

A Dissertation

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Defining the Relationship between Principal's Leadership Style and School Climate as Perceived
by Title I Elementary Teachers

By

Jeff Stanford Williamson

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Advisor: Roettger, Caroline, Ed.D.

Committee Member: Edwards, Mary Ellen, Ph.D.

Committee Member: McKinley, Sandra, Ph.D.

Committee Member: Roettger, Lloyd, Ph.D.

Judith Herb College of Education

College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

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An Abstract of
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School climate research indicates that climate is one of the few critical factors identified for enhancing a school's success. One important factor that impacts school climate is principal leadership style.

The study focused on the school climate of urban, Title I elementary schools and explored the relationship between the variables of school climate and the principal's leadership style. The study examined the relationship between teachers' and principals' perceptions of leadership and school climate. Further, the study attempted to determine if there were differences in teachers' view of the principal's leadership style and school climate on the basis of teachers' demographics (age, number of years teaching, and number of years at current school) in selected schools.

Quantitative information was gathered from 323 Title I elementary teachers and 19 Title I Principals in 19 urban Title I elementary schools. Teachers' and principals'

perceptions of principal leadership style were collected using Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). Their perception of school climate was measured using the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire – Revised Elementary (OCDQ-RE). In addition, teachers and principals provided demographic information.

Three hypotheses were analyzed using Spearman's rho statistical formula. Results of the analyzed data provided the following findings: (1) a significant correlation exists between principal leadership style and school climate, (2) a significant correlation relationship exists principal's view of his/her leadership style and the school climate and the view of the teachers, and (3) a significant correlation exists among related demographic teacher data and the LBDQ and the OCDQ-RE subscales.

The study concluded that a positive relationship and open communication between the principal and teacher is essential to a healthy and open school climate. Principals must maintain a supportive and open relationship with the teachers and work towards a positive school climate that will benefit all. A healthy school climate will be advantageous for the students of the 21st century.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my late mother, Velma, and late father, John who during their life always supported me in my endeavors. They may not be here physically, but spiritually they are with me every day. They always had an eternal faith that indeed I would finish whatever I started. This motivation still lives today with me. To them I will always be eternally grateful.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Public urban elementary schools are facing strong public scrutiny with increased importance placed on academic achievement for all students (Wirt & Kirst, 2001; Spring, 2002). Urban schools in the past have not performed well on standardized tests (Marzano, 2003). The United States government promotes equity goals by extending educational opportunities to all citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or disability (King, Swanson, & Sweetland, 2003). The latest federal mandate of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation Act of 2001 was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). NCLB has placed major emphasis on testing and accountability in individual schools and districts (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2001).

Over 50,000 public schools and 12.5 million students across the United States use Title I Federal funds to provide additional academic support to help low achieving students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). Title I Federal program provides financial assistance through State educational agencies (SEAs) to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007).

LEAs target the Title I funds they receive to public schools with the highest percentages of children from low income families. Schools with at least 40 percent of

students on the Federal free and reduced lunch program are eligible for Title I funds, but the LEAs may set the building percentage higher if the overall needs are great. The district in this study set the building percentage at 70.

There appears to be an on-going struggle to define and redefine the meaning of leadership and it is becoming increasingly evident that traditional leadership definitions are inadequate. Leadership theories may not completely define leadership but they will provide a framework upon which to discuss the various aspects of leadership.

Studies have documented that the leadership of the principal can influence teacher and student educational performance, community approval, and school climate (Dinham, Cairney, & Wilson, 1995). It is vital that the urban principal understands the role of leadership and the relationship of leadership to school climate.

The principals of today can be powerful catalysts for change. Change is needed to improve test scores for all children and close the achievement gap. The focus of this change is that learning should be the norm and not the exception. The principal is not only held responsible for improving test scores for all, but also determines the climate in which work of students, staff members, and parents is done.

Interest in studying school climate has been around since the start of schools and classrooms. Early educators, such as Larkin Dunton (1891) wrote about school climate and classroom control. Cohen (2007) stated “School climate has been gaining the attention of more and more district and state leaders in recent years” (p. 30). Ohio and several other states have developed benchmarks to help principals and staff members to identify and create a positive school climate. The goals of the Ohio school climate

guidelines are to create a school building environment where every child feels welcomed, respected, and motivated to learn (Ohio Dept. Ed., 2004).

Ohio Department of Education Guideline 6 (2004) on school climate stated the following:

Because children spend six or more hours in the classroom, teachers become significant in children's lives. Research supports that when the teacher nurtures a sense of belonging in the classroom, students engage more readily, relate positively with peers and demonstrate good study habits. Likewise, parents of children who are welcomed and involved in the establishment of the classroom environment are more likely to attend parent teacher conferences, monitor study at home, and convey concerns about student progress. A caring classroom is encouraged by improving students' ability to listen respectfully to others; providing opportunities to build self-confidence; putting respect and responsibility into everyday practice; encouraging parent involvement. (p. 12)

School climate is one of the few critical factors identified for enhancing a school's success (Pashiardis, 2000). School climate incorporates many factors. School's climate is often defined as the quality of a school that creates healthy learning places, nurtures children's and parents' dreams and aspirations, stimulates teachers' creativity and enthusiasm, and elevates all of its members (Freiberg, 1999). All members in the school become like a family. Students often say they enjoy their schools because teachers show respect toward all students and the building is like a family.

Statement of the Problem

Being an urban educator is often a difficult job and, with the new mandates of the

NCLB legislation, teachers and principals are being held accountable for students' educational growth. It is now vital that urban principals employ leadership styles that support positive school climates that may lead to higher student achievements. Urban elementary principals need to understand what teachers perceive to be important leadership behaviors and how these behaviors impact school climate.

Therefore, this study identified leadership styles of elementary principals and explored the relationship of the principal's leadership style to school climate in urban, Title I elementary school buildings. This study provides direction for achieving a positive school climate in buildings in poor urban schools. .

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not a relationship exists between elementary principals' leadership style and school climate as perceived by elementary school teachers in 19 urban, Title I elementary schools in Northwest Ohio. The study examined the relationship between teachers' and principals' perceptions of leadership and school climate in urban Title I elementary schools. The study also described differences in teachers' views of the principal's leadership style and school climate on the basis of teachers' demographics (age, number of years teaching and number of years at current school).

Rationale

Few studies have been conducted on leadership style and school climate in urban, Title I elementary buildings. However, various studies have been completed on leadership style and school climate. It is vital that urban elementary principals understand school climate and its relationship to leadership style.

Research Questions

Data gathered by a survey of principals and teachers in urban, Title I elementary schools attempted to answer the core question of this research, Does the principal's leadership style, as measured by the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) (Stogdill, 1963), influence school climate, as measured by the Organization Climate Description Questionnaire Revised for Elementary Schools (OCDQ-RE)? The following research questions, hypotheses and null hypotheses were examined.

RQ 1. What is the relationship between principal leadership styles and school climate?

H 1. There is a relationship between principal leadership styles and the school climate.

H₀ 1. There is no relationship between principal leadership styles and school climate.

RQ 2. What is the relationship between the principal's view and the teacher's view of leadership style and school climate?

H 2. There is a relationship between the principal's view and the teacher's view of leadership style and school climate.

H₀ 2. There is no relationship between the principal's view and the teacher's view of leadership style and school climate.

RQ 3. Is there a relationship between teacher demographics (age, number of years teaching and number of years at current school) and views of leadership style and school climate?

H 3. There is a relationship between teacher demographics (age, number of years teaching and number of years at current school) and views of leadership style and school climate.

H₀ 3. There is no relationship between teacher demographics (age, number of years teaching and number of years at current school) and views of leadership style and school climate.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the knowledge about the relationship of leadership style and school climate on the basis of survey data gathered from the principals and teachers in an urban, Title I elementary school district. Further significance of this study includes the following:

- The data collected from this study may help school districts to conduct meaningful professional development about leadership styles and school climate.
- The data collected from this study may help state departments of education in developing standards for school climate.
- The data collected may help to foster open communication between the principal and teachers.
- This study may help local, urban, Title I elementary schools conduct meaningful staff development about school climate.
- This study may help to direct further research about school climate and principals' leadership style.
- This study may help universities in planning future principals' training.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms have been defined in relation to this study:

Leadership style – Leadership style refers to the level of use of effective leadership behaviors, specifically initiating structure and consideration as defined in the LBDQ (Stogdill, 1963).

Urban Elementary School– An urban elementary school refers to a school located in an urban metropolitan area.

Title I Elementary School– The urban district in this study defined Title I elementary school as one that had a student population of 70 percent or more on the Federal free and reduced lunch program.

Teacher– The teacher is defined as a state certified professional who teaches elementary school students.

Principal– The principal is defined as a state certified professional who leads the elementary school staff members and students.

School Climate– School climate is the quality of a school that creates healthy learning places; nurtures children’s and parents’ dreams and aspirations; stimulates teachers’ creativity and enthusiasm, and elevates all of its members (Freiberg, 1999).

Delimitations

This study had the following delimitations:

- The population of this study was restricted to a Title I urban school district in Northwest Ohio.
- Because of loss of building seniority, teachers are not transferring out of current positions.

- The study was conducted during the 2006-2007 school year.
- The principal and teachers who participated in the surveys worked in Title I elementary buildings.
- The measurements of principal leadership behavior and school climate are based on principals' and teachers' responses to items on the LBDQ and OCDQ-RE surveys.

Assumptions

The following assumptions guided this study:

- The teachers and principals responded honestly and objectively to all questions on each survey instrument.
- The principal's leadership style was calculated on the basis of input of the teachers working in the same building as the principal.
- The participating school's climate was calculated on the input of the teachers and principal who work in that school.
- The perceptions of teachers and principals who responded to the surveys were representative of the school.

Nature of the Study

This study utilized quantitative research methods that included collecting and analyzing numerical data. Three surveys were used to collect the data for this study. The first survey collected demographic information about teachers' or principals' age, gender, number of years in teaching or administration, and number of years working in the current buildings. The second survey was the LBDQ, which identified the principal's leadership style based on teachers' opinions. The principal also completed the LBDQ to

identify his/her leadership style. The final survey was the OCDQ-RE, which was administered to principals and teachers to identify their perceptions of school climate.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This document is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose, rationale, research questions, significance, definition of terms, delimitations, assumptions, and nature of the Study.

Chapter 2 presents a review of significant literature as it relates to school climate and principal's leadership style. Topics include principals' leadership and effective schools, leadership in business, principal career stages, staff morale, the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ-RE), principal-teacher relationship, teachers' perceptions of principal leadership style and its impact on school climate, and a review of the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ).

The research design and statistical methodology for the research are discussed in chapter 3, which also includes a description of the population surveyed and the instruments used to gather data. Presentation and analysis of the data is provided in chapters 4 and conclusions, inferences based on the research, and recommendations for further study are presented in chapter 5.

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Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not a relationship exists between elementary principals' leadership style and school climate as perceived by elementary school teachers in 19 urban, Title I elementary schools in Northwest Ohio. Other research studies have been conducted on this topic, but little research has focused on the elementary level or, specifically, on urban, Title I elementary buildings.

Leadership style has become a significant construct in studies of all types of organizations in recent years and schools are no exception. As researchers delved deeper into what makes a school run smoothly, or how positive school climate contributes to reduced student delinquency and increased student achievement, more studies considered principals' leadership styles as important sources of data (Barker, 2001; Capelluti, 2004; Coleman, 2000; Lieberman, 2004; Oplatka, 2004; Sahin, 2004). Thus, the literature on principals' leadership styles and school climate is found to be converging and strongly related.

Studies also revealed that relationships between teachers and students and between teachers and principals are at the core of school climate. Some researchers, who focused on the dynamics of relationships between stakeholders, argued that positive school climate is all about perceptions of the staff and students.

Moreover, whether or not a principal is doing a job that positively contributes to the school climate is also seen as a perceptual evaluation by others, especially teachers. Therefore, it is important to determine teachers' perceptions about the impact of principals' leadership style upon positive or negative school climate.

Indeed, studies indicate that the teacher's perception of the impact of his or her principal's leadership style on school climate may itself be one of the critical factors in assisting leadership in reforming school climate (Kelley & Thornton, 2005; Williams, 2000; Zimmerman, 2003).

The review of literature for this study examines the issue of school leadership and the parameters and constructs of school climate as well as findings based on the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire created by Halpin (Hoy & Smith, et al., 2003; Kelley & Thornton, et al., 2005; Rafferty, 2003).

Further, the literature review includes studies that have examined the issue of teachers' perceptions of whether or not the principal's leadership style impacts school climate (Bodycott & Walker, et al., 2001; Gunbayi, 2005; Williams, 2000; Zimmerman, 2003). The teachers' perception of school climate is often influenced by past principals, school leaders and parents (Bodycott & Walker, et al., 2001). It is vital to examine the teacher's perception in this literature review, because the impact they have on school climate.

Principal Leadership and Effective Schools

The literature on school leadership derives from preexisting literature on leadership in the business world. This influence continues to be strong, and a shift to transformational leadership from transactional leadership among school principals has