

Scholar–Practitioner Inquiry as International Action Research

Surveying Leadership Perceptions of Principals in the Toledo District of Belize

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Abstract

The scholar–practitioner approach to leadership has the potential for effectiveness in developing countries through contextual understanding of unique circumstances. The purpose of this study was to survey leadership perceptions of principals in the Toledo District of Belize. This data, in the tradition of scholar–practitioner involvement, was used to inform the researchers of context and needs of respondents. The development of further professional activities was connected to the data in order to improve the ability of the principals to support socially just systems of education within the region.

International partnerships in developing countries provide natural alliances with scholar–practitioner leaders. Scholar–practitioners “engage in intellectual work with the purpose, in large part, to create the educative spaces wherein future generations may learn the knowledge and skills necessary to build a principled and democratic society” (Jenlink, 2005, p. 3). Educational opportunities in developing countries may be improved through a scholar–practitioner approach to research and training. This helps in creating these “educative spaces” for socially just behavior, which may be foundational for future leadership.

An increase in social justice may be more likely to occur in international environments through third parties using a scholar–practitioner approach. Kelman (2000) stated that interactive problem solving may provide a strategy for assisting international partners in improving relationships and developing social justice. Kelman’s research involved the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but the principles are the same for other international collaborations. The scholar–practitioner facilitates information exchange and a needs assessment to assist in the empowerment of the local groups in increasing equity and opportunity for all. This is the goal of scholar–practitioner researchers working with principals in Belize.

Belize is a small Central American country bordering Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the south and west, and the Bay of Honduras to the east (Willett & Gaylard, 1992). The country declared independence from Great Britain in 1981, maintaining the official language of English and parliamentary forms of government (Payne, 1990). The southernmost region of Belize is the Toledo District, which is the poorest (Richardson, 2007) and least populated part of the country. The residents of the Toledo District are considered the “forgotten people,” and the schools have been historically low performing on national exams. Most of this area is considered rural, and even the largest schools are in towns that are difficult to identify as urban. The largest town in the Toledo District, Punta Gorda, has less than 6,000 residents (Southernbelize.com, 2009).

Along with the challenges that come from isolation and poverty, schools in the Toledo District often have students who are limited English proficient (Bonner, 2001). In addition to the problems with the student having limited English proficiency, there are many different cultures represented in this region (Hargrove, 2005), including the Mayan and Garifuna. The multiple cultures and language issues of the Toledo District create an educational dynamic that presents challenges for school leaders (Haug, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of school principals in the Toledo district of Belize regarding leadership. What are the principal perceptions of purposes and challenges of school leadership within this part of Belize? The study presents data to understand the current state of principal leadership perceptions in southern Belize. This data may help the researchers, acting as scholar–practitioner leaders, in providing support to increase the effectiveness of the current leadership in southern Belize. This action research will be used in providing the framework for increased social justice, democracy, and leadership effectiveness for the principals in southern Belize, traits important to the scholar–practitioner (Jenlink, 2005).

Education in the Toledo District

Information and needs among groups are often unique; thus, context is important in understanding the dynamics of any social situation. Crossley (2001) suggests that educational leaders neglect the impact of local cultures in understanding

research. He states, "Too often internationally inspired educational innovations fail because they are not well fitted to the local context in which they are to operate, and to real needs, values, and priorities" (pp. 226–227). This statement encompasses a component of the scholar–practitioner, who must respect the local cultures in any assistance. A scholar–practitioner must understand data within the context of the region, in this case the Toledo District of Belize.

Belize is a poor country. Poverty is defined as minimum cost in food, shelter, and clothes in order to live a healthy existence. In the Toledo District, this is determined to be \$236.81 Belizean dollars per month (this is \$118.40 United States dollars). This standard results in a 79% rate of poverty in Toledo (Richardson, 2007). Studies in the United States suggest a correlation between poverty and decreased academic achievement (Sirin, 2005), and many of the factors may correlate with problems in southern Belize. Sirin's research concludes that some of the issues with achievement of students who live in a low socioeconomic status is due to the lack of resources in the schools these children attend, factors common in the Toledo District.

The schools in the Toledo District are either government schools or associated with a religious affiliation (Lewis, 2000). The religious schools in the Toledo district are often Roman Catholic, Methodist, or Adventist. The government finances schools regardless of whether there is a curricular emphasis toward a particular faith. However, the overall financial support is not high; teacher pay is low and school principals often have many responsibilities.

Among these principal responsibilities may be teaching (Hargrove, 2005). The Toledo District primary school principals usually have this role, the exceptions being the few schools that are large enough to justify a separation of duties. Teaching principals have full-time classroom instruction duties along with their administrative job responsibilities. This full-time teaching requirement provides challenges to completing other duties effectively.

The teaching duties of many principals are an obvious factor involving time, but there are others that are related to the context of the Toledo District. Principals and teachers in the rural schools may not live where the school is located. Many take the bus to work and must return on this transportation soon after the end of the school day. The roads between the villages are not paved, so the time required for travel may be extensive. A principal who teaches may have limited time at the school to complete administrative duties.

Teaching principals may struggle to find time for instructional leadership. An effective instructional leader must spend time working with teachers within the classroom and providing feedback through formative conferences (Ovando & Ramirez, 2007). Instructional leadership for teaching principals requires leaving their students unattended for short periods of time. Classes that are unattended may create problems. Student behavior may get worse, and time on task may decrease. These factors potentially impact student achievement while the principal as an instructional leader spends time improving instruction in other classrooms.

Another issue for all schools is that many classrooms have multiple grade levels that a teacher must instruct at the same time. The level of difficulty among students and grades is different, and creating appropriate lessons is a challenge. This may be compounded by students who are not proficient in English (Winsor, 2007), as well as those who bring multiple ethnic identifications into the classroom (Haug, 1998). Efficient learning requires that the task be at the appropriate level of difficulty. A teacher working with multiple grade levels has a difficult task; a teaching principal with multiple grade levels in his or her own classroom while providing instructional leadership to the school has a daunting task.

The contextual dynamics of time within the Toledo District are compounded by the organization of the schools and travel required. In addition, training and education of principals and teachers is often lacking. There are several levels of educational attainment for teachers and principals, the lowest educational attainment being high school completion, and the highest a Bachelor's degree. There are occasionally individuals who have earned a Master's degree, but this is uncommon. The University of Belize introduced its first Master's of Education program in 1996. Few educators in the Toledo District have earned this degree.

Training of all educators has been an area of concern in the Toledo District. This was recognized 14 years ago by a group of educators visiting the region. *Teachers for a Better Belize* (TFABB) was created by Anne Frahn, Kathy Dolan, and Jennifer Johnson in the spirit of scholar-practitioner leadership, bridging the practical needs of the region with the scholarship of teaching. These individuals originally focused on training of primary school teachers in core subjects. By 2005, TFABB narrowed its focus to literacy training for 3 years. Upon the conclusion of this project, TFABB partnered with the Peace Corps to develop two model schools in the area of literacy instruction. TFABB has provided the training that has become the backbone of language arts teaching in the early grades for schools in the Toledo district.

TFABB also formed a partnership with the University of Belize to provide leadership training to principals in 2003. Fifteen principals completed this training. In 2005, with the new focus on literacy, principal training shifted to a focus on instructional leadership in the area of literacy. Principals are to support teachers in processes and procedures in instruction. Principal professional development aligned with the language arts strategies used by teachers would make the student learning more effective. This training continues at the writing of this article, with a week-long training in August each year and a day of follow-up in October and February.

TFABB has taken the approach of immersion in the Toledo District and building relationships with government officials and school personnel within the region. One time meetings do not create change; scholar-practitioner leaders recognize the importance of consistent improvement and the impact of ongoing dialogue. There has to be a relationship built and an understanding of contextual

challenges of the region in order to provide support that assists the educational professionals who work in the local schools.

Method

The research data in this study was obtained through surveys administered at a workshop for principals of the Toledo district at held on February 26, 2009 in Punta Gorda, Belize. This survey was a form of action research (Berg, 2001), even though it used a general population of respondents. The researchers were building data for greater understanding of a population that were training. This bridge between action research and practice is a fundamental trait of the scholar-practitioner (Mullen, 2005).

The questions were open-ended items that were designed to obtain responses regarding leadership roles and traits, as well as develop a better understanding of principal perceptions regarding teaching and community interaction. The questions were based upon conversations during visits with principals prior to the workshop, and the researchers planned to use the information for principal leadership topics in future professional development opportunities in the Toledo district of Belize.

Open-ended survey questions provide a qualitative understanding of the participants and topic being studied (Berg, 2001), often leading to a quantitative follow up to analyze specific areas more closely. The survey questions were as follows:

1. In your own words, what is the mission of your school?
2. Describe your job as principal. What are you expected to do?
3. As principal, what is your biggest challenge?
4. How do you communicate your expectations to your teachers?
5. Describe an excellent teacher.
6. Describe an excellent lesson. What would the teacher do? What would students do?
7. How would you describe parent involvement in your school? What is working well? What would you like to improve?
8. What is the best way to motivate students in the classroom?
9. In your opinion, what are the most important qualities of a good leader?

The responses were analyzed by three researchers, thus providing investigator triangulation (Berg, 2001). The researchers determined general themes within the responses. The responses to these questions represent perceptions of principals regarding important issues in education within the local context of the Toledo district of Belize. This contextual understanding may be used to improve future training provided by the scholar-practitioner researchers to these principals (Dirkx, 2006).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The principals surveyed worked in schools within the Toledo district of Belize. Their experience level ranged from one-half year to 28 years ($M = 7.3$). The education level of the principals varied from a high school diploma to a Master's degree. There were five different levels of education listed: Some training after high school ($n = 17$), Bachelor's degree ($n = 6$), Associate's degree ($n = 5$), high school diploma ($n = 4$), and Master's degree ($n = 2$). Seventy-nine percent of respondents were responsible for teaching duties as well as those in administration. The number of teachers that principals were responsible for supervising ranged from 1 to 37 ($M = 9.6$). The number of students in the schools ranged from 16 to 950 ($M = 181.68$). Classrooms that required the teacher to address the needs of students in multiple grades were common, with 71% responding that this occurred with at least one class at their school.

Principal Perceptions of the School's Mission

The responses to the question regarding the schools' mission had six main themes. The characteristic most often mentioned was academic achievement, listed 97% of the time. The only response that did not clearly mention academics addressed discipline, morals, emotional growth, and spirituality. Academics are the traditional purpose of schools, so it is not surprising that this characteristic was the most often stated.

Holistic learning, which is an extension of the academic purpose, was a common statement on the survey. The respondents wrote about holistic education 44% of the time, either through a direct mention or by addressing multiple student needs that represent comprehensive education. The direct mention of this learning philosophy was evident in the response that the mission was "to educate students in a holistic manner—spiritual, social, physical, and academically for full participation in the growth and development of our country and our world"; and holistic was alluded to in the statement "to instill knowledge, skills, values as well as attitudes in each and every individual child entrusted in our care."

Country pride was evident in several comments that suggested the importance of citizenship. Thirty-two percent of principals made statements about the need for education as improving one's role in the country, such as "to educate young children to be a better citizen of Belize." There were less specific comments that were included in this percentage: Statements such as "to educate students with available resources in partnership with stakeholders to [sic] a better society tomorrow" indicates the importance of citizenship within both Belize and globally.

The mission of developing students' character was written 29% of the time, and spiritual growth had a 26% response rate. Character and attitude was evident

in responses like “transform the young minds, attitudes of each individual and network with PTA to get a sound education.” The spiritual component was not a surprise since many of the schools are affiliated with either the Catholic or Methodist church. Some responses listed a clear religious component: “To educate students holistically emphasizing Catholic morals and values”; or a general spiritual emphasis: “Develop the child mentally, spiritually.” Parent and community inclusion was perceived to be a part of the overall mission by 18% of respondents. “Work with parents, students, community” was mentioned as important.

Perceptions of the Principal's Job

The respondents were asked to describe their job and what they were expected to do in their position. A previous question found that 79% had teaching responsibilities in addition to their administrative duties. This creates limits on time; thus, the fact that 85% identified management duties as the expectation of their position may come as reasonable. If time is a factor, the daily management issues must be a top priority. One respondent stated that his or her job was “to make sure all records of the school are in proper order such as log books, staff attendance, pupils register, financial record of school. Also to make sure that teachers leave their lesson plans on time and up to date.” These requirements were of similar concern to the other respondents who had a management theme.

There were responses that indicated a leadership perspective to the principal's job. Eighteen percent discussed the need for modeling, as evidenced by the statement that “as a principal of a school, you are expected to be a role model, work as a team.” The importance of communication and human relations skills was also mentioned 18% of time. One principal respondent said it was important “to foster communication and collaboration with teachers.” Another 15% alluded to the development of culture as a part of the job, evident in the need “to create a positive atmosphere between all parties involved (student, teacher, management, parents),” or “ensure that the wholeistic [*sic*] environment of the school is conducive to learning.”

Toledo District Principal Challenges

The question “As principal, what is your biggest challenge?” resulted in five major themes from the respondents ($n = 32$). Thirty-nine percent of the respondents listed a major challenge as the administrative responsibilities that had to be accomplished while being a full-time teacher. This factor was clear in comments such as “To teach and administrate—very painstaking,” and “As a principal my greatest challenge is time. As a teaching principal sometimes I do not have time to achieve most of objects/goals for the day. (I teach a multi-grade classroom, too).”

There was another challenge that was mentioned 39% of the time. This was issues with teachers. Toledo district principals felt that there was difficulty in getting consistent high-level teaching from employees. Examples of

this concern were evident in the comment from one principal, who wrote that a challenge was “instructing or guiding teachers without them hating you for finding faults.” Comments expressed concern in “having teachers perform at their optimum,” getting “teachers motivated,” and to help teachers understand “right and wrong.”

The remaining three concerns were parent, student, and money issues. The principals mentioned parents 26% of the time, often in regard to getting them involved in the education of their children. The lack of resources was mentioned in 23% of surveys. “Managing and attracting resources to the school” was mentioned by one principal. This generalizes the responses of those who addressed this problem. Student issues were written by 16% of respondents. Student challenges included “councelling [sic] children with unsatisfactory behavior” and “giving the best opportunities to students.”

Communication of expectations to teachers

The respondents listed several ways in which communication occurred between the principal and teachers at their school. Formal means of communication included staff meetings, staff development, conferencing, and memos. Informal communication occurred through role modeling and classroom visits.

Staff meetings were the most often method of communication, listed by 53% of respondents. The effectiveness of this method during the year could be questioned by some comments, such as “staff meetings were the ideals [sic] time of what is expected from each teacher at the end of the year.” Formal conferencing was written as a method by principals 29% of the time. Memos and written reminders were listed as a communication method in 21% of surveys. Most schools do not have computers and even paper is in short supply. This would preclude the use of written communication that is common in more affluent schools. Staff development was written by 15% of respondents.

Informal conferencing (“informal gathering” or “nonformal meeting”) and role modeling (“ . . . by actions”) were both listed by 18% of principals. Classroom visits, which could be placed in the formal category depending on how it is achieved, were listed by two principals. This may be a result of many principals having teaching duties.

Principal perceptions of the qualities of an excellent teacher

There were four themes found in the question regarding an excellent teacher: Character, preparation, child-centered, and creative. These characteristics sometimes overlapped, and simple professional obligation behaviors (for example, punctuality) were included in character.

Seventy percent of principal respondents mentioned an element of personal character as a trait of an excellent teacher. This included “executes his/her responsibilities to the best of his/her abilities” and “goes the extra mile.” Preparation, which was mentioned in 33% of surveys, was another factor that

could have been included, but it was separated because of the consistent concern with lessons plans, exhibited in the statement by one respondent that excellent teachers “do plans on time.”

Holistic learning was an important characteristic in teachers as perceived by the Toledo principals, and 48% used either this term or others that focused on a child-centered trait. This was evident in general comments like “helps/expects the best from students” to more specific such as “an excellent teacher is one who presents to all children the best he/she can, all the possible information necessary. Works for extra every single day within the classroom.” Creativity can help develop a child-centered classroom, and this trait was listed as a theme 18% of the time. The term “innovative” was often used, and many principals valued “positive in thinking and bringing new suggestions to the staff.”

Perceptions of an excellent lesson

The question related to an excellent lesson had two follow-up questions that focused on the role of the teacher and student. Most respondents (85%) listed active learning by students as the most important trait in an excellent lesson, and particular types of active learning were written in many cases. Toledo principals mentioned group work (18%), hands-on activities (18%), and variety (12%) as specific factors that were included in student activity. As one principal stated, “A well planned lesson [is] full of activities for both teachers and children; one that have [*sic*] of hands on and visual aids. One that have [*sic*] the attention of children throughout the entire lesson.”

Preparation is important for a good lesson, and Toledo principals mentioned this as a characteristic of good teaching on 55% of surveys. Most principals expressed this need for preparation as “well planned.” Within this planning was the need for teacher facilitation, listed 21% of the time, and teacher modeling, which was mentioned by 15% of respondents. This is consistent with the expectations of the Belizean Ministry of Education which prescribes weekly detailed lesson plans.

Perceptions of parent involvement

Forty-one percent of respondents said that parent involvement in their school was good, usually expressed through support and attendance at activities. Comments such as “parent voluntary [*sic*] participate in school activities” summarize the majority of comments expressing positively on parental involvement.

There were 47% of principal respondents who expressed the need for improvement in parental involvement. The majority of comments were related to supporting the student academically at home. One respondent simply wrote, “Help students at home” when discussing areas that need improvement. Another wrote, “Not much support. Not checking on performance,” and similarly, “The support of the parent in monitoring children with homework needs to be improved.” Some principals shared that part of this problem may be the educational level of

the parents. "Parent [*sic*] lack support to students at house due to lack of formal education, no idea of the English language."

Perceptions regarding student motivation

The sample of Toledo district principals were asked what motivated students in the classroom. The response most common related to active learning (52%). "Pupils like to actively participate" and "Get them involved in any activities" were similar to many comments along this theme.

The principals also perceived a caring attitude as motivational. Forty-five percent of respondents wrote a comment related to caring. Some were subtle, such as "get their attention and talk to them" or "develop a child-friendly environment that will encourage student to want to be there." Other comments mentioned caring directly or alluded to this concept more clearly: "Show that you care," "Praise student when trying and encourage them," and "Thank them" were some of the phrases used.

Three other themes emerged to a lesser degree regarding student motivation. Principals perceived incentives or rewards as being important (35%). These comments were expressed through specific comments like "give children incentive" or "give them little rewards." Teacher modeling and adding variety were each mentioned as motivational by 10% of respondents.

Perceptions of qualities of a good leader

The principal respondents wrote that there were several qualities believed to be important to leadership. The overwhelming majority of them (97%) included a human relations skill that was important in building relationships. These qualities included being "rich with understanding," "open," "friendly," "good listener," "role model," "caring," "sensitive," "diplomatic," "kind," "patient," "respectful," "responsible," "cooperative," "approachable," "hones," "lead by example," and many similar concepts.

The next most common quality related to being prepared. Fifteen percent of respondents discussed the need to be "well prepared" or "be an updated individual." There were also a few comments related to work ethic, but many times this included the importance of being a role model, which was included as a human relations skill.

Discussion

There are few research studies that analyze the school systems of Belize, and this is particularly true of the schools in the Toledo district. This qualitative action research study provides an understanding into the perceptions of the principals in schools among the "forgotten people." The scholar-practitioner researchers of this study may use the data in developing principal training and building relationships among these professionals.

The data highlighted some unique problems among these principals in developing the leadership desired, the most obvious being the problems associated with being a teaching principal. This creates an increased importance on time, and a need for teachers who can provide for students and complete other tasks autonomously. Principals need for teachers to be able to get in lesson plans, provide for the needs of students in multiple grade levels within the same classroom, and relate appropriately with parents. The importance of strong teachers is magnified by the teaching responsibilities of the principal.

The principals valued a classroom that valued the contributions of each student. The student-centered, activity-based, holistic learning that is expected within the classrooms is important for the pupils that attend the schools. The students need an emphasis on all areas of development: mental, physical, and spiritual. The challenge, once again, is providing this for multiple ages and grade levels within one class.

This holistic, activity-based environment was found to be important for good lessons, as well as for motivation of students. Incentives and rewards had a role in the motivation of students, but the principals perceived a caring environment as being most important. Good classrooms were student-centered and had teachers who treated the pupils with care. This was similar to the traits of a good principal, and these are values of scholar-practitioner in any setting.

Most of the respondents believed that a good leader in the principal position knew how to treat teachers in a caring, respectful, honest way. Kouzes and Posner (2002) listed several traits of leaders that subordinates valued, and these included honesty, openness, and responsibility. Similar traits are perceived by Toledo district principals as being important for effectiveness.

Increased effectiveness in the schools required greater parental involvement. Students generally do better academically when parents are consistently supportive of the school and teachers. This support often is evident by organizing time and assistance for homework, which seems to be a challenge. The lack of educational level among parents is likely a problem. The lack of emphasis on education stemming from 20 or 30 years ago may be continuing to cycle.

The principals of the Toledo district in Belize have a few unique challenges, such as teaching responsibilities, multiple grades in classrooms, poverty, limited English proficiency, and multiple cultural identities, but there are many issues that are the same as any school system. Professional employees who care for students are valued. Human relations skills are beneficial to developing an environment of trust and cooperation.

The principal respondents expressed an optimism that transcended the challenges. The data suggest an understanding of the potential contributions that each individual, teacher and student, may provide both the local region and country. This recognition is the seminal step to increasing social justice and democracy.

The respondents in this study were principal practitioners who attended training sessions to increase their scholarly knowledge of leadership processes.

As Jenlink (2005) stated, “The scholar–practitioner’s work is that of the intellectual whose efforts are guided by an epistemology of social inquiry as critical practice and a concern for the ‘others’ who populate the school—‘others’ reflective of ethnic racial cultural, linguistic, political diversity; ‘others’ that are situated within and shaped by the ‘social’” (p. 6). The principals and researchers learn from the research to collaboratively develop the “educative spaces” for student success in the Toledo District of Belize.

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