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Student Achievement and the Leadership Capacity of Early Childhood Public Elementary School

Principals: Is There a Correlation?

By

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Abstract

This is a review of literature that seeks to add to the body of information on the evidence of the leadership capacity of elementary school principals who have pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs in their school and how the leadership capacity influence student achievement. This review of literature purpose is out to find what the credentials and qualifications of most elementary school principals who were administrators of an early childhood program are, and if lack of qualification in early childhood made a difference in student achievement. The review revealed (1) the need for additional research on the effect of leadership capacity of principals in charge of early childhood, (2) most elementary school principals do not have any special qualifications for early childhood leadership and (3) professional development for this segment of the school population for the elementary school principal is often neglected. Studies further revealed that professional development for elementary school principals in the implementation and evaluation of a quality early childhood program could make a significant difference in the quality of early childhood experiences which produces higher achievement among students in later grades.

Introduction

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals advocacy team, “research has proven that effective pre-kindergarten programs increase students’ chances of graduating from high school and attending college...” (NAESP, 2010, para. 3). “Unfortunately, “ it goes on to say, “many principal preparation programs and school systems currently lack sufficient training to teach principals how to design and lead quality early childhood programs.”

Whether or not a school is successful is attributed solely to the principal. “School principals are essential to school success,” (Sarasan, 1971, as cited in Lomety, 1989, p. 145). It is imperative that early childhood levels in public schools have qualified administrators as well. This review of literature explores the leadership capacity of elementary school principals who have under their administration early childhood programs, such as kindergarten and pre-kindergarten. The research question addresses whether there is a significant difference in the leadership capacity of elementary school administrators who have had early childhood training or professional development over those who have not. If there is a significant difference, this knowledge will guide superintendents in placing principals they hire in the correct school level administration. Also, it will have shed light on the need for specific professional development geared to the early childhood populations for elementary school administrators.

As Lomety stated back in 1989 (and it is still widely agreed to today),

“... the principal...sets the ambiance of the school, the atmosphere for learning, the level of professionalism and the morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become. Principals are the main link between the school and the community. The way principals perform in that capacity largely determines the attitude of teachers, students, and parents about the school and consequently affects school success .” (p. 145)

Probably everyone in the field of education agree with this above statement. This statement is also true for principals who have pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in their buildings. The ability to incite the early childhood staff to do their very best and incite the early childhood students depends on whether or not the principal is knowledgeable of what this segment of the school population needs. When a principal is demanding that the pre-kindergarten

and kindergarten teachers carry out the same directives in the early childhood classes as those of the older children, they are asking for discontent and dissatisfaction among the early childhood staff and the students. Early childhood students' needs are different from the other students and the elementary school principals who have pre-kindergarten and kindergarten under their stewardship should be knowledgeable of those needs.

The academic achievement of the third through fifth graders is not something that happened just when they entered third grade (the first state standardized tested grade). It began when the student first entered school. Whether or not the school was set up to encourage the natural growth and development of the early learner will determine if the child can do the higher order thinking and application of knowledge needed in the tested grades. As stated by Lomotely (1989, . 152), "Practitioners and researchers alike have known for decades that there is a link between what a principal does in his or her school and student scores on school-wide achievement tests." Therefore, acquiring a principal who is knowledgeable of the early childhood education and can design and lead a quality early childhood program in the school will reciprocate into later student achievement. Principals who have pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in their schools should know how to set up, direct, and evaluate their early childhood program. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1991) says that "...teachers and administrators who work with young children should have a background in Early Childhood Education or Child Development..." (p.46) They go on further to say that, "In addition to coursework, teachers and administrators should have completed supervised training in working with young children."

Evaluating the Early Childhood Programs

The pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classroom should look different from the

classrooms of the older students. These students require play more and they need to be allowed to move freely to explore areas in the classroom that has been specifically set up to encourage learning.

“Unfortunately, many parents and elementary educators do not view experiences in ... prekindergarten [and kindergarten] programs as ‘real learning’. (Spodek, 1999) reported that many of the programs have shifted their emphasis from spurring kindergartners' development to highlighting specific learning goals” (Meyer, 2001, p. 161).

In an effort to meet these specific learning goals, principals have oftentimes foregone early childhood best practices to satisfy if these goals have been met. The work of such developmental theorists as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky serves as a foundation for kindergarten practices (Meyer, 2001, para. 5). These theories say that the early childhood curriculum should not be taught in isolation, but rather through integration of the curriculum. Children do not learn in isolation. The writing must be taught in the context of pretending to write out a grocery list for mother, for instance; which is then going to have to drive her car (that the child has to build with the correct number of wheels) to the store, where they must decide which items to purchase that belong in the soup. Now, for the untrained onlooker, or evaluator, they may not see all the subjects and learning goals met in such a simple activity. The principal needs to be able to help the teachers to design lessons that integrate the curriculum in a way that the early learner will be successful. The principal also needs to recognize good teaching in the early childhood program when he or she sees it. “Early childhood professionals at all levels are concerned about the methods and content in the majority of kindergarten programs. Despite societal changes, kindergarten remains a place where children need a quality program in order to achieve their full

potential,” (Meyer, 2001, p. 161). Just purchasing pre-packaged kindergarten programs and telling teachers to implement it is not the way to success.

“Early childhood education scholars suggest that a narrow academic curriculum in kindergarten has a negative effect on children's development (Burts et al., 1990; Puckett & Black, 1994; Wodtke et al., 1989). For example, significantly more stress behaviors were observed in children enrolled in developmentally inappropriate kindergartens than in their counterparts enrolled in developmentally appropriate kindergartens (Burts et al., 1990). Furthermore, Shepard and Smith (1988) suggest that highly academic kindergarten programs stifle natural exploration, detach reading from normal language development, and substitute inappropriate symbolic learning for more appropriate manipulative learning” (Dever & Barta, 2001, p. 1).

Principals must also realize the need for teachers and staff of early childhood programs to receive professional development geared specifically to their needs. Sending them to workshops geared to other grades and that do not address the specific way that the early learner learns is a waste of time. Refraining from sending these professionals to workshops or conventions at all is also a travesty. Teachers of early childhood need to be kept abreast of the developments in the field of early childhood just like the teachers at the tested grades. For example, the practice of retention which is used in the upper grades proved to have no positive effects for kindergarten. Research provides evidence that retention, extra-year approaches, and academic redshirting are harmful to children. Shepard and Smith (1986, as cited in Dever & Barta, 2001) found that retention does not increase achievement. Similarly, Puckett and Black (1994, as cited in Dever, & Barta, 2001) assert that extra-year approaches: a) bring about little, if any, academic benefit; b) cause some harm to children's social-emotional development; and c)

correlates to higher drop-out rates.

Principals of early childhood should know what a developmentally appropriate program looks like to evaluate it successfully. Central administrators, supervisors, and building principals who oversee the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten program also must be educated about the developmental needs of kindergarten children and the unique needs of the kindergarten program. As Spidell Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) stated, "Communication among teachers, principals, policymakers, experts in childhood education, and parents is vital" (p. 294). With this knowledge, they can provide the administrative support essential to the success of the kindergarten program, value its uniqueness, and interpret it to the community professionally and with integrity. Elkind (1986, as cited in Meyer, 2001, p. 634), cautions that, "The risks of miseducating children are both short- and long-term. In each case, the potential psychological risks of early intervention far outweigh any potential educational gain."

For elementary principals to recognize and implement a developmentally appropriate pre-kindergarten and kindergarten program it takes training more than just knowledge. According to Rodd (2006), "While high-quality services have been associated with experienced leaders, other evidence reveals that training, rather than work experience, is the best predictor of quality early childhood services" (p. 259). But very little training has been available to those who have been employed to administer early childhood services. In fact, says Rodd, the majority of leaders report that they have learned 'on-the-job' with support from some in-service training. As a result, the quality of leadership is unlikely to indicate the hidden and undeveloped potential of many of those in administrative positions in the field. To move the early childhood field along the pathway of professionalism, practitioners need access to the knowledge and skills required for effective leadership in settings and in the community. The profession of early childhood is not

standing still. It is dynamic and characterized by growth, change, and futures-orientation (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). “It is therefore essential that all members of the early childhood field embrace a life- long learning perspective towards their own development, and regard leadership as a key aspect of this development” (Rodd, 2006, pp 259-260).

Site-Based Management in Early Childhood

Site-based management is now in the research as a means of increasing student achievement. No longer is the school centrally controlled, but more autonomy is given to the school site principal. For local site-based management to be successful, people at the local level are given more authority to make decisions and are allowed to introduce changes (Wohlsteter, 1995, as cited in Nupponen, 2006). These ideas have much relevance within the early childhood context. Principals as directors of early childhood grades are more than ever before required to make complex organizational decisions. Successful site-based management must place priority on building capacity for change, and engaging in creative efforts to communicate with families and community (Delgado, 1998, as cited in Nupponen, 2006) because of a strong focus on achieving customer satisfaction as an outcome of education. (Simpson, 1998; Wohlstetter, 1995, as cited in Burbach, & Butler, 2005)

Just because the principal has more authority over the school site, does not mean that he or she is to exercise an authoritarian leadership style to be successful. In the early childhood arena, a more successful leadership style is that of the distributed leadership, or the transformational leadership style. According to Gronn, 2003 (as cited in Nupponen), “Distributive leadership, by its very nature, distributes and allocates tasks so that organizational results are joint products, which cannot be individually disabled.” Principals (also directors) can be key players in the broad array of activities and the rejuvenation of new cultures for quality

implementation of new forms of leadership and management (Wilkinson, 1998, as cited in Nupponen, 2006). Most often women leaders exemplify this distributive leadership style.

Leadership Style of Early Childhood Principals

Studies in leadership styles have found that the style of leadership of the principal has an effect on the total teaching approach in a school. The style of leadership of the steward of a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten staff may require a different approach than the style for upper grades in the elementary school.

“Neugebauer (1990), proposed that the director [of early childhood levels] decision-making style was related to the quality of interpersonal relations within the [school]. When decisions were made within a team environment, staffs were more motivated, dedicated, trusting and clear on center objectives than were staff who worked in [schools] where less attention was given to the quality of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Neugebauer found that the best type of leader within an early childhood program was a democratic motivator. This type of leader trusts staff decision making and creativity, rather than taking a strong supervisory role” (Nupponen, 2006, p.43).

The role and responsibilities of educational leaders of early childhood (who may be school principals or childcare directors) include encouraging flexibility, promoting collaborative planning and shared decision-making, and employing these qualities as a medium for successful change and reform. (Nupponen, 2006) “It is essential that all members of the early childhood field embrace a life- long learning perspective towards their own development, and regard leadership as a key aspect of this development” (Rodd, 2006, pp 259-260).

Women Leadership in Early Childhood

In the United States, Saluja, Early and Clifford (2002) found that only one percent of the

staff employed in early childhood programs is male. "Most early childhood practitioners are female (Larkin, 1999; Press and Hayes, 2002) and therefore, almost without exception, directors of childcare centers are women. Thus, identifying the ethos of feminine leadership has relevance to [early] child care," (Nupponen, p. 44).

Because female leaders most often have the transformational or distributive leadership style, it bears importance to see how this leadership style is useful in the early childhood context. The transformational leader attends to the culture of the organization and makes individuals believe they are part of something worthwhile. The emphasis is on relationships, respect for others, processes rather than products, and the valuing of networking and collaboration. Ozga and Walker (1995, as cited in Nupponen) commented that women seem to place greater emphasis on cohesion and integration, demonstrate less stress and conflict, use less anger as a control mechanism, participate in many more group activities, and tend to avoid authoritarian solutions. Women tend to view the world as a web of relationships, and their mode of leading includes hearing others and being open to others through expressing how they feel (Rogers, 1988, in Nupponen 2006).

Childcare work is a highly feminized occupation, not least because of the nurturing role at its core. Research points to an affirmation that the female style of leadership raises the awareness of those with the organization and focuses on developing a democratic community that is ethical at both personal and organizational levels, through which staff are empowered to take control and make decisions that affect their lives (Applebaum, Herbert & Leroux, 1999; Manning & Robertson, 2002, as cited in Nupponen, 2006). This type of leader (whether male or female) tends to distribute the management functions, characterized by the desire to empower rather than dominate, as facilitative rather than authoritarian (Rogers, 1998, as cited by

Nupponen, 2006).

Professional Development

Because of the type of leadership style of most childcare workers, it is rare to find many of this leadership style who is preparing to be principals. Therefore, most elementary school principals bring with them little or no experience in early childhood. It is for this reason that ongoing professional development is needed for elementary school principals. This professional development should be provided in different stages throughout the growth of the principals' career to assist them in the leadership role that includes the administration of an early childhood program within the elementary school.

Research show that most directors of early childcare facilities felt under-prepared for their role before they took on the position (Hayden, 1997b; Jorde Bloom, 1997; Robert, Woodrow & Moreton, 1998, cited by Nupponen, 2006). They also reported that they had limited access to further professional development once on the job. The few professional development opportunities they were afforded were usually not directed to their specific needs as directors of early childhood programs.

“Jorde Bloom (1997) shows that directors go through ‘stages’ in their development; thus professional development tailored to their developmental needs at different career stages may assist them in their leadership role. Further, directors do not consider themselves as experienced in advocacy (Clyde, 1995; Lunn & Bishop, 2002; Rodd, 1997), which has a negative effect on their professional standing in the wider community. This indicates that directors may benefit from additional support in their leadership role, as they are in a unique position to take part in a broad array of activities

and the rejuvenation of new cultures towards implementation of quality programs”
(Nupponen, 2006, p. 1).

Schools often seek out the help of consultants to provide professional development to their administrators. Care must also be taken in the selection of consultants to administer the professional development. Oftentimes the consultants are not skilled in the field of early childhood care and operations themselves. They just try to make their presentation “fit” the early childhood audience. “Consultants themselves may lack the skill set necessary to be effective. While they usually come to the field already possessing a college degree and some type of early-childhood-related experience (Wesley & Buysse, 2004), as change agents, they need an additional specialized knowledge base (Rust & Freidus, 2001)” (Akerman, 2008, p. 2).

Many times the principal over early childhood grade-levels want the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten to look much like the first grade. They require teachers to forego planned play activities for more rigorous reading and math instruction. When students reach third grade and are still struggling readers, it is understandably that principals will want to start the reading, writing, and arithmetic studies as early as possible. But research shows (Macron, 2002) that too much structure too early can be more detrimental in the long term. Findings indicated that “children whose preschool experiences had been child-initiated demonstrated greater mastery of basic skills at the end of preschool than did children in programs where academics were emphasized and skills were directly taught” (Macon, 2002, para. 5). “At the end of preschool, children in the "combination" model did significantly poorer on all measures except self-help and development of social coping skills compared to children in either the child-initiated or academically directed models. Preschool girls outperformed boys in all areas except gross motor development and play/leisure skills” (Macon, 2002, para. 5). Principals need to be

knowledgeable and kept abreast of recent longitudinal research regarding the outcomes of various early childhood programs.

Conclusions

This review of literature has revealed that there is a need for more professional development in the area of early childhood program implementation for elementary school principals. It was revealed that because of the unique delivery methods of the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs care should be exercised on the part of the superintendent and those in charge of hiring principals for elementary school that they look for qualities of leadership more conducive to this age group. The research also reveal that women leaders would make better principals for early childhood programs than men because of the high probability of the leadership style of women being one of transformational and of distributive leadership, the style most needed for this particular age group. Studies also show that there is a definite long-term consequence to student achievement based on the type of early childhood program the student experiences. Principals of early childhood need to be aware of the various types of early childhood programs and what the long term effect of each type is so that they will implement the best program for the highest long term student achievement.

Recommendations

For schools that include pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs in the public elementary schools:

1. Principals should receive professional development along with their staff on best practices geared specifically to this early childhood age group.
2. Elementary school principals need to be involved in professional development activities that teach them how to administer and evaluate an early childhood program in their

school.

3. Principals should also be instrumental in providing professional development for the early childhood staff in the elementary school.
4. More research should be conducted to establish the actual qualifications of elementary school principals who must implement early childhood programs.
5. More research is needed that focuses on how effective elementary school principals are in communication with the families and extended community early learning centers to help bridge the gap for students entering the elementary school.
6. Finally, there is also not enough quantitative data available to show the relationship between student achievement and the leadership capacity of elementary school principals.

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