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Sharon Gieselmann
University of Evansville

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Principals and School Factors That Impact Elementary School Student Achievement

Sharon Gieselmann
University of Evansville

Abstract

This study examined principals and school factors associated with elementary school student achievement. Nine predictor variables were analyzed to determine their impact on student state assessment scores: (a) years of principal experience, (b) years of teaching experience by the principal, (c) years of principal experience at present site, (d) highest level of education by the principal, (e) principal gender, (f) principal leadership as measured by the three subscales of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale, and (g) free/reduced lunch population at the school. Study findings are discussed.

Conceptual Framework

During the present school accountability era, identifying specific factors that help schools steadily raise the level of student achievement is important to educational stakeholders including school administrators, teachers, parents, and policymakers. Several large-scale literature reviews have been conducted and found associations between factors related to principals and their schools that contribute to increased student achievement (Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins, 1990; Hallinger and Heck, 1996). For example, one body of research makes the conceptual linkage between factors such as school leadership and the school improvement process. Fullan (2002) indicates that principals who are prepared to handle complex, rapidly changing environments can execute reform efforts that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement. However, another body of research determined that school factors such as socioeconomic status impacted student achievement. Schools with predominantly lower socioeconomic status students are likely to perform less well academically than their counterparts who have mixed socioeconomic status populations (Sirin, 2005).

Are there specific factors that impact student achievement? The literature describes several common elements that appear to correlate positively with student achievement, hence their selection for this study. The rationale for their inclusion in this research was that if earlier studies produced significant results, these factors should be examined to determine their impact on student achievement in this particular state. Specifically, nine factors were analyzed to determine their impact on student state assessment scores: (a) years of principal experience, (b) years of teaching experience by the principal, (c) years of principal experience at present site, (d) highest level of education by the principal, (e) principal gender, (f) principal leadership as measured by the three subscales of the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale*, and (g) free/reduced lunch population at the school. Findings from the literature are included in subsequent paragraphs.

Bista and Glasman (1998) discovered a positive relationship between total *years of principal experience* and school improvement. The researchers discovered that total years of principal experience equated with more effective leadership abilities that impacted student achievement. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) determined that principals serving longer, were able to focus on accomplishing the school's mission while Young (1993) found that principals were more collaborative with decision making as their years in school administration increased.

Grady and O'Connell (1993) reported that *principals with more teaching experience* implied better preparation and understanding of school administrative functions. Additionally, the assumption that increased teaching experience equates with better preparation for the curricular and accountability demands found in administration emerged from a study completed by Shakeshaft (1989). Bista and Glasman (1998) also reported that the most important predictor of leadership ability was teaching experience. Teaching experience may prepare administrators for the varied, day-to-day operations of the principalship.

Young (1993) indicated that *years of principal experience at the current school site* impacted student achievement. Principals serving for more than two years at their present site engaged their staffs in collaborative curriculum development, a precursor to improved student learning, much more than those administrators who were new to their leadership position. Other researchers determined that principals who worked for more years at their present site were more apt to collaborate with teachers to improve instruction and formulate a shared vision that organized all elements of the school around increasing student achievement (Bista and Glasman, 1998).

Grady and O'Connell (1993) reported that *principals with higher levels of education* implied better preparation and understanding of school administrative functions. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) described the formal education experience of the principal as a correlate with student achievement. Additionally, several studies indicated that increased levels of

education helped school leaders apply professional leadership abilities that impacted student achievement (Gross & Herriott, 1965; Hemphill, Griffiths, & Frederiksen, 1962).

In their meta analysis of the literature that related to *principal gender* and student achievement, Shakeshaft, Brown, Grayson, Brunner, Grogan, and Hackney (2006) reported that the *gender of the principal* had impacted student achievement in several studies. Furthermore, many researchers claim that principal gender relates to the exertion of different leadership strengths in school administration such as collaborative leadership, which relates to increased student achievement (Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Kochan, Spencer & Mathews, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Meta analyses of school effectiveness literature (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNultry, 2005) concluded that effective principals exerted influence on school processes directly linked to student learning. Achieving high standards in classroom practices during reform requires sound leadership from school principals, recognized as key players for school success as they supervise and organize the work of others (Waters & Grubb, 2004). Furthermore, reform efforts may be short-term and superficial without strong leadership characterized by instructional capacity building in a cohesive professional community (Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

In addition to these factors exhibited by principals that are related to school improvement, other research describes the school factor of *free/reduced lunch population* as indicative of school achievement. Bista and Glasman (1998) found that schools with predominantly low socioeconomic status students were more likely to have lower student achievement. More recently, Sirin (2005) acknowledged that with all things equal in our schools, as student socioeconomic status increases, so does student achievement. Other research supports the connection between student achievement and free/reduced lunch populations as well (Slovacek, Kunnan, & Kim, 2002; Bulach, Malone, & Castleman 1995).

In sum, during the present reform cycle when schools are under increased pressure to meet yearly state and federal assessment goals, it is relevant to determine if these school and principal factors supported by the literature continue to predict increased student achievement in this particular state. The next section provides study methods and procedures for sample selection.

Study Methods and Sample

Sample Selection

The researcher chose elementary school principals in one state heavily involved with comprehensive school reform efforts since the early 1990s for study participation. This state's education reform act altered the school principal's instructional leadership role significantly when high-stakes testing was implemented in the early 1990s and schools were held accountable for student achievement. Addition-

ally, because the elementary school is organizationally less complex than the secondary school, assessing elementary principal leadership skills may be easier. Bista and Glasman (1998) stated that elementary principals are more likely to affect student performance more forcefully and effectively than administrators at the secondary level. Further, Young (1993) determined that principals serving for more than two years at their present site engaged their staffs in collaborative curriculum development, a precursor to improved student learning. Therefore, elementary principals having served a minimum of three years were selected to participate in the study as they presumably had applied leadership skills that impacted the educational environments at their school sites and student performance. State school directories provided names, addresses, and telephone numbers of elementary principals serving at their present site for a minimum of three years. Principals meeting these criteria totaled 340 and comprised nearly equal numbers from rural, suburban, and urban schools throughout the state.

This study used multiple regression, a non-experimental statistical approach, and addressed the question: What principal and school factors predicted student achievement as measured by the state assessment? In the multiple regression, the predictor variables included (a) highest level of education obtained by the principal, (b) years of principal experience, (c) years of teaching experience by the principal, (d) years of principal experience at present site, (e) principal gender, (f) principal leadership determined by the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (Hallinger, 1985), and (g) free/reduced lunch population at the school.

The criterion variable was elementary school student achievement measured by the state assessment. A school's comprehensive score on the state assessment was matched with the particular principal participating in this study. This information was obtained from the state's department of education. At the elementary school level, the state assessment included a national norm-referenced test, the *Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS/5 Survey Edition)*, and a standards-based test that specifically measured student progress on state content standards using a multiple choice and open-response writing format. These tests were administered during a two-week testing window during the spring semester. Sample size for the multiple regression analysis was determined by recommendations from Stevens (1996) indicating 15 participants per predictor variable. The study included nine predictor variables; therefore at least 135 respondents were needed for the study.

Principal Leadership Instrumentation

The *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS)* was utilized for this study because it has been viewed as "the most commonly used instrument in studies that employed an instructional leadership perspective" (Hallinger & Taraseina, 2001). Hallinger described the instrument as "useful for school evaluation, staff development, research, and district policy analysis" (p. 2). The *PIMRS* contains

three dimensions of instructional leadership: (a) *Defining the School's Mission*, (b) *Managing the Instructional Program*, and (c) *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate*, which highlight leadership functions necessary for this reform cycle. The three dimensions are further separated into 10 subscales that contain a total of 50 items for principal response. The first dimension of instructional leadership contains two subscales, *framing the school goals* and *communicating the school goals*. This subscale contains 10 items that determine if the principal has a clear mission focused on the academic progress of students and whether or not they communicate that mission widely to the school community (Hallinger & Taraseina, 2001).

The second dimension of the *PIMRS* is *Managing the Instructional Program*. This encompasses three leadership subscales: *supervising and evaluating instruction*, *coordinating the curriculum*, and *monitoring student progress*. These 15 items assume that even in larger schools, a key leadership responsibility of the principal is developing the school academic core.

The third dimension of the *PIMRS* is *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate* and includes five subscales: *protecting instructional time*, *promoting professional development*, *maintaining high visibility*, *providing incentives for teachers*, and *providing incentives for learning*. These 25 items are broader in scope and intent and describe successful schools as those creating an "academic press" by developing high standards and expectations along with a culture of continuous improvement. The authors report acceptable validity and reliability data. All 50 items use a 5-point, Likert-type scale: (1) Almost Never to (5) Almost Always. Principals who obtain a high rating on one of the leadership subscales are perceived as engaged more frequently in instructional leadership practices and behaviors associated with principals in effective schools (Hallinger & Taraseina, 2001).

Hallinger (1985) determined that the *PIMRS* met appropriate validity and reliability measures. For instance, when determining content validity of the *PIMRS*, Hallinger (1985) asked school administrators to assign potential items from a randomly ordered list into 10 leadership subscales. The remaining 50 items received at least 80% inter-rater agreement, which Latham and Wesley (1981) considered acceptable. Hallinger (1985) also established construct validity by examining school documents related to instructional leadership and found they described a principal's leadership similar to that obtained from the *PIMRS*.

Last, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) reported internal consistency reliability coefficients for the subscales scores obtained from the *PIMRS*. All subscales were at least .80 using Cronbach's test of internal consistency, which is acceptable according to Latham and Wesley (1981)

Data Collection

All 340 principals were sent a mail-out survey containing a *Principal Biographical Data Sheet* to acquire principal

gender, principal age, years of experience as a principal, years of teaching experience, highest level of education, and free/reduced lunch population at the school. Principals also indicated total years of principal experience at their present sites to confirm data reported in the *State school directory*. Principals completed the *Principal Biographical Data Sheet* and self-reported information regarding the variables listed above.

Principals were also asked to complete the *PIMRS* instrument to determine their leadership skills on the three subscales of this instrument: *Defining the School's Mission*, *Managing the Instructional Program*, and *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate*. The researcher utilized the tailored design method outlined by Dillman (2000) for this study: Five contacts were made with respondents: (a) pre-notice letter, (b) survey instrument/consent letter, (c) follow-up post card, (d) replacement letter and survey, and (e) final contact.

Study Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study had certain limitations. First, all participants were from one state and it is possible that individuals from other states might have responded differently to the *PIMRS*. A second limitation was that this study utilized self-reported information based on perception, not actual behaviors. A third limitation was that the criterion variable, student performance on the state assessment, is just one measure of student achievement, not a sole indicator of school achievement. However, while this study had limitations, it expanded the knowledge base about predicting elementary school student achievement using principal and school factors.

Analysis

Principals from 180 of the 340 schools returned survey instruments resulting in a 53% overall response rate. According to Babbie (1990), "A response rate of at least 50 percent is generally considered adequate for analysis and reporting" (p. 182). Preliminary analyses consisted of descriptive statistics for the major variables and a reliability analysis of the *PIMRS*. The coefficient alpha for the 50-item composite score was .97. Nunnally (1967) recommended a minimum of .60 for use of a composite score in statistical analysis indicating acceptability of the instrument. The established coefficient alphas for the three subscales were: (a) *Defining the School's Mission* (.90), (b) *Managing the Instructional Program* (.92), and (c) *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate* (.94). In this study all subscale scores were at least .80 using Cronbach's test of internal consistency, which is acceptable according to Latham and Wesley (1981).

The researcher utilized multiple regression to examine significant predictors of student achievement. Standard multiple regression where all the predictor variables are entered into the equation simultaneously was conducted to determine the significance of the equation. Multiple regression yielded standardized Beta weights for the significant predictors to

indicate the contributions made by each on elementary school student performance measured by the state assessment. Multiple coefficients of determination (R^2) were computed to determine the relative strength of predictor variables in explaining the percent of variance in student outcomes. The .05 level of significance was used.

The assumptions of independence, normality, and constant variance for multiple regression were checked prior to analysis. Histograms were constructed to assess independence and normality. Residuals indicated a fair approximation to a normal distribution; therefore, the responses were independent and followed a normal distribution. To assess linearity and homoscedasticity or constant variance, scatterplots were constructed showing the standardized residuals versus the standardized predicted values. The standardized residuals scattered randomly about a horizontal line, suggesting constant variance. The scatterplot results suggested a linear pattern. These assumptions for multiple regression appeared to be tenable.

In addition, multicollinearity was also examined. Multicollinearity, high correlations among the predictors, was determined by examining variance inflation factors for the study variables (Stevens, 1996). None of the variance inflation factors exceeded 10. Myers (1990) indicated 10 as a value great enough to cause concern. Multicollinearity, therefore, was not an issue. Data analysis results appear in the following section.

Results

Study respondents included 180 elementary school principals whose level of education varied; 16 had a Masters degree, 111 had received Rank 1 principal certification (approximately 30 hours beyond the Masters degree), 42 had a Specialist degree, and 11 had a Doctorate degree. The respondents included 104 female principals (58%) and 76 male principals (42%), which was very similar to the population of elementary school principals in this state (female principals 52% and male principals 48%). Regarding leadership variables for principals, the mean scores were (a) *Defining the School's Mission* (43.20) from a total of 50, (b)

Managing the Instructional Program (65.52) from a total of 75, and (c) *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate* (104.09) from a total of 125. Other descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

The multiple regression results appear in Table 2 to answer the research question "What were the significant predictors of student achievement measured by the state assessment?" Standard multiple regression where all the predictor variables are entered into the equation simultaneously was conducted to determine the significance of the equation. Predictor variables entered were: (a) highest level of education obtained by the principal, (b) years of principal experience, (c) years of teaching experience by the principal, (d) years of principal experience at present site, (e) principal gender, (f) principal leadership as determined by the three subscales of the *PIMRS: Defining the School's Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, and Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate* and, (g) free/reduced lunch population at the school. The criterion variable for multiple regression analysis was student achievement measured by the state assessment. The tables present the standardized regression coefficients (β), levels of significance (t), and multiple coefficients of determination (R^2).

The multiple correlation was $R = .53$ with the $R^2 = .28$, indicating that approximately 28% of the variation in the dependent variable, state assessment scores, can be accounted for by the linear combination of independent variables. The adjusted R^2 (.24) was close in degree to R^2 and demonstrated that the variance linked to sampling error was small. Post-hoc statistical power calculations indicated an observed power of .99, which is considered high. Additionally, the obtained effect size, $f^2 = .38$, was large according to Cohen (1988).

The obtained regression equation for principals indicated that one variable, free and reduced lunch ($p < .01$), was a significant predictor of state assessment scores. The beta value for free and reduced lunch was larger ($\beta = -.50$) than any other predictor variables. None of the other variables produced statistical significance.

In summary, the multiple regression procedure indicated that one predictor variable, free and reduced lunch, produced statistical significance regarding student achievement. How-

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Principals (N = 180)

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Background Variables			
Age	48	7.0	29-65
Teaching Experience	14	5.8	2-34
Total Principal Experience	10	5.8	4-25
Principal Experience at Current Site	8	4.9	4-23
Free and Reduced Lunch Population	55	20.6	3-96
Leadership Variables			
Defining the School's Mission	43	4.8	15-50
Managing the Instructional Program	66	6.6	28-75
Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate	104	11.7	47-125
Total <i>PIMRS</i> Score	213	20.6	143-250

Table 2

Regression Results: Individual Predictors for State Assessment Scores ($N = 180$)

Variable	β	R^2	t
Gender	.09	.01	1.29
Principal's experience	.00	.00	.04
Teacher's experience	.04	.00	.50
Years in present position	.06	.00	.54
Highest level of education	.01	.00	.08
Free and reduced lunch program	-.50	.25	-7.48**
Defining the School's Mission	.11	.01	1.05
Managing the Instructional Program	-.08	.00	-.77
Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate	-.06	.00	-.59

** $p < .05$.

ever, the remaining variables, highest level of education obtained by the principal, years of principal experience, years of teaching experience by the principal, years of principal experience at present school site, principal gender, and principal leadership as determined by the three subscales of the *PIMRS* did not significantly impact student achievement at the schools participating in this study. A discussion of the implications and conclusions for these results follows in the next section.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, the free and reduced lunch variable in the multiple regression analysis largely accounted for the variance of elementary school state assessment scores. Previously reviewed studies confirm this finding. Bista and Glasman (1998) reported that schools with predominantly low socioeconomic status (SES) were likely to have lower student achievement. Bulach, Malone, and Castleman (1995) found a significant correlation between student achievement and socioeconomic status. Last, the Slovacek, Kunnan, and Kim (2002) study of California schools indicated there was a 2.6 point decline on the state assessment for each percentage point of the student free and reduced lunch population. These previous studies, along with the results of the current one validate the impact free and reduced lunch populations have on student achievement.

In contrast to previous findings from the literature, none of the factors related to principals, highest level of education obtained by the principal, years of principal experience, years of teaching experience by the principal, years of principal experience at present site, principal gender, and principal leadership determined by the *PIMRS* produced statistical significance regarding student achievement on the state assessment. More specifically, (a) a principal's highest level of education did not significantly predict student achievement in contrast with findings from the literature, (Grady & O'Connell, 1993; Gross & Herriott, 1965; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hemphill, Griffiths, & Frederiksen, 1962), (b) years of principal experience did not produce statistical significance unlike several studies (Bista & Glasman, 1998;

Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Young, 1993), (c) principal experience at the present school site did not impact student achievement counter to other research (Bista & Glasman, 1998; Young, 1993), (d) years of principal teaching experience did not predict student achievement and contradicts the literature (Bista & Glasman, 1998; Grady & O'Connell, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989), (e) principal gender did not predict student achievement distinct from previous research (Brown, Grayson, Brunner, Grogan, & Hackney, 2006; Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Kochan, Spencer & Mathews, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989), and (f) principal leadership skills were not a statistically significant predictor of scores on the state assessment, which contrasted the literature (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNultry, 2005; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Waters & Grubb, 2004).

With the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, the answer to what factors impact student achievement continues to merit careful consideration as this legislation demands greater measurement of student achievement and requires that all students make achievement progress. Quite possibly, during this current reform cycle, the complexities of the school organizational structure provide challenges for identifying specific factors that produce increased student achievement. This study, however, expanded the knowledge base about predicting elementary school student achievement using principals and school factors as it confirms the impact of free and reduced lunch on student achievement yet it provides some contradictions with the literature concerning attributes related to principals and their relationships with student achievement.

Perhaps the focus on increasing student achievement should be expanded beyond that of the principal's role. Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline (2004) contend that to improve and transform school structures and meet the high stakes accountability requirements, *leaders* need to "assert the importance of changing minds, not just practices, through the messy processes of dialog, debate, and reflection" (p. vi). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2000) further assert that the decision-making process of the group [principal and teachers] ought to be the central focus for school leaders. Hence, further research that examines instructional leadership

and the collaborative efforts between teachers and principals may help schools understand how this dynamic relates to student achievement. Understanding teacher and principal productivity as it relates to increased student achievement is a worthy research goal and warrants continued interest from educational researchers, policymakers, and practicing school administrators.

Further studies that define instructional leadership appear necessary. Although many characteristics of instructional leadership identified by Hallinger and Murphy (1985, 2001) are present in the widely adopted Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium standards used to design university school administrative programs and for state administrative licensure across the country, there is no single accepted description or definition of the principal's role as an instructional leader (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) point out that "Despite its popularity, the concept [instructional leadership] is not well defined" (p. 16). Having a clear definition of instructional leadership and school stakeholders who are involved with instructional leadership is a worthy research goal and warrants continued interest from educational researchers, policymakers, and practicing school administrators.

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- Sharon Gieselmann is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Evansville. Her research interests include equity and social justice issues relating to student achievement. E-mail: sg78@evansville.edu.*
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