Faculty perceptions of shared decision making and the principal's leadership behaviors in secondary schools in a large urban district

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The traditional roles of teachers and principals have changed and improved organizational teamwork is fostered by all members of the learning community assuming decision making roles. Toward this end, the purpose of this correlational study was to explore the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals in a large urban school district and their perceptions of the level of shared decision making practiced in their schools. Leadership behavior was operationalized by the responses to each of the five practices on the Leadership Practices Inventory [LPI] (Kouzes & Posner, 1997). These behaviors were (a) challenging the process, (b) inspiring a shared vision, (c) enabling others to act, (d) modeling the way, and (e) encouraging the heart. The level of shared decision making was measured by responses to the Shared Educational Decisions Survey- Revised (Ferrara, 1994) in the areas of (a) planning, (b) policy development, (c) curriculum and instruction, (d) student achievement, (e) pupil personnel services, (f) staff development, and (g) budget management. The population for the study was a sample selected from all secondary schools in a large public school system. The sample consisted of 646 participants from 26 schools.

The findings should inform the practice of school principals as they create empowering cultures in their schools. Principal preparation institutions must be charged with the task of developing programs that provide experiences which enhance potential leaders' skill to create learning organizations.

Members of the school community should work collaboratively in the educating of students. All decisions are interdependent. Teachers and principals must understand that their traditional roles have changed and improved organizational teamwork will be fostered by all members of the learning community assuming decision making roles. Toward this end, the purpose of this correlational study was to explore the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and their perceptions of the level of shared decision making practiced in their schools. This study provides insight into principal behaviors which nurture participation. The results of the study add to the body of knowledge of educational leadership and have implications for both practicing principals and principal preparation programs. By communicating the best possible leadership practices for principals in implementing shared decision making, it will better equip present and future principals with the tools to create a school culture emphasizing shared decision making.

A Discussion of the Related Literature

Improving education is one of the foremost concerns in America. Parents blame educators, and in turn, educators blame parents for the failure of schools to address the needs of students. Business leaders are dissatisfied because they must establish expensive training programs to teach high school graduates basic literacy skills, which are prerequisites to learning job-specific skills. The demand for improved educational productivity has marked the foundation of the educational reform and restructuring movement of the past two decades. Fullan and Miles (1992) stated that “modern societies are facing terrible problems, and education reform is seen as a major source of hope for solving them” (p. 752). Supporters of reform movements have proposed that public schools’ structures and processes be changed. Timar and Kirp (1989) summarized the reform objectives as seeking legislation to facilitate excellence in education and to provide support for local control of the process.
Many reformers called for fundamental changes in our society’s institutions, the organization and governance of our schools, the roles adults play in our schools, and the practices used to educate our students. Some suggested that our education system was in need of a complete transformation (Chubb, 1988; Conley, 1991; Murphy, 1991; Sarason, 1990; Schlechty, 1990; Sizer, 1984). McCune (1989) added that successful restructuring of schools requires an in-depth understanding of organizations and the ways they must transform to meet the needs of society. Restructuring efforts were characterized by two features—a focus on student-performance outcomes and long-term systemic reorganization (David, 1991).

**Participatory Leadership**

Meaningful change in an organization’s culture is facilitated through the involvement of the organization’s members in planning and implementing the desired change. Block (1993) proposed that organizations must embrace democratic participative structures to effect cultural change. These structures demand a new vision of leadership, in which the decisional ownership and accountability is distributed among all members of the organization.

Increased involvement of employees and other stakeholders in organizational decision making is a practice that has gained much popularity over the past two decades. Global competition in business and industry and the influence of Japanese and European management techniques has intensified the participatory leadership movement in corporate America (Gilberg, 1988; Ouchi, 1981). Shedd and Bacharach (1991) outlined the rationales of participatory leadership that have been proposed by many of its advocates. These rationales are that employee involvement (a) improves job satisfaction, (b) provides higher levels of employee morale and motivation, (c) contributes to greater commitment to organizational goals, and (d) develops a collaborative spirit among all members of the organization.

In an examination of employees participating in quality circles, Rafaeli (1985) reported that employees involved in participatory management have a sense of influence and greater interaction with other employees. Patchen (1970) reported that increased participation in organizational decision making resulted in improved job satisfaction and achievement, and greater organizational commitment among more employees. Manz and Sims (1987), in a study of 276 workers in a mid-size manufacturing firm, observed positive correlation between leader behavior (which encouraged participation) and worker productivity and satisfaction. According to Manz and Sims, the ultimate role of leaders is to “lead others to lead themselves” (p. 119).

It could be argued that in order to meet the challenges of leading today’s schools, leaders must rely more on applying elements from research of cultural, transformational, and participatory leadership. To this end, Sergiovanni (1994a) proposed that the traditional view of schools as formal organizations is a constraint on school improvement. Instead he recommended that schools be perceived as communities, in order that meaningful personal relationships and shared values become the foundation for school reform. These communities can be defined as:

a collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bined to a set of shared ideas and ideals. The bonding and binding is tight enough to transform them from a collection of “I’s” into a collection of “we”, (p. vi)

In becoming purposeful communities, schools provide the structure necessary to develop a culture of empowerment, collegiality, and transformation. The leadership of the school community does not rely on “power over” others but on “power through” others to accomplish shared visions and goals (p. xix).

Based on both qualitative and quantitative empirical research, Kouzes and Posner (1995) identified five effective leadership practices that elicit peak performance from organizations. The five practices identified are “challenging the process,” “inspiring a shared vision,” “enabling others to act,” “modeling the way,” and “encouraging the heart” (p. 18). Each of these practices are embedded within the relationships between leaders and followers.

The first practice, challenging the process, encourages the leader to be a risktaker, by identifying ineffective policies and procedures and experimenting with new and improved ones. Success in this practice is predicated upon the leader’s ability to appropriately match the capabilities of an organization’s human capital with the demands of the tasks.

One of the most difficult practices, inspiring a shared vision (the image of the future that provides focus for all activities), requires the leader to communicate this vision in such a way as to motivate the followers to work toward its achievement. To accomplish this, successful leaders must utilize charismatic leadership strategies and communication to sell the vision to the entire organization. Kouzes and Posner (1995) asserted that although the vision was cooperatively developed with all stakeholders, the leader must articulate it and provide focus. Critical to building a collaborative culture, the third practice, enabling others to act, engenders the development of cooperative goals through empowerment and trust building. Organizational structures should be constructed to encourage group action, which requires the sharing of information, resources, and ideas. These structures provide opportunities for members of the organization to embrace positive interdependence and collegiality (Covey, 1989). Empowering people to work collaboratively is dependent upon leaders:

Making certain that people have the skills and knowledge needed to make good judgments, keeping people informed, developing relationships
among the players, involving people in important decisions, and acknowledging and giving credit for people’s contributions. (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 162)

By sharing power the leader creates a feeling of influence and ownership in organizational success. Leaders may create a sense of covenant by cultivating followers’ capacities to be successful. This sense of covenant increases the followers’ commitment to organizational goals and loyalty to the leader (Sergiovanni, 1994b).

The fourth practice, modeling the way, builds upon Schein’s (1992) strategies for leaders engaging in cultural change. As Schein stated, leaders must constantly endeavor to model desired behaviors through their actions. Leaders must be the “heroes” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982) of the organization by modeling a commitment to visionary goals and exemplary actions. This practice can best be described by the statement, “Titles are granted but it’s your behavior that wins you respect” (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 12).

Kouzes and Posner’s (1995) fifth practice, encouraging the heart, highlights the importance of leaders’ individual and group contributions to the organization’s accomplishments. Encouragement through the celebration of successes, big and small, motivates people to continue to take risks and remain committed to the organization’s goals. Such genuine care provides people with the spirit to overcome insurmountable obstacles.

Through their research, Kouzes and Posner (1995) identified human relations skills as the means by which leaders promote success within organizations. On the other hand, Block (1993) supported the use of democratic structures to promote commitment and stewardship to the organization. To create lasting change, there must be a change in governance through a redistribution of power and control.

The Principal and Shared Decision Making

A review of the literature on school reform and restructuring reveals that the school principal is the key player in all successful reforms. In the first wave of reform efforts, A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983) specifically recommended strong leadership as a means for school improvement. Likewise, second-wave reforms called for restructuring, which reflected a stronger commitment to school-based management. The effective schools movement also recognized the importance of quality leadership by consistently identifying strong instructional leadership as instrumental in creating a positive school climate (Purkey & Smith, 1985).

Studies have revealed that successful schools have principals who exhibit common attributes: (a) a clear sense of mission, (b) well-defined goals, (c) self-confidence, (d) a commitment to high standards, (e) a participating leader, and (f) active involvement in the change process (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; DeBevoie, 1984; McCurdy, 1983). Positive leadership has been the catalyst for school improvement. Mortimore and Sammons (1991) asserted that “the variation between [successful and less successful] schools can be accounted for by differences in school policies within the control of the principal and teachers” (p. 4).

The principal plays a significant role in creating an effective school. In discussing the principal’s role in restructuring schools, Murphy (1994) stated that the principal can be characterized as delegating responsibilities, creating collaborative decision-making climates based on shared vision, providing information and resources, and developing teachers.

The importance of the role of the principal as change agent and instructional leader consistently appears in the research on change and effective schools. Fullan (1991) stated that “all major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change” (p. 76). Other studies focusing on shared decision making and restructuring identified the school principal as the key player in all such efforts (David, 1989; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Rude, 1993; Wohlstetter, 1995). Therefore, it is vitally important to explore the role of the principal in shared decision making.

The changing role of the principal has been the subject of a variety of studies undertaken by professional organizations and boards. The National Association of Elementary School Principals 1988 study reported that principals perceived numerous trends in their way of work, including:

1. enhanced decision-making authority given to schools,
2. greater principal accountability for school decisions,
3. increased need for participation of school staff in decision making, and
4. enhanced need to function as both school manager and instructional leader (Doud, 1989).

These trends are consistent with the second wave of educational reforms and restructuring, which calls for teacher empowerment through a participatory style of leadership (Blase & Blase, 2001; Bredeson, 1989).
One variable affecting the implementation of shared decision making or teacher empowerment is the concept of willingness—the principal’s willingness to empower and the teacher’s willingness to participate. In a study of empowered schools, Short, Greer and Melvin (1994) reported that teacher participation in decision making only occurs in schools where principals desire to have teacher participation. From their study of teachers in 117 schools, Wall and Rinehart (1998) also suggested that a principal’s willingness to empower teachers is contingent upon the principal’s training to facilitate participatory decision making.

The principal also affects teacher willingness to participate. Smylie’s (1992) study of teachers in a Midwestern metropolitan school district revealed that the principal-teacher relationship is a strong predictor of successful teacher participation in decision making. Teachers are more willing to participate in decision making when they have an open relationships with their principal. They are less willing to participate if their relationship is perceived as closed and controlling. Blase (1987) supported the importance of relationships by stating that effective principals nurtured participation through the development of trusting and respectful relationships with teachers.

By providing the support necessary for empowerment, the principal enlists the teachers’ willingness to participate. In their study of a high school implementing shared decision making, Johnson and Pajares (1996) described support as exhibited through the active encouragement of staff members to participate, providing the necessary resources and training, and playing the role of cheerleader, while not obstructing the democratic process. Findings reported by Wohlstetter and Briggs (1994) from a study of 25 elementary and middle schools in 11 districts in the United States, Canada, and Australia illustrate the critical resources principals provide teachers in the implementation of shared decision making. These resources are power, information, skills training, and recognition.

The research literature exploring empowering principal behaviors is scant. One such case study of an elementary principal who practiced teacher empowerment was reported by Reitzug (1994). In the study, 41 teachers were interviewed and numerous observations were conducted over a three-month period. Through categorization of the data, three types of empowering behaviors were identified: (a) support-creating a supportive environment; (b) facilitation-developing the ability for the staff to perform self-critiquing of the school; and (c) possibility-providing the resources to bring action to their critique. Reitzug stated that the empowering principal moves from directing subordinates on how to perform a task to facilitating self-examination of practices. The empowering principal must practice “problematizing” (p. 304) identifying practices that must be more closely critiqued through the framing of the proper questions.

In Kowalski’s (1994) survey of principals in Indiana and Minnesota, it was reported that 10 percent of responding principals agreed that school-based management encourages teachers to take additional responsibilities. Furthermore, 80 percent felt that school improvement was dependent upon teachers’ abilities to become participants in the decision-making process. According to Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1992), principals have reservations about teacher involvement in decision making. However, the researchers did foresee increased potential for greater motivation, initiative, and more effective solutions to problems.

Principals of schools in which shared decision making is successful must understand consensus building and create collaborative environments, which encourage teachers and parents to experiment with innovation (Flinspach & Ryan, 1994). The shared decision-making process is dependent upon the principal’s experiences, skills, and abilities to promote participatory decision making. Principals must “move the scope of authority from participation to empowerment”; this operationalizes shared decision making into a genuine shared governance culture (Blase, Blase, Anderson, & Dungan, 1995, p. 151). “The successful leader, then, is one who builds-up the leadership of others and who strives to become a leader of leaders” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 27). Effective principals foster leadership among followers and create structures through which they may practice leadership.

Research Questions

The study was guided by seven research questions.

1. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in the area of planning as perceived by teachers?

2. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in policy development as perceived by teachers?

3. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in curriculum and instruction as perceived by teachers?

4. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in the area of student achievement as perceived by teachers?

5. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in pupil personnel services as perceived by teachers?
6. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in the area of staff development as perceived by teachers?

7. Is there a relationship between the leadership behaviors of secondary school principals and the level of shared decision making in the area of budget management as perceived by teachers?

Procedures

The population for the study was a sample selected from all secondary schools (grades 6-12 in any configuration excluding alternative schools) in a large urban public school system serving. The school system encompasses 154 schools, serving 126,000 students of which 60,000 are in secondary schools. The student populace is characterized as 54% white, non-minority and 46% minority with the most represented minority group being African American (40.0%).

Schools with principals who had served in their schools two or more years were selected for the study. The sample consisted of 646 participants from 26 schools. These respondents represented a 35% rate of return from the 1841 teachers surveyed and 22% of the total secondary teachers in the school system. Table 1 provides a summary of the sample data.

Each participant was requested to complete two survey instruments (Kouzes and Posner’s (1997) Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) that measures leadership behaviors; and Ferrara’s(1994) Shared Educational Decisions Survey-Revised (SEDS-R) which is designed to measure the level of shared decision making in schools. Each of these instruments identified teacher perceptions of the measured variables. All teachers’ responses remained anonymous, but were coded by school. Schools are not identified by name in the report of results. Data is reported in aggregate form to protect the rights of the participants.

A variety of statistical tools were employed in the analysis of data. These statistical tests included Pearson product-moment correlations, multiple regression, and both one sample and independent sample t-tests. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze the demographic data reported on the SEDS-R. Fink(1995) operationally defines the strength of the correlations as (a) 0 to .25 -“little to no relationship”, (b) .26 to .50 -“fair degree of relationship”, (c) .51 to .75 -“moderate to good relationship”, and (d) over .75 “very good to excellent relationship”(p.36). All hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance.

Discussion of Findings

Pearson product-moment correlations were generated for each of the questions. A total of 34 significant relationships between the leadership behaviors of the principal and the level of shared decision making were identified. The significant correlations ranged between .096 and .191. These weak correlations demonstrate that the principals’ leadership practices only explained between one percent and four percent of the variance in the level of shared decision making. Therefore, there was very little relationship between the leadership behaviors of the principal and the level of shared decision making in schools. Table 2 presents a summary of the findings for the variables for the research question.

The strongest relationship was between the leadership practice of challenging the process and the level of shared decision making in the area of policy development. This means that four percent of the variation in the level of shared decision making for policy development is explained by the principal demonstrating the practice of challenging the process. In other words, the more risk taking behavior exhibited by the principal the greater the teachers’ perceived their input into decisions in the area of policy development. However, it must be noted that this relationship was very weak and the results must be cautiously interpreted.

The weak relationships between the principals' leadership behaviors and the level of shared decision making are supported by Lightfoot’s (1983) study of six effective high schools. In her study, The Good High School (1983). Lightfoot reported the existence of collaborative decision making in each of the six schools. However, the schools’ principals exhibited a variety of leadership styles from authoritarian to participatory.

A possible explanation of the weak relationships discovered for each of the seven research questions may relate to the construct of the principals’ leadership behaviors used in the study. The five leadership practices may not have appropriate definitions of leadership behaviors which influenced the teachers’ perceptions of shared decision making in their schools. Nevertheless, the practices may impact other dimensions of the school culture.

School restructuring efforts have also been studied through the lens of transformational leadership. In their study, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Fernandez (1994) defined transformational leadership behaviors as “identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, providing individualized support, intellectual stimulation, providing an appropriate model, high performance expectations, and contingent reward[s]” (p. 81). Closely related to Kouzes and Posner’s (1997) leadership practices, only two of those transformational behaviors, vision and developing group goals, were shown to be significantly related to teachers’ commitment to change and restructuring. Just as in the present study, these correlations (r=.26 and r=.20) were also very weak.
Another leadership dimension of shared decision making not measured in the present study was the nature of the relationships between principals and teachers. Smylie (1992) found that teachers appeared to be more involved in school decision making if their relationship with the school principal was perceived to be “open, collaborative, facilitative, and supportive” and less involved if their relationships were seen as “closed, exclusionary, and controlling” (p. 63). Teacher empowerment requires the principal to develop a climate of trust and respect (Blase & Blase, 2001; Licata & Teddie, 1990; Murphy, 1994; Short & Greer, 2002; Wall & Rinehart, 1998). Identifying the correlations between such teacher-principal relationships and shared decision making may further inform the practice of school leadership.

Restructured schools require principals who are skilled in creating networks of relationships among members of the learning community. This helps to reduce the isolation of teachers and promote collaborative decision making (Murphy, 1994). Such networks are a prerequisite for professional cultures which embody shared decision making.

Other variables impacting shared decision making in schools relate to the development of support structures. Two facets of these structures are communication and staff development. The principal must communicate the data necessary for stakeholders to make informed decisions. Oftentimes the principal is perceived as a gatekeeper or filter for information. To be empowered, stakeholders must be knowledgeable of all aspects of an impending decision. Similarly, teachers must be trained in the use of data for problem solving. Successful shared decision making processes also require teachers to be trained in leadership skills which facilitate effective work groups. None of these supporting behaviors of the principal were examined in the present study.

From a more speculative perspective, individual leadership behaviors of school principals may have less influence on the decision making culture than the organizational structure and culture of the schools and school district. The policies and practices of a community or organization embody the shared values and meanings of its members (Sergiovanni, 1994a). Since the study was conducted in a single large district, the norms, values, and policies of the school district may be a prevailing factor in the decision making culture of the schools.

The shared values of an organization’s members are the foundation upon which the policies and practices are built (Sergiovanni, 1994a). Consequently, since each of the leaders in the present study were trained and developed within the same organization, their behaviors may reflect the same values and norms. As Ogawa and Bossert (1995) stated, “leadership flows through the networks of roles that compose organizations” (p. 225).

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study provide implications for the leadership of school principals as they implement shared decision making in their schools. Consequently, the results of this study have direct implications for the preparation of future school leaders. Principal preparation institutions must be charged with the task of developing programs that provide experiences which enhance potential leaders’ skill to create learning organizations. Since the findings of this study showed that the specific leadership practices measured explained very little of the variance in the levels of shared decision making, a combination of other factors must impact shared decision making in schools. One such potential factor is the level of training of both principals and teachers in the area of shared decision making. According to Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1992), although principals support shared decision making, the principals’ experiences and training may limit the impact of this reform effort. Therefore, it is imperative that principals receive extensive training in facilitating shared decision making. Furthermore, in order to encourage their involvement, teachers must also be trained in this area.

Shared decision making training topics may include team building, group processes, leading effective work groups, and meeting facilitation. Additionally, principals and teachers should be provided opportunities to apply various decision making models. It is also imperative that all participants are allowed experiences which enable them to be productive team members and not just leaders.

Tomorrow’s principals must create a culture which embraces collaboration and shared governance. Most importantly, twenty-first century school leaders must apply these insights to generate principle-centered practice that embraces the complex strategies necessary to nurture learning organizations.

**Implications for Further Research**

This study has added to the broad body of knowledge relating to the leadership roles for principals in implementing shared decision making. Educational leaders must continue to explore the concept of shared decision making. New questions about the practices of empowering, transformational principals need to be asked, and research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to answer them. As a result of the insights from this study the following additional lines of inquiry are proposed.

1. Replicate the present study in a larger number of schools and in school districts of various sizes. This might account for any cultural factors that may exist in any one district and improve the generalizability of the results.
2. Replicate the present study in schools which are identified as having high levels of shared decision making. The application of the case study method utilizing qualitative tools may increase the richness of the data.

3. Investigate the relationship between the principal’s leadership behaviors and shared decision making using an alternative construct to define leadership behavior and shared decision making. This may identify stronger relationships between these variables.

4. Investigate the components of principal training programs which relate to the skills required to successfully lead shared decision making in schools.

5. Investigate the relationship between shared decision making in schools and the level of student achievement.

Each of these areas of investigation have the potential to create a greater understanding of the nature of school cultures. From these insights, teachers and principals can improve educational experiences for all students.

Conclusion

As we move into the next decade, our schools will evolve into learning organizations. These learning organizations will be communities in which people are given the opportunity to create the results they really desire by assisting each other in the attainment of mutual purposes, while embracing the concept of learning from one another (Senge, 1990). In other words, twenty-first century schools will develop the ability to cultivate synergistic creativity through learning networks. As schools move toward becoming learning organizations they will foster an environment which is capacity building and rich in experimentation and risk-taking.

Instructional leadership will be necessary but not sufficient to lead schools into the next century (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). Twenty-first century school leaders must embrace the concept of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership empowers followers and renews their commitment to the organization’s vision. Re-engineering the learning organization must be a vision shared by all members of the school community and led by the principal.

References


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