International Trends and Lessons in School Leadership:
A Meta-Analysis of Research on Teaching Principals

Jonathan Damiani

Introduction

In the United States today we have an extensive body of literature that focuses on the instructional leadership practices of school leaders working in public schools (Leithwood, 2005; Marzano, 2005). Principals who want to develop reflective, collaborative and problem-solving contexts focused on instruction have traditionally been regarded as instructional leaders (Blase & Blase, 2000). Research into issues of instructional leadership has developed many important discussions for advancing the work that principals do. Key research findings also indicate how administrators have used shared decision-making, and involved other members of faculty in leadership decisions in order to develop their instructional programs and teaching staff (Lambert, 2002). Instructional leaders who develop specific goals using a shared vision can create a climate of teaching and learning that is both more coherent and better equipped to respond to change (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001). Despite this specific knowledge and the understanding that principals are now being held more responsible for the learning that takes place in schools than ever before, very few administrators are actually having any direct instructional contact with their students.

In American schools, the traditional role of principals has been to administer and preserve the status quo (Hallinger, 1992). While more recent definitions of principal as instructional leader have taken hold in most successful schools across the country, for many years the principal's role was related to managing resources and keeping an inventory of tasks and responsibilities (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). In my exploration of the research on instructional leadership I have identified a much smaller body of literature that has received very little attention in the United States, and which is focused on principals who teach in classroom settings. While principals who function as both administrators and teachers have received some recognition in rural communities (McRobbie, 1990), and in smaller primary schools (Clarke, 2002), very little research on these principals has taken place in the U.S. or even overseas where teaching principals are more common in Australia, New Zealand, Wales, England, and Scotland (Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). In Finland, the world's number one performer in literacy, math, and science, principals teach for at least two hours per week (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008), and in South Africa, principals are required to engage in the teaching workload as per the required needs of the school (Venter, 2010). Finland also now requires by law for principals to have been teachers themselves. Perhaps it is no coincidence that principals who emphasize student learning in this way are parts of schools that are testing better and ranking higher on international surveys of child well-being where the United States, incidentally, ranks second to last (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In this review I have chosen several key pieces of research that have influenced my own line of inquiry on how students' perspectives of leadership could be used to inform the work of school leaders.

After spending a significant amount of time reviewing the literature on instructional leadership, shared leadership, and research conducted using students' and teachers' perspectives of principals, I was able to find few empirical studies that focused on principals that worked as teachers. In the United States, there is a handful of non-empirical articles that describe the advantages of this work such as: modeling, enhanced credibility, developing positive relationships with students, staff, and community, an ability to more intimately explore professional development initiatives alongside the staff, monitoring the curriculum, and first-hand evaluation of the instructional program (Goldys, 2009). My interest however is to take a closer look at why principals, many of whom were once long-time teachers (NCES, 2011), abandon the classroom when they become administrators, and why so many exceptional and experienced teachers refuse promotion. In my years working as a teacher, a teacher educator, and an administrator, I have seen so many men and women who entered the field of education to have direct instructional contact with students, fail to make that connection after becoming principals. I have also observed exceptional teachers, capable of effecting change on a larger scale, refuse opportunities to become school leaders because they were afraid they would no longer be able to continue to make a difference in the lives of their at-risk students.

How then can we change the current structures in a way that would encourage principals, most of whom became teachers because they were passionate about teaching kids, to have the flexibility to do more of what brought them to schools in the first place? In order to answer this overarching question, I have selected three questions based on obstacles to instruction for today's principals: (1) How can principals become more reflective about their practice in order to be better leaders of students and teachers? (2) How do principals deal with the role conflict they might experience between wanting to lead a school and still work with kids? (3) Can principals find the time to teach?

The following analysis of this research has been inspired by a teaching principal from Hong Kong who completely transformed the way I viewed school leadership while working at a prestigious international school filled with English language learners from a variety of backgrounds. During that time I made huge strides as a teacher, collaborator, and as a school leader in my own right. The principal I am writing about spent the majority of her time in the classroom, had direct instructional contact with all grade levels, as well as small group instructional time with both at risk and gifted students on a regular basis, and was able to develop meaningful relationships with every student and staff member at her school. It was also this administrator who inspired me to pursue my graduate study into issues of leadership.

I find it important to mention that when I asked my administrator from Hong Kong about how and why she structured her principalship the way she did, she responded simply, "It's always been about the kids, they're why I am here." Months later, when I took the time to speak with another now-retired school leader known for her close relationships with students in an urban school in New York, I was convinced that her explanation would be rife with jargon such as that which appears throughout the educational leadership literature and which some principals use to describe their work in the United States. I was again surprised however, as there was no mention of instructional, transformative, or even shared leadership. Her answer was nearly identical to that of the other principal, and I don't believe this similarity is in anyway a coincidence.

The focus of their work was on the interactions they had with the students in their schools and all other responsibilities were considered secondary. As a result both principals were able to create a school climate where student achievement and social development was the center of attention for teachers like myself, parents, and most importantly students. In my previous research with students and principals, I have begun to develop a theory that school leaders who are not using student-driven approaches to direct their instructional leadership are left with little else but personal inclination or externally-derived and often times ill-fitted models in their quest to structure more responsive schools (Damiani, 2012). After speaking with principals from a wide range of backgrounds, I have also found evidence that administrators who are

accessible to students, increase student responsibility, and play a more interactive role in student learning, are able to improve student-learning outcomes. My perspective is rooted in empirical work, theory and personal experience. As my primary research focus is based on reflective administrative practice and more engaged models of leadership that involve putting students first, I here again position myself as a researcher intent on having principals take the next step in order to have purposeful connections structured into their day which are focused around content, pedagogy, and academic affairs.

Research into instructional leadership has been extensive, and has largely focused qualitatively and quantitatively on identifying or describing effective behaviors that lend themselves to "best practice." Many administrators have turned to these prescribed models (Murphy, 1990) in hopes of developing or re-structuring their approaches to leadership. While some administrators may now be more aware of the teaching and learning that takes place because of this shift in practice, I do not find that they are necessarily better equipped to address the unique learning environments in their own schools. The source of school administrators' failure to be educational leaders lies in the organizational context in which they work, and the set of skills and expectations they bring to their role (Blase & Blase, 2004). Furthermore, many principals fail to engage in instructional behaviors not only because they lack the know-how, but more commonly because competing demands, many of which the principal can manage from within the confines of the main office, may appear more achievable.

If principals can begin to reflect in greater depth on how they influence student learning, and spend less time focused on what others have defined as "best practice," schools can become more responsive, and principals can become more responsible leaders. In an effort to improve schools facing similar challenges, it is imperative for researchers to bring the practices of teaching principals into focus.

Discussion

For the purposes of clarity I have decided to present my analysis of research on teaching principals as it relates to three major themes present in the literature on school leadership: (1) reflective practice, (2) role conflict, and (3) time management. In this analysis I will also identify and discuss the significance the studies have in real world leadership contexts such as the ones we would find in public schools and pre-service administrator education programs. This meta-analysis focuses specifically on several articles that will be reviewed and synthesized for their ability to contribute to our knowledge on teaching principals in unique ways. Each of these articles allows researchers and practitioners to see ways in which principals can become more reflective leaders of students and teachers, as well as how principals deal with role conflict, and problems of time management. In doing so, they help provide administrators, educational leadership programs, and researchers with a new understanding of how principals might be able to function as teachers in some capacity, while eliminating some of the roadblocks to effective administrative practice in schools by adopting a more global approach.

Reflective Practice

The first article (Blase & Blase, 2000) presented in this analysis is a representative study from the literature on school leadership. In this article two American researchers examine teachers' perspectives of principals' everyday leadership characteristics and the impact those characteristics have on teachers. The authors used an open-ended questionnaire to ask teachers what strategies, behaviors, and attitudes principals used to influence the teaching and learning that takes place in schools (Blase & Blase, 2000). Based on the responses of over 800 teachers in urban, suburban, and rural settings, the author contends that the two most important aspects of the principalship are talking with teachers to promote (1) reflective practice, and (2) professional growth (Blase & Blase, 2000).

This article reinforces the extant literature on teaching principals in a number of ways. First, teachers valued principals who used examples and demonstrations both during post-observation conferences, and in day-to-day interactions. Second, teachers valued principals who modeled teaching techniques in classrooms. Principals who taught students were viewed by teachers as impressive instructional leaders who were able to better motivate teachers, and have them reflect on their own practice (Blase & Blase, 2000). Third, the authors concluded that principals who want to develop as instructional leaders need to de-emphasize their managerial role, and make the transition back into the classroom in order to develop relationships with the teachers and students. This study, and others like it in the ever-diversifying body of literature on leadership in schools, recognizes the importance of principals who are interacting with teachers to promote teaching and learning in more direct ways.

Gentilucci & Muto's (2007) study is unique in how the researchers went to students to ask their opinions about the work of their principals. When research has involved grade school students in discussions about learning, it has found that these students are not only motivated to learn, but that they are also capable of talking openly about what it is that motivates them to do so (Gentilucci, 2004). Students have had few opportunities to share their attitudes about classroom management, curriculum, and leadership, and their perceptions of teaching and instruction have all but been ignored (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007).

In Gentilucci and Muto's (2007) study, the researchers have concluded that students appreciate interactive teachers and principals that (a) got to know them, (b) checked on their work, (c) helped them with assignments, and (d) were accessible for instructional and non-instructional support. These findings are interesting in that they demonstrate student's awareness about leadership and their desire for principals to be in the classroom helping them learn. This article also serves as a call to action for former teachers entering positions of leadership. Students want school leaders to help them with their school work, and not just in their more traditional role as the school's head disciplinarian or the person they only see at school assemblies.

Browne-Ferrigno (2003) provides an in-depth analysis of the nature of transformations that occur as teachers prepare to become principals. Of all the articles selected for the purpose of this analysis, the findings of this study provide the best explanation for how to eliminate the structures that have discouraged exceptional teachers from becoming successful principals. It is these structures that make teaching and leadership seem to be two distinctly different tasks, that impede the path of teachers that have the potential for being great teaching principals, and that also sometimes help usher in a type of school leader that is looking to escape the daily pressures of the classroom for higher ground in the main office.

This study used open-ended questionnaires, recorded interviews and cohort meetings to capture the transformative experiences of a cohort of educational practitioners in the United States preparing to become school leaders. After analyzing the data collected from a group of 18 prospective school leaders the author suggested that many successful teachers interested in becoming principals struggle to make the transition into positions of leadership because preparatory programs fail to help practitioners (a) conceptualize this new role, (b) socialize into their new community of practice, (c) cope with their role-identity transformation, and (d) align personal career goals with their new position (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). These four reflective practices are not something that many teachers will be able to do naturally as they prepare for their new position in administration.

These findings are critical for administrator licensure or certification programs that have struggled to prepare teachers to take the next step into positions of leadership. Graduate-level programs like these are designed to prepare these teachers for administrative positions. Yet many certified school leaders never seek these positions after graduation. The author concludes that additional support (in the four areas identified above) is needed for these principals-in-training to make a successful transition from the classroom to a position in administration. If an increased number of expert teachers can receive this

support, and make the leap into school leadership, schools can begin to bridge the gap that exists between the teacher and the principal in an effort to create a more cohesive instructional program.

Role Conflict

Principals in America have been forced into the spotlight and more current descriptions of their leadership role include: initiators of change, educational visionaries, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, special program administrators, school managers, personnel administrators and community builders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). School leadership is now regarded as second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2006). At the same time, the incongruence between what principals want to do instructionally (and actually have time to do), creates dire consequences for school leaders and their work in making a difference in schools (Walker, 2010).

Clarke (2002) describes two strategies that have been adopted to empower teaching principals who are struggling to find the time to manage both their teaching and administrative workloads in Australia. The first strategy was developed to provide teaching principals with support on administrative tasks so that they could better fulfill their instructional role. The second strategy was designed to provide pre-service and new teaching principals with the professional development they needed to succeed with their double-load. The author concludes that both of these strategies helped to prepare more effective teaching principals in small Australian schools, and then begins to make a case for enhancing each of these strategies through research. Clarke's (2002) call for additional research is focused on understanding what successful reform-minded teaching principals do, and on identifying the key challenges facing these practitioners in greater detail.

Murdoch & Schiller (2002) build on this argument in their study by using a mixed method research design to explore these challenges. Role conflict again appears in this study as something that causes administrators to feel frustration as they try to deal with their dual role. Issues of time, professional development, instructional leadership, and career goals are compared using in-depth interviews of Australian principals as the primary research tool. These principals consistently reported that their induction programs were inadequate and that they received very little ongoing support after entering the position. Principals also reported that the teaching aspect of their job was the most rewarding. Principals' perspectives lead the authors to conclude that teaching principals want to maintain a strong focus on the work they are able to do in the classrooms, despite the work intensification.

Role conflict is the main theme that has emerged from my research analysis on teaching principals. Most principals are teachers at heart and yet they spend very little time teaching (Nichols, 2010). The research included in this analysis clearly states that principals who receive adequate preparation and support with administrative tasks, will be better equipped to respond to instructional concerns in a variety of settings. As declining enrollments and budget cuts continue to effect schools in America, principals may begin to enter this dual role in greater numbers. As a result, programs that train, certify, and support aspiring administrators, will likely be held more accountable for the quality of the principals they are sending into the field. With expectations for principals at an all-time high, practitioners and researchers will also need to be more aware of how they are prioritizing their time. Principals who are required to teach, and those who emphasize instructional contact with the students, are being forced to find creative ways to share tasks that have traditionally been regarded as administrative.

Time Management

A secondary theme that emerged from the literature is that principals who are able to make the time to teach find this aspect of their jobs most rewarding. This is an important finding because it presents inspired teachers with the reassurance that they can still enjoy their work while taking on more responsibility as a

school leader. Principals who teach also have a better knowledge of the curriculum, better relationships with their students, teachers, and parents, and are more adept at shaping school culture. Principals have a difficult job, and balancing leadership and management duties is only going to get tougher. There is not enough time in the day for one person to provide a school with leadership and handle operations responsibilities. Often principals must respond to district responsibilities, staff issues, parent concerns, and students before they can begin to think about their key function as instructional leader. Principals who find ways of allocating responsibilities and distributing managerial tasks to other members of staff will be in a better position to focus on their work as instructional leaders. The future of the teaching principalship will depend on both the measures taken by practitioners, and the case that is being made for a research agenda that seeks to better understand and articulate the work of teaching principals.

McRobbie (1990) sought to assess and describe the characteristics and perceptions of teaching principals in rural America. The author uses a respondent driven model to contend that teaching principals are satisfied with their dual role and would recommend the position to others. Seventy teaching principals in grades K−12, who taught an average of two hours a day, said that the primary advantage of teaching was to get to know the students better (Grady, 1990). The principals in this study also said that despite the time constraints, major advantages of being a teaching principal were "credibility, camaraderie, maintaining teaching skills, awareness of classroom activities, rapport with parents, and enjoying the position" (p. 50). While there has been a great deal written about how principals can try to avoid administrator burnout (Brock & Grady, 2002; Chapko, 2001; Queen & Queen, 2005), there is little evidence that principals can transform their position from being a stressful one to one they actually enjoy by making time in their schedule to teach. This article provides principals (and prospective principals) with an opportunity to see how they can experience success and enjoy their job by continuing to do the work of teaching.

One of the most fascinating of the eight studies included in this analysis is Hargreaves & Shirley's (2008) article entitled *The Fourth Way of Change*. This article juxtaposes America's quick-fix approaches to educational reform (merit pay, wholesale emphasis on standardized testing, the charter school phenomenon, etc.) with more long-term approaches that have been taken outside of the country. The article also emphasizes that successful school systems globally have principals more actively involved in their school's instructional programs. For example, in Finland, principals share resources across schools and feel responsible for all the students in their town and city, not only the students in their own school (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). In Finnish schools, principals are perceived as part of a society of equals instead of as competitors or line managers. These radically different ways of thinking about the role of the principal are just the beginning. Finnish principals are also required to teach at least two hours a week and are often recruited from their own schools-the very settings in which they've developed their teaching craft. Add in the fact that it is illegal for a Finnish principal to be recruited from outside education and we have evidence that one of the most successful education systems in the world is standing behind their teaching principals in a way that differs radically from the traditional one.

One emerging program deserving more attention is the well-funded and research based School Administrator Manager Project. This project is helping principals who want to spend more time on instructional leadership. Principals in the study by Turnbull et al. (2010) were given very little in the way of resources other than a School Administration Manager (SAM). This SAM is typically an existing staff person who takes on new managerial tasks and meets with the principals daily to analyze how time is being used to shift non-instructional tasks to others. The program is also designed to provide the principal with monthly support from a Time Change Coach. This role is typically fulfilled by a retired school administrator who serves as a mentor for principals hoping to become more focused on instructional leadership than on managerial tasks.

This same program has found that principals (even those in the highest performing schools) spend up

to 75 percent of their time on management (Walker, 2010). The program, which has garnered a moderate amount of attention amongst administrators in nine U.S. states, helps give principals the time and skills to focus on instruction by helping them find creative ways of delegating time-consuming activities involved with being a building manager to other staff members. It also helps principals become better at distributing various leadership roles to key staff members. More recent data indicates that three years after participating in the SAM Project, Louisville principals were spending more than 70 percent of their time on instructional issues and student achievement (Walker, 2010).

These simple solutions to a seemingly complex problem of time management point less to the need for external funding and support, and more to principals rethinking how they approach their role as school leader. Many principals already have mentor-mentee relationships with more experienced administrators in their district or region. Many also are comfortable delegating some of their management related responsibilities to support staff. Few however are doing much to deal with their inability to re-focus on instruction because they are either too pressed, or too proud, to shift their energies back towards the classroom.

Principals who have successfully found ways to restructure their days, and who have developed creative approaches to delegating management tasks to others (due to programs like the SAM Project or simply their own initiative) should serve as examples for preservice administrators and researchers interested in more closely measuring the direct and indirect influences principals can have on student learning. Principals' direct and indirect approaches to promoting the instruction that takes place in their schools has a significant impact on students' experiences of education. By better understanding how principals think about the approaches they take, students learning outcomes and teacher efficacy can be enhanced.

Toward a Theory of Engaged Leadership

Administrators in American schools are being faced with difficult decisions due to the conflicting demands of the jobs. Principals are required to be experts at staff development, instruction, curriculum, assessment, and resource management among other things. With these conflicting demands come choices that principals have to make as to how they spend their time. Principals' inability to effectively choose the path to reform for their schools in this era of accountability have led to an increase in principal turnover rate (Fuller, 2012). There is also evidence that the increase in principal turnover has led to an increase in teacher turnover (Beteille et al., 2011), and that this turnover rate can have a negative impact on student achievement and other schooling outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2011).

While this data is most definitely discouraging news for prospective administrators and the work of educational leaders as a whole, there is evidence that some principals are entering the classrooms and teaching again. These principals are typically re-entering the classrooms in order to ease problems of overcrowding, lack of instructional staff, or the impacts of budget cuts. However, they are also finding that from this once familiar vantage point they are able to actively monitor curriculum, and have experienced increased recognition from both the faculty and students (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Solutions like this like this could serve as an example of what other schools could do nationwide. These creative approaches to school leadership are being well received by the students in these schools who feel more connected to administrators who are able to function in this dual role (KOB, 2011). Research in the United States however, has largely ignored studying this trend.

The findings of this research analysis suggest teaching principals will continue to be of interest because of financial concerns, but also because many of those in the profession and community will continue to advocate for administrators who are connected to the students (Duke, 1987). The outcomes of research that focuses on this trend may help principals prepare for increased accountability demands in this age

of data-driven assessment. With teachers, students, and parents all interested in principals who are more involved in the teaching and learning that takes place in this era of accountability, researchers could serve to empower practitioners by providing them with knowledge about the substantive issues facing principals making the leap back into the classroom. Case studies of teaching principals who incorporate the perspectives of principals, teachers, students, and parents, and that focus on the principals' motivation for teaching, could provide these practitioners with something concrete they can use to create more responsive models of leadership.

Future research must also highlight the importance of raising principals' awareness of the instructional leadership decisions they make during their day. While more traditional principals spend most of their time managing the ebb and flow of the day, there is evidence that some administrators are able to manage these tasks and still take the time to have structured interactions with kids on a regular basis (Damiani, 2012). Further, while some principals are able to talk about their role as instructional leader, and the role they play in coordinating the teaching and learning that takes place in their schools, my research has found that few principals can be found doing much instructional leadership on a regular basis. Even though principals today are supposed to spend more time focusing on teaching and learning than ever before, students and student learning continue to take a back seat to the work of adults in school.

While there is evidence that some principals acknowledge the value student driven approaches to school leadership have for empowering teachers and students, and are able to talk about some ways they promote quality instruction for kids based on the instructional leadership vernacular, there is limited evidence that principals actively use teacher or student voice or interact with students directly in an effort to address problems in their schools. New studies that focused specifically on this concept of principals' choice, or personal inclination, by examining how principals engage with their instructional program, might help principals recognize there are alternative and potentially more effective ways of spending their time in school.

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