

Fall 11-17-2014

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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Catherine and Breyer, Robert (2014) "The Influence of Effective Leadership on Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol1/iss2/3>

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Keywords

leadership and teaching



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Catherine Barrett and Robert Breyer

ABSTRACT

Principals and educators are challenged with meeting the increased demands of teaching and learning, which becomes difficult in environments filled with negative undercurrents, such as poverty, teacher satisfaction, salary, and instruction. Administrators must instill passion in teachers and provide effective leadership to motivate teachers to engage and energize students. The primary focus of this study was to determine how modeling instructional strategies by principals influence teachers' implementation of strategies that promote greater student engagement and learning. Sustaining teachers' passion for teaching and providing educators with the motivation to engage students in lessons through effective leadership and modeling were addressed in this research.

Keywords: leadership and teaching

Introduction

In recent years, demands in American schools have increased significantly for students, teachers, and school leaders. The 21st century teacher must educate with passion, be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the content, and find ways to make topics fun and appealing for all to ensure academic success. Current approaches such as Dave Burgess' (2012) *Teach like a Pirate* echo this message and challenges educators to meet the demands of the 21st century classroom with boundless enthusiasm and adventure. However, as school leaders work to inspire and lead, inspiration and enthusiasm for teaching can quickly diminish given the excessive bureaucracy associated with accountability and high-stakes testing, salaries that fail to keep pace with inflation, the movement to eliminate tenure, and in states such as North Carolina, the elimination of pay raises for receiving a master's degree (Heitin, 2012). Further, teachers' perceptions of an ungrateful American populous have been fueled by negative images projected by the media. Results of a Phi Delta Kappa Gallup poll (2011) indicated Americans perceive more negative than positive stories are reported about teachers by the news media, and Americans ranked local schools with a positive grade but had lower perceptions of the nation's schools based on negative media attention (Lopez, 2011). As a result of many culminating factors, school leaders are increasingly in a difficult situation and must find innovative ways to increase academic achievement, as well as develop, nurture, and retain effective teachers (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

National initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, an Act of Congress (2001) mandating higher measurable standards and accountability, and Race to the Top (2009), a federal grant-based initiative with similar criteria, have sought to increase student achievement through data-driven measurement of student learning and increasing the use of research-based teaching methods. Some minor gains have been realized; however, both initiatives have generated substantial bureaucracy, and core strategies associated with both models have done more to impede classroom practices grounded in research than promote such practices (Baker, Barton, Darling-Hammond, et al, 2010; Whelan, 2006). Also problematic, principals are often, “asked to improve student learning by implementing mandated reforms that are consistently proven ineffective in raising student achievement” (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 34).

Sustaining an effective faculty of professional educators who are able to maintain and raise student achievement can be a challenge for principals within the current climate. Research suggests effective school leaders must demonstrate targeted leadership skills, such as promoting professional growth among faculty and demonstrating efficacy in pedagogy (Honig, Copland, & Rainey, et al, 2010). Research also shows that teachers believe administrators must understand and support teaching and learning processes and fully understand the challenges involved (Paulsen & Martin, 2014). Research in educational leadership also suggests that collaborative partnerships between administrators and teachers may be helpful in uniting efforts and overcoming the persistent barrage of negative under currents. Therefore, key questions that guided this research included, how can school principals retain relevancy, instill passion, and provide effective leadership that motivates teachers through such challenging times, and can administrators achieve a positive stable environment where teachers view principals as competent leaders and cooperative partners in the education process through modeling effective pedagogical strategies and tools? The purpose of this research was to explore administrator modeling of engaging, energizing methods during staff development and meetings to determine if principals could inspire, further develop, and retain effective classroom teachers and contribute to academic achievement in a rural school setting. This pilot research project sought to answer the aforementioned questions and provide a foundation for future more in depth studies in the area of cooperative praxis and leadership in education.

Review of Literature

The conceptual framework that will guide this work is that of effective school leadership as described in the Wallace Perspective (2013), or schools where principals guide effective teaching and learning. The effective school leadership construct is not a new concept; however, recently, there has been an abundance of research analyzed across multiple grade levels in support of this concept. In a recent research report from the Wallace Foundation (2013) five primary functions of effective administrators were identified as indicators of effective leadership. Each of the five functions is described below and supports the notion that effective school leaders are required in order to develop and sustain effective motivated teachers and increase student achievement.

The Wallace Perspective (2013) is a broad review and synthesis of over 70 research reports and significant publications on effective school leadership. The comprehensive perspective revealed effective school principals perform five key practices. The first is shaping a vision of academic success for all students. The second is creating a climate hospitable to education; the third is cultivating leadership in others; the fourth is improving instruction, and the fifth is managing people, data and process to foster school improvement. Research from the

University of Minnesota and Toronto by (Louis, Keithwood, Wahlstrom, et al (2010), indicated that teachers extolled principals more when an encouraging climate for instruction was created, and higher evaluations were received by principals who encouraged and developed leadership among the faculty. According to Honig, Copland, Rainey, et al (2010), researchers at the University of Washington, found that effective principals focused on the quality of instruction by defining and promoting high expectations and lessening teacher isolation. Further, effective principals are highly visible in the school and focus on making formative observations about learning and professional growth while providing direct and immediate feedback.

In an open-ended questionnaire, Blase & Blase (2000) surveyed 800 American educators asking teachers to pinpoint and describe characteristics and actions of principals who had contributed to the improvement of their classroom instruction and the impact this experience had on instructional practices. Blase & Blase (2000) identified two main themes, the impact of principals talking with teachers to promote reflection and the significance of promoting professional growth accompanied by 12 supporting strategies. Some of the key supporting strategies were providing feedback, modeling effective instructional strategies, and giving authentic praise. As for modeling, Blase and Blase (2000) found that, according to teachers, effective principals demonstrated teaching techniques in classrooms and during conferences; they also modeled positive interactions with students. These forms of modeling were viewed as impressive examples of instructional leadership that primarily yielded positive effects on teacher motivation as well as on reflective behavior. This research also demonstrated how praise significantly affected teacher motivation, self-esteem, efficacy, and fostered, “teacher reflective behavior, including reinforcement of effective teaching strategies, risk taking, and innovation/creativity” (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 134).

Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in his address to the National Association of Secondary School Principals directly addressed the need to strengthen school leadership and find better ways to train school principals. Duncan reported that 70 percent of principals stated traditional school leadership training programs were, “out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today’s schools” (Duncan, 2013, p. 1). In this address, Duncan compared being a principal in today’s schools as a sink-or-swim experience and suggested school leaders must shape the school’s culture and be instructional leaders first and foremost. In closing Duncan stated, “Great principal’s nurture, retain, and empower great teachers. Poor principals run them off” (2013, p. 1).

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) conducted a meta-analysis that included 69 studies, highlighting over 2,800 schools with an estimated 14,000 teachers and 1,400,000 students. From the findings authors created a list of 21 responsibilities that make an effective school leader. A few of the most critical responsibilities listed were being a change agent, engaging in productive communication with and among teachers and students, providing intellectual stimulation that ensures awareness of the most current theories and practices, collaborative involvement with curriculum, and knowledge about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Authors concluded that all 21 responsibilities are significant to the effective execution of leadership in schools.

DuFour and Marzano (2011) examined how district, school, and classroom leaders are able to improve student achievement in *Leaders of Learning*. DuFour and Marzano named a major section of this work, “Leadership is an Affair of the Heart,” to discuss the significance of leading by example and helping individuals develop a sense of self-efficacy through actually becoming more capable. DuFour and Marzano asserted that leadership’s dispositions and

attitudes are contagious and will spread throughout an organization if the leader addresses the issues within an individual's control and then holds the individual accountable for growth and improvement. Through broad polling on leadership, people were asked to think about the best leader they have known and the correlating relationship; respondents concluded that the best leaders take actions that made individuals feel competent and capable (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Westerberg (2013) reviewed significant research literature to write about leadership incorporating relevant experiences from his work as a principal to create a list of ten behaviors that separate successful leaders from the irrelevant. According to Westerberg, effective leaders clearly articulate a vision of effective instruction and assessment and provide precise examples of what this vision looks like. Also important, a common language and terminology is established and used by all to communicate instructional and assessment concepts. Westerberg asserted that every principal must remain intimately familiar with the technical core of teaching by reading professional literature, attending conferences, and working with a professional learning network. Additionally, leaders must be willing to share what they have learned with teachers as colleagues and partners with a common goal. Effective principals can utilize faculty meetings as a place to model high-quality instruction and should take an active role in planning, implementing, and evaluating quality professional development for teachers. Administrators must be viewed as a partner in collaborative productive relationships and be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill in pedagogy. This research explores teacher perceptions when such practices are implemented within a rural school setting.

Methodology

The research project took place at an elementary school located in a rural setting within the Southeastern United States. The school has 654 students from pre-K to 5th grade and includes two self-contained classrooms. The school employs 41 classroom teachers, 12 teacher assistants, one principal, one assistant principal, and one literacy coach. The school has a diverse population of students which includes 70 percent Caucasian, 14 percent African American, and 15 percent Hispanic; 60 percent of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch. Relevant to this research, the school has experienced significant administrative turn-over with five principals and four assistant principals replaced or hired between 2008 and 2013. Demographics contribute to persistent community, economic, and academic challenges that exacerbate a school culture underpinned by low faculty morale.

For this research, the current principal and assistant principal at the rural elementary school agreed to implement strategies of active engagement, or strategies that move the brain into active productive learning (Kagan, 2009), during staff meetings over a six week period to model for teachers how to effectively implement active engagement strategies in individual classrooms. Administrators also agreed to add one simple technology skill that teachers could use to further capture students' interest and enhance engagement during learning activities. Both strategies applied were aligned with the goals listed in the School Improvement Plan. The faculty had also engaged in professional development training during the previous summer to learn how to implement active engagement strategies in the classroom.

Following the constructs of effective school leadership, school leaders implemented pedagogical training. During the first staff meeting of the academic year, the principal provided an Animoto video to explain what topics and strategies would be presented during the initial meeting. After the video was presented, the principal actively engaged faculty in a pairing

activity and asked one member of each pair to explain how Animoto might be used in the classroom and to further explain how and why this tool may engage and excite students about learning. After sixty seconds of sharing, roles changed and the second person in the pair was asked to share thoughts on the same topic. After another sixty seconds, one of the two teachers was randomly asked to stand up and summarize their collective thoughts as the assistant principal recorded the main points on the SmartBoard. After summaries were shared, the principal reviewed the main points on the SmartBoard and praised the teachers for the work accomplished. The principal asked teachers to share opinions on how well they believed the activities would benefit students and if they could implement the suggestions in the classroom. Teachers responded with many positive strategies for implementation and ways to use the activities to improve teaching. The principal challenged teachers to implement some of these strategies at least twice over the upcoming week.

During the second staff meeting the principal used a strategy called, Fan and Pick, to review eight practices for mathematics (Kagan, 2009). The teacher in the one position would pick up the pile of cards in the middle and fan them apart. The person in the two positions would pick a card and then read the question aloud to the team. The team would answer the question. The rest of the team would coach participants toward the correct answer or help fill in parts of the answer the team member missed. The two participants would pick up and fan the cards, and the third person would answer; this pattern is repeated until all the cards are completed. After all groups completed the review, the principal introduced a poster she had made about what was learned through watching the teachers interact in their groups. The principal then modeled a pre-selected technology skill as she showed teachers how to use Glogster, a web-based presentation program. She assigned each group a math practice activity and asked groups to create a poster on Glogster that explained the assigned math practice. Teacher groups had 10 minutes to create a poster. Completed posters were presented, and groups answered questions about assigned math practices. The principal concluded the meeting by reviewing what was learned and emphasizing specific ways to implement the new strategies into the classroom. Similar to the previous meeting, the principal challenged teachers to implement the new strategies at least twice per week until the next staff meeting.

Over the six week period, data were collected by observing and documenting the frequency of implementation of new strategies in classrooms during scheduled administrative teacher observations; through an anonymous faculty survey that specifically asked teachers to indicate value of activities and presentations, frequency of implementation of new strategies and activities, and perceptions of leadership, as well as via informal walks around the building with an observation checklist where implementation could be observed and noted. Surveys were anonymous to provide an opportunity for open discourse and sharing of perceptions by teachers. In addition, administrators worked to build collaborative relationships and encouraged teachers to be honest with responses because the goal was to learn how to be better, more supportive leaders. Data were collected over the six week period and analyzed for results that emerged.

Limitations of the study include that the primary researcher was also an assistant principal at the school, which has the potential to skew teacher responses. In addition, the study was only six weeks in duration, which limits the actual results to a snapshot. In subsequent research, the researcher may choose to have no affiliation with the faculty in order to further strengthen the research. Some of the limitations may restrict the broad generalization of results; however, this research does provide valuable insights into concepts that support effective leadership.

Results

Sustaining teachers' passion for teaching and providing educators with the motivation to engage students in lessons through effective leadership and modeling were addressed in this research. The school's administrative team designed and implemented effective lessons in student engagement during staff meetings which became a space for professional development led by administration. These meetings were designed to replicate classroom instruction where effective teaching strategies were modeled for the faculty. The questions at the heart of this research asked, how can school principals retain relevancy, instill passion, and provide effective leadership that motivates teachers through such challenging times, and can administrators achieve a positive stable environment where teachers view principals as competent leaders and cooperative partners in the education process through modeling effective pedagogical strategies and tools? The results of teacher observations, survey results, and data obtained via anecdotal observations were positive and indicated that the use of modeling by administration had a positive effect on teacher motivation and implementation of more effective teaching strategies being utilized in the classroom.

Through examination of the survey results and walk-through data, a conclusion could be drawn that teachers need an opportunity to see effective teaching strategies being implemented by school leaders. By participating in the different activities, teachers were able to experience learning similar to that which students experience during a lesson and were able to experience the different strategies presented. Teachers were also able to observe how the administrator implemented strategies and modified activities accordingly to fit the needs of participants. According to surveys, administrators were also able to respond to inquiries related to the activities, which led to increased positive perceptions of leadership as well as strategies. School leaders were observed as knowledgeable credible collaborators vested in helping teachers improve student achievement through effective pedagogy. One teacher response noted that "it was a big help to see the different strategies being used and implemented, because I am a visual learner, and I would never have been able to implement these strategies by just reading about them."

During the six week period when the effective teaching strategies were modeled for the staff, there was an observable increase in the number of new strategies being used in the classrooms. Teachers noted on the surveys that they felt more confident and excited about adding new strategies to their lessons. Teachers who were typically reluctant to try the different strategies in their classrooms were observed using modified parts of the different strategies. All teacher participants indicated that they felt that there was more student engagement in the classroom, as well as an observable decrease in discipline issues.

After examining evidence from the collected data, the administrative team concluded that modeling effective teaching strategies during faculty meetings extended beyond professional development and did seem to be a key aspect of retaining relevancy, boosting morale, and providing effective leadership that motivates teachers. The team also concluded that implementation of such activities has the potential to contribute to developing effective teachers in the classroom and improving student achievement. Implications for future research would include a comparative analysis of student test scores pre and post implementation of effective leadership strategies as well as implementing a similar study for a longer duration and with modified survey questions. Results of this process have led administrators to believe that it is imperative to continue implementing this plan throughout the remainder of the school year.

Summary and Implications

For this study, administrators utilized effective active engagement teaching strategies and modeled these strategies at faculty meetings and professional development trainings within the school. Teachers were able to observe how strategies were applied and able to observe how such strategies impacted students during the lesson. Teachers who implemented different strategies in their classrooms noticed a rise in student engagement and a decrease in classroom discipline issues. Teachers reported feeling more confident and excited about their lessons.

Effective leadership according to DuFour and Marzano (2011) refers to leading by example, and in this case, helping teachers feel more capable by having them become more capable. During this study, teachers were given the opportunity to observe administrators model effective teaching strategies, discuss and ask questions, and implement the strategies presented. Faculty reported feeling stronger support from the administrative team through more frequent observations and more opportunities to engage in professional discussions as the team gathered direct feedback from teachers about their lessons. According to teachers, administrators can be perceived as lacking in sound pedagogical skills and understandings about the challenges involved in teaching. However, through effective modeling and relationship and team-building between faculty and school leadership, teachers felt supported and were able to view administrators as more capable, trustworthy, and deserving of respect, which can help to counter the perception of the classroom as a hostile environment.

In conclusion, results of this study support the concept of effective school leadership and the notion that effective leadership guides teaching and learning through modeling effective strategies, building positive collaborative relationships, and demonstrating support for teachers as they implement new strategies in the classrooms. Principals can lack credibility when evaluating teachers on pedagogical practices diminishing the impact of instructional feedback. However, in an environment where principals demonstrate efficacy in pedagogy and lead teachers in learning and adopting effective strategies, teachers can be both motivated and energized to implement fresh approaches to teaching.

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