

It's What Principals Do: Influencing Teachers to Support Students

Marsha Sowell

Texas A&M University – Kingsville



Abstract

Recognized as the leader of the school, the middle school principal is expected to continually facilitate student success and school improvement. One such way principals can lead school improvement is through building supportive, trusting relationships with teachers. This qualitative case study explored the ways in which five middle school principals perceived they built trusting teacher-principal relationships to influence staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions for teachers in an effort to support student success. The principals' insights led to the identification of six themes relating to the middle school principals' role in influencing student success through increasing teachers' motivation, commitment, and working conditions. The themes include: prioritizing classroom visits, helping teachers use data, acknowledging teachers' work, providing for teacher's professional improvement, working collaboratively with teachers, and distributing leadership to teachers.

Keywords: middle school, principal, teacher support, student success

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As the political context changes in America and school reform is apparent, it is important to prepare educational leaders to remain focused on their task. Regardless of the political landscape, the role of the middle school principal remains the same. As Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) summarize, "The main task of leaders is to constantly monitor the status of the internal conditions in the school that influence student learning and improve the status of those conditions that are most in need of improvement and most likely to improve student learning" (p. 256). Because teaching has been identified as the number one influence on student academic achievement (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006), supporting the learning needs of staff will translate into effective practices in the classroom, in turn creating positive learning environments for students. The primary focus of this study was to explore the ways in which middle school principals perceive they influence teachers in an effort to support student success.

Framework of the Study

The Association for Middle Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association) (NMSA, 2010) identified four attributes that influence student success in the middle school. These attributes describe successful middle schools as being developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (NMSA, 2010). Principals can use the attributes in this model to focus their work in school improvement. The attributes of the model warrant a short description:

Developmentally responsive. All school decisions are based on a foundation of the distinctive nature of young adolescents (NMSA, 2010).

Challenging. Academic rigor ensures “that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations” (NMSA, 2010, p. 13).

Empowering. Students are taught “the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge” (NMSA, 2010, p. 13).

Equitable. Schools provide challenging and appropriate learning opportunities in “an inviting, supportive, and safe place” where “human relationships are paramount” (NMSA, 2010, p. 33).

Any change or improvement within the school system begins with the leadership at the campus level (ten Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, Slegers, 2012); leadership that resides primarily in the role of the principal. Principals create effective educational environments, inclusive of the attributes of successful middle schools mentioned above, by influencing the conditions within the school for effective teaching and learning, and by building capacity for professional learning and change (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Leis & Rimm-Kaufman (2016) explain that this influence on school reform is created through building trusting teacher-principal relationships. These trusting relationships allow principals to “improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 3).

It is within this framework of the middle school model and the influence of the principal that this study sought to explore the ways in which middle school principals perceive they build trusting teacher-principal relationships to influence staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions for teachers in an effort to support student success.

Methodology

Research Design

The intention of this study was to provide insights into the middle school principalship. It is important to understand the decisions and actions of the middle school principal in terms of the principal's point of view, thus situating this research within the qualitative design. Qualitative research strives to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3). Utilizing a qualitative methodology, this study sought to interpret and describe principals' actions in a way that would benefit other school leaders who are facing similar challenges.

Data Collection

Data included interviews, observations, and document collection from five middle school principals currently serving in Texas. The participants were purposively selected based on typical sampling and maximum variation in their work settings.

Interviews. Each principal participated in one semi-structured interview with questions used as a guide to focus the interview but remaining open and flexible in wording and timing (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Principals were encouraged to explain their beliefs and experiences in detail and this led to greater understanding of the principals' perceptions.

Seidman (1998) suggests a three interview process, warning that a single meeting with a participant causes a researcher to "tread on thin contextual ice" (p. 11). Although this study utilized one interview, observations that included clarifying conversations strengthened the “contextual ice.”

Observations. To gain more understanding of the principal's campus culture and insight into his/her daily activities, each participant was observed on his/her campus three times.

Merriam (2009) explained, "As an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding the contexts" (p. 119). Through observations, actions the principal may not acknowledge because they are routine were noted and discussed for a more thorough understanding of the action.

Documents. Participants provided documents that gave detail to the actions they took in supporting student success. Documents provided stable reflections of the leadership principals provided on campus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis, according to Glanz (2003), "is the process of bringing structure and meaning to the mass of data collected" (p. 186). Within qualitative research, data collection and analysis is simultaneous. As data was collected from interviews, observations, and documents, the constant comparison method was used to informally analyze data and identify emerging categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Through reflection and informal analysis, the data revealed areas on which to focus continued data collection, strengthening this study.

By utilizing data from various participants, interviews, observations, and documents, triangulation was achieved. Erlandson et al. (1993) explain that triangulation helps ensure the themes are generally supported and "enhances the meaning through multiple sources and provides for thick description of relevant information" (p. 115). Triangulation of the data helped ensure the categories used to answer the research questions were supported by multiple sources.

Context of the Study

While principals across the country have a unique story that could add to this dialogue, due to purposeful and convenience sampling, all five participants in this study served within the same region of Texas. Each middle school was in a different town in Texas, but the towns were

within a twenty-mile radius of each other. Each school was the only middle school within their respective school district and all the schools met state accountability standards in the previous year. Ms. Wills served as the principal of North Middle School, educating 475 students, for four years. Hosting 375 students, Ms. Norris served as the principal of East Middle School for four years. For the past four and a half years, Mr. Contreras acted as the principal of South Middle School, with 950 students. Mr. Wilson, the principal of West Middle School, served 250 students, for three years. Mr. Baker was the principal at Central Middle School, with a population of 725 students, for eight years. All principals, schools, and school districts were given pseudonyms.

Results

Recognized as the leader of the school, the principal is expected to continually facilitate student success and school improvement. This expectation is well warranted, as Bush (2009), Hallinger and Murphy (2013), and others (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016; Mackey, Pitcher, & Decman, 2006; Wilhelm, 2010) continually verify a school's improvement shows a positive correlation to the quality of leadership of principals and teachers. Specifically, at the middle school level, Bickmore (2016) concluded, "the principal was a key factor in moving the school to implement MG [middle grades] practices and organizational structure" (p. 2).

One such way principals can lead school improvement is through building supportive, trusting relationships with teachers (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016). Supporting teachers, Hallinger and Heck (2010) argue, helps create conditions within the school for effective teaching and learning. Mr. Wilson explained the importance of making sure teachers knew the principal supported them: "They [the teachers] will work for you. If they know that you are really on their

side. They will, they'll work". Mr. Baker theorized, "The role of the principal, in my mind, is to help and support and answer questions."

The principals' insights led to the identification of six themes relating to the middle school principals' role influencing teachers' motivation, commitment, and working conditions to influence student success. The themes include: prioritizing classroom visits, helping teachers use data, acknowledging teachers' work, providing for teacher's professional improvement, working collaboratively with teachers, and distributing leadership to teachers.

Prioritizing Classroom Visits

Principals in this study supported their teachers through prioritizing classroom visits. Like Hallinger and Murphy (2013), these principals recognized visiting classrooms allowed them to observe teaching and learning to provide effective feedback to teachers.

The staff handbook prepared by Ms. Norris explained to teachers that campus and district administrators "will be in classrooms as much as possible in order to ensure visibility with our students and to support you as well." Mrs. Norris explained that classroom visits were used on her campus to observe the teaching and learning as well as to be visible in the school.

Ms. Wills sighed, "I need to be in classrooms more. I think I can never be in classrooms enough." She viewed class visits as "just a quick check with what's going on in the classroom. Checking for bell-to-bell, checking for appropriate assessments, everything based on TEKS [the state curriculum] and individualized for the kids." When we debriefed after one observation noting the teacher seemed nervous, Ms. Wills told us this teacher gets nervous when she is observed and pulls out every 'teacher trick'. Ms. Wills explained that this behavior does not bother her because if a teacher puts on a show, it means they can do it. If they do it enough, it becomes a habit.

The principals used classroom visits to support teachers' teaching and to be visible and accessible on campus.

Helping Teachers Use Data

Consistent with the findings of Williams et al. (2010), the principals in this study believed it was important to help teachers use assessment data to drive academic decisions. During a faculty meeting, Mr. Wilson reviewed student assessment data with a math teacher. Referring to a poster with the students divided into quintiles, Mr. Wilson highlighted that at a 70% passing standard, 55% of students failed the assessment and this was "unacceptable." He proceeded to discuss interventions for these students with the math teacher.

During a faculty meeting, Ms. Norris provided her staff with forms to divide students into quintiles based on academic achievement. Ms. Norris had already been filled in the information for the first benchmark, but she asked her teachers to look at the data to fill in the form with the second benchmark scores. She later explained this as a way to encourage her teachers to look at student assessment data.

Student assessments were used as formative measures to help guide the education of the students. Principals frequently helped teachers use assessment data to identify areas on which to focus academic interventions for students.

Acknowledging Teachers' Work

The principals expressed support for their teachers by acknowledging the teachers were professionals and by praising their work. These friendly acts of kindness help build trusting teacher-principal relationships (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016). Mr. Wilson explained, "I consider my staff professionals. And because of that, I try to let them be professionals." A teacher at Central Middle School claimed Mr. Baker was the best principal because he

"encourages us but leaves us alone to do our job. . . . He just expects us to do our job; he doesn't micromanage."

Mr. Contreras frequently praised various teachers on his campus. In conversation, he consistently made comments such as "She was amazing" and that he believed he was very lucky and blessed because "Every teacher here works for a purpose." While visiting classes, Ms. Wills walked by a teacher's desk and left a note that said "Doing a *great* job! Thank you!" The principals thought supporting teachers by acknowledging professionalism and accomplishments of their teachers was an important aspect of the principals' leadership role.

Providing for Teachers' Professional Improvement

The principals supported their teachers by providing opportunities for teachers to improve their practice. Improvement of instructional practices, it is believed, will increase student achievement (McCann, Jones, & Aronoff, 2010). Opportunities to improve instructional practice included professional development, resources, and sheltered time for collaboration and planning.

Ms. Wills explained the teacher mentoring program used at North Independent School District to support new teachers. The principal teamed each first and second year teacher up with a veteran teacher in the same content area, but who had a different conference time. This allowed the veteran teacher to observe the new teacher and the new teacher to observe the veteran teacher. Novice teachers also did one 15-minute walkthrough of another class each week.

The principals in both North Middle School and South Middle School adapted their master schedules to include collaboration time for teachers. Mr. Contreras established that during this time "we look at data . . . we also use it for instructional strategies." These claims were substantiated through observations. During collaboration time, some teachers learned high-yield

strategies by participating in the strategies as professional development. At the same time, ELA teachers reviewed data from a recent benchmark, noting while the scores were not good, they had identified strong and weak skills and were directing their lessons to address these skills. In another room, science teachers reviewed printed PowerPoints, a foldable, and multiple STAAR materials to identify academic vocabulary for review.

The principals provided professional development opportunities, resources, and time to help their teachers improve their teaching practices. Improving the teachers' teaching practices is believed to improve the academic achievement of students.

Working Collaboratively with Teachers

The principals supported their teachers by working collaboratively with their staff. Wilhelm (2010) contrasts the effectiveness of principals who work along-side their staff and those who do not. He asserts that when principals do not collaborate with teachers, "their absence proclaims the negligible degree to which the strategies or practices will actually be implemented, monitored, and supported" (p. 23). Mr. Baker emphasized the importance of working together collaboratively as he compared his preferred leadership style to the Olympic sport of rowing. He described:

We use our oars to row in the same direction at the same time. . . . We all need to row in the same direction. I do not consider my position any more important than that of people in food service, transportation, custodial, or any other position. Because every position is important to getting where we need to be, and where we need to be is student success.

Ms. Norris and Ms. Wills both said they did not ask their teachers to do anything they were not willing to do themselves. Ms. Wills emphasized, "I think they appreciate that. I can get my pencil out and get down and dirty just like they are expected to do with data. So we do that in

PLCs [Professional Learning Communities]; we do it as a whole faculty.” This claim was substantiated as Ms. Wills utilized her department head and grade-level head meeting to work with her teachers to review semester benchmark and intervention data.

Instead of dictating directions to their staff, these principals supported their teachers by working collaboratively to determine the best course of action for all those involved. Their collaborative actions demonstrated their support of the teachers' role as well as their commitment to the strategies and practices implemented.

Distributing Leadership to Teachers

The principals supported their teachers by distributing leadership to the teachers. Like Fullan (2014) and Leis and Rimm-Kaufman (2016), Mr. Contreras believed distributing leadership built capacity and commitment in teachers. During an observation of the ambassador program at South Middle School, a teacher exemplified this idea. She affirmed:

One of the things that I love about working at South Middle School is that the principal and central administration support us. They open the door to try new things and run with them. I'm not a color-in-the-lines person and I've been allowed to grow [programs]. They support us all the way up. We aren't afraid to try new things - and sometimes they don't work. That's okay, we go on.

Throughout this observation, I watched this teacher manage the ambassador program in which eighth grade students taught character lessons to sixth grade students. The teacher managed the curriculum, students, and classroom organization while Mr. Contreras acted as a mentor in another part of the building. He had distributed leadership to her and allowed her to grow this program. He told me the program became so popular that some of the students who applied were not accepted as leaders, people criticized him for not knowing the criteria for being selected as a

leader in the program. He said, "I want to be sure I know about it, but I'm letting her [the teacher] be a leader in that area. That is totally teacher driven."

Mr. Baker distributed leadership by getting other people to lead staff development activities. He told me he had the technology facilitator, the department heads, the diagnostician, the nurse, the librarian, the assistant principals, the custodians, and the school resource officer all lead staff development activities.

Similarly, Mr. Wilson distributed leadership on his campus by having teachers lead organizations such as University Interscholastic League, Student Council, and the National Junior Honor Society. He said, "[Teachers] will come and ask 'Can we do this?' Yeah. Other than the fact that I know about it, they are totally in charge of it. . . I give them a lot of responsibility."

The principals believed that by distributing leadership to their teachers, they were also supporting the teachers' capacity to continue to grow as professionals.

Supporting the teachers in multiple ways was important to the principals. They supported their teachers by prioritizing classroom visits, helping teachers use data, acknowledging teachers' work, providing opportunities for teachers' professional improvement, working collaboratively with teachers, and distributing leadership to teachers.

Discussion

As early as 1895, educators have been concerned with discovering the best way to facilitate young adolescents' success (Alexander, 1987; Lounsbury, 2009). Early middle school advocates such as Alexander (1963) and Eichhorn (1968) espouse the need for educational experiences that are developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents. The Association for Middle Level Education continues to advocate for developmentally responsive middle schools that are challenging, empowering, and equitable for students (NMSA, 2010).

Leithwood et al. (2010) argue that these school cultures "are carefully created and constructed by the school leader" (p. 261). The school leaders in this study recognized that carefully constructed learning environments focusing on students' needs must support teachers in facilitating student success.

Student success in middle schools is achieved when the school is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (NMSA, 2010). These principals prioritized classroom visits to ensure students were being provided a developmentally responsive and challenging curriculum. Through the use of observational data collected in classroom visits and data from student assessments, principals helped teachers make academic decisions to improve instruction (Williams et al., 2010). Principals also supported the teachers by providing relevant, targeted professional development opportunities. Targeted professional development for teachers creates an equitable and empowering school environment, supporting the teachers in improving instructional practices in the classroom. The improvement of instructional practices increases student success (McCann et al., 2010).

Improvement in teaching and learning is highly influenced by the principals' creation of a culture of trust and support for teachers including "staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions" (Leithwood et al., 2006). In this study, the principals recognized this responsibility and actively worked to create these cultures of trust and support. The principals built relational trust, increasing teachers' motivation, by acknowledging their professional work and by distributing leadership to the teachers. These actions help teachers feel valued and supported by the administrators, thus creating a culture of support. By working with teachers, the principals in this study demonstrated a commitment to the school and to the teachers. As Mackey et al. (2006) explain, these actions demonstrate the leader's values and goals, thus setting the expectations of

the school culture. Finally, through class visits and the monitoring of students in the school, principals not only gathered observational data on teaching and learning, but also gathered information on the working conditions of the teachers. This data was then used to identify and meet needs of teachers, influencing the overall working conditions of the teachers.

Conclusions and Implications

The role of the principal is constantly adapting to meet the expectations of a constantly changing world. One thing that has not changed, however, is the principals' need to know how to focus their work to make the most impact on student success in schools (Fullan, 2014). One such way middle school principals can focus their work to impact student success is through the support of their teachers.

Because teaching has been identified as the number one influence on student academic success (Leithwood et al., 2006), supporting teachers will translate into effective classroom practices, in turn creating positive learning environments for students. In the middle school, a positive learning environment is identified as one that is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (NMSA, 2010). Through their leadership, principals support teachers in creating these environments of student success. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways middle school principals perceive the influence they have over staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions for teachers and how it influences student success.

Six activities are identified as actions middle school principals can take to facilitate student success by supporting teachers. Current and aspiring principals and university preparation programs can utilize this research to prepare principals to create programs of teacher support on their own campuses.

Principals ensure middle schools are providing curriculum that is developmentally responsive and challenging by conducting classroom visits to gather information on teaching and learning. Through collaboration, the principals then help teachers use this observational data and student assessment data to identify ways to improve instruction. Furthermore, the principals provide teachers with relevant, targeted professional development opportunities, helping teachers improve their professional practice in the classroom. This type of support for continued learning provides teachers with a work environment that is empowering and equitable, two qualities that are desired in middle schools. To further enhance the work environment, principals seek out opportunities to acknowledge and praise the teachers' work, thus increasing teacher motivation and commitment to their responsibilities. Likewise, by distributing leadership to teachers and allowing teachers to try new things, middle school principals are responding to the development of the teachers while creating an empowering environment.

While conducting classroom observations, helping teachers utilize data, acknowledging teacher's work, providing professional development opportunities, working collaboratively with teachers, and distributing leadership to teachers are all activities principals utilize to support teachers specifically, these actions indirectly facilitate student success (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The NMSA (2010) claims a successful middle school "is an inviting, supportive, and safe place" where "human relationships are paramount" (p. 33). By improving the working environment of the teachers, the principal is helping create this successful middle school environment for students as well. Providing teachers with multiple opportunities to grow in their professional practices is recognized as one way to "boost learning substantially and to sustain that improvement" (McCann et al., 2010, p. 66).

The role of the middle school principal is multi-faceted, but always focused on facilitating student success. Through the support of middle school teachers, principals can continually move toward the goal of student success.

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