The effective principal's role in improving the academic achievement of the school

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Abstract
The effectiveness of the schools in helping students achieve has been of interest to educators and parents throughout history. Although the debate as to whether home or school has had the greater effect on student achievement remains, the school's importance in improving student achievement has been shown (Rutter, Ouston, Maughan, Mortimore, & Smith, 1979; Venezky & Winfield, 1979).

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THE EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN IMPROVING
THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THE SCHOOL

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Connie Ann Aalderks
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The effectiveness of the schools in helping students achieve has been of interest to educators and parents throughout history. Although the debate as to whether home or school has had the greater effect on student achievement remains, the school's importance in improving student achievement has been shown (Rutter, Ouston, Maughan, Mortimore, & Smith, 1979; Venezky & Winfield, 1979).

In the Rutter et al. (1979) study students with similar personal characteristics and family backgrounds were compared from twelve inner city London schools. Differences in the levels of scholastic achievement attained by the students were attributed to the schools.

In the same year Venezky and Winfield conducted a similar project studying the reading achievement growth patterns of students in two urban Atlantic coastal schools. The results were comparable to the Rutter et al. (1979) study, in that differences in the characteristics of the schools resulted in differences in student achievement.

During the past ten years further research has been done concerning the characteristics of schools which have effectively improved student achievement, and the role of the principal in these schools. Although the research regarding effective schools and the principal's role are
interwoven, this paper concentrated on the principal's role in effecting student achievement.

Close examination of the topic revealed two important questions. First, has it been shown that the principal does effect the level of achievement by students? Secondly, if the principal does have that type of impact on achievement, are there specific behaviors evident in the principal's leadership style?

Ogawa and Hart in 1985 addressed the issue of the effect of the principal on student achievement. Their study included 275 elementary and high schools. Student achievement was measured using the reading and math test scores of all sixth and twelfth grade students. Using a procedure, similar to an analysis of variance, a matrix of test results was created for the variables of school (organization) and year (environment). Adjusted factor variance from the matrix resulted in showing that the principal accounted for a variance of between two and eight percent in the test scores of the students. The results, which were considered conservative by the authors, were consistent across the two grade levels and subject matter.

Various review of research (DeBevoise, 1984; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Shoemaker & Fraser, 1981; Sweeney, 1982) as well as other studies (Venezky & Winfield, 1979) have
stated that the principal does have an effect on student achievement.

Leithwood and Montgomery stated the following: "Principal behaviors are increasingly 'effective' to the extent that they facilitate necessary teacher growth and thereby indirectly influence student learning or impinge on other factors to effect such learning" (1982, p. 310).

In a review of research Sweeny (1982) stated:

The evidence clearly indicates that principals do make a difference, for leadership behavior was positively associated with school outcomes in each of the eight studies. Of equal importance was the emergence of specific leadership behaviors consistently associated with effective schools. (p. 350)

There is a wealth of research and reviews on the effective principal. Four characteristics or behaviors, which are recurring traits in many of the studies, appear to be key elements.

The first of these characteristics is setting achievement oriented goals for the school. These goals are the focus of the staff and students.

In 1979 Venezky and Winfield conducted a University of Delaware study which included two elementary schools with similar student populations, socioeconomic status, and history
of reading achievement. One school had recently shown significant gains in reading achievement while the other school had not experienced a similar growth.

The principal's leadership style was the determining factor. The building with greater reading success had a principal who was achievement oriented; the other building's principal was human relations oriented.

The achievement oriented principal implemented and directed work toward the goal of improving reading skills. Specific actions were taken by the principal. For example, an announcement of improving reading scores was made to staff, students and parents. Parents were informed through memos of ways in which they could help. Teachers' assistance was insured, "by developing a cooperative atmosphere in the school he [the principal] managed to obtain the teachers' agreement to set reading as the school's top priority" (Venezky & Winfield, 1979, p. 14).

In a review of research studies on effective schools, Shoemaker and Fraser (1981) found that one of the four emerging key themes is an assertive, achievement oriented leadership style of the principal.

Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) stated:

In sum, effective principals are able to define priorities focused on the central mission of the school and gain
support for these priorities from all stakeholders. Their actions impinge on almost all aspects of the classroom and school that are likely to influence achievement of these priorities. (p. 335)

The second main characteristic of an effective principal is having high expectations of self, staff, and students. Ronald Edmonds (1979) wrote, "Schools that are instructionally effective for poor children have a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum but efficacious levels of achievement" (p. 22).

In 1987 Hord and Hall completed a one year study of nine elementary principals and their daily work in curriculum implementation and school improvement. They studied three styles of principal leadership: responder, manager, and initiator. The initiator style, characterized by academic orientation and high expectations, was found to be more effective than the other leadership styles of responder and manager. The initiator style principal was found to convey those high expectations through frequent interventions (communications) with the teachers and by having a clear focus of how the school should operate and how teachers should teach to be effective. When having to choose between making changes or keeping the status quo, the overall goal of the
school and expectations have first priority with the initiator style principal.

Woven through Abbott's conversations with visitors and faculty are frequent comments about the school's programs for boys and girls, what's beneficial for students, and how students will gain. She emphasizes student outcomes and how to increase or improve them. Her consistent and total attention is on instruction, with no distraction about why effective instruction can't happen. (Hord & Hall, 1987, p. 79)

Eight elementary schools in California served as a research study by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) which examined characteristics of effective schools. All of these schools demonstrated high expectations of their students, although the source and nature of the expectations varied with the socioeconomic status of the school.

The concept of high student expectations is further supported in a survey of principals by Dwyer in 1984 and a review of research by Shoemaker and Fraser in 1981.

The third characteristic of effective leadership that emerges from research as important is frequent monitoring of the students' progress. Monitoring the students' progress of achievement in a building can be seen as a natural extension of setting goals and having high expectations. To see if
the goals and expectations are being carried out a principal needs to be aware of the progress being made. Studies which have been conducted indicate numerous ways in which a principal can demonstrate this part of his responsibility.

Besides gathering test data, principals are actively observing formally and informally in the classrooms, visiting with teachers individually, as teams, and by grade levels. This high visibility of the principal monitoring the building's day-to-day progress of students in the classrooms is an essential characteristic (DeBevoise, 1984; Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Sweeney, 1982).

The fourth and last characteristic, that of giving instructional support, is wider in scope and thus becomes the most difficult to analyze. Giving instructional support includes all the actions by which a principal supports the staff in carrying out their teaching duties. This support can be subdivided into two categories: the physical and social support, or climate, that makes the school conducive to learning; and the technical features of the school organization.

School climate has been defined by Dwyer (1984) and Shoemaker and Fraser (1981) as being the things seen in a school building and the feeling people have from being in the school. It can include everything from new paint in the
hallways to the social aspect of friendliness and cooperation observed in the people working at the school. It is "a diverse set of properties that communicates to students that the school is a pleasant place to be, can help them achieve, and is a serious work place" (Dwyer, 1984, p. 36).

The importance of school climate, sometimes referred to as a safe, orderly environment, needs to be considered as important in the principal's role of giving support (Dwyer, 1984; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Shoemaker & Fraser, 1981).

In considering the physical and social aspects of school climate there are many duties for the principal to undertake, including the examples given above. In making decisions concerning the climate, the overall question a principal may ask is whether or not the decision will help make the school a pleasant place conducive to learning for the students.

The second category of giving instructional support is technical features of organization. Within this category are all the tasks which need to be accomplished to insure teachers the maximum amount of time teaching as efficiently and effectively as possible. Anderson and Pigford (1987), Dwyer (1984), Hord and Hall (1987), Leithwood and Montgomery (1982), and Rutherford (1985) include this factor as important in being an effective principal.
The list of specific principal's duties which fall under this category is extensive. Examples of technical support include: providing adequate planning time for the teachers, providing the funds and materials needed for each classroom, monitoring class size and teaching assignments, and providing inservice for the staff.

All of these duties are carried out by the effective principal in the belief that by doing so teachers' effectiveness will be maximized and thus student achievement will be improved (Rutherford, 1985).

The review of literature has shown that the principal does effect student achievement. The effective principal in many of the studies exhibits four characteristics: academic orientation, high expectations, monitoring of the students' progress, and providing instructional support through the school climate and technical features of the organization. In this review of literature none of the studies or reviews found only one characteristic or trait that was the key to be effective.

Teaching students is a complex task; being the principal for a staff and students is also complex. There is not one solution, one characteristic of leadership style which will solve everything. It is the interworking of all these characteristics that help make the principal effective in
improving student achievement. The implementation of these characteristics by a principal into his own leadership style can be a useful first step, a beginning, in strengthening our schools. With that perspective, the principals of today need to look at their responsibilities and begin to "develop strategies that will enable them to provide instructional leadership despite increased demands from the tasks" (Anderson & Pigford, 1987, p. 71).

The effective principal will then become the "type of administrator who can conceptualize instructional processes enough to orchestrate, lead, and implement efficient and effective programs" (Keedy, 1987, p. 6).
References


