

Social Contexts and Processes that Influence Effective School Principals

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Abstract

The role of the school principal can influence the culture of the school environment and the way that staff members, students, and parents successfully interact with one another. This paper uses a sociological framework, in particular, the symbolic interactionist, and structural functionalist paradigms to examine the multifaceted role of the effective school principal. The principal is primarily responsible for providing and distributing leadership, teaching the staff to analyze data to improve student achievement, and building school capacity through professional development. This research explores the important dynamic role of the school principal and what it means to lead effective change.

Keywords: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, collaborative leadership

Principals certainly play a vital and multifaceted role in shaping schools that are productive instructional environments for teachers and optimistic learning environments for students. Principals must be knowledgeable and effective in the way they shape the school environment. In the era of No Child Left behind (NCLB), it has become more critical than ever that the role of the principal is viewed as an instructional leader rather than just an administrator. According to Hallinger (2003), principals who are instructional leaders lead from a combination of expertise and charisma; they are hands-on and goal-oriented; they are focused on the improvement of teaching, learning, and student academic outcomes. Instructional leaders are viewed as culture builders.

Principals play managerial, political, instructional, institutional, human resource, and symbolic leadership roles in their schools (Bolman & Deal, 1992). Each role takes on a different meaning based on the audience or stakeholder involved in the school. A sociological examination; however, can provide an extra dimension to our understanding of effective schooling practices. Lindsay and Beach (2000) provide functionalist and symbolic interactionist lenses from which to explore a principal's role in today's schools. As the principal seeks to establish collegiality,

collaboration, and professionalism within the context of the school, these two paradigms provide a closer analysis in doing so.

The functionalist paradigm focuses on schools as systems, working interdependently, therefore by establishing school goals and standards and working with staff, students, and parents to make effective decisions, the principal can expect to see change across the school. Teachers, students, parents, and other staff members all play a critical role in the day-to-day interaction of the school and in the improvement of outcomes.

The symbolic interactionist paradigm focuses on individuals and how they behave in face-to-face social settings (Lindsay & Beach, 2000). This paradigm can provide a platform for principals to observe and meet with individual teachers to discuss instructional strategies and best practices that are applicable to their classroom environment. This paradigm also allows individual teams of teachers to meet on content or grade levels to discuss assessment data and ways to improve their instruction.

The most effective principals operate from a value system that places a high priority on people and relationships (Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, Ackerman, 2009). Research suggests that there are three sets of core leadership practices that a principal should acquire: develop people, set

directions for the organization, and redesign the organization (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). To be able to effectively carry out these practices, principals will need to have the ability to grow and maintain honest, supportive relationships with all stakeholders involved in their school.

Instructional leadership developed during the effective schools movement of the 1980s. The principal was viewed as the primary source of educational expertise. To standardize the practice of effective teaching, the principal's role was to maintain high expectations for teachers and students, supervise classroom instruction, coordinate the school's curriculum, and monitor student progress (Barth, 1986).

Relational skills are essential to strong, sustainable school leadership (Fullan, 2003). Principals, who serve as instructional leaders, as well as interactionists, can foster a school environment that encourages positive relationships among staff, students, parents, and the community. It is critical, however, that a principal demonstrates that importance of valuing relationships. This becomes particularly important when principals are tasked with affecting change. It also becomes important when principals try to ameliorate any social or economic challenges that may affect students' academic success. When principals are able to affect change, they embody elements of both instructional and transformational leadership (Cotton, 2003).

As functionalist leaders, principals are able to have an effect on the operation of every aspect of the school; therefore they have the power to increase the school's capacity to innovate. They also have the ability to stimulate flexibility as well as to higher productivity in terms of restructuring the organization's goals and achieving school outcomes. Research also suggests that this type of principal is able to build vision and foster commitment to group goals (Hallinger, 2003). In this type of environment, the cultural context interacts with the institutional context to shape desired outcomes for schooling or school effectiveness (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998).

Research on effective schools has focused much attention on school leadership. Evidence suggests that principals' attitudes and behaviors play a large role in shaping how schools create a context in which students can effectively learn (Davis et al., 2005). Effective principals can create collaborative cultures within the school to bring all stakeholders toward common goals for the school. This provides a platform for shared leadership and an opportunity for others to recognize their abilities in providing effective leadership as well. In part, most principals are trained as managers, and are not prepared to meet the school's needs in regard to instructional leadership (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). As the role of the principal is examined through the sociological perspective, it is evident that certain characteristics and practices are essential for effective schooling. This paper uses a sociological framework, in particular, the symbolic interactionist and structural functionalist paradigms to examine the multifaceted role of the effective school principal.

Distributed Leadership

Kouzes and Posner (1995) define leadership as, "The art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (p. 30). Today's principals require a varied skill set to meet the instructional, disciplinary, community, policy, legal, and assessment requirements (Davis et al., 2005). Educational leaders were once defined as managing forces but recent years have challenged that definition due to the federal and state standards placed on schools. A position that was once seen as managerial in nature, has transformed into a position where leaders are responsible for molding the organization to attain success (Levin, 2006).

Leading experts in the field have studied a more focused aspect of leadership, one that is distributed in nature, to better understand the relationship between educational leaders and student achievement. Distributed leadership is functionalist in nature in that it relies on shared values of the members, provides an organic structure of interdependent parts, and constantly seeks equilibrium within the organization (Ruane & Cerulo, 2000).

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) argue, "...that school leadership is best understood as a distributed practice, *stretched over* the school's social and situational contexts" (p. 23). Their study was grounded in activity theory which analyzes the large scale tasks (macro functions) and day to day work (micro tasks), rather than at the position or role of a person. Their goal was to determine the associations between macro functions and micro tasks that effect change. The decisions to study distributed practices stemmed from the realization that leadership is spread out and therefore is "more than the sum of each individual's practice" (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 25). Distributed leadership and functionalism align in that one's individual practice helps make up the greater whole of an organization.

The findings of Spillane et al. supported the following: (1) the need to study more "integrative understandings of leadership" (p. 27); (2) the need for studies to focus on the school level, rather than the individual leader; (3) the recommendation to avoid generic templates to guide leaders and instead, have them develop "rich theoretical knowledge from practice" (p. 27); (4) the need for spreading the educational and leadership experiences around a school rather than developing a formal leader to reach optimum effectiveness; (5) the need for reflection to determine if leadership tools confine or facilitate further activity (Spillane et al., 2001).

Goldstein (2003) applied the distributed leadership principles, defined by Spillane et al., to the embedded single-case design research study which sought to investigate the shifting leadership responsibilities in districts that adopted the Peer Assistance Review (PAR) evaluation system. This summative evaluation program, PAR, was designed for consulting teachers (CT), who were identified through excellent instructional standards, to mentor new and selected veteran teachers (Goldstein, 2003).

In the beginning stages of PAR, CTs struggled to define their role as mentors and had conflicting thoughts of themselves as evaluators. Over time, some CTs began to take on language that

showed a sense of likeness to the role of the evaluator but were reluctant to make final decisions about teacher performance. Principals appreciated the reduction in workload but were conflicted by the reduction of their role in the evaluation process. Some administrators continued to form their own opinions through their personal evaluations despite the prescribed PAR program (Goldstein, 2003). It was evident that principals struggled at times to share the leadership role.

Principals and consulting teachers began to find middle ground when they approached PAR from a collaborative stance. There were two types of distributed leadership models present in this study: (1) division of responsibilities between actors; (2) distribution of leadership to be shared by actors. "The collaborative approach to evaluation suggests a model of distributing leadership that is less about dividing tasks than sharing responsibility for them" (Goldstein, 2003, p. 114). All parties involved began to share values and were able to maintain stability through distributing the leadership tasks; thus, making it functionalistic in nature.

In 2006, Levin wrote the article *Can Research Improve Educational Leadership?* to examine educational leadership studies to determine how useful it is to our understanding. There is concern regarding the lack of "solid research" and overabundance of opinions woven into the studies. Leadership is abstract and tainted by social realities. Because of the multifaceted realities of studying leadership, he calls for the use of qualitative and quantitative studies to produce a more thorough investigation.

Collaborative Leadership

Another type of leadership that is widely studied in the educational arena is collaborative leadership. Hallinger and Heck (2010) define collaborative school leadership as, "...strategic schoolwide actions directed toward improvement in student learning that are shared among teachers, administrators, and others" (p. 228). This form of leadership study lends itself to the lens of functionalism due to the shared values by the

members of the organization and the interdependent parts that promote stability (Ruane & Cerulo, 2000).

A unidirectional and reciprocal-effects model was used by Hallinger and Heck (2010) to study collaborative leadership within an elementary school setting. Their report focused on collaborative leadership and the effects on student growth in elementary mathematics. It was assumed that leadership involves a shared vision, distributed leadership, facilitation of professional learning to build capacity, and the improvement of teacher's capacity to positively affect student performance (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

The unidirectional model ($A \rightarrow B$) suggests that there is an effect seen from the first to the second variable. An example of this being that instructional coaching affects a teacher's practice. The reciprocal-effects model, ($A \rightleftarrows B \rightleftarrows C$) and ($A_1 \rightarrow B_2$ and $A_2 \rightarrow B_1$), on the other hand, suggests that a cause and effect relationship can be seen between variables (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Thus, causing feedback loops, which are defined as "...a casual chain (or cycle) from one construct passing through one or more other constructs and back to the original construct" (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 230).

Hallinger and Heck (2010) found that the reciprocal-effects model was the most theoretically persuasive due to the integrated cumulative research. The study, "...integrates cumulative research from mediated-effects models with new conceptual relationships that can be specified and tested with longitudinal data" (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 245). Their findings support that collaborative leadership was the driving force in school improvement (Hallinger and Heck, 2010).

Using Data Analysis to Improve Student Achievement

Federal, state, and local systems of accountability mandate schools to take a closer look at various forms of student data to meet accreditation and AYP standards, as well as improve overall student achievement. Principals and teachers of successful schools focus intently on student data from multiple sources, particularly,

cohort data (Reeves, 2004). As part of the academic and cultural context of the school setting, there is an increasing awareness of the availability and amount of data that schools utilize as part of their data analysis process to improve student achievement. School leaders are increasing time during the school day for teacher collaboration in the analysis of attendance, demographic, grade distribution, discipline, and assessment data. This is due in part to the principal's unique role in the educational system and the school improvement process. A key element is a well-organized approach to using assessment data. As an instructional leader, a principal learns to effectively utilize data and collaborates with the school staff to make decisions for the overall achievement of the school.

Research by Shen et al. (2010) suggests that the systematic use of data to shape school-based decisions means a fundamental shift in practice for school leaders and their staffs. This process will assist principals and teachers in understanding their student achievement challenges and potential solutions to those challenges. There is evidence that suggests when teachers collaborate to pose and answer questions informed by data from their own students, their knowledge grows and their practice changes. Examining student data through symbolic interactionism invites principals and teachers to interact and engage themselves in the process of making meanings of student achievement and creating next steps necessary for improvement.

Research has found that in fact principals do want to use data to provide instructional leadership in a more informed way (Torrence, 2002). According to Love, Stiles, Murphy, & DiRanna (2008), effective data use will not occur unless schools address data capacity. Essentially, principals will need to distribute leadership to establish data teams, designate data coaches, create structured time in the school calendar for collaborative analysis, build staff skills in data analysis and assessment literacy, and display data in formats that facilitate inquiry and analysis. It is critical to ensure the broad representation that makes collaborative analysis meaningful.

Effective principals know that a commonly identified element of accountability systems is their ability to inform parents and the community about student progress and status. NCLB requires schools to provide information to parents and the community that is clear and understandable. It is important that principals have specific formal policies and practices in place to ensure that parents and the community understand complexities associated with assessment information and results. By doing so, they invite parents and members of the community to become more involved in the educational process by providing accountability information. Schools are also encouraged to have high expectations for all students. Strong relationships and partnerships can have a positive effect on how a principal is able to inform all stakeholders.

Building School Capacity through Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development is derived from data analysis and becomes the avenue for improved student achievement. Building school capacity through professional development relies heavily on the interaction of people to promote learning and growth. Using the sociological paradigm symbolic interactionism to study professional development is justified in that people socially construct learning through their actions, or learning activities (Lindsey & Beach, 2000).

Lambert (2003) defines professional development as, "...learning opportunities that can be found in collegial conversations, coaching episodes, shared decision-making groups, reflective journals, parent forums, or other such occasions" (p. 22). Lambert outlines the design as a reciprocal process of constructivist learning. First educators examine surfacing prior knowledge to reflect upon what one currently believes and does instructionally. Second, she promotes engaging in inquiry where one would create new knowledge by conducting action research, examining student work, and reading research. Next, educators are asked to reflect on past practices and newfound knowledge through the inquiry phase to begin to reframe one's actions and future plans. It is in the last phase,

reframing, where educators change their practices by combining the first three steps. Each step is necessary to the positive outcomes of professional development (Lambert, 2003).

Teachers need to be competent in various effective classroom practices including: knowledge of their students, curriculum and content, planning units and lessons, monitoring and adjusting instruction, assessing student work, and reflecting on their teaching (Youngs & King, 2002). Research shows that the quality of instruction a student encounters directly affects their achievement (Reeves, 2004). These facts drive the need for targeted professional development.

Building school capacity and sustaining it starts with a principal who is viewed as an instructional leader (Gimbel, Lopes, & Greer, 2011). Although an instructional leader is vital to the success of a school, there are other leadership principles that help promote professional growth among a staff. In order to be effective, one must develop strong relationships, promote positive dialogue, building a shared commitment to set goals, create opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice and allow teacher input when decision making (Gimbel et al., 2011; Youngs & King, 2002). These practices are imperative for teacher to feel validated, respected, and able to buy in and trust their leader's vision. Zimmerman (2006) notes that regular communication between a principal and their teacher's results in teachers who possess high self-efficacy.

In the qualitative study by Gimbel et al. (2011), a Likert-type questionnaire was used to determine "...teacher and principal perceptions of the role of the principal in fostering teachers' professional growth" (p. 19). Their findings supported the notion that the perceptions were many times contradictory. First, new teachers found value through mentorship opportunities however principals did not find it as important. Second, principals saw themselves seeking teacher contribution when making decisions, whereas teachers felt left out of the process. Lastly, it was noted that the more experienced teachers experienced less communication from their

principal, including professional development opportunities.

Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor (2003) researched how distributing leadership through the professional development experience and how it effects one's practice. They found that professional developments can help cultivate leadership, i.e., "the effects of staff development were strongly related to the performance of *instructional leadership*" (p. 361). Rather than defining role expectations, professional development opportunities encourage instructional leadership (Camburn et al., 2003).

In larger districts, principals do not always reserve the right to set the professional development agenda. Johnson & Chrispeel's (2010) qualitative study of inquiry through a case study found that leadership teams can connect the district to schools and the staff at large. These leadership teams play the vital role as communicators. The networks allow for both parties to access and increase new knowledge to further promote student achievement. Lambert (2003) argues that the district should reserve the right to set the vision for professional development. Based on the finding about building trust, one would caution a district whose leadership teams are not in place. These networks are vital to promote buy in throughout the district about the professional development vision.

Principals can positively affect the quality of instruction by creating structures that promote teacher learning. Such structures include establishing regular meeting times for teachers to plan and reflect on instructional practices, developing systematic school wide professional development, promote trust and rapport, and by distributing the leadership (Youngs & King, 2002). Building school capacity is a multifaceted and challenging for principals and districts to handle. Through in depth instructional knowledge, commitment to building trust and fostering reflection, schools can begin to build their learning capacity through professional development experiences.

Implications for Further Research

There are direct policy implications for districts that want to place the most effective principals in schools that are in need of strong leadership. Principals who are able to utilize the functionalist and symbolic interactionist paradigms can be savvy about developing organizational management skills; establishing relationships with teachers, students, parents, and the community; collaborating with staff; analyzing assessment and other school data, providing meaningful staff development; allocating resources, and providing planning time for teachers. There are consistent findings among studies that principals' involvement in framing, conveying, and sustaining the schools purposes and goals represent an important domain of indirect influence on school outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Many principals have few experiences managing complex organizations prior to entering administration in their school. A critical piece to developing effective, socially aware principals is providing them training in several leadership areas, most importantly, organizational skills, time management, relationship building, collection of data, and the utilization of data to solve problems (Torrence, 2002). States and school districts should invest in principal preparation to optimize school success. This type of training will also increase a principal's ability to build a school's learning capacity and distribute leadership among the staff.

Educational leaders may find value in adopting a sociological lens to study effective practices of the school principal because there are new levels of reality to encounter with the demands of NCLB. The school principal can play a vital role in shaping the culture of a school and the way teachers and students see reality and themselves. Within a social culture, cultural values and collaborative relationships should exist. The personal values of school principals are important in shaping their attention and behavior (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998). Leadership promotes organizational improvement and this is sustainable for leaders themselves. Principals who share leadership responsibilities with others would be less

subject to burnout and would not have to face the challenges and complexities of leadership alone. Hallinger (2003) suggests that when the principal elicits high levels of commitment and professionalism from teachers and works interactively with teachers in a shared leadership instructional capacity, schools have the benefit of integrated leadership.

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