Secondary Principal Instructional Leadership Actions in Effective Schools that Promote Successful Speech Therapy Interventions (STIs)

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ABSTRACT

The challenges of delivering speech language therapy services to students in secondary school settings have reached alarming levels of complexity. This can be attributed to the increasing number of students qualifying for the services as well as the number of speech language professionals that are needed to deliver the services. Compounding this problem further are current school structures that for years have traditionally promoted the delivery of these services in isolation. Through the promotion and establishment of non-traditional structures which promote the development of collaborative agreements between principals, speech language professionals, regular and Special Education teachers, the author suggests that secondary school principals will be in a better position to situate their schools is such a way that ensures the delivery of high quality speech therapy services to not only students with speech impairments but also to all students in the schools that they lead. In this article, the author supports the use of several strategies from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association that secondary principals can employ as instructional leaders to ensure the success of students in need of speech-language therapy services. It is proposed that these strategies translate into effective instructional leadership actions by principals that are well-supported by the literature in the field. These actions also appear to be consistent with what practicing speech language professionals recognize as effective strategies that can be used by instructional leaders to deliver high quality speech therapy interventions.

Most secondary school principals today will agree that one of the areas of school administration that has experienced a rapid and consistent growth and that has become one of the most complex responsibilities of public school principals is the effective administration of Special Education programs. Many principals believe that much of this expansion and complexity stems from the increase in the number of students who are qualifying for Special Education services. This belief appears to be well-supported in the literature. According to Greene (2005), "the number of kids in our schools classified as disabled has been increasing steadily for twenty-five years" (p. 22). Further, between the 1976-1977 and the 2000-2001 academic school years, the percentage of students who participated in Special Education programs increased by over 50 percent, and data trends suggest that this growth continues (Greene, 2005).

Furthermore, these data also indicate that the growth in student participation in Special Education programs may not be distributed equally throughout all Special Education categories. In one state, for example, according to the Texas Education Agency (2008), while students at the secondary level with Emotional Disturbance (ED) and Learning Disabilities (LD) make up a large portion of program participants, the third group with the most participants includes those students with speech impairments. As such, these student increases by category would also suggest to most, if not all, practicing secondary school principals that the effective coordination needed for the delivery of these types of services and the number of specialized professionals required to successfully provide the services present a significant challenge to the practice of principals in secondary school settings.

Additionally, data from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) help to provide a high degree of consistency between the data that support the above-stated conclusions and the realities of the job that principals cite daily. For example, in a recent survey conducted by the ASHA (2008), current practicing speech-language pathologists (SLPs) listed the high amount of paperwork and the high caseload size as the two greatest challenges experienced by school-based SLPs today. This is driven by the fact that as the number of students who qualify to receive speech-language therapy services increases, the number of qualified SLPs needed to deliver the services also increases. This problem is further compounded by the testimonies of public school human resources professionals who state that the nation-wide shortage of school-based SLPs accounts for one of their greatest challenges in the recruitment and retention of SLPs. Meanwhile, the number of students requiring STIs is also increasing, albeit at a disproportionate rate.

Purpose of the Article

Challenging as this may seem, some of the actions that secondary school principals can employ to effectively deal with this challenge is to utilize their instructional leadership skills to ensure the effective delivery of STIs by SLPs. In this paper, the author supports the use of several ASHA strategies that secondary principals can employ as instructional leaders to ensure the success of students in need of speech-language therapy services. It is proposed that these strategies translate into effective

instructional leadership actions by principals that are well-supported by the literature in the field. These actions also appear to be consistent with what practicing SLPs recognize as effective strategies that can be used by instructional leaders to deliver high quality STIs.

Methodological Considerations

For the purposes of this study, the author employed a descriptive (qualitative) design. Several sources of data were collected and analyzed. Data sources were coded and thematized to provide clarity and meaning for the reader. Also, several meetings were held to assist the researchers derive, organize and present the following actions in a way that they could be immediately implemented by practicing secondary school principals. In an effort to try to ensure a greater degree of practicality for the implementation of these strategies in the field of school administration, several currently practicing SLPs, secondary school principals and central office administrators were consulted. These consultations led to a greater degree of refinement of the proposed actions.

Principal Instructional Leadership

Principals in effective secondary school settings recognize that one of the most important responsibilities that they perform is that of being an instructional leader. Principal instructional leadership, though, has been conceptualized in the literature as both broad and narrow (Murphy, 1998; Sheppard, 1996). Principals' instructional leadership actions that indirectly impact student achievement that include, for example, the management of the day to day operations of the school setting are considered to be actions that are consistent with the broad view of instructional leadership. Conversely, those principal instructional leadership actions that directly impact student achievement such as the evaluation of teaching, teacher mentoring, staff development, and instructional collaboration are considered to be consistent with the narrow view. For the purposes of this article, the author employed the narrow view of instructional leadership. Specifically, it is proposed that those instructional leadership actions that secondary school principals perform that serve to foster and maintain collaborative relationships between SLPs, special education teachers, regular education teachers, school administrators, and university researchers result in the delivery of high quality services for students with speech language disabilities and likewise impact their overall academic achievement.

Effective Schools Research

Principals in effective secondary school settings also recognize the influence that decades-long research on effective schools plays in their role as effective school

administrators. For example, the work of Ronald Edmonds in the 1970s resulted in the identification of the first correlates of effective schools (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2007). These included: (a) strong leadership, (b) a climate of expectation, (c) an orderly but not rigid atmosphere, (d) communication to students of the school's priority on learning the basics, (e) diversion of school energy and resources when necessary to maintain priorities, and a (f) means of monitoring student (a teacher) achievement (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2007; p. 38). Subsequent research aimed at discovering additional characteristics of effective schools revealed the value of curriculum and instructional articulation and organization as well as collaborative planning and collegial relationships.

It is both the narrow conceptualization of principals' instructional leadership actions and the effective schools research which served as the basis for framing the current paper and also to provide a basis for the following instructional leadership actions that the author proposes will lead to the delivery of higher quality services for students with speech language impairments as well as stronger academic performance for these students.

University-School Collaboration

In several states, the evaluation of students in need of STIs rests mainly with public school districts' SLPs. These states also allows for the delivery of STIs by speech therapy assistants under the supervision of a licensed SLP. At the same time, many school districts are situated within a reasonable proximity to university programs that have authorization to train both speech therapy assistants and SLPs.

According to Apel, Brown, Calvert, Paul and Throneburg (2002) and Goldstein and Swasey-Washington (2002), school district personnel should actively seek university programs that are preparing speech therapy professionals as a means of improving the delivery of speech therapy services. For example, university researchers can assist the school's speech therapy professionals with the evaluation of their programs. These evaluations could then be utilized as a basis to spark a dialogue between regular education teachers, special education teachers, school administrators and speech therapy professionals to establish opportunities for the delivery of speech therapy interventions and evaluations during instructional time and within the natural classroom setting. It is believed that this collaboration can lead to more authentic student evaluations, more effective speech therapy interventions, and stronger student academic achievement. Additionally, these collaborative agreements give public school districts additional help in the delivery of STIs and evaluation services to their students while at the same time tapping into current day research methods and the expertise that university researchers can provide at no cost to the school.

Providing Staff Development and Training Opportunities

According to Ehren (2007), secondary school principals should seek to provide opportunities for speech language professionals to meet with regular education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators as a means of providing staff development and training sessions. During these sessions, SLPs can share therapy strategies that could be incorporated into the teaching in the classroom and provide additional instructional strategies for teachers to use with all students, in general and students with language disabilities, in particular. In doing so, teachers could also learn strategies through which they can assist SLPs with the delivery of speech therapy services. Secondary principals should also seek collaborations between SLPs and elective teachers and physical education teachers to make all teachers aware of these strategies. Inevitably, this can only lead to the enhancement of the teaching and learning process in secondary school settings.

STI in Natural Classroom Settings

Principals should provide common times for SLPs and classroom teachers as well as other special education personnel to meet as a team to plan for the delivery of STIs to students with language disabilities within the natural classroom setting as opposed to a controlled setting (ASHA, 1990). It is proposed that this arrangement (a) can help to ensure the enrichment of the services, (b) provide consistency in the delivery when not all speech personnel can be present, (c) lead to greater collaboration between the faculty and (d) also enhance the learning experiences of all students in the natural classroom setting.

Student Speech Evaluations in the Natural Setting

In many school-based settings, SLPs conduct student speech evaluations in settings external to the classroom (ASHA, 1990). These types of arrangements provide the SLPs with only a one-time limited analysis of the student's language skills. It is believed that while there is no doubt that these evaluations are conducted by qualified SLPs who are highly trained and specialized to determine the degree of the speech language disability, there is always the possibility that the reliability of such evaluations could be highly enhanced if they were conducted in more natural settings. Compounding this problem further is the fact that traditional methods of speech language evaluations cause the school principal to develop a perception of the SLP's work as that which is highly removed from the teaching and learning process which is the organizational core of all schools. However, there is nothing to prevent principals, teachers, and SLPs from working together to evaluate and deliver the speech language services that are needed. As such, the authors support the belief that principals should purposely plan and seek avenues of collaboration between all school personnel to ensure a higher degree of quality for the delivery of STIs. These collaborations should not only be seen as being in the best interest of the students but also for the schools that they attend.

School-Based Speech Therapy Clinics

Faucheux and Oetting (2001) suggest that in addition to establishing collaborative speech therapy services in schools, principals can help SLPs further enhance their practice by working to commit school or school district funds for the establishment of school-based speech therapy clinics. In some middle school settings in which the principals have worked collaboratively with SLPs to establish clinics within the school, the administrators have seen student performance on standardized tests increase by 20 percentage points as well as an increase in these students' grade point averages (Faucheux & Oetting, 2001). Additionally, student participants in the lab also reported positive attitudes to the interventions and these students also appeared to display higher levels of self-esteem.

Conclusion

The challenges of delivering speech language therapy services to students in secondary school settings has reached alarming levels of complexity. This can be attributed to the increasing number of students qualifying for the services as well as the number of speech language professionals that are needed to deliver the services. Compounding this problem further are current school structures that for years have traditionally promoted the delivery of these services in isolation. Through the promotion and establishment of non-traditional structures which promote the development of collaborative agreements between principals, SLPs, regular and Special Education teachers, the author suggests that secondary school principals will be in a better position to situate their schools is such a way that ensures the delivery of high quality speech therapy services to not only students with speech impairments but also to all students in the schools that they lead.

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