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The Role of the Principal in Successfully Promoting School Effectiveness

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Abstract
Education systems are evolving to become more accountable in meeting student needs. With increased demands for transparency and efficiency, schools have to become more effective in their teaching and learning processes to ensure student success. School leaders can use complex and multi-factorial models to increase effectiveness but the complexity of these models may limit their practical application. It is recommended that principals use established school effectiveness factors to change the school culture and create a safe learning climate that enhances student learning. These factors, including instructional leadership, the setting of high expectations with numerous learning opportunities, student progress tracking, and the establishment of a clearly communicated school mission, are discussed from the perspective of the leader. Consequently, a practical blueprint for change that increases school effectiveness is presented for school leaders.
Keywords: School Principal, Correlates, Effectiveness.

Introduction

Educational effectiveness research (EER) aims to identify the parameters that make a school better at improving student progress and creating models that can be implemented in other schools (Luyten et al., 2005). After successfully proving that schools make a fundamental difference in education, quantitative research focused on school system effectiveness and the effects of teachers on student progress (Reynolds et al., 2014). Although research provides important insights, the application of models has not always been successful because the theory relies on research and explanation whereas the implementation requires innovation, problem solving and practical change (Creemers et al., 2013).

To bridge this gap between theory and practice, the school principal has the responsibility of understanding the research, including how multiple parameters influence school effectiveness, and be able to select and implement the factors applicable to their own school setting. Successful implementation is imperative as student learning is the ultimate goal and the theory must guide practitioners on what is appropriate. Accordingly, school leaders need to know what needs to be done and what steps are needed to achieve those aims.

To address these goals, this report briefly discusses the complexities of EER and then focuses on seven school factors that enhance effectiveness (Lezotte, 1991). Emphasis is given on how the principal can implement change and exhibit leadership qualities to practically modify the school climate and increase effectiveness.

Educational Effectiveness Research and the Difficulty of Applying Theory to Practice

Extensive research into educational effectiveness has led to the development of complex models that aim to bridge theory and practice. These models of effectiveness are dynamic, as they recognize that teaching must adapt to student needs that are constantly changing, and also multi-level as they take into account multiple parameters including student, classroom, and school factors (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010; Creemers et al., 2013). These complex, multi-level models aim to explain how different components influence effectiveness while simultaneously explaining important factors in an attempt to assist in implementation (Creemers et al., 2013).

Despite the mounting literature, implementation has provided elusive as practitioners do not consistently utilize the findings to their students' benefit (Harris et al., 2013). It is suggested that this disconnect could be due to the daunting amount of available research and that the published works are aimed more for academics than practitioners (Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ, & Stoll, 2006). Since effectiveness is multifactorial and successful implementation is complex and situation-dependent, it is worth suggesting that the principal should be responsible for implementing change programs appropriate to their school settings based on research. This requires that the principals are well-versed in EER and can guide change implementation to facilitate effectiveness.

Although this endeavor is complicated, it is well established that pupil learning is primarily influenced by classroom teaching with leadership playing a major role (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). Successful school leaders are people-centered, effective communicators, place great emphasis on teaching and learning and can creatively problem solve and manage people (Pashiardis et al., 2011). Therefore, principals can spearhead the progress of schools. In order to do so, the characteristics of successful schools must first be identified so they can be tackled by leadership. It must be emphasized that is not suggested that leaders do not embrace EER; instead, what is proposed here is that principals guide change to maximize effectiveness and use EER when situationally appropriate.

Correlates of Effective Schools

Effective schools have characteristics that correlate with successful learning. These correlates are a clear mission for the school, high expectations for the entire school community, efficient instructional leadership that guides the school to success, opportunities for students to learn, an environment that is safe and orderly, close and positive relationship between home and school as well as frequent monitoring of student progress and the use of results and data to improve performance (Burušić et al., 2016; Lezotte, 1991). In addition, school effectiveness can be improved by enhancing literacy and numeracy, emphasizing teaching and learning, making use of data and setting targets, as well as by continuous professional development for teachers (Harris et al., 2006). Furthermore, it is recommended that teaching quality and the conditions influencing the student, classroom and school levels that can improve teaching be prioritized for improvement (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010). Finally, a systems wide approach across the whole

school is essential and decisions pertaining to school improvement should be based on data collected in the school (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010). Interestingly, all these reports indicate that school leaders can directly or indirectly influence effectiveness.

Since school effectiveness is greatly influenced by the school leader, the principal can create an environment and culture to enhance effectiveness. This task is difficult since external and internal factors, including guardian employment status, social demographics, school funding and support, teacher turnover, geographical isolation and others, greatly influence the success of students (Harris et al., 2006). In consequence, a school leader must be intimately familiar with the school setting, demographics and local culture to successfully bring about change.

The Role of the School Leader in Implementing Correlates of Effectiveness

According to Lezzote, the school must have a clear mission which can be formulated by the leader in collaboration with teachers and stakeholders (Lezotte, 1991). To successfully set a new mission, the leader must implement change and should be effective in communicating their vision, empowering teachers to encourage participation and create a school where the ultimate goal is successful student learning. The school culture must be collaborative to allow teachers to voice their opinions and staff should be included in creating this vision to maximize involvement and avoid teacher attrition. This mission must permeate the school culture and the vision should be frequently reinforced by the leader (Burušić et al., 2016).

The creation of the vision must take into account the school demographics and composition. Information regarding parent employment status, education levels, finances as well as parent involvement in the community and the school need to be utilized. The vision can be used by the leader to create a culture that fosters learning based on the composition of the school population. For example, in rural communities with low income parents, additional support might be offered to the student population if needed and that is something the leader must recognize and facilitate. The principal must also communicate the school mission to the community, model ideal behavior and exemplify characteristics necessary for success.

Notable among these characteristics are the high expectations that need to be clear to all teachers and students. Prior attainment, socioeconomic status as well as gender influence student results (Pashiardis et al., 2011). An effective leader will be able to identify what models of EER to use depending on their school and set high expectations for the staff and students. Therefore, local customization of models is imperative for success and must be coupled with high expectations. Teachers are already held accountable and should be offered training to maintain high standards of pedagogy. This might require a shift in the school culture; therefore, the leader must be supportive and facilitate collaboration, experimentation and excellence. An empathetic leader realizes that teachers are also educational leaders in their own classrooms and promotes shared decision making, creates an environment to foster success and constantly supports and empowers teachers. As a consequence, the high expectations are positively received and effectively passed on to students.

Students are held to high standards and should be given ample opportunities to learn. The effect of socioeconomic discrepancies and family conditions can be overcome when schools increase the quality, variety and quantity of educational opportunities offered to students (Valenzuela, Bellei, & Allende, 2016). Hence, a well-balanced curriculum should be used to efficiently teach students and allow them to progress. Teachers who are well prepared should

guide pupils and teach using modern and effective pedagogy. The school leader must ensure that staff is appropriately trained and well equipped to handle their workload and classes. Teachers in turn must ensure to challenge their students to their fullest potential without fear of failure. In such a way, a culture of excellence is created from the top that is well supported.

The leader must also create an environment that is safe and orderly. Teachers should model respectful behavior to ensure that all students learn effectively. A welcoming environment in the school allows students to focus on learning and it is the role of the leader to ensure that there are no bullying or exclusionary attitudes. As an effective communicator, the school leader must also extend this attitude towards the community and foster positive home-school relations. By gaining the trust of the community, the parents will support the academic staff in their endeavors and the school's decisions pertaining to their children.

Finally, the school leader must ensure that student progress is frequently monitored. Since student learning is the ultimate goal, academic improvement should be tracked to ensure that pupils are learning effectively. If not, corrective measures should be taken to remedy any gaps. Value-added models that use linear regression to plot progress and determine school effectiveness via the calculated residuals are of great use in tracking progress (Leckie & Prior, 2022). However, assessment does not always have to be summative as long as students are given opportunities to demonstrate learning. The school leader must create a culture of excellence, but simultaneously encourage students to take risks, learn creatively, be original thinkers and take ownership of their own learning to guarantee student progress.

The task of leaders is not trivial or easy. Leithwood et al. stress that successful leaders set clear directions by building a shared vision, setting high expectations and communicating clearly, emphasize staff development and build relationships, develop the organization via collaborations within and outside the school and improve the level of instruction (Leithwood et al., 2020). The repetition of these core correlates emphasizes the critical role of the leader.

A successful leader must adapt the correlates to create a change implementation program that is specific and tailored to the demands dictated by school demographics. The changes must also permeate the school culture and become embedded in the school vision. This is imperative because long-lasting changes are difficult to maintain (Valenzuela et al., 2016). The leader must convince the stakeholders and community that the methods are effective so that the changes become permanent. Demonstrating effectiveness is important and leaders must convince policy makers about what needs to be done to improve education. As daunting as this task may be, improving effectiveness and consequently student learning is the ultimate goal of educators.

Conclusion

Schools are becoming more accountable to stakeholders and tax payers, with a great emphasis being placed on efficiency and meeting high student, parental and societal expectations. School effectiveness research aims to underpin what makes certain schools more successful, while considering the multitude of factors influencing academic institutions, including socioeconomic discrepancies and the school setting. Complex models can be used to investigate school effectiveness and school leaders can use established effectiveness factors to facilitate learning. The role of the leader in utilizing these factors was discussed with emphasis on a practical approach that can be used to create a culture of excellence and high expectations, a safe environment that offers ample learning opportunities, student monitoring to ensure

progress and the involvement of parents in the school community. Along these lines, school effectiveness will improve and will help educators maximize student learning, which is the ultimate goal of schools.

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