nontraditional manner, because many of our teachers even new teachers who come from traditional educational setting they tend to yell at kids. We do not yell at [our school].

She also said that they had to really work on how to teach students from poverty feel empowered.

Dr. Spears also offered another training topic, Jensen’s brain-based teaching. The charter school had a curriculum for brain-based teaching where students would be more purposeful, mindful, sympathetic, and self-reflected. Students have been taught how to do breathing and “how to use their breathing to help them being more in tuned with themselves.” In addition, Dr. Spears also scheduled monthly professional development sessions, “touch backs,” throughout the year. She added four additional PD days built into the calendar and three or four early release days for reviewing of data.

Wearing Different Hats

Several of the participants specifically pointed out the variety of roles of charter school principals that needed to be carried out because of limited personnel. The charter school principals had to perform different duties to manage the schools. In addressing this issue Ms. Hopkins tied it to limited resources and added that principals had to have their “fingers in many pies to keep things going.” She pointed out limited resources by saying, “It’s typical, at least at small charter schools that I have worked with, that the amount of extra staff you have is very limited.” She added that it was hard for charter school people to specialize in something because they had to “wear different hats” to keep things going.

Ms. Jackson clarified this concept, wearing different hats, more clearly with providing examples of roles that she assumed. She said:

You know campus administrators perform several duties that you may not have to perform in the independent school district (ISD) because there are other resources and

staff available to perform those duties. But in the charter schools you wear variety of different hats. You're over attendance, you have to keep with staff, personnel matters and you also have to perform parent-teacher conferences, and conferences with your teaching staff. You are the instructional leader on the campus, you are the manager of the attendance on the campus so all the roles that possibly would be divided among several departments in ISDs, it all collapses into one role for the administrators in the charters.

Conclusion

A limitation of this study is that only six charter school elementary principals were included, yet findings within the scope of this study support that these elementary charter school principals consider the instructional leadership role as important to their leadership within their schools. They are actively engaged with instruction through scheduling time for vertical team and data meetings, supporting teacher morale, focusing on student learning, and providing a viable curriculum. As recommended by Clifford et al. (2012), they implemented a variety of professional development strategies to promote instructional improvement. This study suggested that charter school principals were typically placed at the center of instructional practice in schools but that principals were often multitasking because of time and man power restrictions. Consequently, elementary charter school principals assume many different roles. The most important role is that of being the instructional leader of their school, thus they prioritize their roles because of time and man power restrictions. It should be expected that some roles will be neglected or overlooked simply because they cannot handle everything at a limited time with limited resources and staff.

Since charter schools will continue to grow and serve minority populations while addressing their challenges to provide an option for parents, it is crucial that charter school principals are supported to do their duties effectively and efficiently. The following items are strongly recommended to assist charter school principals:

- Region service centers and TCSA can build and support collaborative efforts between principals of charter schools and traditional public schools.
- TCSA and charter school boards can provide peer support by establishing a network of charter school principals (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).
- Region service centers and TCSA can provide more training for charter school principals based on their needs such as time management and prioritizing tasks (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).
- Charter school boards and university principal preparation programs can provide mentoring programs for principals (Germeten, 2011).
- University principal preparation programs can increase training on specifics of instructional leadership (Lynch, 2012).
- Charter school principals can implement strategies to minimize managerial tasks.

By studying and understanding the roles of elementary charter school principals and their practices as instructional leaders, charter school boards, as well as university principal preparation programs, can offer focused training that is tailored to meet the needs of the charter school principal. Principals at charter schools serve children and thus it is important that charter

school educators have the knowledge and skills to do this with excellence. These findings also contribute to a better understanding of the role of the principal in other non-traditional school settings.

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