The Relationship of Principals’ Leadership Styles and their

Effects on School Climate

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Abstract

The inherent organization of a school, and its climate, is largely predicated by the principal’s leadership and management styles. This quantitative research will examine the relationship of principals’ leadership styles on school climate. Participants will be randomly selected among three elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools with similar socio-economic profiles in a suburban region. Each building principal will be administered a Leader Behavior Analysis to record their self-reported leadership styles. Ten teachers in each school will be administered a survey consisting of two parts: (1) Leader Behavior Analysis and (2) Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire. The teachers will identify the leadership styles of their building principal and the school climate within their respective buildings. Research findings will be analyzed for future leadership seminars to further explore and consider the relationship between principals’ leadership styles and their affects on school climate.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship of principals’ leadership styles and their effects on school climate. School climate, as defined by Hoy and Miskel (2005, p. 185) is “the set of internal characteristics that distinguish one school from another which ultimately influences the behaviors of each school’s members.” School climate can influence teacher performance, which in turn, affects student performance. “Virtually all researchers and the National School Climate Council agree that four major factors shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment” (Cohen, Pickeral and McCloskey, 2009, p. 46). The extent to which leadership positively or negatively impacts school climate is influenced by the leadership style adopted. A positive school and learning environment positively affects teacher performance. This research will examine the relationship of principals’ leadership styles on school climate and identify those leadership behaviors which promote positive school climates.

Literature Review

School systems have become more complex in their organizational structure as the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act have increased. Serving a multitude of student needs and abilities, schools are mandated to improve student achievement while teaching to the “whole child” in a presumed safe and nurturing learning environment.

School effectiveness and improvement research shows that leadership styles play a key role in ensuring growth in schools. However, Elmore (2002, p. 2) stated that “public schools and school systems as presently constituted are simply not led in ways that enable them to respond to the increasing demands they face under standards-based reforms.”

Researchers have tried to show the relationship between leadership styles, school climate, teacher effectiveness, and student learning (Deal and Peterson, 1990). The role of a school administrator is to assess the needs of the building and to implement policies and procedures that promote student achievement. It is through the administrator’s leadership that the school’s learning climate, the relationship between staff, and the teacher morale is shaped (Korkmaz, 2007). Researchers have suggested (Freiberg, 1998) the establishment of a positive school climate can strengthen staff performance, promote higher morale, and improve student achievement.

Research has demonstrated there is significant evidence to suggest that a school leader must first understand the school’s culture before effecting change (Leithwood, Louis, Andersen and Wahlstrom, 2004). Organizational culture and climate is viewed as overlapping. Schein (as cited in Macneil, Prater and Busch, 2009) supported the relationship between culture and climate by describing that norms, values, rituals and climate are all expressions of culture. The shared perceptions of behavior are more readily measured than shared beliefs or values. Thus, climate is the preferred construct when measuring the health of a school (Macneil et al., 2009).

School climate is defined as “the relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behavior and is based on their collective perception of behavior in schools” (Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp, 1991, p. 10). Kottkamp (as cited in Kelly, Thornton and Daugherty, 2005) found that climate consists of shared values, interpretation of social activities, and commonly held definitions of purpose. The school leadership style is key in developing a positive school climate (Hoy and Miskel, 2005). A growing body of research calls for education leaders to become more transparent about their goals and to ensure participation of all staff in developing a positive learning climate (Cohen, Pickeral and McCloskey, 2009).

Hallinger and Heck (as cited in Macneil et al., 2009) proposed the school leader does not directly affect student achievement. Instead, the school leader indirectly affects learning by impacting the climate of the school. School leaders must first diagnose the school climate to capitalize on existing leadership strengths (Fairman and McLean, 2003). Without knowledge or understanding of the school climate, effectual change does not occur.

Research has suggested that leaders who fully understand leadership theory and improve their ability to lead are able to reduce employee frustrations and negative attitudes in the work environment (Kelly et al., 2009). School leaders can foster an understanding of the school vision, facilitate implementation of the mission, and establish the school climate. The style of leadership can strengthen or negatively impact the school climate. Lakomshi (2001) concluded that it is necessary to change an organization’s culture to effect organizational change and that a causal relationship exists between the role of the leader and the organizational learning.

Various leadership models and definitions have evolved over the last century. In the early to middle 1900’s, research ranged from examining leader psychological and trait theories to examining leader behavioral approaches suggested Polleys (as cited in Black, 2010). In the 1970’s, servant leadership was defined (Black, 2010). Black (2010, p. 437) defined servant leadership as a philosophical theory of “serving others before themselves, assuming a non-focal position within teams, providing resource and support without an expectation of acknowledgement.” Ehrhart, Hunt, and McCowan (as cited in Black, 2010) found that studies have shown a relationship of implementing principles of servant leadership and positive organizational climate.

Korkmaz (2007) examined the affects of the principal’s leadership style: transformational leadership and transactional leadership, on teachers’ job satisfaction and organizational health. Korkmaz (2007) found that “transformational leadership has a profound impact on teachers’ job satisfaction, while the transformational leadership of the principal directly and, through teachers’ job satisfaction, indirectly affects the school health.” Transformational leaders, as suggested by Sosik et al., Hater & Bass (as cited in Korkmaz, 2007) encourage staff by stimulating them intellectually to adopt creative thinking processes, and to encourage them to solve old problems through new techniques.

Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) examined whether focusing on strengths through appreciative inquiry would be related to measurable changes in school climate. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011, p. 422) defined appreciative inquiry as “both a philosophy and an approach for motivating change that focuses on exploring and amplifying organizational strengths.” In their longitudinal study, three areas of inquiry were identified: student achievement and success, trust and respect, and community pride and involvement. The findings demonstrated significant improvements in seven of the eight climate and trust variables assessed (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2011). The findings demonstrated that the energy and emotion associated with identifying, celebrating, and building on strengths enable people to transform systems.

“Schools can use climate data to promote meaningful staff, family, and student engagement – and to enhance the social, emotional, skills and dispositions that contribute to success in school and in life” (Cohen, et al., 2009, p. 46). Given the influence of leadership styles, this research will examine those leadership traits which produce a positive school climate. This research will further examine the relationship between leaders’ and teachers’ perceptions of leadership styles and their impact on school climate.

Method

This research will incorporate a quantitative design to examine the relationship of principals’ leadership styles and their affects on school climate. Participants will be randomly selected from three elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools with similar socio-economic profiles in a suburban region. Each building principal will be administered a Leader Behavior Analysis to record their self-reported leadership styles. The principals will select leadership styles in relation to depicted scenarios. Ten teachers in each school will be administered a two-part survey consisting of the Leader Behavior Analysis and the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire. The 90 teachers will identify the leadership behaviors and styles which represent their respective building administrator on the Leader Behavior Analysis. Secondly, the teachers will report their assessment of their school’s climate on the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire. The correlation between principal leadership styles and school climate will be examined to determine these relationships.

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