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Leadership in Effective Elementary Schools: A Synthesis of Five Case Studies

Jim Parsons, Larry Beauchamp
University of Alberta, Canada

Administrators in five highly effective elementary schools were studied. These leaders, through acts of will and insight, had given up iconic and heroic leadership status, so that school leadership might be shared. Leadership has a significant effect on student learning. Principals' influence is often indirect, works through others, and happens best by developing teachers' efficacy in curriculum and instruction, engaging and motivating staff, fostering a shared purpose, creating conditions for effective teaching and learning, fostering program coherence, encouraging organizational learning, and through feedback, direction, and communication. Significant leadership practices include communicating a clear vision and priorities, focusing time and attention on what matters most, enabling teachers to develop pedagogical and content skills and capacity, providing instructional guidance, empowering others to make significant decisions, addressing supportive structures and resources, developing school improvement plans, providing instructional guidance and coherence, engaging the larger school and district community, acting ethically, and engaging in continuous learning and growth.

Keywords: instructional leadership, transformational leadership, teacher leadership, shared leadership, principals, school administration, teacher administrator relationships

Introduction

Administrators in five highly effective elementary schools were studied. These leaders, through acts of will and insight, had given up iconic and heroic leadership status, so that school leadership might be shared. This is not a new idea. The increased involvement of all "employees" as stakeholders in organizational decision-making has become a globally accepted practice over the past 20 years. Teachers involved in the study participated in school leadership, and influenced and interacted with others.

Relationships in the five schools had become the foundation for all the good work done in the name of teaching and learning. The study schools were a collection of people joined together by their will to help children learn. That will transform them from a collection of individuals into a value-driven community who lived the mantra—"It is all about the kids". The principals were united in their practice: They were the leaders of their schools, but in this leadership, they did not rely on "power over" others as much as "power through" others to forward the shared vision and goals of their schools.

Statement of Problem

The education system in Alberta is characterized by a highly collegial relationship that exists among

Jim Parsons, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.
Larry Beauchamp, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.

members of the educational and school community as they work together to create positive learning experiences for students. One crucial aspect of this relationship is the professional collaboration that exists between teachers and administrators. The focus of this study was to understand the role of the school principal in facilitating such collaboration and to show how this collaboration was vital in creating optimal learning opportunities for students.

Research Question

The research question was as follows: What are the successful behaviors and actions of administrators that make highly effective elementary schools good places for student learning?

Background and Need

By identifying leadership practices that foster what Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, and Rodrigue (2004) have termed "teaching for deep understanding", it is hoped that schools can be helped to mediate the often conflicting priorities they faced daily. In addition, Alberta Education released the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* (2009). According to the document's preamble, "The principal is an accomplished teacher who practices quality leadership in the provision of opportunities for optimum learning and development of all students in the school" (Alberta Education, 2009). It would be useful to understand the many ways in which administrators demonstrated the exemplary practices associated with the guide's identified leadership dimensions.

Method

Alberta Teachers' Association staff contacted district office leaders and members of the Council on School Administration in an effort to identify prospective study schools. Key considerations included school size, community characteristics, geography, and the demographic profile of the staff and administrative teams.

A list of 30 schools was developed. Each school was visited to outline the general purpose of the study. The researchers spent two full days in each of the 30 selected schools on discussing the project and research process in detail. Initial data were gathered by asking staff to provide written responses to two questions: (1) What makes this school a good place for teaching and learning? and (2) How does your administration help make it so? Written responses were gathered. Following transcription, notes, and written responses were studied for content and were organized into themes. The data suggested that good administrators should:

(1) build and communicate common goals, a common sense of purpose, and a clear vision;

(2) take the time to really "know" their teachers (and students) and appreciate, value, and respect them;

(3) monitor, participate, and be "involved" with students, especially helping with difficult, high needs, or at-risk students;

(4) listen, care, and support teachers both on professional and on personal matters and always have "Open Doors";

(5) create "family friendly" working and learning environments;

(6) be organized and provide detailed, inclusive, and proactive planning;

(7) celebrate learning and success with both formal and fun filled informal events;

(8) include others in planning and deciding, and be "equal partners" who empower good decision-making among teachers;

(9) be leaders who "walk their talk";

(10) create safe, positive, innovative learning communities through quality hiring, active support, providing and managing resources, and building embedded time where staff work together.

The themes aided in the generation and shape of the interview questions used with the five case study schools that were eventually selected. Parsons and Beauchamp (2011) spent two full days in each of the five study schools. Interviews were open-ended and included every teaching staff member in each school and all educational assistants who were interested in being interviewed.

Interviews, typically 30 minutes in length, were done in pairs. Following the interviews, notes were transcribed and read several times to generate specific content from each school. In addition, the researchers took part in other school activities to better understand the work occurring in that school. The notes for each school both became the content of each individual case study and, when synthesized and examined across case studies, they were used to make broader generalizations. Each completed case study was taken back to the study school and presented to staff to verify the interpretations. What follows is a report on the synthesis of the results from the five individual case studies.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

The researchers did not have access to an acceptable ranking that would reveal the five most highly effective elementary schools in Alberta. The process for school selection followed the criteria largely based upon reputation. Researches had not defined specific criteria for defining "highly effective", but they were clear in their discussions with study teachers that "highly effective" meant that children were learning.

It should also be noted that this study was an "appreciative inquiry". Researchers were looking specifically for what worked well, and they specifically noted to those at the schools involved that this study would be positive.

Finally, this study was limited, because researchers spent a relatively short time in each school. During that time, their main task was to interview teachers and other school staff members. The study was delimited by not interviewing parents, although such interviews might have added more to the research. That said, it was recognized that data collection was not exhaustive.

Literature Review

Stronge (1988) and Flath (1989) noted that principals' jobs were changing to be less business managers and more "instructional leaders". Principals of the day, spent most of their time dealing with necessary "administrative details", such as moving from school crisis to crisis and putting out fires, all without ever proactively controlling their own time. Such leadership seemed heroic, and for the most part, solitary. That archaic concept has been replaced, and the more accepted belief is that schools work better when leadership is shared.

The Principal as Instructional Leader

Jenkins (2009) noted that instructional leadership as a concept emerged in the 1980s and was influenced by research that correlated effective schools with principals who promoted student learning. Wasicsko (2007) suggested a close link between the person of the leader and the job of the leader. He believed that it is the human qualities and dispositions of leaders combined with their knowledge and skills that transform teachers' and students' lives and create school cultures where people learn and grow. How powerful is a principal's leadership? Angelle (2006) found that this culture impacted teachers early and stayed with them throughout

their careers.

Leadership studies have been redirected from administrative management towards instructional leadership, and from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Strain (2009) reviewed the concept of leadership by using a linguistic concept known as a "turn" (an abrupt change in the mood or argument of a poem). Strain reminded that leadership cannot be examined outside of time and place—specifically, outside of history and culture. For example, Batagiannis (2009) suggested that today's educational leaders are working in a society that seeks immediate and perfect solutions. The result is a tendency for "push-button" leadership that neither trusts nor respects educational judgment.

The reliance on high-stakes, normative testing represents such an example. At its fundamental theoretical base, high stakes testing exists, because educational norms—which represent a "one-size-fits-all" policy—are believed to offer greater insight than local (teacher or school-based) insights about how children learn differently. Perhaps the impact of this focus has been best played out in the US (United States) with the institution of the NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act) policy. The NCLB is an example of how a search for quick fixes and normative results can create simplistic, technocratic, and prescriptive solutions that, in the end, work to deskill teachers and principals.

Stack and Mazawi (2009) highlighted a contradiction in educational leadership: the conceptual, theoretical confusion and resulting lack of consensus about what educational leadership means contrasts sharply with the certainty of agencies that sanction, regulate, and administer educational leadership. For now, it is important to note that school leadership—one of the jobs of principals—plays itself out in an era of accountability for achievement. As Vanderhaar, Munoz, and Rodosky (2006) reconfirmed that, poverty, teacher experience, and previous student achievement were the best predictors of student achievement and those resulting in the most significant amount of variance. The context of children's lives can wreak havoc with a school's learning goals.

Mero (2009) studied the principals of MetLife-NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) BTS (breakthrough schools) to see if desirable leadership traits could be summarized. These schools had exhibited high results while serving large numbers of economically challenged students. Mero identified the following traits of BTS principals: (1) hold high expectations and goals for all students and staff members; (2) seek input from all stakeholders; (3) encourage the growth and professional development of staff members; (4) engage in lifelong learning; (5) visionary; and (6) value collaboration. Perhaps, this summary of six traits can be a precursor to what the job of a principal should be.

The Job of the Principal

Zepeda (2007) simply wrote that the work of a principal is multifaceted, hectic, and fraught with uncertainties. Perhaps a principal's biggest current issue is that the work is being enacted in an ongoing environment of accountability where a principal's work as instructional leader is increasingly being linked to narrowly defined (by someone else's standards) academic "results".

One pragmatic and complex problem principals faced is that their day-to-day activities occur within a space that almost demands immediate administrative attention—the management aspect of their work. Such attention almost always involves people, happens quickly, and seems to narrow a principal's work to effective school management while dragging principals away from visionary or big-picture activities that are the life's blood of instructional leadership.

As noted previously, there has been a "turn" in the way principals work. Bossi (2007) believed that a

principal's role has changed from managing and evaluating teachers to creating and maintaining data-driven, collaborative cultures. Today's principals must focus on the achievement of all students by being both an instructional leader and a learning leader. Zepeda (2007) examined the work principals must accomplish if they are to become their schools' instructional leaders. Her examination centered on the areas of developing a vision and culture that support successful instructional programs, professional development, and other activities that help improve teaching. Without such focus, principals cannot help teachers who themselves are pushed—perhaps threatened is a more apt word—to higher accountability standards. As Zepeda (2007) suggested, instructional leaders must support the work of teachers, so that schools might more effectively focus their attentions, energies, and efforts on student learning and achievement.

Tirozzi (2001) noted that there are two kinds of accountability—one given as norms from standardized tests and the other one that teachers and principals live with each day that is embodied in the needs of specific children on specific days with specific curricular outcomes. Negotiating these different accountability demands can be a challenge.

Parkhurst (2009) believed that new principals begin their jobs with great enthusiasm about becoming instructional leaders who spend time visiting classrooms and becoming involved in the daily activities of curriculum and instruction. In time, the reality of daily choices between office management and classroom learning hits home. Many past principals look back at the demands of their work, ruing their choices. Yergalonis (2005) theorized that young principal candidates glibly believe that they should become instructional leaders but soon lose their focus and become operations managers.

Good (2008) believed that the quality of instruction is the principal's main responsibility. She noted that instructional leadership once involved tasks like setting goals, allocating instructional resources, managing the curriculum and checking lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, teaching demands more sophisticated insights about professional development and demands that data be used to inform instructional decisions. Like DuFour (2002), she suggested that, with a shift in attention from teaching to learning, "learning leader" has become a better job title than "instructional leader".

Frick (2009) reminded us that choices filling a principal's day are more than political, they include difficult moral choices. Such moral clashes often pit personal beliefs and values against organizational, professional expectations. Frick's findings suggest that such choices come at a cost and that principals experience intrapersonal moral discord as part of the process of making difficult moral choices.

Marshall (2008) suggested that principals can spend too much time on the "wrong things" and not enough on the "right things". She believed that principals should proactively focus on the two or three high-priority activities that would help bring their students to "high achievement levels". Without such explicit focus, principals can get lost in the day's "clutter". Perhaps, only a lifetime of experiences can reveal the truly important from the seemingly important. Bonilla (2006) identified 10 school leadership problems that prevent principals from creating successful schools. These include: (1) low visibility; (2) office fixation; (3) lack of or too much delegation; (4) choosing programs over people; (5) dictatorial or egotistical style; (6) lack of praise and recognition; (7) criticizing and discouraging; (8) focusing on negatives; (9) failure to control mood; and (10) forgetting the students. What seems clear in Bonilla's list is the very human element of a principal's work. Perhaps these simpler, more human activities are the "clutter", and Marshall (2008) believed that they must be exorcised. Tobin (2009) reflecting on a leadership career offered 10 practical reflections that he hopes can act as a survival guide. These are reminders for both veteran administrators and guidance for new principals: (1)

know yourself and where you are going; (2) do not be overly prepared; (3) link with others; (4) measure your words; (5) take responsibility; (6) keep others informed; (7) maintain your perspective; (8) have the courage to make the right decision; (9) know that all you really have is your integrity; and (10) enjoy yourself. Again, one can see the human element in these "reminders".

In summary, a principal's job is difficult, multi-contextual, and it asks principals to make immediate and difficult choices. Often, such choices pit the instructional leadership "side" of the job against the administrative "side".

The Principal and Other Teachers

Leadership is becoming less hierarchical and more horizontal. Today's most successful schools are sites where leadership is shared and, in fact, where that sharing is nourished. Stoll and Temperley (2009) believed creative leadership focuses on seeing and doing things differently so as to improve the lives of all students. Such creative leadership has been shown to improve student's learning in a wide variety of schools. For example, Kinney (2009) interviewed the 2009 MetLife NASSP Middle Level Principal of the Year, who stressed the need to empower teachers, so that collaborative decision-making could take place. Graczewski, Knudson, and Holtzman (2009) reviewed school reform literature and concluded that principals should move past traditional administrative roles to become instructional leaders. They built a three-pronged connection for school improvement: (1) coherent school-wide vision; (2) a principal's engagement in instructional improvement; and (3) effective teacher professional development that focuses on content and curriculum.

Frey and Fisher (2009) also made the case that principals have an indirect, but crucial impact on improving student achievement. Although they believed that the work of classroom teachers is the most crucial link to student achievement, it is the principal who best helps teachers improve their practice. Pate, James, and Leech (2005) reminded us that principals are no longer the sole instructional leaders within schools. In fact, their research shows that the most successful schools spread leadership responsibilities widely among teachers. How can such shared leadership occur in schools? Jackson (2009) suggested a series of targeted, strategic conversations designed to help teachers improve their instruction. For her, teachers and principals should work together in these conversations to identify instructional problems and attempt to seek solutions.

Moving to shared leadership is not easy. Mangin (2007) attempted to discover what conditions helped elementary principals support school-based teacher leadership. She found that the more principals understood what teacher leaders did and the more they dialogued with these teacher leaders, the more they supported teacher leadership. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) found that the presence of shared leadership and professional communities created powerful, positive impacts on teaching behavior and that teachers' self-efficacy increased when shared leadership and professional communities were present.

Teacher professional development has tended to gather teachers into groups—generally away from their work sites—and introduce them to expert-driven educational ideas. Teachers then took the ideas or insights to which they were exposed back into the classroom, employed them, and trusted that student learning would improve. Reeves (2009) challenged the belief that professional development programs and lectures (outside experts) are sufficient to change professional practice. He believed that many schools ignore research evidence supporting the power of direct modeling by classroom teachers as a key to professional learning. Yost, Vogel, and Rosenberg (2009) examined the results of a teacher leadership-training model (Project Achieve) and suggested that, when teachers are given chances to improve their teaching practice through on-site,

personalized, professional development led by other teachers, increased student learning follows.

Central to a principal's work with teachers is the "invitation" to teachers to take part in the leadership of the school. The idea of invitation is crucial, because one cannot forcefully create such relationships. Often, educational leaders miss this point—especially at the highest levels of policy-making. One cannot force, even good ideas, on those working in stress-filled environments—and schools are such places. For example, Daly (2009) believed that, although the NCLB brings social justice and equity issues to the forefront, the act's threat-and-sanction methods increase stress levels and lead to rigid responses, especially in schools labeled PI (program improvement). Daly believed that rigid responses limit options and information and constrain decision-making.

The Principal and Student Achievement

The role of the principal in promoting school reform leading to increased student achievement, is a topic with a long and evolving history. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) made two important claims: First, "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 7); Second, "leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most" (p. 7). In other words, without powerful leadership, troubled schools are unlikely to be changed for the better. The authors stressed, "Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst" (p. 7).

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) examined the nature, causes, and consequence of school leader efficacy (the power of a principal to influence student learning directly or indirectly). Collective efficacy was the belief in the capabilities of the system as a collective actor, working together to achieve its educational outcomes. The study's findings linked school leaders' efficacy and the effects of conditions found in schools on student achievement. These findings have been mirrored in other research. For example, Chance and Segura (2009) examined behaviors associated with improved and sustained student achievement in a study that linked three organizational and instructional practices to successful collaboration, and in turn, to improved student achievement: (1) scheduled time for teacher collaboration; (2) structured and focused collaboration time devoted to improving instruction and student achievement; and (3) behaviors that focused on student-centered planning and accountability.

In an article critiquing top-down directives for school improvement, Gallagher (2009) introduced the concept of "kairos" to describe "appropriateness for the occasion at hand" and argued that educational policymaking, teaching, and assessment are most effective and ethical when carried out at the local level. Citing the US policy "NCLB", Evans (2009) explored relationships between teachers' collective sense of efficacy and student achievement. Evans argued that research shows a direct link between teachers' sense of efficacy and student performance by specifically governing the actions and decisions teachers make. As Evans suggested, NCLB places greater importance and monitoring on student success within ethnicity or socio-economic categories, and as a result, teachers are evaluated on goals within these categories. However, the research also shows that teachers feel less competent teaching students from poor backgrounds and therefore, they have a lower sense of efficacy for these students.

Goldring et al. (2009) argued that effective school leadership is a key to students' academic success. However, they believed that the development of effective school leadership has been hampered by the lack of technically sound tools that assess and monitor principals' performance. They believed that sustainable

leadership is possible in a context where new expectations are raised towards schools, but noted that principals are especially challenged to respond to new and sometimes contradicting expectations.

Even as schools change, are those changes sustainable? Moller, Vedoy, Presthus, and Skedsmo (2009) restudied three schools that had, five years earlier, been identified as successful. The authors found that learning-centered approaches had been sustained in all the schools during the five years. They also found that all principals continued to work to influence staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. They also found that teamwork and sustaining and promoting equity and social justice were important actions in these schools. The authors suggested that principals have the power to set the tone and agenda for school development, even though leadership is interactive and involves many people.

Findings

The data synthesized from the five original case studies "fell" into ten main themes. At some school sites, there was a subtle or nuanced difference between such concepts as "common language/vision" and "student-centered". However, when comparing schools with schools, the themes held together well.

Theme One—The Principal Is Knowledgeable

For teachers, "knowledgeable" meant that principals teach or are willing, on occasion, to take over the classroom. Teachers revealed how their principals substituted for them, so they could spend extra time working together. They appreciated principals who spent time in their classrooms, coming to know student names and backgrounds. Teachers believed that a leader should be one of "them" and appreciated that they had not forgotten what it meant to be a teacher.

Teachers wanted their principals to be knowledgeable, because this helped them enact constructive leadership within their schools. Teachers respect leaders who share their expertise by using stories and examples. Although teachers are competent, principals who lead highly effective schools know how to help when asked. These principals cared in active ways, for example, by setting up school procedures that monitored children's progress, so no "kid fell through the cracks".

Good principals see the big picture, know the system, know how things work, and lead inside and outside of schools. According to their teachers, nothing surprised them as leaders. They have seen and done much. Teachers seek them out for counsel and "information". These highly effective principals insure that the entire community works well together.

Theme Two—The Principal Trusts and Respects

Teachers defined "trust and respect" in terms of principals trusting and respecting teachers' work, the students, and parents. Teachers felt valued. Principals believe that teachers are both competent and willing to do their work. As one teacher put it, "They believe we will do a good job, and we do!" Teachers were not micro-managed.

Teachers valued "trust and respect", because it meant that their principals assumed the best in them. Often teachers echoed the sentence "We all feel valued for our teaching and equally for who we are". Teachers understood that a principal's job was to bring together different personalities and different skills, but believed that within a school's faculty "We are different, and that is our strength". Principals trusted what teachers did, and they unified staff and encouraged them to trust each other.

Such trust and respect happened corporately, but also often individually, as with the teacher who noted, "I

was going to retire but I deferred it because the principal said, 'We do not want you to leave'". Teachers valued freedom to do what they do best. They appreciated that their principals did not interfere. They felt trusted to focus on curriculum outcomes in ways that were often unique to them. As one teacher noted, "It does not matter how we get there—just that we do".

Theme Three—The Principle Is Caring and Safe

"Caring and safe" meant that the principal listened, asked about, and personally cared for teachers. The schools were not places where teachers and students worked, but rather, places where teachers and students lived. As a result, it was obvious that the administrative teams were "there for" teachers' and that teachers' personal lives were almost as important as their professional lives. Teachers' personal and family issues come with them to school; and when their principals understood and helped in personal ways, school was better.

Specifically, "caring and safe" meant that principals helped teachers with "aggressive" parents and that they regularly "checked in" with teachers and followed up on actions or conversations. When these things happened, teachers reported that everyone—from students to teachers to parents—felt safe. The principals in this study modeled caring. As a result, teachers believed that they could "go to" their administrative team "for anything!" and that "I can call anytime!".

This research repeatedly reminded that teachers are pragmatists—they will do almost anything or put up with almost anything to help their children learn. Their "What you see is what you get" mentality helps them feel safe to act in the best interests of their students. Their work belief could be summed up in the following relationship between their administrator and themselves: "If my principal cares, I feel safe. If I feel safe, then I have the freedom to do what I know is best for kids".

In conversations, teachers listed many practical and caring principal's actions. These included a principal covering a class so a teacher could attend a medical appointment, and covering a class for a young teacher who was moved to tears over the plight of a student. Another principal provided personal support when a teacher's daughter was ill by driving the teacher to her daughter's school, then home, and finally arranging for a substitute. Another drove a student to her mother's funeral. By the totality of these actions, principals demonstrated to teachers that they have value as people. The following sentence was repeated often: "No matter what is happening in life, I can go to them for anything". Teaching is an action that engages both hearts and minds.

Theme Four—The Principle Is Disciplined and Decisive

"Disciplined and decisive" meant that principals were strong and confident. Teachers wanted their leaders to collaborate and consult with them, but they also wanted their leaders not to be "Wishy washy!". School is a place where things need to get done—Parents need to be dealt with and problems need to be fixed so teachers can teach. If there was a problem, principals attended immediately. Principals also set up appropriate interventions. They went to bat for teachers. They helped with struggling students. They found the resources teachers needed to do their work.

When teachers reported that principals were disciplined and decisive, they meant that their principals were authentic, genuine, and confident leaders. What you saw was what you got. Their principals did not play games. Instead, they were forthright. They said what needed to be said. They were collegial, yet decisive and as one teacher said, principals "Do not shuffle, they pick up the ball". This meant that, if kids needed help or outside expertise, they got it. Teachers appreciated that their principals fought to get them what they needed to do their

jobs—things like funding or special education support, and that they spoke to parents of disruptive children and helped teachers arrange appropriate testing.

Finally, principals helped where teachers felt the greatest need. They supported teachers when dealing with parents. They gave advice about curriculum, behavior problems, and family situations. They provided support and resources, and they were "on it" immediately! They were not afraid to get to the bottom of issues. The focus of the teachers was teaching. These teachers were not interested in politics, and they just wanted to do their jobs. They valued principals who helped them achieve those ends.

Theme Five—We Are a Family/Community

"We are a family/community" highlighted the fact that a school is a small village, filled with joys and heartaches. This study suggested that the walls between a teacher's personal and professional life were permeable. Perhaps, for many teachers, these two lives were the same. For the teachers, family and community meant that they worked together to support each other. Teachers shared the important things of the school—stories and resources. Within these communities, diversity was allowed and, even, encouraged. This diversity included others—chief of which are parents. Thus, good schools need to have great parent involvement and strong parent councils.

When the study schools worked well, they created room for a personal "family" balance in teachers' lives. Teachers enjoyed the blending of family and community. They spoke of dinner clubs and valued social interaction. They noted that their schools were more than schools; they were families. These families accepted and recognized individual differences, and accepted the people for who they were. What is the result? Teachers reported that they loved coming to work! They appreciated being taken care of and taking care of others. They appreciated the group's intimacy: They tearfully stood up and publically acknowledged the value of their friends—other teachers—who were there for them during personal tragedies. They remembered the quilters group that they were part of who helped a family that experienced a tragedy—this, for them, was the real intimacy of a family. These stories became active treasures to which teachers responded by noting that their school was a great place to work.

Story after story spoke of faculty and staff members caring about each other and their students, and the stories grew into normative rules for living. Stories became "This is how we do things around here". Schools, through stories, grew into families in both good times and bad. When a teaching assistant passed away from cancer—the school organized a walk—the school held hands together—the school became a unit.

Theme Six—The Principal Is Positive

"Positive" meant having fun, celebrating, having a sense of humor, and working with enthusiasm. Teachers in this research focused on the positive. They looked for ways to help students achieve. They seldom used threats, and they had high energy. Principals were confident leaders who supported the emotional needs of teachers and who balanced academic with affective learning. When teachers talked about "positive" as a concept, they also focused on the kinds of positive, specific feedback they were given by their principals. Teachers noted that they started staff meetings with "bouquets" (kudos) and that their principals acknowledged them and celebrated their successes.

Theme Seven—The Principal Has High Expectations

"High expectations" meant that principals were not hesitant to express expectations or set goals. The principals had high academic goals and expected the best from teachers and students. They strove to do the best

for "kids". Principals also expected and were proactive in creating professional development. They encouraged and supported teachers' learning. This professional development was local and focused upon site-based goals.

When teachers spoke about the high expectations of their principals, they noted that their principals held them to high standards and that they "wanted" to rise to these standards. Teachers noted that their principals would not allow them to "stagnate or bog down", but they also did not make them work alone. For example, principals sat with teachers to do individualized programs, intervene with parents, or work to create time and space for professional dialogue.

As a group, the study schools strove for excellence. In this striving, principals supported teachers' growth and "never" refused teachers' opportunities to partake in professional development. As a result, the culture of the school was busy and intense. Principals let staff know what was expected, but they gave leeway about how their teachers might practice their craft. As one teacher noted, this relationship was "win/win". Teachers spoke about being part of a "highly academic" school where they could be "the best we can be". All these were done, according to teachers, with a lack of micro-management.

Theme Eight—The Principal Is Aware of Innovations

"Aware of innovations" meant that principals knew "the Big Picture". For teachers, this awareness allowed them the freedom and encouragement to take risks, innovate, and try new things. Being aware of innovations meant that principals stayed up-to-date so teachers could focus on teaching. Principals knew what was going on in the school and community and kept teachers aware of the same by communicating changes and helping to make teachers' jobs easier. When teachers spoke about their principal's awareness of innovation, they often mentioned technology. In study schools, principals worked to help their teachers understand technology by creating spaces and opportunities for professional learning. One school, for example, had created a space called "Technical Tuesdays" where staff could discuss issues with technology. All the schools supported innovations. Teachers reported, "awesome" support for the use of technology. Principals "stepped up" to help schools access technology grants by working to provide space for professional learning. The word from teachers and principals was that, if teachers had passions for anything, they should pursue it!

Theme Nine—We Speak the Same Language

When teachers noted that their principals "speak the same language", they included common vision, goals, and values shared among all faculty and staff members. Often, this common language was purposely built around specific programs such as character education. Different schools utilized differently, but equally effective, means to build common language and values. These means could be pedagogical—such as grade-level teacher meetings or book clubs where educational ideas and theories were discussed. Some schools employed other formats—such as leadership academies.

The one constant in the study schools was that teachers worked together in groups that, while not in themselves concerned primarily with shared language, had the impact of building shared vision and values through language. Teachers, across schools, noted that their school had a shared mission statement that was actually lived. Everyone knew this vision and worked at it.

Theme Ten—The Principal Communicates Well

"Communication" meant that people within schools communicated openly and honestly and that through their communication, schools worked to establish a culture of belonging. For teachers, communication meant that they had good meetings, needs were followed up, newsletters and email served good purposes, the

principal checked in often and would walk around and engage people within the school.

School communication not only included those within the schools but also extended to parents. Teachers understood and also appreciated that parents' concerns needed to be followed up. Principals helped teachers and their schools by getting information out to interested parents as soon as it became available. Teachers also appreciated that any school communication was a mix of personal and professional information.

Summary

These 10 themes represented the findings of what made these schools successful. Administrators and teacher leaders provide most of the leadership in schools. A core set of practices form the "basics" of successful leadership: These include setting directions and developing people. Successful leaders productively respond to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented context of educating diverse children.

Leadership has a significant effect on student learning. School leaders make a difference. Principals' influence is often indirect, works through others, and happens best by developing teachers' efficacy in curriculum and instruction, engaging and motivating staff, fostering a shared purpose, creating conditions for effective teaching and learning, fostering program coherence, encouraging organizational learning, and through feedback, direction and communication.

Significant leadership practices include communicating a clear vision and priorities, focusing time and attention on what matters most, enabling teachers to develop pedagogical and content skills and capacity, providing instructional guidance, empowering others to make significant decisions, addressing supportive structures and resources, developing school improvement plans, providing instructional guidance and coherence, engaging the larger school and district community, acting ethically, and engaging in continuous learning and growth.

What was learned about student achievement? Most importantly, schools do make a difference, and teachers' expertise develops as they expand their insights into what works, leadership matters and the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997).

Discussion

George Theoharis (2009) wrote a helpful book in which his principals, similar to the principals in this study, worked to improve student learning using humane and equitable practices. Theoharis named the seven "keys" crucial for social justice leadership. His research suggested that principals should:

(1) acquire a broad, reconceptualized consciousness that includes a strong knowledge and skill base;

(2) possess core leadership traits;

(3) advance inclusion, access, and opportunity for all students;

(4) improve the core learning context—including both teaching and curriculum;

(5) create a climate of belonging;

(6) raise student achievement;

(7) sustain oneself professionally and personally.

Clearly, similarities exist between this work and George Theoharis' (2009). When teachers in the study schools spoke of their principals' good work, they were heard to acknowledge that their principals had strong

knowledge and a wide skill base. They reported that their principals were not afraid to lead and were "all about ALL the kids". These principals encouraged the entire school to work, so that "No child fell through any cracks". Principals worked both with students and teachers, and were both curriculum and people leaders. Everyone within the school felt a part of the enterprise of that school. It was apparent how the actions of principals affected the work of teachers so children could learn. Finally, it was obvious how the work of principals motivated others to sustainable action.

Reeves (2006) outlined a framework that connects school leadership to student achievement. Reeves believed that current leadership practices perpetuate structural inequalities of schools. He attempts to expose educational myths that prevent change, offer school practices that enhance student achievement, and create a framework for effective school leadership. Reeves called for an attitude adjustment in schools. He outlined what he called a "blame culture" and suggested that, "No one chooses failure, and the presumption that failure is a choice is deeply rooted in the need to elevate blame over responsibility" (p. xxiii). He believed that the assumptions of culture are seldom discussed in schools.

Reeves' work is highly provocative. He referred to current grading practices as "sucker punches" to students and representative of a cowardly system that lacks commitment to those practices that support student growth—early interventions being a case in point. Reeves provided a detailed analysis of the failings of the bell curve and called school leaders to exorcise unproductive, ineffective, and punitive grading systems. Reeves' vision of effective schooling rests on the following framework and three presumptions:

> (1) leadership, teaching, and adult actions matter;
> (2) particular leadership actions show demonstrable links to improved student achievement and educational equity;
> (3) leadership is neither a unitary skill set, nor a solitary activity. (Reeves, 2006, pp. xxiii-xxiv)

Reeves (2006) believed that school leaders must think and act differently. They must create and maintain an organizational culture that utilizes the talents and abilities of all members of the organization. Improving schools is too great a challenge for solitary heroic leaders; instead, school leaders need to create an environment of professional effectiveness with clearly articulated goals and deliberate actions that acknowledge organizational shortcomings and create environments of action. "We survive as a species and as leaders of organizations not due to solitary efforts but due to organizational and collaborative success" (p. 26).

Reeves (2006) linked effective leadership to improve student achievement by focusing on building a vision, developing relationships, better knowing one's organizational system, maintaining a commitment to reflection and collaboration, utilizing analytic skills to address uncomfortable truths (for example, "Students do not exhibit low academic achievement because they are poor but because of the way we treat poor children" (p. 57)) and recognizing the importance of personal communication.

Friesen's (2010) research suggested that teachers are necessary designers of learning, that students' work needs to be worthy of their time and attention, that assessment practices improve student learning and guide teaching, that teachers must foster a variety of interdependent relationships, and that teachers improve their practice in the company of their peers. Friesen's recent work echoes our findings.

Hargreaves' (2010) research on school improvement in Finland, Tower Hamlets, and England noted that, over two years, two thirds of Finnish schools improved at double the rate of the national average. His research suggested a number of catalysts for school improvement: These include school support networks; useful professional development; expert analysis of achievement data; mentor schools and consultants; data-informed

reflection and decision-making; strategies that are short, medium and long-term; and Web portals with chat rooms and discussion forums. His findings in Tower Hamlets suggested that setting shared and ambitious targets, hiring quality teachers, forming strong local partnerships, knowing people and being present in schools, ensuring that schools work together, and developing community are keys to significant student gains. Hargreaves' "Fourth Way" of school improvement involves schools working together, sustainable and systemic leadership, mindful learning and teaching, shared targets, accountability by sample, community development, and evidence-informed communities within an environment of active trust focused on an inspiring and inclusive vision. His findings reflect those of this study.

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