PRINCIPALS’ AND TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF CRITICAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of critical leadership skills for elementary principals and to examine if there were any significant difference in perceptions of critical leadership skills between elementary teachers and principal. The Elementary Principals’ Critical Leadership Skills Survey was used to collect the data for this study. Completed surveys were received from 294 teachers and 197 principals from elementary schools in South Carolina. A significant difference was found between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of the critical transformational skills ($p = .017$) needed by the elementary principal. In addition, Analysis of Variance findings revealed that race had a significant main effect on the perceptions of critical leadership skills for all four categories: technical skills ($p = .001$), human relations skills ($p = .001$), conceptual skills ($p = .001$), and transformational skills ($p = .010$). For human relations skills, another significant main effect was found for educational level ($p = .022$). In addition to race, position ($p = .004$), gender ($p = .028$), and educational level ($p = .037$) all had significant main effects on the perceptions of critical transformation skills.

Recent educational reform efforts have focused on the significance of the leadership role of the principal (Blase, 1987; Keefe, 1987; Pigford, 1995; Schlechty, 1990; Schwahn & Spady, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994; Short & Greer, 1997). This role was found to be crucial since the responsibility of initiating school improvement efforts and maintaining school effectiveness lies primarily with the principal. In addition, effective schools research designates the principal as a key leader in developing excellent schools (Anderson, 1991).

Also found in effective schools research (Smith & Greene, 1990) is the belief that the complexity of the principal’s role is increasing; thus, the demand for a multitude of skills needed to be an effective school administrator has intensified. Although they found a lack of congruence between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of leadership, Gordon, Stockard, and Williford (1992) observed that how the principal prioritizes these skills and tasks is essential to the effective operation of the school. They further observed that how teachers perceive the importance of these skills can become a significant factor in building a positive
and productive school environment. As we prepare for new challenges from Schlechty’s (1990) 21st century schools and as we continue with current restructuring efforts, the importance of critical leadership skills and how teachers perceive a leader’s skills are further magnified. This study determines which leadership skills are critical as perceived by classroom teachers and building principals.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to compare and contrast elementary school principals, and teachers’ perceptions of critical leadership skills as needed in an era of educational reform. Specifically, the study was designed to determine the congruency between elementary school principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of the principals’ leadership skills critical for effective job performance and efficient reform. In an effort to learn more about this issue, the following research questions were examined:

*Which leadership skills are perceived by elementary school principals and teachers as most critical for successful job performance?; and*

*Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of elementary school principals and elementary school teachers regarding critical leadership skills for elementary principals according to gender, race, location of school, and educational level?*

**Method**

This study utilized the survey research design to compare the perceptions of principals and teachers. The randomly sampled population consisted of 294 elementary teachers and 197 elementary principals from throughout South Carolina. The instrument used was a modification of the *Elementary Principals’ Critical Leadership Skills Survey* (Young, 1994). The study was designed to answer the following research questions: Which leadership skills are perceived by elementary school principals and teachers as most critical for successful job performance?; and Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of elementary school principals and elementary school teachers regarding critical leadership skills for elementary principals according to gender, race, location of school, and educational level?

**Instrument**

The survey instrument, *Elementary Principals’ Critical Leadership Skills Survey* (Young, 1994) was modified and revised to include a Likert-type rating scale with six possible responses as follows: 1=Not Important, 2=Of Little Importance, 3=Moderately Important, 4=Important, 5=Very Important, and 6=Extremely Important. In addition to demographic data, the survey consisted of 56 various administrative and leadership skill items that were divided into four categories: technical, human relations, conceptual, and transformational leadership skills. Technical skills were those skills which include proficiency in procedures, methods, and techniques of education, as well as finance, maintenance, and scheduling. Human relations skills included the ability to work well with others in a group or one-on-one setting, communication, coaching personnel, developing human resources, and forming school/business partnerships. Conceptual skills included the ability to view the school as a whole, to focus on outcomes, and to have a philosophical base for decision-making. Transformational skills related to leaders having a vision of what is possible, serving
as a role model, establishing a school culture bonded in that vision, fostering collaboration, and maintaining a personal vision.

Sample

The target population for this study included elementary school principals and teachers. The original sample consisted of 225 elementary school principals and 475 elementary school teachers selected from those schools represented by the chosen principals. Of the 225 principals sampled, 197 principals returned surveys for a return rate of 87.5%. Of the 475 teachers sampled, 294 teachers returned their surveys for a return rate of 61.9%.

According to gender, less than half (43.1%) of the principals were males with more than half (56.9%) being female. According to gender among the teacher population, nearly one-fifth (18.1%) of the teachers were male and more than four-fifths (81.9%) were female. The findings indicated that 45.9% of the principals were from rural elementary schools with 32.5% from suburban and 21.6% from urban schools. Within the teacher sample, 51.7% indicated they were from rural elementary schools while 35.5% were from suburban and 12.8% from urban schools.

Results

The purpose of this research study was to investigate principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of critical leadership skills for principals in elementary schools in South Carolina to determine if a significant difference exists between the two sets of perceptions. The t-test was employed to analyze the data for the four categories (Technical, Human Relations, Conceptual, and Transformational) of critical leadership skills. The results of the t-test analysis revealed a statistically significant difference (t-value = 2.39, p = .017) between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of transformational skills. The overall results of the analyses of main and interaction effects revealed that race, position, educational level, and gender all had significant main effects on how principals and teachers perceived the importance of critical leadership skills for elementary principals.

The findings of this study revealed that principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of three categories of critical leadership skills (technical, human relations, and conceptual) were similar. In contrast, a significant difference was revealed between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of the fourth critical leadership skill (transformational) needed by the principal. The greatest disparity between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions in the transformational skills category was noted in the item “translating vision into action.” Principals gave this skill a higher level of importance than did teachers. This finding may indicate that perhaps principals have a better understanding of the role that vision plays in transformational leadership.

While principals ranked the transformational skills category as having the highest degree of importance, teachers gave their top rating to the human relations skills category. These skills are important for effective interaction among students, staff, and community. “Promoting high staff morale” was considered by teachers to be the most important human relations skill, and it received a higher rating from teachers than principals. The implication is that principals may need to be more aware of how to motivate staff and the importance of building staff morale. Research by Blase (1987) confirmed that teacher morale enhances the possibility of productive interactions between teachers and others.

In the conceptual skills category, nearly all of the principals (99.0%) and teachers (96.2%) noted that problem analysis is “important,” with nearly half (49.5%) of the principals and nearly two-fifths (38.3%) of the teachers indicating that the ability to “analyze the critical aspects of a problem” was “extremely important.” “Promoting a positive school image” and
“Understanding the impact of decisions on the overall school picture” were also rated “extremely important” by both principals and teachers.

In the technical skills category, an overwhelming majority of principals and teachers cited “Maintaining a safe and orderly school environment” as the most critical skill. “Managing fiscal resources” were also highly rated items.

Summary

In summary, it can be noted that as the role of the principal becomes more complex, all four categories of skills will become increasingly important for school leaders as they face the challenges for leadership in a new era of educational reform. Nevertheless, two clear messages were received from the results of the study. First, teachers in the study emphasized the need for positive human relations, specifically, the area of staff morale. Secondly, principals should consider the need for educating their faculties on the importance of translating vision into action. This perceived lack of importance by teachers may be a result of their non-participation in planning and restructuring efforts. Certainly, principals need to review current practices to ensure participation, so that faculty may assess ownership and understanding of the restructuring process. Through participation in the process, teachers will better understand the relationship between vision and application, and develop a new appreciation for the importance of transformational skills within an era of restructuring.

References


