



IMPACT
OF TWO
ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL
PRINCIPALS'

LEADERSHIP
ON GIFTED
EDUCATION

IN THEIR
BUILDINGS

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Currently, principals are involved with a variety of programs offered in schools, such as IDEA, English Language Learners, Title I remedial services, migrant education, and gifted and talented programs. Added to the list of responsibilities is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001) law that promulgates that no child will be left behind academically. However, there is “a growing recognition that gifted students are being poorly served by most public schools” (Hoy & Hoy, 2003, p. 39). Are principals really serving the gifted and talented students in our schools? The purpose of this study was to investigate principal leadership on gifted education in schools that were known to have high-quality elementary gifted programs.

In “A Tale of Two Principals,” Weber, Colarulli-Daniels, and Leinhauser (2003) investigated the role of principals in relation to gifted and talented children. However, they found neither extensive nor current research focusing on the role of the principal in elementary schools specifically for gifted learners. This situation does not appear to have changed.

Gifted children continue to be an underserved population in school. They have “become the educationally disadvantaged children in America” (Roepers, 1986, p. 6) and are “woefully underserved” (Robinson, 2006, p. 342). As Gallagher (1997) pointed out, “All children should have their educational needs met in the school program and that ‘all children’ means all children, including gifted students” (p. 156). Principals should strive to see that *all* of their students are served in their schools (Matthews & Crow, 2003). In these standards-driven times, it is a strong and forward-looking principal who recognizes that all students need to learn something new each day. Clark (2005) described how

one Ohio school district discovered to its dismay that NCLB was not benefiting every child. Gifted students were not making the expected amount of progress and, in some cases, gifted learners were even regressing. Clark said they discovered “The fallacy in the long-held belief that the brightest students can progress and thrive on their own”; that, in fact, they too need to be challenged like any other student (p. 60).

With the rise in site-based management, principals gained more responsibility to lead their schools toward greater learning opportunities; however, a great deal depends on the principal’s strength as an instructional leader and the individual’s knowledge of the educational and affective needs of gifted students (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). The research of Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996, p. 544) showed “that principals play an important role in school effectiveness,” although they only had an indirect effect on student achievement. It is through improvement of teacher practice that the principal affects student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Because there has been a shift from what teachers are doing to what students are learning (DuFour, 2002), principals need to place emphasis on quality staff development (Killion, 1998), which works to strengthen instructional skills (Lashway, 2003). According to DuFour (2002), “A focus on learning affects not only the way that teachers work together but also the way that they relate to and work with each student” (p. 3).

Unlike the tale of two principals where gifted learners were educated in special schools, gifted students within this Midwestern state are educated in broadly heterogeneous public schools. Consequently, in the fall of 2005, the authors initiated a study that investigated principal leadership on gifted

education in public schools that were known to have high-quality elementary gifted programs. The research presented in this article is the beginning of a comprehensive research agenda focusing on principal role and function regarding gifted education.

Method

Participants

In order to determine characteristics and skills of principals that appear to be supportive of positive school experiences for gifted learners, the state consultant for gifted education was asked to supply a list of elementary principal names for those schools providing strong programs for gifted learners. Purposeful sampling was used because capable and willing participants were needed in order to learn as much as possible about their leadership styles in general and how these styles impacted the education of the gifted learners in their schools. Two elementary school principals were intentionally selected from this list. Both principals were women who worked in remote and rural areas of this Midwestern state. They were known to the researchers as being strong administrators and supporters of gifted learners.

One principal had been in gifted classes herself and had endorsements in elementary education, gifted education, and elementary administration. She earned a master’s degree in education in gifted and talented education and had been a principal for 4 years with responsibilities for one school. Prior to her position as principal, she was the director for enrichment for gifted students and a grade-school teacher, attending the state conference on gifted education many times. She said she had always been interested in

gifted education and was an advocate for gifted students' needs.

The second principal administered a K–5 school in one town and a middle school serving grades 6–8 in another town that was 30 minutes away. She had been in education for more than 20 years in various positions and had been a principal for 6 years. This principal had a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a master's degree, and doctorate in administration. Her most recent training that related to gifted learners was in differentiation, tiered lesson planning, brain research on learning styles, and differentiation strategies.

Procedure

A list of in-depth interview questions and prompts were generated based on the characteristics, skills, and dispositions found in the professional literature that described effective principals. The questions first focused on the education of all students and then narrowed in each category to applications for gifted-learner supports.

Telephone interviews were set up with each of the two principals at a time of their choosing. Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and followed the same protocol for the questions. Prompts were used if the participant's responses did not include specific areas of interest. One researcher led the interviews because she had prior experience with interviewing techniques and two of the researchers took notes that were compared immediately after the interview to corroborate the data and note themes. The third researcher analyzed the data and organized it into key

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themes, which were subsequently further analyzed by all the researchers.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

Results appeared to be affected by the demographics of the towns in which the schools were located. Although both districts were situated in rural parts of the state, one was a city district serving a town of approximately 8,000 whose nearest neighbor was a town of approximately 15,000 located in close proximity. The school principal who was interviewed served 320 students. This larger school had 40% of students on free and reduced lunch, and had a 30–40% minority population, primarily multiple-generation Hispanic families. The second site was a very rural, consolidated district serving two towns with popula-

tions of approximately 300 and 900 respectively. The elementary school was in one town and the middle school was in another located 30 minutes away. The enrollment was approximately 185 between the two schools; more than 65% of the students were on free and reduced lunch, and cultural diversity was minimal. The nearest large neighbor was a town of 9,000 located approximately 60 minutes away.

Service Delivery Issues in Rural Areas

The size of the school and community impacted the delivery of services. Both principals made it clear that the attitudes and perceptions of their small communities affected aspects of how they administered their schools. Emphasis was placed on the importance of input from the stakeholders because it was a small community, making networking and staying abreast of current research all the more important.

Colangelo, Assouline, Baldus, and New (2003) noted that there were some advantages to the small numbers of students in a school. Although one principal said it was a challenge to serve low-incidence gifted students such as those who are twice-exceptional, the fact that the classes were small made it easier to differentiate for individual students.

The remoteness of large portions of the state was sometimes a factor that limited service options. For example, although gifted learners may need a counselor on a formal or informal basis, the more rural district had to contract with a counselor in private practice in a larger town, and that was primarily for students in special education. On the other hand, library

resources did not appear to be affected by isolation. The more rural district made use of the Internet to access material for student research, and the city district librarian provided high-end books for the advanced readers, using interlibrary loan when necessary.

Another key issue was limited resources, which impacted all areas of education in both schools. Money for district operations was tight throughout the state. Two areas specifically mentioned were cultural development and assessment of priorities. Grants were used to supplement district monies in these areas. No state budget line existed to fund gifted education. Districts could apply for small amounts of state funding through gifted-specific grants, although the money available for distribution never reached \$4 million. Dwindling state funds has hampered all of education since the events of September 11, 2001. Current funding for gifted education is currently less than \$2 million. Paying for special programs such as services for gifted learners appeared to be a challenge when there were no federal dollars targeted specifically for them, unlike special education. Both principals pointed out the benefits of the grant money because it made their programs possible, increasing identification and garnering more support from upper administration.

Strength Themes

Important themes emerged from the interviews, demonstrating the reasons these two women were effective principals. They were instructional leaders who provided strong support for their teachers through mentoring (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998), differentiated supervision (Glatthorn, 1997), and support based on the readi-

ness of individual teachers (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007). The collegial relationships they built with their staff appeared to permeate everything they did. They were child advocates who used a team approach to meet students' needs. Both principals were accepting of student differences and had teachers who were open to differentiation to meet those needs. School programs were academically driven with research-based decisions and performance data used for decision making. Because of their size and their community composition, services were embedded into general education rather than adding additional services. One principal grouped students at their instructional level in reading and the teachers used curriculum compacting at times in mathematics. The other district had a small amount of separate off-site enrichment services, and the principal encouraged curriculum compacting at all grade levels, sometimes even in kindergarten. The gifted students in one district took frequent field trips and were encouraged to work with community mentors as part of their enrichment. The other district was too isolated to make field trips practical.

Gifted-Specific Issues

Even though the gifted programs in these two schools were strong, there were clearly some important areas that had not been addressed. One principal said she was a strong advocate for gifted education, but she was concerned with the perception of elitism, a common issue described by multiple researchers (e.g., Colangelo et al., 2003; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995; Marshall, Ramirez, Plinske, & Veal, 1998). Counseling services were available; however, gifted learners were denied affective services such as

group discussions on topics related to gifted needs. This might be perceived as elitist in their small community. One principal recognized individual differences and strived to meet the needs of all students. On the other hand, she declared that "all kids are gifted and talented."

Strong staff development was provided for both teachers and paraeducators in areas that impacted the general curriculum, but it did not extend to specific support for gifted education. The gifted coordinator for each district attended the annual state conference and brought the information back to the district; however, there was no structure in place to share what was learned with the rest of the staff or district. Further, this was the only staff development received specific to gifted education.

Services Provided for Gifted Learners

Both principals recognized and encouraged the use of pretesting and compacting (one began as early as kindergarten) and differentiation in the regular classroom. The principals played a role in supporting the teachers, who used a team approach to serving their students. Cluster grouping was used for interest and learning style but not for ability. When classes had paraeducators assigned to them, they helped any student who needed it, including gifted students if they needed assistance with their extensions. Resources within the community were used to enhance options for students, including those who are gifted.

Challenges remain. There was very little grade acceleration, although subject acceleration was sometimes used. One principal identified student self-evaluation as an area that needed to be added. Affective support was minimal. Cluster grouping for ability was

strictly informal. Some services were limited or nonexistent in order to avoid being too visible; the purpose was to avoid being seen as providing an elitist program.

Knowing, but not Doing

There are administrative practices that the principals knew were essential to quality education but they were unintentionally not applying them to services for gifted learners. The two principals interviewed for this study reported following practices that would be expected of building administrators who were familiar with effective schools research (e.g., Glickman et al., 2007). Although their gifted programs were strong enough for the state director of gifted education to place them on a list of the best elementary programs in the state, there were crucial areas in which their knowledge and practice of what should be done to ensure increasing quality of instruction did not apply to their school's gifted programs.

- Principals evaluated their regular education programs using disaggregated data, performance tasks, and both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced test scores. Faculty teams met to make use of data for the general education program. Input was sought from teachers, students, and parents for summary evaluation at the end of the year; however, this practice was not applied to the gifted program.
- The principals were uncertain if their goals for their gifted program had been met, because these goals were not included in their school improvement plans.
- Both principals tried to avoid separate classes for their gifted learners and embedded services within the heterogeneous classroom; however,

it appeared that the differentiated content and methods were not integrated into the general curriculum.

- Despite good communication skills on the part of each principal, there were communication gaps that were apparently unnoticed until the interviews were conducted (e.g., no formal sharing of information gained from gifted conferences).

Conclusions and Recommendations

What Do These Findings Mean for Practice?

Data analysis is crucial for the evaluation of all educational programs, including the gifted program. Furthermore, the analysis for all programs forms the foundation for continuous school improvement. As part of this continuing process, measurable goals must be set and then data collected to determine if the goals have been met. Otherwise, there is no way to know the extent of students' achievement and what educational changes need to be enacted in order to improve that achievement. If goals for the gifted program are not articulated, it is very difficult to determine if these goals have been met.

Services for gifted students should be part of the school's mission and be communicated clearly to the public. Communication is "the lifeblood of every good school organization. . . . It is the process that links the individual, the group, and the organization" (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 209). In order to communicate the school's mission, the principal serves as the link from the school to the community. With clear communication, both internal and external publics would be "more likely to support

new ideas" (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 247).

However, there appeared to be a breakdown in communication between these publics. If the principal does not share the vision with school personnel and community members, special programs such as special education and gifted education go nowhere. Espousing the vision is one thing; changing classroom teacher behavior is another.

Unless all teachers understand the needs of gifted learners and have the instructional skills to educate them appropriately ("Gifted and Talented Education," n.d.), these students waste a considerable amount of learning time. The greater the divergence of the students' talent from the norm, the more the typical school instruction is a misuse of these students' time (Clark, 2002). If "professional training should allow people to learn how to be more effective teachers" (Joyce & Showers, 2003, p. 1), then learning about the specific characteristics of and instructional strategies for working with gifted learners should improve teachers' ability to educate learners who need more complex and fast-paced learning (Clark, 2002). Educators who have had little experience with gifted children may develop "positive attitude changes, for example toward their own role, different groups of children and aspects of the curriculum" (Joyce & Showers, 2003, p. 2).

Principals Have Too Much to Do

Are principals being asked to do too much? "Changes in society, the economy, and the political arena have compelled educational leaders to reconceptualize the principal's role" (Newman, 2001, pp. 6–7). For example, principals are responsible for instructional leadership, including teacher supervision, staff develop-

ment, and program evaluation. They must contend with limited funding and limited time to manage each of the tasks. In addition, principals need to effectively communicate with all stakeholders and initiate public relations strategies with stakeholders to enhance, as well as maintain, support for their schools and the services they provide.

The principal's major responsibility is to ensure that learning takes place in each and every classroom, for each and every student. Principals must be sure that teachers are well trained to work with the wide range of students in their classrooms. It is crucial that teachers receive quality staff development in areas of student learning ("Instructional Leadership by Principals," 2006), including gifted education, because they have the power to influence student learning more than anyone else. This would seem to be a logical approach to improving gifted programs because the principal oversees the entire educational program *and* provides a sense of direction (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2004). Principals should be spending more of their time on the following:

- establishing the direction in which the school will go;
- building capacity in people;
- developing a climate and culture that promotes rather than restricts the reasons for the school's existence, namely teaching and learning. . . . climate and culture are the key ingredients. ("Instructional Leadership by Principals," 2006, ¶4)

Not only are climate and culture essential for the general education program, but in order to develop quality programs for gifted learners, the climate and culture of the school

and community need to be supportive to avoid the stigma of elitism.

Divide and Conquer

Because the principal oversees the entire educational program and provides a sense of direction (Ubben et al., 2004), that does not mean he or she needs to do it all. Freeing up some of the principal's time seems a necessity in order to allow even the most effective leaders to build strong, integrated services for their students, including those who are gifted. Results of this study suggest the following strategies:

- *Shift to a learning community paradigm.* Ubben et al. (2004) described this kind of environment as one in which the principal no longer is the single leader but rather oversees the full educational program and provides a sense of direction. According to Reeves (2006), "leaders need not, indeed they cannot, *be* every dimension themselves, but they can and must insure that every leadership dimension is provided by some member of the leadership team" (p. 34). To make this approach to leadership possible, the teachers and staff provide more input with everyone actively working to attain the same goals.
- *Identify teacher leaders.* With a learning community in mind, we suggest designating selected teachers as leaders who could assume delegated responsibilities from the principal for procedures and processes such as coaching other teachers, leading learning teams and study groups, and engaging in reflective feedback (Ubben et al., 2004).
- *Fill communication gaps.* Strategies for filling gaps include formalizing small-group networking and increasing staff development by adding mentoring, peer coaching, and team

teaching. In order for these strategies to be effective, the principals need to establish "a two-way communication climate" (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 229). Seeking feedback is fundamental for improvement and change.

Gifted programs must be held accountable by implementing the same standards as for general education. Current methods that are informal must be formalized. An essential aspect of this formalization is the inclusion of goals for the gifted program in the school improvement plan. "The principal has the opportunity to provide knowledgeable ideas, encouragement, and active support to the gifted program, and has a major responsibility of making the program workable within the framework of the total school program" (Norton & Zeilinger, 1983, p. 102).

Principals are in the best position to enact coherent, developmentally appropriate educational experiences for all of their students, and *all* should include gifted learners. In contrast to the enduring myth that children who are gifted can learn on their own, gifted learners are children first, and as such, need well-trained and caring teachers who can guide their learning rather than leaving them to fend for themselves (Clark, 2002). In the role of instructional leader, the principal can build into the school culture, in addition to the vocalized curriculum, the expectation that all children will be taught at their developmental level, even when some of them are working far in advance of the general student body. It is the principal who has the power to impact student achievement.

According to Sergiovanni (2006), "a strong consensus is emerging that, whatever else they do, principals must be instructional leaders who are directly involved in the teaching and

learning life of the school” (p. 269). Therefore, it is essential that advocates for quality education for gifted learners work with their school principals to ensure that this education is included in the school improvement plan and given the same attention as the general education program. Indeed, in order for principals to have effective schools, they need to focus on the learning of every student they serve, for as DuFour (2002) states, “A focus on learning affects not only the way that teachers work together but also the way that they relate to and work with each student” (p. 3).

Parents, teachers, and the students themselves are important advocates for gifted education; however, without the school principal's support, services for gifted learners will continue to be disjointed and piecemeal at best. Based on the intensive interviews of these two very effective and dedicated elementary school principals, more time and energy is needed to be directed toward working with faculty and staff in their schools and with counterparts in other schools to build the kind of services gifted learners need and deserve. **GCT**

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