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An Analysis of Superintendent and Principal Perceptions Regarding the Supervision and Evaluation of Principals

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Empirical Research

An Analysis of Superintendent and Principal Perceptions Regarding the Supervision and Evaluation of Principals

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Abstract

The goals for this study were to examine principals' perceptions regarding their own supervision and evaluation and compare to superintendents' perceptions regarding the supervision and evaluation of principals. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What are the perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding their own supervision?; (2) What are the perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding their own evaluation?; and (3) What are the differences in perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding supervision and evaluation? This study followed a descriptive format and used a 20 item on-line survey to measure principal and superintendents' perceptions regarding critical elements in their own supervision and evaluation cycle. Out of the participants solicited, 102 principals agreed to participate (37% response rate) and 23 superintendents agreed to participate (48% response rate). Results indicated overall superintendents and principals were in agreement regarding 19 out of 20 statements describing the supervision and evaluation of principals. In addition, there was a significant difference in both supervision and evaluation perceptions between superintendents and principals. Results from this study provide implications for those who supervise principals, as well as for those who train superintendents.

Keywords

principal supervision; principal evaluation; superintendents; principals

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Introduction

In the era of educational accountability, the performance of students demonstrating academic proficiency is paramount. As instructional leadership of principals is directly correlated to creating a culture of continuous improvement and increases in student achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), and is second as an influence following the effectiveness of teachers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004), focusing attention on principal performance is essential. With past accountability legislations including No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and Race to the Top (RTTT) (USDOE, 2009) increasing school performance is linked with instructional leadership of principals. Following the passage of RTTT, 34 states increased the accountability for principals in new principal evaluation systems (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012). With the confluence of instructional leadership and principal performance based on both federal and state accountability policies, principal evaluations are being thrust into an increasingly bright spotlight (Williams, 2015). These principal evaluation systems are also undergoing current scrutiny with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). The ESSA shifts the responsibility for accountability measures back to state and local agencies.

Although the evaluation of principals is becoming an increasingly important topic and recognized as one of the methods to improve the performance of schools (Mendels, 2017), principal evaluation has not been viewed as an important or effective education policy (Reeves, 2009). The evaluation of principals has been overlooked with limited research (Fuller, Hollingworth, & Liu, 2015; Miller, 2014) as more attention has been focused on the evaluation of teachers and not on principal evaluation (Grissom, Blisset, & Mitani, 2018). In addition, Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, and Leon, (2011), found only 20 peer reviewed journal articles regarding principal evaluation published between 1980 and 2010. Not only is there limited research, the effectiveness of past principal systems has been poor (Clifford & Ross, 2012; Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011). Principals have not been included in the design or establishment of evaluation systems (Clifford, Berhrstock-Sharratt, & Fetters, 2012). This contradicts The National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) which recommends including principals in the design of evaluation systems (Clifford & Ross, 2011). With researchers stating principal systems have been poor, some school districts have begun to support the development of principal supervisors to improve the evaluation of principals (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, & MacFarlane, 2013). By utilizing principal supervisors who function as instructional leaders for their principals, principal evaluation can become “a tool for growth” (Micheaux & Parvin, 2018).

In response to the need to improve the supervision and evaluation of principals, the Wallace Foundation supported six large school districts in changing how they supervise and evaluate novice principals (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). As a result of this initiative, districts hired more principal supervisors, refined the evaluation system, and focused on instructional leadership (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, & Simon, 2013). In a survey of 25 participating states, the development of principals by improving the practice of principal supervisors was of high priority, however, only six percent of those states report making progress (Riley & Meredith, 2017). In one study, principals indicated the role of the superintendent was important

as principals developed teacher leadership skills (Wells, Maxfield, Klocko, & Feun, 2010). When principals were asked about the level of support they received from their superintendent, principals were not satisfied with their superintendents' support (Thomas, Holdaway, & Ward, 2000).

In the past, most evaluation systems have used the Interstate School Leadership Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Canole & Young, 2013). Now with Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) approved as updated standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) (NPBEA), state standards will be used to align with PSEL (Riley & Meredith, 2017). However, this process of alignment is slowly gaining headway with only 21% of states reporting progress (Riley & Meredith, 2017).

Following the onslaught of federal legislation, organizations such as the Wallace Foundation and New Leaders have provided tool kits or blueprints to help states or districts develop principal evaluation systems (New Leaders, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Recommended practices in principal evaluation systems include five key areas: vision, climate, cultivating leadership, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Stronge (2013) offers six standards for principal evaluation systems: instructional leadership, school climate, human resources leadership, organizational leadership, communication and community relations, and professionalism. New Leaders (2012) provided a description of principal evaluation components including goal-setting, data analysis, plan implementation, mid-year formative reviews, and a summative evaluation rating. Both supervision and evaluation are important in improving the performance of principals and these concepts have distinct differences. Backor and Gordon (2015) worked with participants to define evaluation as a "long-term commitment to continuous growth rather than one or more traditional observations using a district or state evaluation instrument" (p. 109) for principal preparation programs. Kizlik (2008) described evaluation as a complex process that involves making judgments and taking the assessment results into account. Evaluation can be seen as a judgment made over time using observation, assessment, and other related data.

Supervision, although seen in many iterations, is often recognized as a process using formative data to arrive at strategies for improvement. That process, as identified by the seminal work of Goldhammer (1969), includes:

1. Pre observation conference
2. Observation
3. Data Analysis and strategy
4. Conference
5. Post conference analysis

These recommended steps in supervision are echoed in the survey questions asked in this study, which are reviewed in more detail in the methods section below.

Although the superintendent is usually charged with the supervision and evaluation of principals, in many districts the superintendent might delegate these responsibilities to an assistant superintendent (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013). For the purpose of this

manuscript, central office personnel responsible for the supervision and evaluation of principals will be referred to as principal supervisors. Other names for this position include instructional leadership directors (ILDs) (Honig, 2012), instructional superintendents, and area superintendents (Saltsman, 2016).

To summarize, the researchers of this study hope to contribute to a better understanding of how superintendents and principals perceive the effectiveness of a principal supervision. Moreover, it is important to better understand how evaluation systems might lead to the improvement of principal performance and ultimately the improvement of student achievement.

Research Design and Methods

This study examined principal and superintendents' perceptions in a Mountain West state regarding supervision and evaluation within their own evaluation cycle. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What are the perceptions of principals and superintendents regarding their own supervision?; (2) What are the perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding their own evaluation?; and (3) What are the differences in perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding supervision and evaluation? This study followed a descriptive format and used a 20 item online survey to measure principal and superintendents' perceptions regarding critical elements in their own supervision and evaluation cycle. The survey was sent electronically during a spring semester to all participants with one follow-up reminder.

Study Participants

Participants solicited included 275 principals from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, or schools including kindergarten through eighth grade and/or twelfth grade in a Mountain West state. Participants also included 48 superintendents from a Mountain West state. All principals and superintendents in the Mountain West state were invited to participate regardless of gender, experience, or educational degree. Out of the participants solicited, 102 principals agreed to participate (37% response rate) and 23 superintendents agreed to participate (48% response rate).

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was a survey constructed by the researchers based on the supervision and evaluation process outlined by Goldhammer (1969). This was adapted to represent the supervision and evaluation of principals. The first section of the survey consisted of 9 Likert scaled statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree), all focused on supervision. Items measured concepts such as meeting at least once a year to establish goals, discussing the principals' performance based on student achievement, and observing the principals in a leadership responsibility. The second section consisted of eleven Likert scale measuring evaluation. Items assessed concepts such as articulating a set of performance standards, using feedback to improve principals' performance, and identifying performance strengths. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire survey was 0.96. Reliability for each subscale was also adequate (supervision: 0.93 and evaluation: 0.92). Principals were

asked 20 questions regarding their own supervision and evaluation. Superintendents were asked the same 20 questions regarding the supervision and evaluation of their principals.

The final section of the survey collected demographic information from the sample, which consisted of (a) gender of participant, (b) size of district, (c) years of experience in current position, and (d) gender of supervisor(s). Demographic information was collected purely for descriptive information regarding this Mountain West state. Sixty-nine principals were male and 36 were female. Superintendents were predominately male (n = 21) with only two female superintendents. Most principals worked in a district with less than 3000 students (n = 70, 69%) and 20 superintendents worked in a district with less than 3000 students (87%). Principals had served in that position for approximately 10 years (M = 9.79, SD = 7.01) and superintendents had been in their role for just over nine years (M = 9.09, SD = 7.03).

Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis included means and standard deviations for the entire sample. Data were also broken down by subscale and by principal/superintendent. This grouping was used to conduct an independent t-test examining differences between principals and superintendents' perceptions of supervision and evaluation.

Research Question One

Research question one asked, "What are the perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding their own supervision?" Nine items on the survey addressed this question. Means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 1).

Overall, principals agreed with all of the nine statements regarding principal supervision as all statements had means higher than 2.50. Superintendents showed higher agreement with all nine statements with means higher than 3.00. Principals agreed most regarding meeting at least once each year with their superintendent to establish goals for their professional growth (M = 3.20, SD = 0.87). This sentiment was echoed by superintendents who agreed they meet at least once a year with their principals to establish goals (M = 3.78, SD = 0.42). Principals agreed least with their superintendent routinely using classroom walkthroughs to monitor classroom instruction in their school (M = 2.32, SD = 0.99). Superintendents highly agreed that they walk through their principals' building to monitor classroom instruction (M = 3.64, SD = 0.65). The total evaluation subscale score average was 2.75 (SD = 0.71) for principals and 3.48 (SD = 0.30) for superintendents.

Table 1
Principal and superintendents' perceptions regarding their own supervision

Statement	Principal *M* (*SD*)	Superintendent *M* (*SD*)
I meet at least once each year with my principals to establish goals for their professional growth.	3.20 (0.87)	3.78 (0.42)
I observe my principals in a leadership responsibility at least once a year.	2.88 (0.94)	3.78 (0.42)
I walk through my principals' building to monitor classroom instruction in his/her school.	2.32 (0.99)	3.65 (0.65)
I meet with my principals to discuss how their performance will be assessed.	2.75 (0.86)	3.35 (0.49)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss student achievement.	2.84 (0.85)	3.74 (0.45)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss remediation for marginal teachers.	2.68 (0.85)	3.39 (0.58)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss how the school's faculty will actively engage students in learning.	2.67 (0.87)	3.13 (0.69)
I believe my principals improve their performance based on my feedback and supervision.	2.76 (0.82)	3.13 (0.63)
I believe I provide my principals with meaningful feedback during the school year.	2.69 (0.87)	3.35 (0.57)
Total Supervision Subscale Score	2.75 (0.71)	3.48 (0.30)

Note. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Research Question Two

Research question two asked, "What are the perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding their own evaluation?" Eleven items on the survey addressed principals' perceptions of their evaluation. Again, means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 2).

Overall, principals agreed with ten of the 11 statements regarding principal evaluation as eight statements had means higher than 2.50. Superintendents consistently rated the items higher with all means higher than 3.00. Principals agreed that their performance is evaluated once a year (M = 3.22, SD = 0.67). Superintendents also scored this statement high noting that they evaluate their principals at least once a year (M = 3.70, SD = 0.47). One item where principals and superintendents showed a great deal of discrepancy is the analysis of data during a summative evaluation. Principals scored this item low (M = 2.47, SD = 0.86) while superintendents agreed this takes place (M = 3.32, SD = 0.48). The total evaluation subscale average score for principals was 2.91 (SD = 0.58) and 3.34 (SD = 0.30) for superintendents.

Table 2
Principal and superintendents' perceptions regarding their own evaluation

Statement	Principal *M* (*SD*)	Superintendent *M* (*SD*)
My principal evaluation system clearly articulates a set of standards to rate the performance of my principals.	3.02 (0.70)	3.13 (0.63)
At a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I discuss the things we agreed to focus upon during an earlier goal setting conference.	2.81 (0.82)	3.35 (0.49)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I analyze the data he/she collected during school year.	2.47 (0.86)	3.32 (0.48)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I identify their performance strengths.	2.90 (0.85)	3.43 (0.51)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I identify areas in which my principal(s) can improve.	2.90 (0.80)	3.50 (0.51)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals are expected to reflect about their performance.	3.08 (0.71)	3.39 (0.58)
My principals view my evaluation as valuable feedback.	2.90 (0.84)	3.00 (0.31)
My evaluation accurately reflects my principals' performance.	2.84 (0.76)	3.17 (0.49)
The performance of my principals is evaluated at least once a year.	3.22 (0.67)	3.70 (0.47)
A variety of information (teacher evaluations, budget, student achievement) are used to evaluate my principals.	2.74 (0.86)	3.32 (0.57)
I ask my principals for input concerning their evaluation.	3.04 (0.77)	3.43 (0.66)
Total Evaluation Subscale Score	2.91 (0.58)	3.34 (0.30)

Note. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Research Question 3

Research question three asked, "What are the differences in perceptions of principal and superintendents' regarding supervision and evaluation?" Principals were compared to superintendents on supervision and evaluation using an independent t-test. Both supervision and evaluation showed a significant difference between the two groups. Significant results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Perceptions of principals and superintendents regarding their own supervision and evaluation

Subscale	*Principals n =111*	*Superintendents n =23*	*Effect Size*
Supervision	2.75 (0.71)	3.48 (0.30)	1.33
Evaluation	2.91 (0.58)	3.34 (0.30)	0.93

Note. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); * denotes significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Results of the independent t-test indicated there was a significant difference in how principals and superintendents viewed supervision, t (79.61) = -7.82, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, superintendents scored supervision higher (M = 3.48, SD = 0.30) than principals (M = 2.75, SD = 0.71). Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated for supervision. The interpretation for Cohen's d is defined as "small, d = 0.20," "medium, d = 0.50," and "large, d = 0.80" (Cohen, 1988). The effect size for this significant difference exceed a large effect size (d = 1.33). There was also a significant difference in evaluation perceptions between superintendents and principals, t (63.12) = -5.25, $p < 0.05$. Superintendents viewed the evaluation as more valuable (M = 3.34, SD = 0.30) than principals (M = 2.91, SD = 0.58). The effect sizes for the significant difference between principals and superintendents on evaluation was large (d = 0.93).

Discussion

The quantitative analysis of superintendent and principal perceptions was limited to the viewpoints of superintendents and principals regarding principals' supervision and evaluation in a Mountain West state. The findings can be summarized as following: overall both superintendents and principals were in agreement regarding 19 out of 20 statements describing the supervision and evaluation of principals. In addition, there was a significant difference in both supervision and evaluation perceptions between superintendents and principals. Although both principals and superintendents agreed with 19 of the statements regarding supervision and evaluation (means higher that 2.50) all 20 statements were ranked higher by superintendents as compared to the responses from principals. This finding reveals superintendents feel they are actively involved in the supervision and evaluation of principals while principals do not feel as supported in the process.

Important components of the supervision of principals include goal setting (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016; Protheroe, 2009), the observation of principals, monitoring instructional leadership by visiting the school (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, & Simon, 2013), and discussing the assessment of principal performance (Honig, 2012). Student achievement data should be reviewed, and if needed, remediation provided for marginal outcomes (Range, Hewitt, & Young, 2014). Feedback from superintendent to principal should improve performance (Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015; Micheaux & Parvin, 2018), and be meaningful to the principals.

The evaluation of principals should be based on clearly articulated standards (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Derrington & Sharrat, 2008). Summative evaluation conferences should be based on data (Sanders, Kearney, & Vince, 2012) from agreed upon goals (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012; Sinnema & Robinson, 2012), and include performance strengths and areas of improvement (New Leaders, 2012). Summative evaluation conferences should contain feedback and opportunities for principals to reflect about their performance (Pearce & Arredondo, 1996; New Leaders, 2012). The evaluation should be accurate, and be performed at least once a year (Derrington & Sanders, 2011). Potential sources of performance information could include teacher evaluations, budget, and student achievement (New Leaders, 2012). Additionally, other measures of principal performance could contain student outcomes such as performance on state or district assessments and attendance or graduation rates (Fuller, Hollingworth, & Liu, 2015). Principals should also have an opportunity to provide input during all steps of the evaluation

process (Clifford & Ross, 2011). Multisource feedback, which includes principals' self-reflection regarding their evaluations as well as evaluative feedback from teachers, fellow principals, or superintendents is a relatively new procedure for principal evaluation and could provide potential motivation for improvement (Goldring, Mavrogordato, & Haynes, 2015).

Implications

Principals and superintendents were in agreement regarding the importance of supervision and evaluation. Clifford & Ross (2011) and Connelly & Bartoletti (2012) stated principals who benefit from effective supervision and evaluation can indirectly influence "teacher working conditions" (p. 4) and improve student achievement (Clifford, Hansen, & Wraight, 2014). Superintendent preparation programs could also include a focus on improving the instructional leadership of principals through the supervision and evaluation of principals.

One potential rationale for the difference between the significant perceptions regarding supervision could be that not all instructional supervisors "made intentional moves to help principals value their own development as instructional leaders rather than to engage in instructional leadership work such as classroom observations as a matter of compliance" (Honig, 2012, p. 747). It is possible some superintendents might have difficulty creating this value in supervision with the past practice of supervision of principals emphasizing checklists or compliance (McMahon, Peters, & Schumacher, 2014) without developing trust or communication between principal and superintendent (Hvidston, McKim, & Holmes, 2018).

Although there has been a recent emphasis on providing principal supervisors with professional development and also hiring principal supervisors based on their aptitude to provide instructional leadership supervision (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, & Simon, 2013), those principal supervisors who have not had the benefit of this professional development training might not have the same set of instructional leadership supervision skills. As districts emphasize supervising and evaluating principals, a large case load of principals to supervise might also cause a difference in perceptions. For example, one district increased the number of principal supervisors so each of the eight instructional superintendents were responsible for between seven and nine schools (Gill, 2013). This case load for principal supervisors is in contrast to a Council of Great City Schools survey of 41 large districts where the average number of principals supervised was 24 with a range from three to 100 (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios; 2013). The larger the case load of principal supervisors the less likely principal supervisors are able to provide support to principals and build meaningful relationships.

Developing relationships is difficult in the nexus between supervision and evaluation where the coaching is formative supervision and being the boss is summative evaluation (Saltzman, 2016). During evaluation, whether formative or summative, the power hierarchy plays a role. Accepting coaching and evaluation from someone of authority can be challenging. One way to combat the power hierarchy is to build trust between principal supervisors and principals, which supports principals in accepting evaluative feedback (Oksana, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012). When evaluation systems are used as tools to make personnel decisions as dismissal or require professional development (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012), principals might not feel supported or trusted, possibly resulting in a different level of perception.

Because of the stress and principal turnover over as the result of NCLB accountability measures and sanctions (Mitani, 2018), state agencies might consider principal support and mentoring as they develop evaluation systems for principals. This stress, resulting from satisfying accountability systems, could also contribute to the difference in perceptions between principals and superintendents. However, superintendents are charged with district instructional improvement based on the instructional efforts of principals and the performance of schools, creating operational stress that flows from the top and down through the organization. Principals who are effective leaders engage in creating cultures where high quality instruction is demonstrated by increased student academic performance. If principals are also instructional leaders who develop strong teachers, supporting those principals by providing supervision and evaluation systems with supervisors who can mentor and coach to improve instructional leadership is a powerful concept. Although research regarding the roles of principal supervisors is limited, impetus is growing for schools to implement principal supervisors because of the powerful impact on effective principals. A better understanding of how superintendents and principals perceive the effectiveness of a principal supervision and evaluation system could lead to the improvement of principal performance and thus the improvement of student achievement.

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