Instructional Leader or Instructional Manager: Who Has the Greatest Impact on Reading Achievement?

Ivy Sherman

C. W. Post Campus/Long Island University

Abstract

There is overwhelming research that internationally United States students are lagging behind their peers in science literacy. In addition, according to the 2007 NAEP data, only 31% of eighth graders performed at proficient levels in the areas of reading and writing. As these data are carefully considered by federal, educational and research organizations resulting in radical educational reforms, the role of principal becomes increasingly scrutinized. To improve instruction in the classroom does the principal need to be a content area specialist in all academic subjects, as well as the expert on pedagogy, or an instructional manager? For purposes of this study, an instructional manager is one whose days are filled with tasks that are managerial; for example, scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and community, and dealing with crises and situations that are inevitable in schools. They may coordinate teacher's meetings and staff development, but infrequently provide insights to teachers on how to improve upon their craft in the classroom. Instructional leaders devote at least 60% of each day in classrooms – it is a priority - spend time analyzing instruction, discussing curriculum, and fostering a professional learning community through thoughtful conversations and staff development. Principals need to be the key actors in school reform. The results of surveys to be completed by principals and teachers in a non-experimental quantitative study will determine which leadership style has the greatest impact on literacy achievement.

Keywords: instructional leadership, instructional manager, pedagogy, literacy

Instructional Leader or Manager: Who Has the Greatest Impact on Reading Achievement?

School leadership styles are as varied as the personalities of those who lead. The principal of a school, regardless of level, is charged with being the instructional leader. In this age of school reform, sustainability, and accountability, the role of the principal is the most critical to systemic change. A quality curriculum and effective instruction are key elements to ensure successful teaching and learning on any campus (Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, & Simieou, 2010). It is the principal who is responsible for carrying out the school's vision and to guarantee that effective teaching and learning are taking place in every classroom. Due to the current climate of school reform, principals are held more accountable for student success making school leadership even more critical (Levine, 2005). The purpose of this study is to determine the qualities and levels of instructional expertise of the most effective principals and how they impact literacy achievement.

In preparing our students to compete in a global economy and in a world that is complex and challenging, public education is the best hope our nation has to create the future of our country. Studies since the late 1970s have identified the impact principals have on schools, the qualities of the most effective principals, and the strategies, skills, and understandings school leaders need to possess when they are hired. The challenge also demands great attention to leadership development programs at colleges and universities. In 1996, the development of the Interstate School Leaders LicensureConsortium Standards have guaranteed universities must use innovative

strategies to ensure aspiring principals are equipped with the necessary tools for successfully implementing and monitoring curriculum (Grigsby et al., 2010).

Few findings from research on principal leadership are sufficiently grounded as to be uniformly applicable in all schools (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996). In their review of the literature on organizational leadership and successful schooling, Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) argued against a unitary construct of principal leadership. "Like earlier leadership studies, no single style of management seems appropriate for all schools…principals must find the style and structures most suited to their own local situation…a careful examination of quantitative studies of effective schools…suggests that certain principal behaviors have different effects in different organizational settings."

Skills needed for successful school leadership are influenced by many factors, for example, level (primary, elementary, secondary – middle or high school), location (urban, suburban, rural), socioeconomic status of a community and its school population, personal characteristics, and performance level of a school. The research of Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1990) suggests "gender related socialization experiences also seemed to contribute to a relatively large proportion of women viewing themselves more as curriculum and instructional leaders; relatively larger proportions of men, in contrast viewed themselves as general managers."

Literature Review

The study by Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, and Simieou (2010) focused on the emphasis principals' place on the design and delivery of curriculum and instruction on individual campuses and the extent to which federal regulation has impacted principal

behaviors as instructional leaders. As public education moves into what some consider a state of crisis as evidenced by global reports such as the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, educational researchers and policymakers understand the responsibilities of school principals have swelled to include a staggering array of professional tasks and competencies. Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). The information inferred through these studies, as well as previous research done by Grigsby et al. and Davis et al. also supports the need for more instructionally-based principal preparation programs. According to Davis et al., (2005), evidence indicates that effective school leadership programs are research-based, have curricular coherence, provide experience in authentic contexts, use cohort groupings and mentors, and are structured to enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools.

Grigsby, et al. (2010) also highlights the need for principals, at all levels, to be able to manage their administrative responsibilities, secondary to their instructional ones. In the study conducted by Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996), the researchers used four antecedents that affect principal instructional leadership – socioeconomic status,

principal gender, parent involvement, and teaching experience. Each antecedent variable had a different impact on principal effectiveness. This study concludes that principals do contribute to the effectiveness of their schools, however, the research found the impact to be indirect. Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger (2003), concur in their meta-analyses "that educational leadership is related to school organization and culture as well as to teacher behavior and classroom practices and these factors are related in turn to student achievement." This is considered another effect of good instructional leadership.

As research has shown, it is not only the individual attributes of the principal and the school that can affect student outcomes, but that the overall locale, specifically urban, suburban, and rural environments have an impact as well. Each requires different skill sets. The report, *A Comparison of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Principal Leadership Skills by Campus Student Achievement Level* (Erwin, Winn, Gentry, & Cauble, 2010), discusses the varying challenges that principals face in each of these environments. In LaRue County, Kentucky, a district that is considered mostly rural, an initiative has been adopted to alleviate principals' time on managerial tasks. Schools that are part of the initiative employ a trained School Administration Manager (SAM). Funded by the Wallace Foundation, the SAM initiative gives principals the time to focus on teaching and learning. The paper, *Journalistic Accounts – Improving Leadership for Learning: Stories from the Field* (Mezzacappa, Holland, Willen, Colvin, & Feemster, 2008), offers solutions that are taking place around the nation to assist principals in spending the majority of their time in classrooms and becoming true instructional leaders. The SAM

initiative systemizes the process by showing principals exactly how they spend their time and how they can use it better. It encourages changes in professional practices driven by coaching and data (Holland, 2008). According to Willen (2008), in Delaware, the Delaware Performance Appraisal System clearly defines leadership expectations. In 2006, with just a few counties participating, principals were evaluated for their goals, vision and ability to create and reinforce a culture of learning. Student achievement is used as a measure of effective leadership. Due to its positive impact, the system is now used state-wide.

New York City School District 2, over an 11-year period, under the leadership of Superintendent Elaine Fink and her predecessor, Anthony Alvarado, amassed a strong record of successful school improvement in a very diverse urban setting (Fink & Resnick, 1999). Taking over the role of Deputy Superintendent from a principalship, Fink was convinced that principals were the key actors in school improvement and her main job as Deputy was to teach principals how to become instructional leaders. The success of District 2 has been revered by those who study systemic school reform. Its overall commitment to large-scale instructional improvement, its heavy investments in instructionally-focused professional development for teachers and principals, its focus on the principalship as the primary role in school-level accountability for instructional improvement and student performance, and its relatively long history of engagement in fundamental issues of large-scale instructional improvement render the district unique (Elmore & Burney, 2000). In addition, Stein and D'Amico (2000), use District 2 as their research site to build an argument for the need for administrators to possess subject-

matter specific knowledge in order to successfully guide and support reform. They contend that all administrators who profess to be instructional leaders must have some degree of understanding of how instruction and learning differ in various subject areas. Principals in District 2 learn alongside their teachers. They made their expectations surrounding literacy clear and observed teachers frequently to ascertain the degree to which those expectations were being met (Stein & D'Amico, 2000). Furthermore, they were good evaluators of the quality of instructional practice in literacy and would arrange for teacher assistance when needed and facilitate moving teachers out of positions when warranted.

Independent-Dependent Variables. The independent variables are community-specific. They are socioeconomic status, school size, and level. Other independent variables are more specific to the principal. They are gender, years as a teacher, principal preparation program and training, the amount of professional development the principal attends and facilitates, and years in the position. The dependent variables are outside partnerships the school is engaged with, behaviors that impact effective teaching and learning, keeping current on trends and reform models, curriculum development opportunities, time away from instructionally-based tasks, and support and curricula knowledge of central office administration.

Hypothesis. Based on the review of the literature, the researcher hypothesized that principals who are instructional leaders, specifically in an urban environment, have the greatest impact on literacy achievement.

Methodology

A non-experimental quantitative research design was used in the form of electronic surveys to gain a better understanding of the expertise and instructional priorities principals' have in the teaching of reading and how their knowledge correlates to student outcomes. The time principals spend receiving and giving quality professional development, time spent in classrooms providing meaningful feedback to teachers, and involvement in the design of curriculum were also assessed. A different survey was given to principals and teachers electronically using Survey Monkey. The participants had two weeks to respond to the questions in the multiple-choice response survey.

Instruments. The principals' survey (Appendix A) consisted of 18 multiple-choice questions subtly divided into four categories – school characteristics, principals' professional qualities and instructional precedence, and the instructional priorities of the local education agencies. The teachers' survey (Appendix B) was comprised of 17 multiple-choice questions, also finely divided into four categories – school characteristics, years in present school; perception of principal's building priorities and knowledge of best practices in literacy.

Participants. A total of 638 principals across the United States were sent the electronic surveys. High-achieving principals were identified using the federal Blue Ribbon Schools database. Blue Ribbon Schools are nationally recognized private, charter, and parochial schools, at all levels, that are high achieving or have made significant academic gains over a five year period based on standardized testing results. Blue Ribbon Schools are nominated by state education departments yearly. The surveys

were sent to 319 Blue Ribbon School principals from the 2009 school year. To identify principals of low-performing and failing schools, the 2009 state education department report cards were used from eight states selected at random. Three hundred nineteen surveys were sent to principals from these states in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Four hundred twelve principals returned the survey. Only those with four years experience or more in their present assignment were used in the analysis. Results were used from 291 principals – 195 Blue Ribbon principals and 96 low-performing school principals.

Using the same 638 schools, 12,760 classroom teachers were sent a different electronic survey than their principals. Data were collected from 5,185 classroom teachers – 4,011 from Blue Ribbon Schools and 1,174 from the low-performing schools. Of the 5,185 returned surveys, 3,110 teachers had been in their present school for at least two years.

Results

Frequency distribution was used to sort the responses. The data were placed on Excel spreadsheets where it was easier to determine the individual responses to each question. Responses of Blue Ribbon principals' surveys were analyzed to determine trends in effective instructional leadership. Surveys of low-performing schools principals were analyzed to determine leadership trends in low-performing schools. The data were compared to reveal the differences in leadership styles of principals of achieving schools and low-performing schools.

Using a cross-data comparison, teachers' survey results were compared to principals' results by school type - Blue Ribbon or low-performing - to determine consistency in principals' perceptions of their leadership styles, if there were significant differences in the instructional priorities of the principals of high-achieving or schools that showed consistent progress in the area of literacy, and those who lead low-performing schools.

Discussion

There are several possible scenarios the research could have concluded. Most importantly, the researcher would hope the hypothesis would be realized through the analysis of the data. If the data showed a significant difference in the instructional priorities of local education agencies and the principals of Blue Ribbon schools and those of low-performing schools, then it is critical that principals receive the support they need in order to become instructional leaders so all schools can achieve in the area of literacy. Perhaps acquiring trained School Administration Managers as done in LaRue County, Kentucky, would be a possible solution to enable principals to be more available to receive and give focused professional development in literacy, spend time in classrooms so they provide focused, meaningful feedback to teachers, and become involved in curriculum development.

Based on the research, the hypothesis also predicted that urban principals are better trained as instructional leaders. Principals who work in city schools have access to greater resources, especially the availability of Title 1 funds. In addition, proximity to colleges, universities, and cultural institutions increases opportunities for partnerships. If

a school's instructional program is well-aligned to an on-going partnership with a college, university, or cultural institution, professional development is more readily available and applicable to the culture of the school. Off-site experiences and field-based projects further connect course content with practical applications. Because students' academic needs tend to be greater in the majority of urban schools, principals need a different set of skills, not only to address social and emotional issues but academic concerns as well.

A leadership trait that most of the literature identifies is the necessity for principals to be visible entities in their schools, especially in classrooms. They must spend a large part of their day improving teaching and learning. Curriculum and instruction must be the priority in order for students to grow and achieve and for teachers to be effective. Principals must understand the differences in pedagogy for different subject areas. Days cannot be consumed with managerial tasks. This research will hopefully confirm when building leaders make the aforementioned a priority, students will achieve regardless of locale and level of the school. Over the last 30 years the research has been able to determine the direct effects instructional leadership has on student achievement. The generalizability of this information is extremely valuable because it pertains to all state and local education agencies, principals, and principal preparation programs.

If the hypothesis is not realized and there is no significant difference in the traits of Blue Ribbon principals and principals of low-performing schools, then deeper research into the success of Blue Ribbon principals needs to take place. Other variables such as

parental involvement and whether or not individual schools have extended-school day programs can also impact their success. A careful analysis of the research instrument must also take place. Teacher responses can be skewed based on negative feelings toward their principal which would affect the ecological validity. The researcher might have to consider changing instruments, possibly to an ethnographic-qualitative research design.

The data could also indicate a difference in instructional priorities based on school level. Since secondary schools usually have department chairpersons and assistant principals assigned to curriculum areas, the instructional leadership role could be passed on to those members of a school team.

Although the hypothesis predicts that urban principals are better trained to be instructional leaders, the data may indicate specific trends in leadership styles in rural and suburban environments as well. Circumstances could possibly hinder the development of instructional leaders, for example, a principal in a rural setting could be responsible for more than one school or multi-level schools, therefore decreasing focused time on instructional priorities.

Conclusion

After evaluating some of the different scenarios that could result from the research, the researcher concludes that this is only a baseline study that has tremendous implications for further investigation. The researcher is considering pursuing additional studies in leadership styles in Title I or non-Title I schools, school level, and locale.

References

Bossert, S., Dwyer, D., Rowan, B., & Lee, G. (1982). The instructional management role of the principal. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 18, 34-64.

Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., & Meyerson, D. (2006). School leadership study guide – developing successful principals. Retrieved from the Wallace Foundation website: http://www.wallacefoundation.org/

Elmore, R.F., & Burney, D. (2000). *Leadership and learning: Principal recruitment, induction and instructional leadership in Community School District #2, New York City.* Retrieved from University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center website: hhtp://www.lrdc.pitt.edu/hlpc

Erwin, S., Winn, P., Gentry, J., & Cauble, M. (2010, May). *A comparison of urban, suburban, and rural principal leadership skills by campus student achievement level.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, Denver, Colorado.

Falco, J., & McClure, R. (2007). Setting the agenda for school leadership: Developing school leaders for a new era. *Journal – School Administrators Association of New York State, 36* (2), 13-17.

Fink, E., & Resnick, L. B. (1999). *Developing principals as instructional leaders*. Retrieved from University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center website: http://www.lrdc.pitt.edu/hplc

Fullan, M. (2002). The change leader. *Educational Leadership, 59*, 16-21.

Grigsby, B., Schumacher, G., Decman, J., & Simieou, F. (2010). A principal's dilemma: instructional leader or manager? Retrieved from *AcademicLeadership.org*

Hallinger, P., Bickman, L., & Davis, K. (1996). School context, principal leadership, and student reading achievement. *The Elementary School Journal, 96* (5), 527-549.

Hess, F. M., & Kelly, A. P. (2007). Learning to lead: What gets taught in principal-preparation programs. *Teachers College Record, 109*(1), 244-274.

Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (1996). *Standards for school leaders.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from the Council of Chief State School Officers website: http://www.ccsso.org/isllc.html

Leithwood, K., Begley, P., & Cousins, B. (1990). The nature, causes and consequences of principals' practices: An agenda for future research. *Journal of Educational Administration,* 28, 5-31.

Levine, A. (2005). *Educating school leaders*. Education Schools Project. Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved from http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf

Mezzacappa, D., Holland, H., Willen, L., Colvin, R. L., & Feemster, R (2008). *Journalistic accounts - improving leadership learning: Stories from the field.* Retrieved from the Wallace Foundation website: http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledgecenter/improving-leadership-for-learning-stories-from-the-field.pdf

Stein, M. K., & D'Amico, L. (2000, April). *How subjects matter in school leadership.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Witziers, B., Bosker, R. J., & Kruger, M. L. (2003). Educational leadership and student achievement: The elusive search for an association. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 39* (3), 398-425. doi: 10.1177/0013161X03253411

Appendix A - Principal survey: Instructional leader or instructional manager?

1. Blue Ribbon School? __ Yes __No
2. Title I school? __Yes __No
3. What level best describes your school?

   __Pre-School __K – 2 __K – 5 __3 – 6 __6 – 8 __9 – 12
4. Number of students? __1 – 300 __301 – 500 __501 – 800 __801+
5. Do you have an assistant principal assigned to your school? __Yes __No
6. Is your school __Public __Private __Charter?
7. Locale? __Urban __Suburban __Rural
8. Does your school have partnerships with colleges, universities, or cultural institutions?

   __Yes __No
9. Years in this position? __0 – 3 __4 – 8 __9 – 14 __15+
10. Years as a teacher? __0 – 3 __ 4 – 8 __9 – 14 __15+
11. Gender? __Male __Female
12. How often do you receive professional development?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never
13. How often do you receive focused professional development (expectation is to develop expertise in an area)?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never
14. How often do you give professional development in literacy?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never
15. Do you consider yourself an expert in best practices in literacy? __Yes __No

16. How often do you give professional development in a non-academic area (budgeting, sexual harassment, etc.)?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never

17. How often are you involved in curriculum writing with your staff?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never

18. How many times a week do you visit each classroom?

    __10+ __5 – 8 __3 – 5 __1 – 3

Appendix B - Teacher Survey: Instructional leader or instructional manager?

1. Blue Ribbon School? __Yes __No

2. Title I school? __Yes __No

3. What level best describes your school?

   __Pre-School __K – 2 __K – 5 __3 – 6 __6 – 8 __9 – 12

4. Number of students? __1 – 300 __301 – 500 __501 – 800 __801+

5. Is your school __Public __Private __Charter?

6. Locale? __Urban __Suburban __Rural

7. Does your school have partnerships with colleges, universities, or cultural institutions?

   __Yes __No

8. Years teaching in your present school? __0 – 3 __4 – 8 __9 – 15 __15+

9. Do you think your principal conveys high expectations to the staff? __Yes __No

10. How often do you receive focused professional development (expectation is to develop expertise in this area)?

    __On-going __Often __Sometimes __Rarely __Never

11. Do you feel your principal is knowledgeable about best practices in literacy? __Yes __No

12. Do you discuss best practices in literacy with your principal at least once a week? __Yes __No

13. Does your principal ever model best practices in literacy for you? __Yes __No

14. Does your principal provide meaningful professional development to the staff in the area of literacy?

    __Yes __No

15. Have you ever worked on a curriculum project with your principal?
    __Yes __No

16. How often does your principal visit your classroom each week?

    __10+ __5 – 8 __3 – 5 __1 – 3

17. Does your principal provide meaningful feedback to you after classroom visits?
    __Yes __No