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Trilateral Perceptions of the Importance of Instructional Leadership Behaviors

Anna Schwan
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Recognizing a global focus on principals to be proficient instructional leaders while meeting the demands of multiple responsibilities, this study seeks to investigate the perception of importance of research-based instructional leadership behavior functions through a triangulated lens of teacher candidates, teachers, and principals. This study aims to empirically investigate the level of perceived importance of job-related functions of the school principal by asking teacher candidates, teachers, and principals to appraise responsibilities of instructional leaders on a modified version of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS). Participants were 75 principals, 336 in-service teachers in South Dakota and Nebraska and 94 teacher candidates at six universities across South Dakota and Nebraska. The data reported in this article demonstrate that respondents consistently rated the behavior functions as important, but differed in their perceptions of importance. The data also imply a rank of importance that could be utilized as a priority list for a school principal.

Introduction

How principals spend their time has been the focus of numerous studies over the past two decades (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007; Muse & Abrams, 2011; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Whitaker & Turner, 2000). The predominant themes indicate school principals are hurried, taxed, and held accountable for an array of responsibilities, but spend the majority of their time on managerial tasks. For example, some studies have described principals as consistently spending much of their time on “real-life priorities such as dealing with parents who show up at school, enacting student discipline, completing observations, supporting teachers, placing parent phone calls, handling e-mails, and dealing with various crisis situations” (Muse & Abrams, 2011, p. 55). The tendency is for administrative and managerial duties to consume much of the school principal’s day rather than duties that support academic instructional that more closely align with student achievement outcomes (Horng, Klaskik, & Loeb, 2010; Manasse, 1985; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012; Whitaker & Turner, 2000).

Time is a precious commodity of which a principal must be extremely mindful and deliberate about its expenditure (Grissom, Loeb, & Hajime, 2015). Unfortunately, 70% of principals have reported that their biggest challenge is lack of time (NASSP, 2001). Nonetheless, mounting pressure on districts to improve student achievement has placed a targeted focus on principals. This focus is not without reason; the resounding consensus of a large number of studies conducted over the last thirty years is that superior principal leadership is correlated to affirmative school-related outcomes, most notably student achievement (Anderson, 1989;

Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Erickson, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Sykes, King, & Patrick, 2002). Current expectations demand that principals demonstrate knowledge of both instruction and management, and to be effective, they must gracefully toe the line between instructional and managerial functions (Muse & Abrams, 2011).

The multifaceted role of principals often results in a disconnect between what they think they ought to do and what they are actually doing (Whitaker & Turner, 2000). Some research has documented principals' beliefs that they should focus their time on functions related to teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2015; Muse & Abrams, 2011; Whitaker & Turner, 2000), but that the nature of the job consistently demands otherwise (Muse & Abrams, 2011). Compounding the issue is that many new principals encounter feelings of shock at the multitude of responsibilities and duties now upon them. An assumption guiding this current study is that behaviors associated with instructional leadership have historically been vague, making it easier to surrender time to well-defined managerial tasks. Better awareness of instructional leadership behaviors could help principals prioritize their efforts accordingly.

The current study sought to investigate the importance placed on instructional leadership behaviors, as defined in the framework by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), by not only principals, but also by teachers and teacher candidates. The triangulation of their perceptions informs us of which behaviors various stakeholders believe principals should concentrate on and place in a position of priority. The research question guiding the investigation is: How do the perceptions of principals, teachers, and teacher candidates compare?

The principals who focus on teaching and learning have the most influence on student achievement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The issue is not what instructional leadership responsibility is "best," but facilitating guidance over teaching and learning in demanding environments requires principals to be very deliberate with their time and have a clear direction of how to prioritize.

Visionary principals have a clear purpose of what they want their schools to achieve, and it must be clear to the entire school community. Sparks (2007) observes that successful leaders must "cultivate clarity regarding values and fundamental purposes that are most important" (p. 13). The evidence in this research suggest that principals are not facilitating a recognizable vision that teachers and principals can cohesively promote.

Conceptual Framework

School reform in the 21st century requires that principals demonstrate proficiency in instructional leadership, which is typically defined as a collection of direct and indirect functions that support classroom teaching and student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The principal's impact on student achievement is second only to that of the teacher's, and some researchers argue the school principal is the dominant catalyst in achieving desirable school outcomes (Hallinger, 2010, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, et al., 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Sykes et al, 2002; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Many early studies on instructional leadership lacked explicit descriptors of corresponding behaviors (Bossert, et al., 1982; Greenfield, 1982; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 1981; Murphy, Hallinger, & Mitman, 1983), thus providing little practical direction on which behaviors are considered instructional (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). Back in 1985, Hallinger and Murphy remarked that part of the reason administrators found difficulty in exhibiting distinction was due in part to no clear-cut definition of the term *instructional leader*. In response to the need for an articulate description of the principalship, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) developed a framework that not only delineates the job functions, but also offers an explicit and systematic way of evaluating the principal's effectiveness in performing the various behavior functions. The framework recognized leadership as comprised of three dimensions: *defining the school mission*, *managing the instructional program*, and *promoting a positive learning climate*. The three dimensions are further disseminated into ten instructional leadership functions as outlined below (see Methods).

According to Hallinger and Murphy (1985), the first dimension, *defines a school mission*, is built on the notion that while the principal is not sole proprietor of the school's mission. For example, the principal is accountable for collectively involving staff, students, and the community in fostering ownership of the mission, operationalizing it, and communicating it appropriately. The process is similar to articulating strategy and elucidating expectations in business (Diamond, 1999). The second dimension, *manages the instructional program*, maintains that the overall responsibility of coordinating the school's curriculum, student progress, and supervision and evaluation of teachers belongs to the principal. *Develops a positive school learning climate*, the third dimension in the framework, marks effective schools with a climate that personifies high standards, professional development of human resources, and positive expectations.

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) created a tool based on their framework, known as the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (PIMRS), to measure the three dimensions through 50 specific "behaviorally anchored items" (Hallinger et al., 2013, p. 276) that operationalize the functions. The PIMRS was originally designed to be completed by the principals themselves as well by their supervisors and the teachers whom they supervise. The final product is meant to give principals a well-rounded assessment of their practice from multiple angles (Gurley, Anat-May, O'Neal, Lee, & Dozier, 2016). Hallinger, Wang, and Chen (2013) reported that the PIMRS has been repeatedly analyzed for reliability and validity and found to be both valid and reliable when measuring explicit instructional leadership behaviors (Dimension 1, $\alpha=.88$, Dimension 2, $\alpha=.91$, and Dimension 3, $\alpha=.93$). The whole scale alpha reliability estimate was reported as .96.

The PIMRS has since been extensively used all over the world in more than 200 empirical studies conducted in 22 countries (Hallinger, 2011). Numerous studies exist that utilize the PIMRS as a means to compare the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding how often the specific behavior functions are enacted (Hallinger, 2005). The current study seeks not to compare observations of enacted behaviors, but to examine perceptions of importance of instructional leadership behaviors from various points of view. While the PIMRS is predicated on the balance of the three dimensions, the current study assumes the reality that principals consistently seek to prioritize their efforts based on what functions they perceive to be the most immediately demanding of their time, in other words, the most important.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived importance of instructional leadership behaviors by principals from the view of principals, teachers, and teacher candidates (university pre-service students). In order to gather these data, the nomothetic survey, which emphasizes the objective collection of data from a large sample source for the purpose of quantitative analysis (Crossman, 2019) was selected.

Instrument

The original version of the PIMRS (Hallinger, & Murphy, 1985) asks teachers under principals and supervisors of principals to indicate the extent to which they feel their principals have demonstrated 50 specific behaviors during the past school year, and for principals to do the same with regard to their own behavior (1 = *almost never*, 5 = *almost always*). With the survey authors' permission, the current study modified the introductory wording of the statements on the PIMRS to prompt respondents to rate the *perceived importance* of the behaviors (1 = *not important*, 2 = *minimally important*, 3 = *slightly important*, 4 = *fairly important*, 5 = *very important*). The behavior functions remained identical. A reliability analysis indicated that the modified instrument was strongly reliable, $\alpha=.923$. All items appeared to be worthy of retention, resulting in the same or decrease in the alpha if deleted. The original whole scale alpha reliability estimate was reported as .96 (Hallinger, Chung, & Chen, 2013).

The instrument included 50 items total among the three dimensions and ten functions. Each function contains five behaviors:

- Dimension 1: Defines a school mission (10 behavior items)
 - Frame the school's goals
 - Communicate the school's goals
- Dimension 2: Manages the instructional program (15 behavior items)
 - Supervise and evaluate instruction
 - Coordinate the curriculum
 - Monitor student progress
- Dimension 3: Develops a positive school learning climate (25 behavior items)
 - Protect instructional time
 - Maintain high visibility
 - Provide incentives for teachers
 - Promote professional development
 - Provide incentives for learning

Procedures

The states of South Dakota and Nebraska were selected as the research sites for this study out of convenience. To reach teacher candidates, emails were sent to department chairs of education programs in six random public universities, six in each state. The e-mail asked department chairs to disseminate the e-mail and survey instrument to teacher candidates in their programs.

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Utilizing listings on the states' department of education websites, an e-mail was sent to 160 randomly selected principals of public schools. The e-mail asked principals to complete the survey and to distribute the survey instrument to the teachers in the school.

A total of 505 individuals responded to the survey: 75 principals, 336 teachers, and 94 teacher candidates. This was a response rate of 47% for principals, 14% for teachers, and 32% for teacher candidates. While the return rate for teachers was low, the number of responses was deemed an acceptable sample.

Descriptive data was first exemplified for the total sample and individually for the three groups. The researcher decided prior to conduct three pair-wise comparisons from the outset rather than an analysis of variance with post-hoc tests.

Results

The research question asked: *How do the perceptions of principals, teachers, and teacher candidates compare?* The overall results among principals, teachers, and teacher candidates indicate that respondents perceive all functions to have importance, with all but three having an average score that indicates a general perception of the behaviors being fairly-very important on the five-point scale (1 = *not important*, 2 = *minimally important*, 3 = *slightly important*, 4 = *fairly important*, 5 = *very important*). Three instructional leadership functions perceived as equally most important by the total sample were *frame the school goals (F1)*, *supervise and evaluate instruction (F3)*, and *promote professional development (F9)*. The function perceived as least important, although still averaging a score of slightly-fairly important was *provide incentives for teachers (F8)*. Table 1 shows that descriptive statistics for the total sample and each group of respondents. Specifically for principals, *frame the goals*, *promote professional development*, and *supervise and evaluate instruction* were equally ranked as the most important instructional leadership functions. Regarding teachers, *supervise and evaluate instruction* was ranked highest in importance, followed closely by *promote professional development* and *frame the school*

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Instructional Leadership Behavior Functions

| | Total Sample | Principals | Teachers | Teacher Candidates |
|-----|---|------------|----------|--------------------|
| F1 | <i>Frame the school goals</i> | 4.41 | 4.24 | 4.39 |
| F2 | <i>Communicate the school goals</i> | 4.01 | 4.09 | 4.17 |
| F3 | <i>Supervise and evaluate instruction</i> | 4.41 | 4.28 | 4.23 |
| F4 | <i>Coordinate the curriculum</i> | 4.13 | 4.01 | 4.12 |
| F5 | <i>Monitor student progress</i> | 4.03 | 3.85 | 3.92 |
| F6 | <i>Protect instructional time</i> | 3.91 | 3.67 | 3.57 |
| F7 | <i>Maintain high visibility</i> | 4.07 | 4.01 | 3.82 |
| F8 | <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> | 3.9 | 3.96 | 4.00 |
| F9 | <i>Promote professional development</i> | 4.41 | 4.25 | 4.26 |
| F10 | <i>Provide incentives for learning</i> | 3.94 | 3.92 | 4.12 |

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goals. Teacher candidates perceived *frame the goals*, *promote professional development*, and *supervise and evaluate instruction* as the most important, respectively in that order. Table 2 shows that order of the functions from highest to lowest importance for the total sample, and individually for each respondent group.

The research empirically examines how teacher candidates, teachers, and principals perceive the importance of the functional behaviors of the instructional leadership dimensions of principals. While F1 *Frame the school goals* was perceived as the most important with the least amount of variation in responses, the respondents' perceptions of the importance of several other functions were similar. Overall the respondents appear to feel the behavior functions are important, but F1 *Frame the school's goals* emerged as the most important. We did not find the behavior functions to be ranked according to the dimensions originally set forth in the development of the PIMRS (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). F3 *Supervise and evaluate instruction* and F9 *Promote professional development* have similar means and are ranked 2 and 3. F10 *Provide incentives for learning* and F2 *Communicate the school goals* have similar means and are ranked 4 and 5.

Table 2
Rankings of Mean of Perceived Importance of Behavior Functions

| Rank | Total Sample | Principals | Teachers | Teacher Candidates |
|------|--|--|--|---|
| 1 | F1 <i>Frame the school goals</i> | F1, F3, F9 <i>Frame the school goals, Supervise and evaluate instruction, Promote professional development</i> | F1 <i>Frame the school goals</i> | F1 <i>Frame the school goals</i> |
| 2 | F3 <i>Supervise and evaluate instruction</i> | F4 <i>Coordinate the curriculum</i> | F3 <i>Supervise and evaluate instruction</i> | F9 <i>Promote professional development</i> |
| 3 | F9 <i>Promote professional development</i> | F7 <i>Maintain high visibility</i> | F9 <i>Promote professional development</i> | F3 <i>Supervise and evaluate instruction</i> |
| 4 | F10 <i>Provide incentives for learning</i> | F2 <i>Communicate the school goals</i> | F2 <i>Communicate the school goals</i> | F2 <i>Communicate the school goals</i> |
| 5 | F2 <i>Communicate the school goals</i> | F5 <i>Monitor student progress</i> | F4 <i>Coordinate the curriculum</i> | F4, F10 <i>Coordinate the curriculum, Provide incentives for learning</i> |
| 6 | F4 <i>Coordinate the curriculum</i> | F10 <i>Provide incentives for learning</i> | F8 <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> | F8 <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> |
| 7 | F8 <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> | F6 <i>Protect instructional time</i> | F6, F10 <i>Protect instructional time, Provide incentives for learning</i> | F5 <i>Monitor student progress</i> |
| 8 | F5 <i>Monitor student progress</i> | F8 <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> | F5 <i>Monitor student progress</i> | F7 <i>Maintain high visibility</i> |
| 9 | F7 <i>Maintain high visibility</i> | | F7 <i>Maintain high visibility</i> | F6 <i>Protect instructional time</i> |
| 10 | F6 <i>Protect instructional time</i> | | | |

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F4 *Coordinate the curriculum* is ranked 6 and F8 *Provide incentives for teachers* is ranked 7. The remaining three behavior functions, F5 *Monitor student progress*, F7 *Maintain high visibility*, and F6 *Protect instructional time* are ranked 8, 9, and 10. Figure 1 displays the results of the rankings of the behavior functions.

Figure 1
Rankings of the behavior functions of the PIMRS

| Defines a School Mission | Manages the Instructional Program | Develops a Positive School Learning Climate |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Frame the school's goals | 2. Supervise and evaluate instruction | 10. Protect instructional time |
| 5. Communicate the school's goals | 6. Coordinate the curriculum | 9. Maintain high visibility |
| | 8. Monitor student progress | 7. Provide incentives for teachers |
| | | 3. Promote professional development |
| | | 4. Provide incentives for learning |

Group Pair-wise Comparisons

For F1 *frame the school goals*, despite all groups ranking this function as the most important, there were statistically significant differences in levels of perceived importance. Principals had a higher perception of importance than teachers ($M = 4.41$ and 4.33 , respectively) and teacher candidates ($M = 4.39$) also had a higher perception of importance compared to teachers.

For F2 *communicate the school goals*, again, groups ranked the function similarly, coming in as fourth most important, but statistically significant differences in perceptions of importance were found between each combination of pairs. Teacher candidates felt it was more important than did principals ($M = 4.17$ and 4.04 , respectively) and teachers ($M = 4.09$). Teachers had a higher sense of its importance than reported by principals.

F3 *supervise and evaluate instruction* was ranked highest by principals (in a three-way tie), second by teachers and third by teacher candidates. The average perceived importance by principals ($M = 4.41$) was statistically significantly different than the average of teacher candidates ($M = 4.23$) and teachers ($M = 4.28$).

F4 *Coordinate the curriculum* had the second highest average by principals but the fifth highest average for teachers and teacher candidates. The result of the principals was significantly higher than that of teachers ($M = 4.13$, 4.01 , respectively). Although this function was in the middle of the list for both teachers and teacher candidates, teacher candidates ($M = 4.12$) had a higher average perception of important than teachers. The results are indicated in Table 3.

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Table 3
Group Pair-wise comparisons

| | | Principals/ Teachers | | | Principals / Teacher Candidates | | | Teachers / Teacher Candidates | | |
|-----|---|-------------------------|-----------|----------|------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
| F1 | <i>Frame the school goals</i> | | | <.01 | | | 0.24 | | | <.01 |
| F2 | <i>Communicate the school goals</i> | | | <.01 | | | <.01 | | | <.01 |
| F3 | <i>Supervise and evaluate instruction</i> | | | .02 | | | <.01 | | | .90 |
| F4 | <i>Coordinate the curriculum</i> | | | <.01 | | | .90 | | | .01 |
| F5 | <i>Monitor student progress</i> | | | .06 | | | .74 | | | .89 |
| F6 | <i>Protect instructional time</i> | | | <.01 | | | <.01 | | | .12 |
| F7 | <i>Maintain high visibility</i> | | | .26 | | | .02 | | | .01 |
| F8 | <i>Provide incentives for teachers</i> | | | .03 | | | .17 | | | .04 |
| F9 | <i>Promote professional development</i> | | | .28 | | | .01 | | | .23 |
| F10 | <i>Provide incentives for learning</i> | | | <.01 | | | .11 | | | .02 |

For F5 *monitor student progress*, the data did not indicate a significant difference among any of the pairs.

With averages that ranked F6 *protect instructional time* as seventh and ninth most important, both teachers and teacher candidates reported significantly less importance than principals ($M = 3.67, 3.57$ and 3.91 , respectively).

For F7 *maintain high visibility*, principals reported this was having the second highest important despite the fact that teachers perceived this as lowest in importance and teacher candidates as second lowest. Nonetheless, the difference in averages between principals and teachers was not significantly different. There was a significant difference between teacher candidates and principals ($M = 3.82$ and 4.07 , respectively).

For F8 *provide incentives for teachers*, the data indicate a significant difference in the average reports of importance by teacher candidates ($M = 4.00$ and 3.96 , respectively). Teachers felt this had less importance that did teacher candidates, but higher importance than reported by principals ($M = 3.90$).

F9 *promote professional development* had one of the higher averages for all three groups. A significant difference was only indicated between principals and teacher candidates ($M = 4.41$ and 4.26 , respectively).

Lastly, for F10 *provide incentives for learning*, the data indicated that teacher candidates ($M = 4.12$) perceived the behavior function to be more important than did teachers ($M = 3.92$) and principals ($M = 3.94$).

Discussion

This research examines specific operationalized behaviors as defined in the current body of literature of the principal as an instructional leader. Data from prior research reported in this article indicates a mounting pressure on principals to excel as instructional leaders while increasing student achievement. Furthermore, the interest in training school principals to be effective instructional leaders has heightened globally (Gewertz, 2003; Hallinger, 2005; Stricherz, 2001a). Defining, understanding, and communicating instructional behaviors is especially salient as principals continually find themselves responsible for excellence in instructional leadership whether or not they feel proficiently adept. The challenge that school principals face, however, is that they are consistently inundated with the daily tasks of running a school, and often times their priorities shift to managerial tasks rather than focusing on responsibilities associated with teaching and learning.

The data furnished by this study demonstrate that the respondents share a similar opinion of the importance of the ten instructional leadership functions as measured in the PIMRS. As reported earlier, the PIMRS has been highly tested for validity and reliability and used extensively over the last thirty years (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Gurley et al., 2016; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006) in a variety of studies on principal effectiveness (Gieselmann, 2009).

While the respondents consistently rated the behavior functions as important, the data imply a rank of importance that could be utilized as a guide for a school principal. The data suggest that principals focus their attention on framing the school goals as the behavior deemed most important by all three groups on which to apply their time and effort. The first dimension in the PIMRS is *Defining a School Mission* which contains the top ranked behavior function, *Frame the school goals*. The school vision is often considered to be the school's overarching purpose of the school which acts as a compelling student learning outcome. Angelica (2001), Calder (2002), and Humphries (2005) defined mission as "what we, as an organization, are all about," "why we exist," and "what we do." Essentially a school's mission is the chief message conveyed to its stakeholders. It is curious to note that while the data indicate F1 *Frame the school goals* as the most important, the other behavior function in the dimension *Defines a School Mission*, F2 *Communicate the school goals*, was ranked 5th which could possibly be the result of respondents' perception that framing the school goals may also include some communicating of the school goals.

The function with the second highest perceived importance is F3 *Supervise and evaluate instruction* closely followed by F9 *Promote professional development*. F3 and F9 were perceived similarly and appear to be perceived at a similar level of importance. The fourth

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highest perceived important function is F10 *Provide incentives for learning*, followed closely by F2 *Communicate the school goals* which is the third grouping. The data demonstrate F2 and F10 are perceived to be at a similar level of importance.

The sixth highest (4th group) perceived important function is F4 *Coordinate the curriculum* which is perceived to be significantly different from F2, F10, and F8. The seventh highest (5th group) perceived important function is F8 *Provide incentives for teachers*, which is perceived to be significantly different from F4, F5, F7, and F6. The last group of F5 *Monitor student progress*, F7 *Maintain high visibility* and F6 *Protect instructional time* are perceived to be at a similar lower level of importance.

The study confirmed several significant differences between groups' perceptions of the ten instructional leadership behavior functions. These differences suggest a misalignment of understanding among three extremely important groups within a school: those training to be teachers, in-service teachers, and school principals. The data indicated a consistent statistically significant difference in the way that teacher candidates viewed the importance of behavior functions as compared to teachers or principals. This finding raises the question of what teacher candidates expect from their principal as new teachers. It would appear that teacher candidates are not familiar with the principal's role and what they should expect from their leader.

Interestingly, teacher candidates and principals do view some functions as having similar importance but then the data indicate that teachers and principals do not perceive similar importance (F1 *Frame the school goals*, F8 *Provide incentives for teachers*, and F10 *Provide incentives for learning*) of the same functions. This brings about a question that merits investigation in future research: what creates changes in teacher perceptions on the importance of leadership behaviors after they have had experience teaching? Teachers and principals differ in their perception of importance of seven behavior functions (F1 *Frame the school goals*, F2 *Communicate the school goals*, F3 *Supervise and evaluate instruction*, F4 *Coordinate the curriculum*, F6 *Protect instructional time*, F8 *Provide incentives for teachers*, and F10 *Provide incentives for learning*). Based on the differences in perceptions of importance, it would appear as though the two most important instructional entities in the school building are misaligned in their understanding of what particular functions entail and/or are in disagreement about what principals ought to be focusing their efforts. In either case such misunderstanding does not aid in a cohesive partnership aimed at student achievement. New and practicing teachers look to the building principal for instructional leadership. However; without a common understanding of what that looks like, how can principals and teachers expect to effectively work toward achieving high instructional success?

It would seem apparent that school principals, as the foremost leaders of a school building, should commence their instructional leadership efforts on operationalizing the school mission, but as Fayed and Yoshida (2014) noted, the steps to do so effectively are not listed in any principal training manual. The PIMRS offers a starting point as evidenced by high perceptions of importance by all three groups; principals should first work to frame the school goals as a result of the mission. Just as in a classroom, carefully selected and inclusive of constituents' beliefs, objective statements and learning outcomes must exist and be communicated in order to conduct a conducive learning environment. Principals wishing to be effective instructional

leaders might consider organizing their efforts similarly to those of teachers in a classroom, and similarly, communicating the strategy to their constituents.

The findings of this study provide opportunities for school principals to see how specific behaviors related to instructional leadership were ranked by other principals, in-service teachers, and pre-service teachers. Modifying an instrument used in hundreds of prior studies (Hallinger et al., 2016), we find the prospect of ranking the duties of a school principal so that priorities can be shifted accordingly. In addition, difference in perception of importance of instructional responsibilities is demonstrated among the groups, presenting a need to articulate and continue to discuss the instructional responsibilities of the principal so that a common thread exists among the groups.

It could be argued that while it appears as though respondents answered similarly as indicated by relatively close means, perhaps it is the result of a lack of collective understanding and agreement about the exemplar behaviors of the principal as an instructional leader. Without a specific operationalized set of responsibilities that define the principalship, it becomes very difficult for the principal to prioritize activities and dedicate time to responsibilities linked to teaching and learning that could be described as vague and undefined compared to managerial tasks that are tangible and finite.

The ranked results indicate how respondents perceive the importance of the ten delineated behavior functions which provides a useful commencing point and possible priority list for any principal desiring to prepare for the job or reflecting on current leadership.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be underscored. The issue of measurement error is present to some extent for each of the survey statements. Self-ratings of the importance of instructional leadership behavior functions are likely to be flawed assessments of behaviors that actually lead to increased student achievement. The data in this study was self-reported and could contain potential bias. For example, in-service teachers may have subjective assessments of their current principals that could potentially affect their responses to the behavior functions.

The data accumulated by the survey were collected from respondents in two rural Midwest states; the study does not include urban representation. In addition, teacher candidates and some teachers may not necessarily have an adept understanding of what each of the behavior functions entails and could therefore misinterpret the statements and judge importance accordingly.

Implications for Practice

For years the field has been insisting that principals focus on instructional leadership (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006), but the literature tends to suggest that school principals are not concentrating their time and efforts on responsibilities associated with teaching and learning. Research outside of education has shown that professionals with time management skills are more likely to concentrate their efforts on areas that are high priority (Claessens, van Erde, Rutte, & Roe,

2004), and Grissom et al. (2015) found that principals who were able to prioritize spent more time on instructional tasks.

The challenges presented by definition of a school principal create a conflict. Principals agree that responsibilities associated with teaching and learning are more important, but an overarching vagueness of tangible behaviors gives way to managerial duties that present themselves as concrete finite tasks. In other words, principals tend to see *instructional leadership* as intimidating and they simply do not know where to start. The findings in this study give principals an indication of where their efforts should be first directed and where to then focus.

This research strengthens previous work as well as new contributions to the research on operationalizing instructional leadership behaviors of school principals. We further reinforced the PIMRS as a valid delineation of critical behavior functions for school principals as instructional leaders. We found statistically significant difference between the groups' perceptions of the importance of the ten behavior functions indicating that principals could utilize this tool as an avenue of articulating the job that leads to collective understanding of what is expected of school principals.

The question of how principals can best support their teachers consistently weighs on the mind of every building principal. The job is demanding, and principals face an incredible amount of pressure to perform as instructional leaders and to produce top student results. Knowing specific behaviors associated with effective instructional leadership and how the importance of those behaviors are perceived by teacher candidates, teachers, and other principals aids in developing a strategy. Stephen Covey (1989) said it best, "The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities," (p. 161).

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