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Teacher Perceptions of the Instructional Leadership Practices of Principals

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In today's world school leadership, particularly instructional leadership, has taken on a new look. The era of high-stakes accountability has changed almost everything. The instructional leader of the 80's was presented as an efficient top-down, task oriented manager who was focused on curriculum and instruction rather than buildings and budgets (Lashway, 2002). Gone are the days when principals spent most of their time with bus schedules, fire drills, and general curriculum, says the National Association of Elementary Principals (Henry, 2001). Leaders must keep abreast of state and federal goals, the latest technologies and teaching practices, as well as learn to use data to identify learning gaps among all students.

The 21st century instructional leader is portrayed as a democratic community minded leader who builds consensus around a vision grounded in agreed upon standards for student learning with a commitment to be accountable for results. No matter how desirable it is for principals to be instructional leaders, the fact remains managerial responsibilities have not gone away (Lashway, 2002). Someone must be responsible for and assure those managerial tasks are completed. In other words instructional leadership is necessary but not sufficient to create an effective school.

As educators continue to develop school cultures which enable all learners to achieve at their highest levels, the role of the principal becomes paramount. This survey research project endeavors to explore the instructional dimension of the principalship.

A Discussion of Related Literature

The literature on instructional leadership is filled with references to the principal as the primary source of this leadership in effective schools. The principal has to be the person instructional personnel look to for leadership (Edmonds, 1981). Principals should be primarily instructional leaders and lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center (Stricherz, 2001).

School effectiveness literature illustrates the importance of the principal in providing effective leadership and supportive management in schools (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Effective schools have effective leaders (Smith, Maehr, & Midgley, 1992). Effective change in classrooms comes about through a conscious focus on instructional leadership by the principal (Fink & Resnick, 2001). Helping to define priorities in instruction is a primary element of instructional leadership (Tice, 1992).

Effective principals are those who operate to identify, establish, and supervise the shared mission of the school with members of the school community (Lambert, 2002). Principals should insist on a student learning focus, encourage and support leadership in others, model and participate in collaborative practices, ask questions, and facilitate a dialog that focuses on student learning.

Blasé and Blasé (1998) describe instructional leadership as complex and demanding. Their studies, based on teachers' perceptions, found instructional leaders

provide not only insights into what helps teachers to grow, but what followers want and find helpful from their leaders. They asked teachers to describe principals who had a positive influence on student learning. Two broad themes emerged: talking with teachers and promoting professional development. The principal has been characterized as the “chief learning officer” who bears “ultimate responsibility for success or failure of the enterprise, which would indicate an important role for principals in program implementation (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001). Bloom, Castague, and Warren, (2002) believe there is little doubt that an effective principal is prerequisite to school improvement.

Writing and research related to leadership in education has often concentrated on what makes up the leadership function. Scholars have been successful in making up lists of what instructional leaders do or should do, but practitioners are far from taxonomy of what comprises leadership because both leadership and management are contested notions. Instructional leadership is about leading teachers’ professional learning (Southworth, 2002).

Educators have known some principals are more effective than others. Principals have been told they must be effective instructional leaders, yet exactly what that means has remained vague (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004). Waters, et. al. believe if instructional leadership matters, it could be empirically defined, and effective leaders would know not only what to do, but how, when, and why to do it. They identified a positive relationship between school leadership and student achievement. They identified 21 key areas of leadership responsibility significantly correlated with student achievement. Effective instructional leaders understood which changes were most likely

to improve student achievement, what those changes implied for everyone, and how to structure their leadership practices for success.

Five types of administrative behaviors (a) defining goals and mission of the school, (b) promoting an instructional climate, (c) supervising teachers, (d) overseeing curriculum, and (e) monitoring student progress have been consistently identified as occurring in effective schools (Blank, 1987, Purkey & Smith 1983). These behaviors are regularly and consistently reported as important and recent works have supported these claims (Murphy, 1988, Blasé & Blasé, 1998, Henry, 2002).

The days for the principal as the lone instructional leader are over. No longer can one administrator serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators (Lambert 1998; Lambert, Collay, Deitz, Kent, & Richert, 1997; Olson, 2000; Poplin, 1994; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Fullan (2002) defined instructional leadership as the central role for the principal and a valuable first step in increasing student learning, but says that definition does not go far enough. Because principals are not directly involved with instruction, their role consists more of monitoring student progress through teacher contact, supervising teachers, and managing school curriculum and staff development (Meyer, Scott, and Deal, 1983).

Liethwood, Jautzi, and Yeoman (1999) believe the most fully developed model of instructional leadership is the one developed by Hallenger and his associates and consists of three broad categories of leadership practice: defining school mission; managing the instructional program; and promoting the school climate. According to Hallenger and Heck (1997) leadership practices contribute to the outcomes desired by school but the contribution is always mediated by other people, events, and organizational factors such

as teacher commitment, instructional practices, or school culture. This is consistent with the proposition that leaders achieve their results primarily through other people.

Instructional leadership has been linked to high levels of professional knowledge, skill and understanding about pedagogy, knowledge of curricular, pupil learning, adult learning, and human interaction, skills in change management, group dynamics, interpersonal relations, and communications. Also certain personal qualities and individual attributes may be important such as high energy levels, resilience, determination, empathy, and optimism (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Southworth, 2002).

Hallenger and Murphy (1987), through their research and experience suggested principals are unlikely to be strong instructional leaders unless three conditions are met: district decision makers must reduce the barriers that keep principals from performing their instructional leadership role; instructional leadership must be defined in terms of observable practices and behaviors principals can implement; and assessment methods must generate reliable, valid data on instructional leadership behavior and provide information principals can use in their professional development.

Four obstacles suggested by Hallenger and Murphy (1987) which seriously restrain principals from exercising strong instructional leadership are: lack of knowledge of curriculum and instruction; professional norms; district office expectations; and role diversity. Professional norms that suggest educational decision making in the teacher's domain mitigate against strong instructional leadership. Principals often informally trade their authority in the areas of curriculum and instruction for compliance by teachers on other issues. These trades result in territorial boundaries that limit the frequency and

depth of principals' classroom visitation as well as their initiative in consulting with teachers about instructional matters.

Hallenger and Murphy (1987) also believe the principal's role comprises three dimensions of instructional leadership activity; defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting the school learning climate. Managing the instructional program consists of supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. They say instructional leaders have a clear vision of what the school is trying to accomplish and defining the mission entails leading the staff in developing school wide goals and communicating them to the entire school community. The sense of mission evolves from a feeling of purpose shared by staff, students, and community. School goals are articulated to promote both accountability and instructional improvement. Coordinating curriculum is the process of ensuring that students receive appropriate instruction in areas identified by the district (Hallenger & Murphy, 1987).

Sheppard (1996) itemizes the following principal behaviors as being connected to teachers' professional growth and performance: framing school goals, communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, maintaining high visibility, promoting professional development, and providing incentives for learning.

To change the expectations for instructional leadership to one of student learning being the priority, leadership roles could be described as anything done to improve teaching and learning. The role of principals, superintendents, and other educational

leaders have expanded during the past decade to include a larger focus on teaching and learning, professional development, data-driven decision making, and accountability (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). Richard Elmore (2000) described the principal's role as being responsible for designing and implementing a well-focused school improvement plan while working with other key players in the improvement process in a distributed leadership model. Elmore believes each role leads to a different kind of expertise that leaders must both respect and cultivate for there to be success in providing leadership.

Recently instruction has surged back to the top of the leadership agenda driven by the relentless growth of standards-based accountability systems. Explicit standards of learning coupled with heavy pressure to provide tangible evidence of success have reaffirmed the importance of instructional leadership (Lashway, 2002).

With this importance reaffirmed, what remains is to more clearly define instructional leadership and the many responsibilities for those who are considered instructional leaders. The issue most prevalent in the literature is the importance of the role principals plays in the instructional leadership process. What remains unclear is how these roles are to be fulfilled in today's schools by principals.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine how teachers perceive the changing instructional leadership role of principals and to what extent the instructional leadership is practiced. The research further attempted to determine whether instructional leadership practices of principals were consistent with the new paradigm for instructional leadership

established by the accountability movement. Three major research questions were addressed:

1. How do teachers perceive their principal's supervisory activities in instruction?
2. How active are principals perceived to be in overseeing instructional support programs?
3. How do teachers perceive their principal's participation in activities that promote an instructional climate?

Methodology

Through a review of the related literature, a survey instrument designed by King (2002) was adapted for use in the study. The survey consisted of 20 closed-ended responses divided into 4 sections. The first section of the survey requested information on how often the respondent's principal participated in activities related to instructional leadership, such as visiting classrooms, providing feedback on lesson plans, and conversing with teachers about instruction. Responses to these items ranged from "never", "rarely (or 1-2 times per year)", "often (or 3-5 times per year)", or "very often (or 6 or more times per year)" (coded 0 - 3). Embedded in this section were two items that did not follow the response format. One item asked respondents how satisfied they were with the level of support their principal provided in the area of curriculum and instruction. Forced responses were "not satisfied", "somewhat satisfied", "satisfied" or "very satisfied" (scored 0 - 3). The second item asked respondents to identify their principal as either (a) teacher focused, (b) management focused, or (c) learning focused.

In the second section, respondents were asked how active their principal is in supervision of the following instructional support programs: (a) special education, (b) library media, (c) guidance counseling, and (d) ESOL. Responses ranged from “not active”, “somewhat active”, “active”, or “very active” (coded 0-3).

The third section consisted of five Likert scaled responses to statements describing the principal. Responses ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). No neutral response was provided so respondents were forced to either agree or disagree.

The fourth section solicited demographic information. Respondents were asked to provide their years of teaching experience (1-5 years, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, more than 20), their gender, ethnicity, highest academic degree, and the grade level assignment (pk-5, 6-8, 9-12).

The survey was administered to 168 teachers enrolled in Educational Leadership classes as graduate students at a regional university. The participants represented 27 rural school districts in the university’s service area. Participation was voluntary and the surveys were completed anonymously. The completed questionnaire item responses were tabulated and are presented as proportions. In addition, subscale scores were calculated to explore differences in the perceptions of elementary, middle, and high school teachers.

Results

Characteristics of Participants

Of the 168 study participants, 137 (81.5 %) answered all items. Because the study was a preliminary investigation, the decision was made to omit incomplete surveys. Of

the complete case respondents, 103 (75.2 %) were female (92 Caucasian, 9 African American, and 2 Hispanic) and 34 were Caucasian males. Slightly over half of the respondents (96 or 53.2 %) had 10 or fewer years of teaching experience while 12 (8.8 %) had more than 20 years of experience. The majority were pre-K through 5th grade teachers (67 or 48.9 %), with 32 (23.4%) teaching 6th through 9th grades and 38 (27.7%) teaching grades 9 through 12. Most respondents, 72 (52.6 %) held a Master's degree while 56 (40.7 %) held a Bachelor's and 9 (6.6 %) had completed a Specialist's degree.

Summary of Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive their principal's supervisory activities in instruction?

Four survey items addressed the frequency at which principals engaged in the supervision of teaching and learning activities. Responses to the individual items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Item Responses (in percentages) to Principals' Instructional Supervision Activities (n = 137)

Item	Never	Rarely	Often	Very often
How often does your principal:				
visit your class in an instructional supervision role?	8.0	62.8	23.4	5.8
provide feedback on your lesson plans?	40.1	40.9	14.6	4.4
conference with you about your teaching performance?	35.8	49.6	12.4	2.2
converse with you about teaching and learning?	13.1	44.5	29.9	12.4

As can be seen, the majority (over 65 %) of teachers report that their principal never or rarely engages in these activities. In addition, 75 respondents (54.7 %) reported being “not satisfied” or only “somewhat satisfied” with the level of support provided by their principal in the area of curriculum and instruction decisions (item 4). Indeed, the majority (90 or 65.7 %) identified their principal as “management focused” while only 36 (26.3 %) described their principal as “learning focused, and a mere 11 respondents (8.0 %) reported that their principal is “teaching focused” (item 6). To assess differences in the perceptions of elementary, middle, and high school teachers, responses were summed across the four items to create a subscale score. Internal consistency using Cronbach’s α indicates acceptable reliability for the subscale at .76. The mean and standard deviation for each school level are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations for Subscale 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Principal's Supervision of Teaching and Learning Activities

	N	Mean	SD
Elementary School	67	4.6	2.2
Middle School	32	4.7	2.5
High School	38	3.5	2.4

A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the total scores using a family-wise $\alpha = .05$. Pairwise comparisons were made using Bonferroni's adjustment. The overall F-test indicated statistical significance ($F(2, 134) = 3.71, p = .03$) among the groups. The pairwise comparisons revealed that elementary and middle school teachers rated their principals higher, on average, than the high school teachers for these activities; however, due to differences in sample size statistical significance was found between elementary and high school teachers only ($p = .04$). The estimated effect size for the mean difference between elementary and high school teachers' perceptions, calculated using Cohen's d statistic was found to be .55.

Research Question 2: How active are principals perceived to be in overseeing instructional support programs?

To determine the involvement of principals in overseeing curriculum, respondents were asked to rate their principal's activity level in four common educational programs.

Their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Item Responses (in percentages) to Principals' Instructional Support Supervision Activities (n = 137)

Item	Not Active	Somewhat Active	Active	Very Active
How active is your principal in the supervision of the:				
special education program?	32.1	43.1	19.7	5.1
Library media program?	38.7	43.8	13.9	3.6
guidance program?	29.2	42.2	21.7	3.7
ESOL program?	42.3	42.3	11.7	3.6

For each program, less than 25 % of the teachers viewed their principal as being “active” or “very active.” Only 12.5 % reported their principal to be active in supervising the ESOL program.

Item responses were summed across the four items to create a subscale with an internal consistency reliability of $\alpha = .90$. A one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences among elementary, middle, and high school teachers' perceptions for this subscale ($F(2, 134) = 1.56, p = .21$). Table 4 presents the mean and standard deviation for each school level.

Table 4.

Means and Standard Deviations for Subscale 2: Teachers' Perceptions of Principal's Instructional Support Supervision Activities

	N	Mean	SD
Elementary School	67	4.0	3.2
Middle School	32	3.5	2.6
High School	38	2.8	2.5

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive their principal's participation in activities that promote an instructional climate?

Survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement to five statements addressing the principal's participation in promoting an instructional climate. Table 5 summarizes the responses to each item.

Table 5.

Item Responses (in percentages) to Principals' Activities to Promote an Instructional Climate (n = 137)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My principal: encourages discussion among teachers about teaching and learning.	6.6	16.8	47.4	29.2
possess sufficient knowledge of curriculum and instruction necessary to lead teachers in the development of an effective instructional program.	3.6	25.5	46.0	24.8
develops a culture of high expectations for ALL students in the school.	5.8	14.6	53.3	26.3
designs teacher professional growth opportunities that are aligned with school and student learning goals.	2.9	21.2	56.9	19.0
encourages teachers to share the responsibility for leading the instructional program.	5.8	20.4	49.6	24.1

In general, teachers report their principal engages in activities that promote an instructional climate. For each item, over 70 % of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the statement described their principal.

The item responses were summed to create a subscale with an internal consistency reliability of $\alpha = .88$. Because Levene's statistic indicated a violation of the homogeneity

of variance assumption ($F(2, 134) = 4.4, p = .014$), the Brown-Forsythe robust test was used to assess differences among elementary, middle school, and high school teacher perceptions. Statistical significance was found among the three groups ($F(2, 134) = 3.6, p = .03$). Further examination using Bonferroni's adjustment revealed a statistical significance between elementary and high school teacher perceptions ($p = .03$) but not between elementary and middle school ($p = .4$) nor between middle and high school teacher perceptions ($p = 1.0$). The estimated effect size between elementary and high school teachers' perceptions was $d = .58$. Elementary principals were perceived to promote an instructional climate more often than other levels. The mean and standard deviation for each grade level is shown in Table 6.

Table 6.

Means and Standard Deviations for Subscale 3: Teachers' Perceptions of Principal's Activities to Promote an Instructional Climate

	N	Mean	SD
Elementary School	67	6.3	1.8
Middle School	32	5.7	1.8
High School	38	5.2	2.3

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study are both promising and disconcerting. Most teachers appear to agree that their principal seeks to promote an instructional atmosphere. Principals are seen as being knowledgeable about curriculum and as promoting student learning and teacher professional development. However, the majority still describe the principal's leadership as focused on management issues rather than instructional issues.

The data indicate a focus by principals on the daily operational and maintenance activities associated with school operation rather than the activities associated with the instructional leadership function as identified in the survey and gleaned from the literature.

Principals are viewed as having very little, if any, involvement with the supervision of instructional support programs such as special education, library media and guidance services, and ESOL. Each of these programs is instrumental in the success of a school's instructional program. Principals must lead in developing a common sense of connection for these support programs to school's mission for teaching and learning.

In relation to Blase and Blase's (1998) two premises concerning instructional leadership, promoting professional development and talking with teachers, principals received high marks in the area of staff development in that an overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated they "agree" or "strongly agree" their principal promotes teacher professional growth. On the other hand, principals are perceived as having very little dialogue with teachers pertaining to the praxis of teaching. Almost 36% reported their principal "never" conferenced with them about teaching performance and 58% "never" or "rarely" converse with them about teaching and learning. Additionally, teachers reported principals appear to infrequently monitor and assess classroom instruction. It is discouraging that about 73% "rarely" or "never" had classroom visits related to instructional supervision.

The data do reflect that elementary school principals are perceived as promoting instructional leadership more often than their high school counterparts. This observation may be a reflection of the different backgrounds and experiences of these principals and

the cultural differences in elementary and high schools. Elementary schools often project a more collegial culture than high schools (Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp, 1991).

While it is possible these instructional leadership duties are delegated to other school administrators, research on effective schools (Lezotte, 2001) consistently identify strong instructional leadership by the principal as a correlate of high-achieving schools. Hallenger & Murphy (1987) purport principals shape the learning climate by directly or indirectly maintaining high visibility in order to communicate priorities and model expectations; and establishing clear, explicit standards that embody the school's expectations of students. Therefore, the principal is a key player in today's school reform and accountability movements.

Although only teachers' perceptions about their principal are presented in this study, the preliminary findings indicate principals are not fully embracing their role as the instructional leader. These data indicate the instructional leadership function is not being practiced to any degree in the schools sampled.

In a time of increased demands for student achievement brought about by the federal No Child Left Behind law and state accountability systems, it is imperative for principals to embrace the instructional leadership function and make it their chief role. The principal is the primary source of instructional leadership in effective schools (Edmunds, 1981, Purkey & Smith, 1983, Stricherz, 2001).

Further investigation into the reasons principals often fail to carry out the instructional leadership function is needed. It seems clear improved student achievement results from effective instructional leadership in schools (Waters, et. al, 2004). With the weight of accountability warring heavily on principals every effort should be made to

insure that they have the skills and resources necessary to balance the roles of daily manager and instructional leader. The instructional leadership function can no longer be ignored. Superintendents and school boards should demand this from all principals.

There are also implications for leadership preparation programs at colleges and universities. Those who prepare future principals must focus their efforts to assure graduates of their programs are well trained in how to carry out instructional leadership functions. This training should address not only the knowledge base needed, but should provide opportunities for practice in actual school settings.

The responsibilities for and expectations of student success continue to increase with each day. If student achievement is to improve in schools the practice of instructional leadership must also improve. Principals must be true instructional leaders. They should and must know what is going on in the classrooms and converse with teachers about instruction. Principals must monitor student and teacher progress toward the school vision, mission, and goals. They must lead collaborative, continual efforts to improve teaching and learning within their schools.

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