A Close Look at Six Super Star Principals: Implications for Educational Leadership and Administration Programs

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This discussion focuses on a research project designed to identify critical leadership behaviors and characteristics of very successful elementary school principals. The project which ultimately became a book published jointly by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Corwin Press used research methodology inspired by Collins' work (2001) to analyze a series of intensive conversations with six highly successful principals. The goal was to find out more about what superstar principals do well. The purposes of the project were to gain insights in order to improve educational leadership programs and to shed light on the type of preparation that makes a great school administrator. Open-ended qualitative interviews were used to identify recurrent patterns as described by Merriam (1998). The discussion concludes with a summary of implications of this research for improvement of educational leadership programs.

Introduction

During the past twenty-five years, a sizable amount of evidence has accumulated to support the notion that the principal plays a major role in the success of a school and the achievement of its students. It seems strange, however, that sound, *empirical* research-based knowledge about how to prepare great principals is, at best, sparse (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). This state of affairs was particularly unsettling to the members of the faculty at our university as we contemplated redesigning our educational leadership and administration programs. More than a decade earlier, we participated in the Danforth Foundation's Principal Preparation Network and incorporated what we thought were important concepts, knowledge, and effective leadership practices in our programs. Moreover, our department was familiar with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and California's standards. Nonetheless, we continued to be concerned by the dearth of empirical research supporting the content of the standards, especially since these standards would soon shape our educational leadership and administrator preparation programs.

The ISSLC Standards

Some of the knowledge, dispositions, and performances prescribed by the ISLLC standards are supported by sound empirical evidence, and some are just good common sense. For example, most of us would agree with ISSLC that school administrators should have "knowledge and understanding of operational procedures at the school and district level." Most of the standards, however, are craft knowledge or "best practices." For instance, what real evidence do we have that improved school performance is linked with a school administrator's disposition toward "the principles in the Bill of Rights," suggested by ISSLC?

The origin of this craft knowledge usually comes from brainstorming sessions with prominent educators and experts. In addition, the ISLLC standards and many of their state level counterparts are also "validated" (Murphy, 2005, p. 166). This means they were read and judged to be accurate by a large number of the same experts who developed them in the first place. In a sharp criticism of the process, English (2005) recalled that Educational Testing Service used fourteen "subject-matter experts" to conduct a "job analysis." This resulted in statements about the responsibilities and knowledge areas needed by beginning school administrators. These statements were mailed to more than 10,000 principals who then validated them. Ninety-five percent of these principals judged the knowledge areas to be important, and 97% said the responsibility statements were important. English argued correctly that this process is simply a validation exercise. "It is not a measure of the truthfulness of the responsibilities or knowledge areas per se" (p. 5). The result of this process was a consensus about what should be included in the preparation of school administrators. Missing was the research base connecting these standards with student performance—the ultimate mission of schools. In other words, we don't have solid evidence that all or even most of these standards make any difference in the preparation of high quality school administrators capable of leading schools to greatness.

To be clear, the ISLLC Standards and their state level counterparts accomplish what they are supposed to accomplish. They are the best we can come up with, given our present knowledge base. As a result of our discomfort over this state of affairs, we became convinced not only that more research is needed, but also that another approach is vital.

Applying Good to Great Research to Educational Leadership Programs

We were intrigued with the work Collins (2001) reported in his best-selling book, *Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't.* He began by identifying "great" companies and asking, "Why?" This approach was similar to what Peters and Waterman (1982, 1994) did when they investigated the leadership practices of the top companies of

that day and memorialized them in their famous book, *In Search Of Excellence.* The idea in both cases was to examine great operations and determine why. We decided that we could use the same approach Collins used to gain insight into the characteristics and behaviors of our very best practicing administrators—our superstar principals. Armed with these enormously valuable insights, we would then be better able to design more relevant preparation programs for our educational leadership candidates.

What ensued was a research project which ultimately became a book published jointly by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Corwin Press (authors). We used research methodology inspired by Collins' work (2001) to analyze a series of intensive conversations with six highly successful principals. We wanted to find out more about what superstar principals do well. Our purpose was to gain insights to improve our educational leadership and administration program. What sort of preparation makes a great school administrator?

Our program had all the regular features which were all supported by the conventional wisdom of the craft. Part of the rationale for licensure is to protect the public. Requiring school administrators to be educated in school law would certainly seem to fit this criterion. And how about curriculum management and school finance? Or leadership? All, according to conventional wisdom or "craft speculation" should be part of the pre-service training in a solid school administrator preparation program. We were reminded of the experience of a young California superintendent in the first year of his first superintendency. The county superintendent usually called on the local district superintendents to screen papers for superintendent openings in the county. The novice superintendent was asked to serve on the paper screening committee for a nearby school district superintendency along with two other prominent superintendents—one of whom had been honored recently as Superintendent of the Year by the Administrators' Association. The conversation began with the usual question, "What qualifications are we looking for in a superintendent for this school district?" The young superintendent replied eagerly with conviction, "I think he or she should have significant experience as a principal." Later the young superintendent recalled he was embarrassed to learn that neither of the successful superintendents he was meeting with that day had been principals. His belief in the necessity of principal experience was based on craft speculation. There was some common sense support for the notion, but no empirical evidence.

The Collins (2001) research and the earlier Peters and Waterman (1982, 1994) research both focused on the link between the "greatness" of a private sector company—measured by its success—and its management practices or the leadership characteristics of its chief executive officer (CEO). It is not surprising that the results were similar in some respects. Collins found the following characteristics and behaviors among the CEOs of good companies that became great: (1) unwavering resolve, (2) duality of professional will and personal humility, (3) ambition for the success of the

company, (4) compelling modesty, (5) ability to put the right people in the right positions (6) courage to confront brutal facts, (7) the Hedgehog Concept—A Focus on the primary mission and capabilities of the company and (8) culture of discipline

More than two decades before, Peters and Waterman (1982) found similar management characteristics common among America's best companies. They were (1) a bias for action, (2) close to the customer, (3) autonomy and entrepreneurship, (4) productivity through people, (5) hands-on, value driven, (6) stick to the knitting, (7) simple form, lean staff and (8) simultaneous loose-tight properties.

Notice that Collins' "Hedgehog Concept" is reminiscent of Peters and Waterman's "Sticking to One's Knitting." Likewise, reading about Collins' "Culture of Discipline" reminds us of the "Simultaneously Loose-Tight Organizations" discussed by Peters and Waterman.

Many of us who have spent parts of our careers in the private sector know that much can be learned from business leaders. We also recognize that much of what has been done in the management of education is often superior to the private sector. In his recent publication, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors, Collins* (2005) admitted, "We must reject the idea—well intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become 'more like business." Business norms are not the path to greatness for public schools, but the principles of great leadership are. Moreover, the evidence suggests that these principles of great leadership are linked to increased student performance—the fundamental mission of the public schools (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Berends, Chun, Schuyler, Stockly, & Briggs, 2002).

Leadership Behaviors and Characteristics of Superstar Principals

At the core of our research project was a series of formal conversations with six very successful, "superstar" principals. For comparison, we also interviewed a similar group of five elementary principals with similar schools, but who had not achieved the degree of success of our superstars. We used open-ended, qualitative interviews to identify recurrent patterns as described by Merriam (1998). Since our research was patterned after Collins' (2001) work, we found the characteristics and behaviors he identified in private sector CEOs to be useful in characterizing principals of "great" schools. Thus, our interviews were guided by a series of questions that were modified versions of the questions Collins asked his CEOs. Following is a summary of the characteristics and behaviors which emerged from the conversations with these very successful superstar school leaders:

1. *Unwavering resolve*—They were relentless, aggressive, and continuously involved with the primary mission of the school. In the private sector, the CEOs with unwavering resolve were described by Collins (2001) as "more

plow horse than show horse . . . fanatically driven, infested with an incurable need to produce results" (p. 20). Our highly successful principals demonstrated similar resolve.

2. *Compelling Modesty*—They readily assigned credit for success to others and accepted blame for failures. In contrast with the "I-centric" or charismatic principal, the superstar principals in our study were reluctant to describe the role they played in the success of the school, rather, they attributed it to the work of others. One principal stated very honestly, "I see my main responsibility here is to support the people who do the real work in the classrooms . . ."

3. *Duality of Professional will and Personal Humility*—They were humble, yet willing to stand firm against destructive challenges. They acted as buffers between the school and the forces of special interests whose prime concerns would interrupt sound teaching and learning. One principal testified, "I am not afraid to go to bat for my teachers when issues from outside the school are making their work tougher."

4. *A Culture of Discipline*—They had a vision focusing on student achievement and promoted teacher responsibility. They created an expectation that their faculties would be disciplined professionals who would do everything in their power to accomplish the school's mission—and would need very little supervision.

5. *"First Who . . . Then What" Approach*—They were persistent and successful in their efforts to bring the right people to their schools and eliminate the wrong people. For example, they demonstrated a savvy understanding of the educational bureaucracies in which they were working and used this understanding to manipulate personnel assignments to the benefit of their schools.

6. *Hedgehog Concept*—They knew what the school could do and focused intensely on accomplishing the school's primary mission. One of the superstar principals remarked with conviction, "Teaching reading and ensuring that kids read is the most important thing elementary schools do, and kids who read most read best."

7. *Confront the Brutal Facts*—They analyzed student achievement and other data, and worked through the challenges. They were not hesitant to reveal organizational shortcomings and call for help to address them. One principal recalled a moment in time when the teachers seemed defeated. "We needed to talk about what to do. It was then I realized that we didn't know how to do that. I mean there was a lack of communication between administration and the teaching staff. It is one of those things where we had to grow together and work together if we wanted to improve."

8. *Ambition for Success of the School*—They put the school before personal ambitions, valued staff development, and exhibited concern for school leadership succession. As one principal put it, "I want the passion and quality of instruction to continue and to even improve . . . after I leave."

9. *Ability to Build Relationships*—In our conversations with the successful principals, we discovered an additional critical leadership quality among all of the superstars—the ability to build relationships. One of the highly successful principals summed it up this way: "My job is all about relationships—my relationships with teachers, teachers with teachers, teachers with students, students with students, and all of us with parents and the community . . . "

This latter ability was not identified specifically in Collins' research on successful private sector CEOs; however, it surfaced prominently during the conversations we had with the school principals in our study and is supported in Fullan's (2008) Six Secrets of Change. Building relationships is understandably essential in providing an environment that embraces professional learning communities in schools.

The principals we interviewed exhibited to some extent all the characteristics and behaviors of the most capable, "Level 5" leader of Collins' (2001) research as well as the very important capacity for building relationships. With each principal, certain characteristics were more dominant than others, but all the skills positively associated with facilitating those functions deemed important by research and especially the research on developing professional learning communities (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2005) were present when looking at the six principals as a group.

Just as the eleven companies of Collins' (2001) study rose to be leaders of sustained profitability, great schools are those that make improvement in student achievement and sustain that greatness. Our investigation has supported our suspicion that highly successful principals possess certain characteristics and behave in specific ways which cause their schools to be very successful. However, our research, like the recent research of Collins and of Peters and Waterman (1982, 1994) 25 years before, only provides strong imputation, not irrefutable truth. We studied only six very successful elementary school principals and a similar group of principals for comparison. Collins studied only 11 companies; Peters and Waterman, 75 companies. Moreover, we tend to believe in talent (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). A few people are endowed with propensities and develop them marvelously without a preparation program. Thus, conclusive "proof" is elusive.

When we began this project, we wondered whether the approach to research on leadership Collins (2001) used in *Good to Great* is applicable to schools and principals. Collins and his associates zeroed in on the connection between institutional greatness and the characteristics and behaviors of institutional leaders. We speculated that this might be the missing link in many of the standards for preparation programs. Our project represents one small step toward addressing the question of whether Collins' research on great private sector leaders is applicable to public school administrator preparation. With some exceptions, we think it is.

Administrator Preparation Program Reform

An administrator preparation program curriculum consisting of heavy doses of school law, school finance, human resources management, leadership principles, and curriculum management is comfortable and defensible. After all, most practicing administrators would agree that a working knowledge of the laws governing schools is important. We thought so, and to a lesser extent, we still do. We continue to believe these knowledge bases are important.

Our research suggests that Collins' (2001) work in Good to Great is right on target as an approach for deciding what school administrators should really know. The focus of an educational leadership preparation program, for example, should be on developing leadership behaviors and characteristics that are typical of exemplary leaders and that impact the success of schools. In other words, the program should concentrate on how great school leaders behave and what they do to make a difference. This requires that we embrace the premise that research-based determinants should play a greater role in shaping our programs than the traditional consensus-based standards.

Implications for Improving School Administrator Preparation Programs

Most of us recognize that not every person can be educated to be a great leader. But our preparation programs must be designed to give a fighting chance to those who have what it takes. Many practicing administrators complain that the programs currently in existence are simply hurdles to be jumped, dues to be paid—in fact, detriments to recruiting the stars we need to lead schools to greatness. What, then, are the implications for program improvement resulting from the research and professional dialog we just concluded? Our study suggests the following action:

1. *Eliminate the Myths.* In other words, exalt empirical evidence as a basis for administrative action. Spend hands-on time collecting data and deciding how to use it. Throughout history, myths have been used to prop-up the status quo. Course curriculum in the preparation of school leaders should include rigorous examination of the axioms and truths we build our schools around—from state and national testing to grouping and grading, from teacher evaluation to school size (Frase & Streshly, 2000).

2. *Teach the Necessary Human Relations Skills.* Prominent among the behaviors of our very successful principals was the demonstrated ability to build strong human relationships. Contrary to popular opinion, human relations skills can be taught. The counselor preparation departments have been doing it for years. They call it "counseling practicum," and counselor candidates are taught how to relate to clients individually and in groups. They learn how to build relationships. Not every candidate will catch-on, but the

talented ones will—and they deserve a program that emphasizes this critical leadership skill (authors).

3. *Study Great Leaders.* Get back to the fundamentals. A program whose goal is to prepare great leaders must focus on what great leaders do. The coursework should include studying the work of such men as Niccolo Machiavelli and the biographies of such men as Abraham Lincoln, as well as examples of principals whose schools made "the leap from good to great." This idea is not novel. We have been educating our military leaders this way since wars were first fought. It's time to use this technique to strengthen our front line school leaders.

All of the personal attributes of our superstar principals help them accomplish their missions competently in one way or another. Of all the modifications of administrator preparation suggested by our research, the focus on developing skill in building human relationships stands out as a prime requisite for great success in the principalship. Our conversations with superstar principals have convinced us of the vital importance of this critical proficiency. The time has come to rethink our administrator preparation programs to focus more concentrated attention on personal forces of leadership.

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