The principal’s role in achieving school effectiveness
Conference paper

George Iordanides, Angeliki Lazaridou, Maria Babaliki

Abstract

This is a report on an investigation of the question “What can school principals do to foster school effectiveness?” More particularly, the project investigated opinions of Greek high school teachers about what principals could/should do to increase the effectiveness of their schools. In general it was found that participants thought principals could improve school effectiveness most by engaging in activities that develop a good climate and ensure appropriate resources are available for instruction. There were many parallels between particular findings and extant understandings recorded in the literature.

Key words: Principal, school effectiveness, teacher, secondary education, Greece

Organizational effectiveness receives considerable attention in the theoretical and research literature about school administration. Generally, the information addresses two fundamental objectives: to compare the educational results of various schools and to identify the factors that characterize the more effective schools. In the final analysis, the end objective is to understand how schools can maximize students’ progress (Mortimore, 1998). But school effectiveness can be a confusing topic. A major reason is that there are many ambiguities in the associated theory and research. For example, it has been defined in many ways and there are discontinuities and contradictions in the information about the factors associated with it.

Our research addressed the general question “What can school principals do to foster school effectiveness?” More particularly, we investigated Greek high school teachers’ views on what principals can/should do to increase the effectiveness of their schools. This line of inquiry is important because principals have been portrayed regularly as having significant effects on school effectiveness, yet very little research has been done in this regard in Greek schools.

Related theory and research

In this section we provide brief and selective outlines of extant information about the characteristics of effective schools, the role of school climate, and the ways school principals can contribute to increasing school effectiveness, with particular reference to the principalship in Greece. In each instance our purpose is to highlight discontinuities and gaps in the information that point to useful research.
Features of effective schools

Early attempts to identify the characteristics of effective schools are marked by differences in the number of factors and the factors themselves (e.g., Edmonds, 1982; Brophy, 1982; Metzler 1990). More recent catalogues (e.g., Shannon, 2003; Riley & Fouts, 2003) displayed the same differences. Even more recently, Pasiardis and Pasiardi [Πασιαρδής & Πασιαρδή] (2006) highlighted a set of factors providing some indication that the characteristics of effective schools in Greece may be different from those elsewhere.

The role of school climate

Hallinger and Heck’s (1998) review of effectiveness studies carried out in the period 1980-1995 led them to conclude that principals exercise a measurable effect on school effectiveness and student achievement – but do so indirectly. Hallinger and Heck concluded, as others have done since then, that the leadership provided by a school’s principal exerts indirect influence on students’ achievements through the school climate they craft (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Eckvall & Ryhammar, 1999; Leithwood, Jantzi, Earl, Watson, Levin, & Fullan, 2004).

Activities of the principal that are associated with school effectiveness

In the literature considerable attention has been devoted to teachers’ roles in the improvement of school effectiveness (Southworth, 2002) but it also includes a large body of information about leadership skills and knowledge that principals require for supporting and improving education.

According to Koontz and O’Donnell (cited in Saitis [Σαΐτης] 2000), leadership involves the art and the process of influencing individuals so that they collaborate willingly to achieve common objectives. It entails four basic abilities: to respond to how individuals are motivated in different situations by different factors, to inspire and guide the members of the organization, to create a suitable climate, and to articulate and support clear objectives.

On the other hand, Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) maintained that five elements characterize an effective leader: stability, commitment to involving others, being instructive, providing frequent and personal control, and recruiting and replacing suitable personnel.

Yet another perspective was advanced by Everard and Morris (1999). They maintained, first of all, that the effectiveness of a school depends on the principal collaborating with the teaching staff to achieve a common and explicit vision, a timetable that is faithful to the official program of study, and frequent evaluations of students’ progress with a view to improving the program of study and students’ achievements. Second, they said that the principal of an effective school has a specific administrative plan of action, is reliable, creates a climate of respect, has the ability to set clear objectives and to realize them, demonstrates flexibility, and undertakes initiatives. Furthermore, she or he shows confidence, manages the school finances efficiently and effectively, counsels students and imposes discipline, has the ability to influence the members of school community and to lead them to positive results, builds a collection of robust information, and collaborates with students, parents, other school personnel, and people in other institutions.
Conclusion

There is considerable ambiguity in the literature about the particular activities that are associated with greater school effectiveness. One question that requires to be investigated, then, is “What can principals best do to promote school effectiveness?” Since principals’ influence on effectiveness is mediated by school climate – which is a function of school members’ perceptions – answers to this question could be generated with audits of teachers’ opinions about the activities that help to improve school effectiveness.

Research design

Objectives and research questions

The general question that guided the investigation was “Which duties and initiatives of the principal do the teachers perceive to be important in the improvement of the school’s effectiveness?”

Method

Data were collected in a school prefecture in Central Greece. The questionnaire used was constructed and pilot-tested specifically for this study. In the first part, there are questions about the demographics of the respondent. In the second part, the items probe the respondent’s perceptions of the contributions that the school principal makes to school effectiveness. Responses to these 22 questions are recorded on a five-sector Likert scale that ranges from “Not at all important” to “Very important”. The questions were derived from the literature about the principals’ roles in improvement of school effectiveness. The questionnaires were distributed personally by the researcher, and teachers were informed about the purpose of the survey, that their participation was voluntary, and that their anonymity would be maintained.

The data were analyzed with the statistical package SPSS 17.

Participants

The sample consisted of 109 teachers; hence, the findings cannot be generalized.

Findings

Demographics

The demographic data were unremarkable except for one feature. The distribution of experience was decidedly skewed towards the low end of the scale. 60% of the teachers in the sample were relatively low on experience: 28% with 1-5 years of experience, 32% with 6-10 years. The group with 11-15 years of experience constituted a further 20% of the sample. In contrast, 6% had 16-20 years of experience, 8% had 21-25 years, and 10% had 25+ years of experience. In the
immediate future, this may give rise to an interesting succession situation: When the most senior teachers retire, there will be few ones to replace them.

**Directors’ activities that promote school effectiveness**

In Table 1 the means and standard deviations for the questionnaire items are presented, with items arranged in descending size of the means.

**Table 1**

Average responses to the questionnaire items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Managing decision making and problem solving.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Create an atmosphere of collaboration and trust among students and teachers.</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Caring about the promotion of a climate of collaboration, professional behavior, and open communication among teachers and between teachers and the administration.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Caring about the promotion of a good school climate.</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Positively influencing teacher’s optimism and enthusiasm for teaching and learning.</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Using the participative approach to decision making.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Knowing the personality, talents, and special abilities of each teacher, so that responsibilities are assigned appropriately.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Making sure that a variety of books, teaching methods, and other materials are available to teachers.</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>0.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Talking with teachers at the beginning of the school year about the curriculum and its implementation.</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Producing a timetable that supports the achievement of objectives and the orderly</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.656</td>
</tr>
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</table>
functioning of the school.

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Promoting positive attitudes and high expectations for learning.</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Organizing extracurricular activities that promote interactions among students, teachers, and the administration.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Making sure that teaching is more student-centered.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Motivating teachers to perform better.</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Collaborating with teachers in the provision of higher order learning objectives (critical and analytical skills, problem solving).</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Urging teachers to communicate regularly with the parents of the students using various means – phone calls, mail, etc.</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Getting informed by teachers about students’ progress.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Promoting regular meetings with the parents.</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Promoting collaboration between the School Committee and the local community</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Promoting various methods of student evaluation (written, oral, projects, etc).</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Urging teachers to use evaluation results to improve teaching.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Specifying the content of evaluation of each student in collaboration with the teachers.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>0.871</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, the means show clearly that these teachers saw all of the activities referenced in the questionnaire as “quite important” to “very important”, the lowest mean being 3.96.

Second, as the standard deviations show, the greatest alignment of the teachers’ views was in connection with the promotion of harmony – managing decision making and problem solving well (item 16), and fostering a climate of trust and collaboration (item 11).
Third, the participants thought that the school principal could improve the school’s effectiveness most by working to develop a good climate for learning. They attached most importance to ensuring harmony (items 16 and 11), nurturing an open climate (items 14 and 13), and ensuring that teachers are activated to teach and valued as partners in decision making (items 15 and 2). Activities that support quality instruction followed (items ranked 7th to 10th) – assigning teachers to appropriate duties, ensuring a good supply of teaching resources, clarifying curricular requirements, and constructing a supportive timetable.

**Discussion**

We stress our interest in considering of how the results of this investigation relate to extant understandings about the roles of school principals in fostering organizational effectiveness. The discussion focuses on our findings in general, and school leadership.

**General parallels**

Our findings are in accordance with the results of other research that looked into educators’ perceptions concerning the improvement of school effectiveness in many ways. By way of illustration, we present the essence of only one such investigation, a study of five effective schools in England (Kimber, 2003). Amongst other things, in those schools the leaders:

- focused on maximizing learning, in both vision and actual practices and activities;
- emphasized collaboration;
- developed positive interpersonal relations;
- were amenable to distribution of responsibilities and leadership roles; and
- facilitated professional growth activities.

These factors parallel those considered important by the teachers in our investigation.

**School leadership**

As noted before, the teachers saw all of the activities referenced in the questionnaire as quite important to very important. We think this may be a proxy indicator of a belief that a school’s principal plays a significant role in determining school effectiveness.

Another feature that is noteworthy concerns the teachers’ opinions about decision making. Although they assigned the highest level of importance to good management of decision making (item 16), they rated the use of a participative approach to decision making (item 2) lower in importance. One has to wonder whether this is an indication of support for a directive style of leadership and/or a reflection of the centralized system of school governance in Greece.

We see some indications in the data that the teachers had a preference for the transformative rather than transactional approach to leadership. They attached high importance to the principal having a strong vision for the school, showing confidence in teachers, emphasizing the importance of regular professional development, working to build good interpersonal relations with and among staff; and maintaining open communications with teachers. These are some of
the characteristics of transformational leadership; they contrast sharply with the power-based, ultimately coercive strategies of transactional leadership

**School culture and climate**

Finally, as noted earlier, principals are perceived to be able to have an indirect effect on school effectiveness by managing the school climate (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Ekvall & Ryhammar, 1999; Leithwood, Jantzi, Earl, Watson, Levin, & Fullan, 2004). Our findings supported this. The participants emphasized a number of questionnaire items that relate to the creation of a positive school climate. Specifically, they attributed the highest levels of importance to three activities:
- Creating an atmosphere of collaboration and trust among students and teachers.
- Caring about the promotion of a climate of collaboration, professional behavior, and open communication among teachers and between teachers and the administration.
- Caring about the promotion of a good school climate.

This finding in particular indicated that there is a need for further investigation of how principals contribute to school effectiveness in Greece.

**References – English**


**References – Greek**


Σαΐτης, Χ. (2000). *Οργάνωση και Διοίκηση της Εκπαίδευσης*. Αθήνα: Ατραπός