Lessons Learned from a Successful Middle School Principal in Türkiye: Insights into Effective Leadership Practices

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Abstract

Examining successful school principals can contribute to the efforts of developing new leadership models and management strategies specific to the education system. This study focuses on the practices of a school principal who enhanced the performance of a school with low academic achievement in a remarkable way in a few years. The participants of this case study were a school principal and three teachers, and the research data were analyzed thematically. The school principal was observed to exhibit certain patterns of effective behavior to ensure the success of the school. It was found that the principal had strong personal values and believed that students could learn, established a system that enabled students to learn at school, focused on academic goals, recognized school stakeholders and included them in student learning processes, developed a school culture based on trust and implemented practices that closely followed and evaluated their learning.

Keywords: *School Leadership, Student Learning, Successful School Principals*

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Introduction

School principals are important actors who indirectly affect student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Seashore et al., 2010). The significance of school principals for learning outcomes has been the focus of many research studies (Pashiardis & Johansson, 2021). However, it has recently been revealed in different studies that school principals exhibit context-sensitive leadership behaviors, and it has been stated that it is necessary to investigate what behaviors leaders display in what context (Clarke & O'donoghue, 2017; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2018). Hallinger (2011) asserts that leadership emerges in an environmental context, personal characteristics of leaders are important in leadership practices, leadership indirectly affects student learning, and it has an influence on school development as a whole, not just student learning. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2008) indicate that successful school leadership includes the dimensions of creating vision and setting a direction, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing teaching and learning programs. They also point out that 'successful leaders are context-sensitive'.

Investigating effective school principals' leadership characteristics is of great importance to understand the reasons behind their success. They employ various strategies to create an environment in their schools in which students can be successful. Identifying these strategies can help other school administrators use similar strategies to increase student achievement (Bartell, 1989; Drysdale, & Gurr, 2011; Haiyan & Allan, 2021; Stronge & Xu, 2021). On the other hand, in Türkiye that has a centralized and competitive education system, the roles and responsibilities expected of school principals have increased in recent years in order to increase the academic performance of students (Balyer, 2012). Some principals can perform these roles more effectively compared to others (Polatcan & Cansoy, 2018). Yet, the question of how some principals create a culture focused on student learning and increase academic achievement in their schools, despite being in the same conditions with others. In this regard, this study aims at examining the practices of a school principal who was able to enhance the academic achievement of his students in central exams in the last few years. Thus, a school principal's behavioral patterns in a centralized education system will thus be revealed. The research question addressed in this study is as follows: "With which practices does a school principal increase the achievement of his school in central exams?"

What Do Effective School Principals Do?

International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) is a significant contribution to the literature on successful and effective school principals. ISSPP is a project that has explored the characteristics of academics and practitioners representing many countries, and effective school principals who are successful in various school contexts since 2002 (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011). Within the scope of this project, academics conducted various studies to examine successful principals in contemporary schools. In these studies, it is stated that successful school principals engage in post-heroic leadership practices, a combination of transformational and instructional leadership (Harris, 2002). Research also shows that successful school principals are determined, success-oriented and supportive while having a sense of purpose and establishing strong

relationships. These principals see themselves as leaders who establish strong relationships with teachers and manage instruction (Day & Leithwood, 2007).

In many studies on what effective school principals do, there are striking common points in their practices of school principals. In studies in the international literature, it has been reported that effective school principals play a key role in shaping the vision, values, culture, structure, expectations, and processes of their schools and engage in a range of practices aimed at improving student outcomes by focusing mainly on teaching, learning and school capacity. Accordingly, it is emphasized that effective school principals have educational goals, exhibit a strong commitment to the success of their schools, support the professional development of teachers to encourage teacher leadership, and try to make a difference by dedicating themselves to teaching and learning. Furthermore, these studies underline specific roles of school principals that include having a strong sense of purpose, believing in students, trying to enable teachers to believe that all students will be successful, establishing cooperative and trust-based relationships, informing teachers, students and families about the achievement level of students, receiving community support, and focusing on the holistic development of children by creating rich learning environments (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Drysdale et al., 2009; Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2020; Garza et al., 2014; Gurr et al., 2003; Pashiardis et al., 2011; Ramalho et al., 2010).

School leaders improve learning and teaching indirectly and strongly by enhancing the motivation and commitment of their staff and creating favourable working conditions (Leithwood, 2008). In addition to the views that the effect of school principals' leadership practices on teaching is direct, indirect or reciprocal (Hallinger & Heck, 1998), another accepted belief is that this effect occurs indirectly by creating conditions that encourage effective learning and teaching (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Influential school leaders are great educators who focus on processes of learning, teaching and school development (Murphy et al., 2006), have severe visions about learning, and have high expectations for all students and staff (Rutledge et al., 2015). As is reported in many studies, *learning* is what matters for successful principals. At this point, their role in the process of creating a positive learning environment for teachers and students is critical (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Context of the Study

The Turkish education system has a highly centralized nature. The central organization is the only authority responsible for all education policies to be implemented throughout the country, including the appointment of school principals and teachers, the content of the curriculum, and the textbooks used in schools. This centralized structure in education is among the factors limiting school principals' teaching-oriented actions (Beycioglu et al., 2019; Şişman, 2020). Nation-wide exams are at the center of the Turkish education system (Yılmaz, 2017). In recent years, the roles and responsibilities expected of school principals have changed in Türkiye in order to increase students' level of academic achievement. With higher standards of accountability, there are more expectations from school principals to improve instruction (Balyer, 2012; Erdağ & Karadağ, 2017)

Altınkale Middle School, where the study was conducted, was established in 2012. It is located in a neighbourhood close to the city centre and where university students mainly live. Consisting of a five-storey building, the school has 20 classrooms, a rich library (i.e. a flexible library with digital tools in some Turkish schools), a science laboratory, a computer laboratory and a multi-purpose hall. It has 37 teachers, 2 assistant principals and 520 students. Students enroll in the school based on the area of their residence. However, the school is also in demand from other neighbourhoods. Parents of the students exhibit a mixed socioeconomic profile. The percentage of students with low socioeconomic status was stated to be around 30% by the school principal. The socioeconomic statuses were determined based on the school principals' views. They were asked about the approximate percentage of students with low socioeconomic status in their school. The parents working as labourers are in the majority, as there are parents with different professions, including doctors, lecturers and teachers. Other than the diversity of parents with different socioeconomic statuses, the majority have a high level of parental involvement in their children's education. It is remarkable that the parents, who had a high level of involvement in the school by monitoring their children's development or through various activities, have a strong trust in the school and especially the school principal.

The school principal Ali has been working at Altinkale Middle School for eight years. He is known as a person who loves his profession, is successful in human relations, has strong communication skills, and is friendly and responsible in the city. Principal Ali is a school principal who follows innovations, develops himself and is committed to student learning. The school, ranked 16th in the province when School principal Ali was appointed as the principal, gained momentum during his administration. According to the 2018-2019 academic year statistics, the rate of graduates placed in reputable high schools was 22%, which went up to 32% in the following year. It was then 38% in the 2020-2021 academic year. The school principal was thus assumed to have an effect because of the steady increase in the percentage of students placed in quality high schools. (Quality high schools are those where students in the tenth percentile are placed according to the central exam results they entered at the end of 8th grade.) The demand for the school, which has started to be known for its achievements in the social, cultural, sports and especially academic fields in the province, has been increasing in recent years. The teachers interviewed at the school that has sufficient physical capacity and strong teaching staff, also referred to School principal Ali's leadership role in increasing the school's achievement level.

Method

Research Model

This study aimed at identifying the leadership practices of a model school principal that drew attention to his effective administration and examine the effects of these practices on the quality of instruction and student learning. This attempt was designed as a qualitative research method case study by the research aim. In qualitative research, real-life situations are explained and processes and meanings are interpreted (Silverman, 2018). Case studies also allow for an in-depth examination of a context, revealing contextual differences with their reasons (Ersoy & Saban, 2019) and answering questions such as *how, why* (Yin, 2009). In this case study, the participants

were first determined, then data collection tools were developed, and a pilot study was conducted. This was followed by fieldwork in natural environments.

Participants

In the qualitative research approach, it is essential to employ participants who can obtain data suitable for the research purpose (Oplatka, 2022). In this regard, it is necessary to determine the criteria for case selection (Merriam, 2018). In the present study, criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling method, was used to determine a school as well as a school principal and teachers working in this school. According to Patton (2018), criterion sampling is based on selecting situations that meet the researcher's predetermined criteria.

The criteria used in this study included the school being a state school and having a success story, and the principal having worked in this school for at least three years. To find a school that meets these criteria, interviews were conducted with five school principals across the province, and Altinkale Middle School was selected for the study. The school principal working in this school was accepted by his peers for his success-oriented management. In the interview with this school principal, information was obtained to select teachers who could contribute to the study following the criterion sampling method. Thus, three teachers with different majors who had worked in the school for at least three years were selected. Erdi, a mathematics teacher, has a bachelor's degree. Erdi, who has a teaching experience of 20 years has been working in the school for six years. Binnur, a teacher of religious culture and knowledge of ethics, has a master's degree. She has been working in the school for nine years. Her professional experience is 14 years. Basak is a guidance teacher. She has a master's degree and has worked at Altinkale Middle School for five years. The teachers can be said to be experienced, hard-working and open to professional development. These teachers were selected because they had been working with the same principal for many years and were familiar with the school.

Data Collection

Observations, interviews and document analysis can be used as data sources in qualitative research (Yin, 2017). In this study, multiple data sources were employed in accordance with the nature of qualitative research and to reach a holistic meaning. For this purpose, fieldwork was carried out in natural environments through observations, interviews and document analysis. Necessary permissions were obtained to comply with ethical principles and implement the study, and the research data were gathered in September 2021. A semi-structured interview form was developed to be used in the interviews with the school principal and teachers, and a pilot interview was conducted with a school principal and a teacher to determine the adequacy of the interview questions. After the interview questions were revised, the interviews were conducted with the participants in a way that would not disrupt the course hours. The interview with the school principal lasted 100 minutes, and those with the teachers took 20 to 25 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the permission of each participant. Data were also collected through formal and informal observations. Moreover, documents such as the school's website, strategic plan, brochure and social media accounts were examined to reveal a more comprehensive and consistent meaning. These documents were used for holistic and reflective ideas while reporting the findings.

For example, student achievements and socio-cultural activities at school were examined on the school's website.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis that consists of arranging the raw data obtained and revealing findings (Creswell, 2021) is a process that continues simultaneously with the data collection process (Oplatka, 2022). In this study, the process was carried out simultaneously by reading the data obtained during the data collection process, conducting open coding, and comparing the codes with the data from the observations and documents. In data analysis, all the texts were read carefully, and the parts related to the research question were determined, which is the sorting stage. Data segments were then coded, and the categories were formed after the coding was completed (Miles et al., 2014). Coding generally progressed inductively (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Similar studies were also referred to while naming codes and categories. For example, the school principal's feelings of justice, trust, high motivation and empathy were called as the theme "strong personal values and beliefs" (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Example of coding and creating descriptive themes*

Descriptive Theme	Categories	Coding
Having Strong Personal Values and Beliefs	Values and beliefs	Justice Trust High motivation Emphaty

Trustworthiness and Ethics

In qualitative research, it is of great importance that all processes are implemented ethically in order to ensure validity and reliability. In this study, it was aimed to retrieve valid and reliable information by using the methods proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Multiple sources were used in the data collection process. In this regard, the teachers' opinions were also consulted in addition to the principal's, and different documents were used. The environment and participants were introduced with context-specific descriptions, and the findings were elaborated through direct quotations from the raw data. In accordance with the member-checking method, the researchers aimed to prevent errors in interpretation by sending the raw data to one of the participants, and made a comparison by presenting the open codes to an expert. Moreover, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they participated in the study on a voluntary basis. They were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential. Pseudo-names were used to keep the participants' identities confidential in the study.

Findings

In this section, School principal Ali's leadership practices and the effects of these practices on the quality of instruction are presented under six themes. These themes are "having strong personal values and beliefs", "establishing a system", "building a positive school culture based on trust", "getting to know the school community well and involving them in processes of student learning", "focusing on academic achievement", and "closely monitoring and evaluating students".

Having Strong Personal Values and Beliefs

School principal Ali is a person who has the values of justice, trust and empathy, who strongly believes that any student can succeed, and who can take risks. He thinks that having been sensitive to social problems and open to self-development during his youth is the basis of his current professional activities. School principal Ali, who loves his job and is experienced, seems to have dedicated himself to his profession and school. In addition, his fair, respectful and friendly personality is positively reflected in his relations with the school community. As a good listener, he is open to innovations and development. He responds to the wishes of teachers in all kinds of work they want to do. Following current teaching methods, examining other schools and bringing good practices to his school, School principal Ali cares about professional solidarity and carries out joint works with his colleagues in his province. He explains his attitude towards this issue with the following statements:

> "I also do research about other schools at the same time. I follow five or six private schools. I use the activities implemented in these schools (for example, screaming, balloon popping activities). In addition, one of our original works is that we developed a project together with three schools. Without jealousy, we put real efforts into it. There really is strength in unity".

Having high internal motivation, School principal Ali carries out various activities that make a difference in his school and works beyond working hours. He sets a good role model for teachers with his work. Modelling the behavior he expects from others, School principal Ali also lightens teachers' load. He said, "I'm not the kind of person who wants something from the teacher and does nothing. My door is always open. For example, sometimes I lighten teachers' load myself. When you do that, you are not a burden". It can thus be said that School principal Ali's personal characteristics, values and beliefs as a school principal are the source of his instruction-oriented practices and school management style. In this respect, School principal Ali is in a key position in the school development process.

Establishing a System

School principal Ali thinks that establishing a system in his school where the goals are clear, what needs to be done to reach these goals are clearly stated, and everyone fulfils their responsibilities plays an important role in school development. For this purpose, there are many instruction-related activities in Altinkale Middle School, and the school principal has the role of a system founder. School principal Ali is the pioneer of works such as the Test Monitor Project, Subject Revision Project, reading activities and brainstorming group. Through these efforts, school staff gets to know parents and students closely, motivation tools are used effectively, and the continuity of

academic achievement is ensured. School principal Ali refers to the existence of a system as the school's strength. While forming this system in which the school community is aware of the goals, student achievement is systematically monitored, and students and teachers are constantly monitored through frequent practice exams, School principal Ali has gone beyond his role as an administrator and increased the quality of instruction. His following statements support this observation:

> "I really learned that this is all about a system. As soon as you build your system, for example, when you start a test project and spread it over four school years, once you improve students' reading comprehension and reading, you see the results. So, the most powerful aspect of the school is the system. You have a clear system. When I took over the management of this school, I knew what we could achieve through a variety of project".

Building a Positive School Culture Based on Trust

School principal Ali is aware that a peaceful working environment where all stakeholders work together has an influence on learning and teaching. He thus pays due attention to take everyone's opinion and be respectful and fair. He explains his role in this process by saying, "My philosophy is to be at your school, monitor the developments and notice the problems". Harmony and order can be easily seen from the first moment one enters Altinkale Middle School. School corridors and boards are filled with instructional and entertaining visuals that can attract students' attention. School principal Ali, a highly visible school principal, maintains the school discipline with his friendly but strict approach. The following statements are important in describing this approach:

> "It is not possible for a student with a goal to disrupt the school and classroom order. That's why we move on with no problems. I mean, there are no students in my classes that could pose a problem. This is because I encourage all of them in some way to do something". School principal Ali

> "He (School principal) has a close relationship with students, but he also has a disciplined attitude. Of course, it is very important to adjust the balance. He can also be tough when necessary". Erdi, Teacher

Parents' beliefs, expectations and confidence in both the school principal and the teachers is a notable finding. Their trust in the school has noticeably increased during School principal Ali's term as the school principal. The following statements of the school principal and teachers show this trust:

> "Parents believe that we work hard and that we will help their children progress. This belief actually makes a lot of things easier. It increases parental support for school. The parents once bought me a plane tree, planted it in the school garden and had a sign on it. (The plane tree of our school. So that it will be remembered later, and my name will be there.) So, I believe that we had a good impression on our parents". School principal Ali

> "His relationship with parents is excellent. In fact, I think this is one of the reasons why our school is the best. Parents strongly trust the school management. In fact, I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that they almost send their children to this school for the management". Binnur, Teacher

School principal Ali cares about teachers' motivation being high and organizes various activities for this purpose. He says, "What we do, we do with our teachers.", and tries to create a positive school culture based on cooperation. The positive school culture, where all stakeholders are involved in the learning process, and that involves mutual trust and respect, must have played an

important role in the success of Altinkale Middle School. Such a school culture increases the school community's commitment to the school and encourages many activities that foster student learning. At this point, it seems that the support from parents has increased, cooperation between teachers of different majors has been formed, voluntary work has been carried out, teachers' learning has been supported, and as a result, the quality of education has increased.

Getting to Know the School Community Well and Involving Them in Student Learning

School principal Ali is aware that teachers and parents have an influence on students' learning process. With this awareness, he adopts a humanistic leadership role and attaches special importance to getting to know the school community. He shares messages and posts on guidance and motivations in social groups with parents and thinks that these are effective. Parents feel that they are valued, and thus they provide material and moral support to the work that School principal Ali wants to do for his school and students. This cooperation gets even strengthened in the course of time. Stating that he spends at least an hour with every parent who comes to the school during the registration period, the school principal sees this period both as a means of getting to know the parents and also for the parents to learn about the school and its vision. School principal Ali describes his communication with parents as follows:

> " For example, I take student registrations myself. And the duration of a single registration is about an hour for me. What does that mean? I tell the student about the functioning and mentality of my school in that one hour. We want the student to study and read. When we have this communication with the child, we don't have problems with him or her for four years."

School principal Ali values teachers and cares about their job satisfaction. He thinks that the teacher is an essential actor in the school's academic achievement, and he makes an effort to meet teachers' needs. In addition, he tries to provide them with whatever they need in any creative work they want to do and supports their professional development. His following statements relates to these efforts:

> "I want my teachers to be happy. If they are happy, you will certainly have success. Our school went through renovations, and the first thing I thought was to build a kitchen for the teachers. I sometimes serve them fruits. We put the fruits on their table before the class break. Even that motivates them. Without teachers, nothing can be possible. I mean, teachers, their efforts and dedication are actually the biggest factor in this success".

School principal Ali knows all students and monitors their academic and social status. Being constantly in interacting with students in his office, classrooms and social platforms, School principal Ali cares about all students, not only the successful ones. He spends time with them before the bell rings and listens to their problems and wishes. Having over 500 students, School principal Ali states that this is time-consuming, but its effect on students is quite important. The importance he attaches to getting to know the school community and its effects on teaching are also by the teachers in their and School principal Ali's following statements:

> "As a school principal, I know almost all 500 students. Getting to know them is the most important thing on the road to success. It takes my time, but I am happy". School principal Ali

> "I think it is very effective that he has a one-to-one relationship with students and gets to know their parents very closely. Parents strongly trust the school management. He knows how parents can contribute to the

school and uses it well. Since he is kind and friendly, our parents support the school in any way they can". Binnur, Teacher

"Of the principals I have worked with so far, I have never met a school principal who is so close to students. I mean, he is always in interacting with the students. The same with parents. He communicates with them through phone calls, correspondence in WhatApp groups and face-to-face meetings". Erdi, Teacher

"It is a great advantage for us that school principal gets along well with all the parents at school". Basak , Teacher

Focusing on Academic Achievement

School principal Ali aims to make his school gain a reputation and displays a leadership role with a vision of sustainable success, putting teaching and learning in the centre. Believing that a student who has academic goals will also have good manners, School principal Ali considers himself responsible for student learning and thinks that this responsibility begins by setting goals. The academic focus in setting goals can be traced in his following sentences:

> "I started here 7 or 8 years ago. When I took over, my school was ranked 16th-17th in the province. In some subjects, we were way behind. I did a lot of work in the first year, but it was a group of students that I just took over. I couldn't make a change for them. But in the following year, we have done a lot of work to increase the level of achievement. Academically speaking, our goal was to be the first school in our district, and we succeeded. It was then to be among the first five schools in the province, and we succeeded in that, too. In addition, one of our students got the highest score in the high school entrance exam in the whole province. Every student's academic achievement is always in my mind. My dreams and goals are to be successful in this respect."

During the interviews, the teachers stated that School principal Ali prioritized teaching in his managerial role and emphasized that he worked like a teacher with high academic goals, and encouraged them to do more:

> "… For our principal, I think the first priority is teaching. I can say that he is a person who is ambitious about teaching. In that sense, he guides us well". Binnur, Teacher

> "I think we are lucky that our school principal sets high goals. It is because the way he directs us urges us to work harder". Erdi, Teacher

In the process of determining the school's goals, School principal Ali takes teachers' opinions, cooperates with them and emphasizes the importance of informing the school community about the school's goals. His and his teachers' following statements on this matter are as follows:

> "When everyone knows what to do, we don't experience any problems. I find it very important for everyone to know the school's goals. In my school, both parents and students know what we expect from them. Teachers are also aware what we want done. We talk about these issues in our meetings. We also share messages on WhatsApp groups or our school website". School principal Ali

> "Our school principal is extremely effective and competent in setting goals. He pays great attention to academic success. No top-down decisions. Of course, he may have a general goal in mind as a leader, but he shares it with everyone. He says this is what we should focus on this year, and asks us what we think". Basak, Teacher

School principal Ali's setting high academic goals based on cooperation and conveying them to the school community can be said to have been influential on the rising success of Altinkale Middle School, which has recently become known for its academic achievements.

Closely Monitoring and Evaluating Students

School principal Ali conducts important activities that support teaching in the process of achieving academic goals. He closely monitors the process of high school entrance exams and encourages teachers and students to focus on their needs by monitoring performance on a subject basis. These activities include the Subject Revision Project, Test Monitor Project, brainstorming group, creating a culture of reading, peer teaching, student coaching, establishing strong connections with the local community, and using motivational tools effectively.

It is an essential finding that School principal Ali has established strong connections with the local community. He obtains resources for his school through solid networks with the provincial directorate of national education, various institutions and parents, and speeds up the school's development process. This facilitates many activities that support student learning.

The school principal is highly visible and thus is aware of every situation in the school. The teachers interviewed stated that School principal Ali was a school principal who was visible above the average. In addition, School principal Ali uses motivational tools effectively for both students and teachers and thinks that it is quite effective for learning. The following states point to this aspect of his management:

> "Everything in this is motivation. If students has a motivation, they divert their attention to something. So, we care about motivation. We reward them when they are successful in practice exams or in different activities. We give them a certificate. We take them to dinners or picnics. We make them feel proud by having all students to applaud them at the ceremonies".

School principal Ali makes an effort to create a culture of reading and thus sets reading goals for students. He asks every student to read at least two books a month. His goal is to have a school with students who read, make book presentations or host author meetings. About coordinating the curriculum, he asks teachers to administer subject evaluation exams at the end of each unit and attaches extra importance to reading questions. These efforts of School principal Ali support student learning and make learning continuous.

The Test Monitor Project is a project carried out at all levels in the school and supervised by School principal Ali himself. In the interviews with the teachers, this project was explicitly emphasized and even referred to as "the reason why parents prefer this school". Within the scope of this project, students solve multiple-choice questions from all the subjects they are responsible for, the high school entrance exam and present their work to the school principal every week, and in this process, parents are also included in students' learning process.

For School principal Ali, monitoring student achievement systematically is of great importance. He stores the results of the practice exams, which are administered quite frequently, on his personal computer and shares them with the parents. At this point, he takes care of students like a teacher, helps them solve questions and checks their homework. Caring about not only successful students but all of them, School principal Ali acts with the belief that "Every student has a level he or she can achieve". This attitude of School principal Ali who continuously monitors teachers in the process and does not prefer structured lesson activities is explained in Erdi 's following sentences:

> "School principal Ali didn't attend my class even once, but of course he is following. How does he do that? He talks to the students. For example, he knows what I'm teaching any week. He knows what subject outcome

I'm working on or what class I'm behind schedule. He asks the teacher why the class is behind. He discusses various measures that can be taken".Erdi, Teacher

The brainstorming group is an original work that School principal Ali initiated and continued under his supervision. In this group, School principal Ali encourages students who progress in the practice exams to solve new-generation questions, supports peer teaching and creates a social environment for students. In the interviews, all teachers emphasized the importance of the projects that School principal Ali carried out to improve instruction. They referred to this with expressions such as "lighting the load, support, encouragement or motivator". The following views of teachers are of significance for exemplifying School principal Ali's efforts to improve teaching:

> "He undertakes the task of checking homework, which is normally the teacher's job. (…) I see this as lightening our load. He is like a teacher or even more than that sometimes. He has classes with students in which he helps them solve questions. He checks the homework himself. He always communicates with them through groups to motivate them. He pursues any failures. He tries to find the reasons behind it. He communicates with their parents. Rewarding, for example, is very important for him. There is so much that he has been doing". Begum, Teacher

> "He puts a lot of effort into it. This is one of the cornerstones for success. This is because the faster your leader goes, you try to keep up with him. Your pace is increasing, too". Basak, Teacher

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study that aimed to reveal the leadership practices of a school principal who draws attention to his effective practices and the effects of these practices on the quality of teaching highlighted six different practices. Despite the diversity of practices, each one has the aim of enabling higher-quality learning for students and increasing the academic achievement of the school. The school principal, School principal Ali, focuses on the same ideal in his thoughts and practices. The school's level of academic achievement has increased continuously during his management. This situation has increased the school's popularity and made School principal Ali a school principal pointed as model in the environment.

School principal Ali makes an effort to develop every student holistically, believes in success for each one of them, has value-based attitudes, care about students, and is committed to his job beyond the concept of working hours, which is a notable finding reported in this study. With his personal values and beliefs, School principal Ali has the mentality that sets the foundations for many practices. Moreover, he strives to establish a system in which there is a shared vision in his school, and everyone acts with the awareness of their responsibilities. In this sense, he works in cooperation with the school community. As the founder of the system, School principal Ali demonstrates leadership beyond his managerial position with many instruction-focused activities and puts teaching first. He also emphasizes getting to know the school community with his humanistic leadership role. He involves parents in the educational process and creates opportunities for them to support the school. Being aware of teachers' power to increase the school's success, he supports teacher learning and organizes various activities to increase their commitment to the school. School principal Ali takes care of students personally and uses motivational tools effectively in this process. He maintains the discipline in the school with his kind and friendly attitude, and strives to create a positive school culture where everyone trusts each other and collaborates. A positive school culture plays a facilitating role for many practices in

which student learning is the focus. In such an environment, people have more trust in each other, teamwork is formed, and professional exchanges are enabled. Teachers carry out many voluntary activities to improve their school with the support and confidence of the school principal. With his visionary character, School principal Ali successfully conducts many activities that support teaching at his school. In this respect, he sets a good role model and lightens the teachers' workload. He provides resources to his school through his strong connections with the local community, creates a culture of reading, closely monitors students and teachers, and constantly supervises the learning process as he is aware of the curricula.

School principal Ali's leadership practices features higher quality teaching by building strong relationships with students, teachers, parents and the school environment. The findings obtained in the present study can be said to be compatible with the results of many studies in the literature. The results that are consistent with the findings of the present study include setting clear goals and high expectations for students by prioritizing student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008), focusing on student success, maintaining collaborative and trust-based relationships (Ramalho et al., 2010), creating a clear sense of purpose for their schools and mobilizing the school community for this purpose and supporting teacher professional development (Garza et al., 2014; Drysdale & Gurr, 2011), building a success-oriented school culture (Bilge, 2013), focusing on individuals, ensuring staff's commitment to school goals, trying innovative approaches and modeling desired behaviors expected from staff (Pashiardis, 2011), increasing teacher satisfaction, involving parents in the teaching process and valuing the school community (Noman et al., 2018; Gurr et al., 2005; Garza et al., 2014), focusing on children's holistic development, not just academic outcomes (Drysdale et al., 2009), creating positive environments to improve students' academic outcomes (Ağaoğlu et al., 2012; Gurr et al., 2005), working by prioritizing instruction, collaborating with teachers, creating a warm learning environment (Sanzo et al., 2011), establishing healthy relationships with the community and school stakeholders (Gürbüz et al., 2013), and monitoring student progress (Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2020). In addition, the research findings also overlap with the results of many studies carried out within the scope of ISSPP. As a result, in the context of the Turkish education system, it can be argued that an effective school principal contributes significantly to school development with a series of practices that are influential on student achievement and teacher learning. In this respect, a school principal who loves his job, is committed to his school, works with an attitude that is success-oriented and highlights humanistic values can improve instruction by creating a positive learning environment. Furthermore, the practices carried out by the school principal focused in this study support the argument that leadership cannot be separated from the context.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be offered to school principals: School principals should work to increase student achievement by establishing a system focused on improving student learning. This system should be designed in a way that maximizes their potential, and it should be continuously improved by identifying the flawed aspects. Principals should believe that each and every student can succeed and should ensure the success of all students by keeping their motivation high. This can enhance students' self-confidence and enable them to be more involved

in the learning process. Moreover, school principals should create a school environment based on trust and that has open communication. In such an environment where everyone openly shares an opinion, activities for student learning can be easily carried out. Principals should always encourage parents and the community to support student learning. Since parents play an essential role in students' success at school, it is vital that principals guide them in this direction. Principals should constantly monitor and evaluate student achievement, and quickly take measures in the case of failures. This can help increase student achievement by making it easier to identify and resolve student-related problems.

To meet growing standards of accountability, it is important for school leaders to recognize leadership practices that enhance student achievement. For this reason, it can be suggested to introduce school principals, who are known for their effective practices, to the society. In this regard, these school principals can be brought together with their colleagues through various events (face-to-face or online). Skills such as empathy, respect, trust and healthy communication that an effective school leader should have and that can be acquired later can be added to leadership training programs. Moreover, school principals can be allowed to work in the same school for a certain period so that they can implement effective practices. These principals can mentor other principals working in schools where change is necessary. Effective school principals can be examined in graduate programs on educational administration as case studies, and the gap between theory and practice can be narrowed.

Limitations

This study was carried out in the context of a school principal in Türkiye that has a central education system. Despite providing comprehensive and in-depth information, it is limited to the practices of a single school principal. Nevertheless, the results can guide school principals in similar contexts. The views of school principals and several teachers were examined in this study, and other stakeholders (e.g. parents and students) were not included in the interviews. School principal may have given biased answers to the questions due to the perception of social desirability and teachers due to bureaucratic pressures. For this reason, to reach more objective results, the views of stakeholders such as teachers, assistant principals, parents and inspectors can be examined, instead of focusing only on the school principals, and longitudinal observations can be made in schools.

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