
Synthesis of Research on the Principal as Instructional Leader

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The quest for a clearer understanding of what makes certain principals more effective than others has spanned several decades. Many able researchers have already traced the evolution of this inquiry (Greenfield, 1982; Rutherford, Hord, and Huling, 1983). Even more scholars have attempted to synthesize or categorize the findings of studies that examine principals' traits, behaviors, styles, and contexts (Persell, with Cookson and Lyons, 1981; Bossert, Rowan, Dwyer, and Lee, 1981; Greenfield, 1982; Blumberg and Greenfield, 1980). This review adds to the literature on the principal's role as instructional leader and evaluates what we know, what we don't know, and what we need to know about the role.

We broadly interpret the concept of instructional leadership to encompass those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to promote growth in student learning. Generally such actions focus on setting schoolwide goals, defining the purpose of schooling, providing the resources needed for learning to occur, supervising and evaluating teachers, coordinating staff development programs, and creating collegial relationships with and among teachers.

Instructional leadership is a somewhat new term in the literature on effective principals. In the 1960s and early 1970s, researchers concentrated on demographic characteristics of principals, such as race, age, physical appearance and size, sex, formal education, aspirations, and years of teaching experience. These studies yielded little

information about how principals exercise leadership generally, or affect the instructional process. Ultimately, personal traits were shown to be unreliable predictors of leadership effectiveness (Rutherford, Hord, and Huling, 1983, pp. 10, 16).

The Principal-as-Person

After enduring a period of disfavor, studies of principals' personal characteristics have recently resurfaced with a new slant. Three studies from the 1980s examine the principal-as-person in terms of leadership styles and capacity for personal interaction. Little, if any, attention is given to the traits mentioned above. The first of these studies (Blumberg and Greenfield, 1980) consists of case studies of eight principals identified as effective by their colleagues and university faculty members. The principals were carefully selected to reflect diverse environments at the elementary and secondary levels and to include the experiences of both male and female administrators.

In their analysis of the eight case studies, Blumberg and Greenfield conclude that

...most people can learn the necessary attitudes and skills that enable a group of people to function adequately. And it seems to be true that groups can learn to accept influence from a variety of people and to assign group functions accordingly. What seems not to be true, is that anyone can assume the role of leading an organization—a school—in the direction of making itself better than it is. Other things besides democratic functioning have to occur and the suggestion here is that these other things start

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with the character of the person involved (p. 245).

Among the characteristics of instructional leaders that Blumberg and Greenfield observed in their sample (inferred primarily from talks with the principals) are:

- A propensity to set clear goals and to have these goals serve as a continuous source of motivation
- A high degree of self-confidence and openness to others
- A tolerance for ambiguity

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- A tendency to test the limits of interpersonal and organizational systems

- A sensitivity to the dynamics of power

- An analytic perspective

- The ability to be in charge of their jobs.

The value of Blumberg and Greenfield's work lies not so much in the generation of yet another list of characteristics of effective principals. (It is not, after all, an easy matter to translate such a list into a program for professional development, nor are these characteristics easily discerned in the process of hiring a new principal.) Rather, the work is significant for its descriptions of the principals and their own assessments of how they operate in their schools. The eight subjects of the study reveal eight different styles of leadership and a look at the ways in which individual leaders adapt to and manipulate environments that are equally idiosyncratic.

One salient point that Blumberg and Greenfield repeatedly make is that the principals they observed were not willing to simply "keep the peace" and maintain a smooth-running organization. To some degree, all were *innovators*, constantly seeking ways to effect school improvement with an emphasis on student learning.

Another study, commissioned by the Florida State Department of Education (Huff, Lake, and Schaalman, 1982), set out to identify the competencies that characterize outstanding elementary and secondary principals—the "water walkers"—in the state. A critical-incidents study focusing on high and low points in the principals' experiences, the Florida report seeks to "uncover the thoughts underlying observed behavior . . . and distinguish between average (or acceptable) and outstanding performance."

The sample for this investigation was selected by identifying "outlier" districts with achievement scores that exceeded expectations (a predicted achievement level based on variables beyond the control of the school—college education of parents, total of minority stu-

dents, poverty index, number of Hispanics in each grade, and occupation of parents). Within each of the outlier districts the superintendent was asked to rank the top 10 percent of both principals and schools. The researchers selected their group of exemplary principals



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from the list of high-performing schools whose principals had served for at least three years and were also ranked as high-performing administrators by their superintendents. The control group of average principals was selected according to student performance on the state-



wide assessment tests. These students performed at or close to the statewide average, their schools were not highly ranked by superintendents, and they did not place in the top 10 percent on national tests. In addition, to independently validate the selection process, interviewers who were uninformed about the principals' performance randomly met with and ranked the administrators in both groups as high or average performers.

After evaluating the data gathered from the 31 principals involved in the

project, Huff and her colleagues compiled a list of 14 competencies (six basic and eight optimal). Their findings complement those of Blumberg and Greenfield. Beyond the basic competencies, the effective principal has a clear sense of mission and control, tests the limits in providing needed resources, is persuasive and committed to high standards, uses a participatory style, and is not content to maintain the status quo.

Since there was no systematic basis for selection of the eight principals in Blumberg and Greenfield's study, it is reassuring to have their conclusions reinforced by the Florida investigation, which employed a somewhat elaborate method of sample selection. Where Blumberg and Greenfield's investigation was nonaggregative, and therefore illuminating on an individual basis, Huff and her associates used statistical analysis of the frequency of specific behaviors to identify those competencies that are *basic* (shared equally by members of both groups), and those that are *optimal* (yielding a model that is potentially generalizable and useful in performance appraisal and training).

A third study by Persell and others (1982) provides a summary of "recurrent themes" in the literature on effective principals. Those that touch on the principal's role as instructional leader reiterate the statements of Blumberg and Greenfield, and Huff and associates. Persell then raises the question of whether "all principals can be equally effective instructional leaders. Are there certain personal traits, skills, knowledge, or interpersonal styles that principals need in order to be effective instructional leaders?"

The literature asserts that effective principals are forceful, energetic, and goal-directed (Egerton, 1977; Hall and others, 1980, p. 24). Persell and her associates remain unconvinced, howev-

er, that energetic or dictatorial principals always engender positive consequences. Theodore Sizer (1983), who directed a structured survey in over 100 high schools across the country, recently remarked, "It is hard for teachers to carry a school with a weak principal, but a strong principal doesn't make a good school." The literature at present does not tell us the conditions under which forceful personalities contribute to increased effectiveness or vice versa.

Concerning self-confidence, openness to new ideas, tolerance for ambiguity, and other traits, Persell asks how these traits were measured and finds a lack of correlation with specified outcomes. Another important question is whether principals who display few of these traits perform badly. These questions reveal the significant weaknesses in research on the principal-as-person: (1) principals' characteristics and behaviors are difficult to measure and to correlate with the desired outcomes of schooling; (2) there have been no studies of ineffective principals to compare to those of effective principals; and (3) most prescriptions for desirable characteristics do not consider context or situational factors. Explaining effective leadership and its effect on student outcomes without addressing these weaknesses is akin to explaining the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo by noting Wellington's general characteristics and describing his typical mode of action.

Perhaps the important lesson to be learned from an examination of the characteristics of effective principals relevant to instructional leadership is the diversity of styles that appear to work. Rather than seeking a prescription for principal behavior, research needs to clarify how different styles and personalities interact with specific contexts to produce either desirable or undesirable consequences. We have seen what

works in one context, at one time, but we have yet to examine longitudinally what happens when leadership in one school changes. The question remains: Does the principal have a measured effect on student achievement? If so, what are the characteristics and styles that contribute to this effect? And finally, can the same effect be replicated in other contexts?

Reflecting on his observations in high schools, Sizer commented:

What works in A may not work in B. There are a variety of styles that can be effective; it's the match that's important. I observed one large high school in which the principal behaved somewhat like a Muslim imam. His doors were always open and he held court throughout the day, dispensing justice and wisdom. No one was denied entry. Well, this school turned out to be an extraordinary school and it was his almost mythical stature that held everything together. He would not have been able to survive, I suspect, in a small, conservative community.

Meeting the School's Leadership Needs

Since the uniqueness of each principal's situation makes generalizations about personal characteristics and leadership styles difficult, some researchers have focused on the common leadership functions that must be satisfied in schools rather than on the person of the principal. Some studies suggest the possibility that many principals do not exercise instructional leadership, that such leadership is, in fact, supplied by other members of the organization.

Lortie (1982) describes the principal's role as residual, consisting of what no one else is assigned to do. He states that the leadership role of the principal has never been positively defined. Rather, it has evolved over the years as an accumulation of tasks that teachers were either unable or unwilling to perform. If the concept of instructional leadership is to be taken seriously, the residual role must be defined. To accomplish this, research needs to move beyond an examination of how a principal behaves to an understanding of what the principal can do to facilitate the job of teaching and encourage student learning. In addition, it is important to know what functions are essential in diverse contexts.

In an attempt to elaborate on how principals contribute to effective instruction, Duckworth and Carnine (1983) have written of the importance of pro-

viding consistent standards and expectations for teachers. Despite the need and desire for autonomy, "teachers need the backbone of organizational policy to sustain their efforts . . . with new strategies." According to Duckworth (1983) staff meetings, staff development activities, and observation of and consultation with individual teachers provide opportunities for the principal to encourage and recognize good work and show determination to remedy slack teaching. These events require direct action, although context, interpersonal relations, and the principal's leadership style will dictate how such action is accomplished.

Bossert and others (1981) and Dwyer and others (1983) have developed a framework for examining instructional management in schools that considers context as well as personal characteristics and functions. They argue that personal, district, and community characteristics influence a principal's management behavior, which affects the school's climate and the organization of instruction. These factors in turn affect student outcomes.

Through observations of five principals, Dwyer and others have contributed an appreciation of the interplay of personal styles, contextual factors, and organizational functions in managing an effective school. Like Sizer, they recognize the importance of matching job requirements, personality, and experience in principal selection.

The five principals described in Dwyer and others' case studies were recommended on the basis of reputation within their districts. The participants varied by race, sex, experience, and school and district characteristics. The initial in-depth interviews revealed that the principals felt their personal traits, experience, training, and beliefs influenced the nature of activities. Subsequent observations confirmed this view.

Dwyer and others found that the community had a dramatic impact on the work of each principal observed. One principal commented that 60 percent of his job entailed responses to situations originating in his community. The communities were perceived as providing both constraints and opportunities for the principals.

Highlights from Research on the Principal as Instructional Leader

- Principals cannot exercise instructional leadership in a vacuum. They need support from teachers, students, parents, and the community.
- Common leadership functions that must be fulfilled in all schools including communicating the purpose of the school, monitoring performance, rewarding good work, and providing staff development. Whether or not these functions must be carried out by the principal depends upon the make-up of the teaching staff and the organization of the school district.
- While previous studies have generally concentrated on only one facet of instructional leadership—such as personal traits, leadership styles, management behaviors, or organizational contexts—current studies tend to address the interrelationships between these factors.
- The personal characteristics of the principal cannot be ignored when studying what constitutes effective instructional leadership. However, studies of personal characteristics and leadership styles are of limited use out of context.
- The desirable characteristics of effective principals have not been convincingly correlated with student achievement.

The institutional contexts circumscribing these principals contributed significantly to the way they chose to approach instructional matters.

The two principals who appeared to be least obtrusive in instructional matters in their schools . . . led faculties composed of 10-year or more veterans of the public school classroom. The more direct interventionist principals led less mature faculties of faculties in which more turnover occurred. Successfully leading stable, experienced teachers, then, may require a distinctly different strategy from leading relatively new or inexperienced teachers (Dwyer and others, 1983, pp. 52-53).

Despite a high degree of individual variation among the principals, Dwyer and others found some fundamental functions shared by all who have an important influence on instruction—hiring staff and providing training for those already on the staff, monitoring, exchanging and controlling information, planning, and interacting directly with students. In fact, many of the principal's essential activities are of a routine nature. The principals in their study participated in daily cycles that helped them assess their schools' working order and the progress being made toward long-term goals.

We speculate that the effects of these routine acts on the quality of instruction and student experiences in schools can be substantial. As such, this developing perspective on instructional leadership provides the overworked, out-of-time practitioner with a manageable alternative form. . . . These are the common acts of the principalship. They require no new program, no innovation, no extensive change. The success of these activities for instructional management hinges, instead, on the principal's capacity to connect them to the instructional system (Dwyer and others, 1983, p. 54).

Gersten and Carmine (1981) have identified six administrative and supervisory support functions that they consider essential to instructional improvement. They do not believe, however, that these functions need necessarily be carried out by the principal. Their work with Follow Through in inner-city schools has revealed that the principal may not play a central role in increasing the instructional effectiveness of schools. They argue that most principals either are not trained to be instructional leaders or have too many other demands placed on their time. What principals can do is ensure that someone in the organization fulfills the following support functions:

- Implement programs of known effectiveness or active involvement in curricular improvement
- Monitor student performance
- Monitor teacher performance
- Provide concrete technical assistance to teachers (inservice programs, coaching)
- Demonstrate visible commitment to programs for instructional improvement
- Provide emotional support and incentives for teachers.

Gersten and Carmine's concept of support functions suggests the practicality of using a team approach. Just such a pattern was discerned in the case studies conducted by Blumberg and Greenfield and by Bossert and others, although the degree to which a team is used varies widely, depending on the principal's leadership style. Typically, members of such a team could include a vice principal, a resource teacher, a department head, a facilitator, or a curriculum specialist from the district office (Hord, Hall, and Stiegelbauer, 1983).

While Gersten and Carmine do not reserve a particular role for the principal

as instructional leader, Hall and others (1982) argue that certain functions in an implementation effort must be accomplished by the principal. Those principals who exercise greater instructional leadership rely less on a second "change facilitator" than those who tend to maintain the status quo, but even the latter must show commitment to an innovation if it is to be adopted. Judith Little (1983), who has examined collegial relationships between administrators and teachers in providing norms for continuous improvement, perceives an advantage to sharing the leadership role in a change effort.

We're increasingly coming to speculate that the question of instructional leadership or facilitation of change is not just the province of a single role in the school, although the principal has some rights of initiative that others do not have. . . . I would speculate that the more broadly they are distributed to two, three, and four change facilitators, you may have the greater prospects for continuation of a particular set of practices (Hall and others, 1983, p. 180).

Despite disagreement about who should perform the functions of educational leadership, there is agreement about what those functions are. Re-

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searchers' lists (Bossert and Dwyer and others, Duckworth, and Gersten and Carnine) all include communicating a vision of the school's purposes and standards, monitoring student and teacher performance, recognizing and rewarding good work, and providing effective staff development programs.

Two problems remain with the generation of this abbreviated list: (1) these functions are ideal, and (2) they do not reflect what most principals do or feel they can do. Moreover, the agreed-upon functions have not been correlated with any criteria reflecting the outcomes of schooling, such as student achievement, absenteeism, staff morale, or organizational climate. Measurement of these variables and correlation with administrative behavior are still fraught with difficulties.

A Shared Responsibility

Obviously many questions remain unanswered and await further investigation as well as refinements in research methodology. What, then, has research contributed in recent years to the quest for a more substantive understanding of the principal's capacity for exercising leadership?

First, examinations guided by separate theories of leadership based on personal characteristics, leadership styles, situational factors, and management behaviors have yielded a body of knowledge that now informs a more integrated approach to the topic. It is clear that principals do not act in isolation, that there are, as Dwyer and others maintain, myriad factors, both external and internal, affecting their work and behavior.

Second, past failures to adequately explain effective leadership in schools or to identify "rules" of instructional leadership have spawned a healthy skepticism concerning the application of anti-septic theories to schools teeming with real people using a language totally foreign to the theorist. The language in the case studies reviewed here generally bears a close resemblance to the language of principals and teachers.

Third, recent research on the principal emphasizes the variation possible in providing instructional leadership. Beyond lists of desirable characteristics and essential functions, there is a growing awareness of the complexity and uniqueness of each principal's situation,

which dictates an idiosyncratic blend of the desirable and the possible.

Research should help principals evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses and the constraints and opportunities posed by their environments. With an understanding of these factors, principals can look for ways to ensure that others on the staff or in the community provide resources complementary to their own.

Ultimately, the provision of instructional leadership can be viewed as a responsibility that is shared by a community of people both within and outside the school. Principals initiate, encourage, and facilitate the accomplishment of instructional improvement according to their own abilities, styles, and contextual circumstances. They still need a lot of help from others if improvement is to become the norm. □

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