

## **A Comparison of Practical Leadership Skills of Principals and Assistant Principals**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As the number of public schools continues to increase, so does the need for qualified principals. The purpose of this study was to determine if the assistant principalship adequately prepares individuals for the role of the principalship by comparing principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification on practiced leadership skills as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire. Although, the assistant principalship appears to be receiving better training and experiences to assume the principalship than in the past, there remains room for growth in this critical professional development area.

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Based on Texas state enrollment data from 1998, there were 7,673 public instructional institutions, including all high school, junior, intermediate, middle, elementary, and alternative schools, (Texas Education Agency, 2010; Texas Education Agency, 2011). In the summer of 2011, the total number of public schools in Texas increased to 8,526 (Texas Education Agency, 2010; Texas Education Agency, 2011). Each of these public institutions is headed by a principal.

The spike in the number of public schools from 1998 to 2011 indicates a need for qualified principals to run these schools.

There is a significant amount of research concerning organizational and leadership theory in reference to the best way to run an organization in general (Hackett & Hortman, 2008; Johnson, Aiken, & Steggerda, 2005; Nelson, Low, & Hammett, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2006). However, when these theories are applied to schools, a special lens needs to be used in their evaluation and application. Sergiovanni (2006) stated, "Schools need special leadership because schools are special places" (p.1). Schools are distinctive organizations because of the children they serve, and therefore, require leadership unique to the needs of schools. The purpose of the school leader, the principal, is one of moral and ethical responsibility (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 79).

Sergiovanni stated it best when he described the singularity of schools in relation to organizational theory. He said,

Schools are places where children and young people struggle to achieve the necessary developmental growth and to accumulate the necessary intellectual knowledge, practical skills, habits of mind, and character traits that will enable them to 'run the country' in just a few short years after they graduate from high school. (2006, p. 43)

School leadership hierarchy is typically centered around curriculum and instruction; and begins with the principal and ends with the classroom teacher (Brown & Rentschler, 1973, pp. 36-38). Terms being interchangeable, the traditional hierarchy begins with the senior leadership consisting of the principal/head, the assistant principal/vice-principal/deputy-heads, and instructional facilitators/deans of instruction, followed by middle leaders such as department heads/other coordinators, and ending with career teachers (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2005, pp. 15-18). While not always the case, ideally when a school's principal leaves, he/she will be replaced by the next in line for command, typically an assistant principal (Barker, 2006, pp. 277-280). The assistant principalship can be seen as the last training ground for the role of the principal (Yukwong & Walker, 2010, pp. 531-533). The assistant principalship is extremely important in light of the continuous improvement efforts of schools, because assistant principals typically become principals.

### **Background to the Problem**

The assistant principalship has been professed to accomplish two important school related organizational goals: "to facilitate the effective administration of the school and to provide training opportunities for future school principals" (Goodson, 2000, pp. 56-57). The purpose of this study was to determine if the assistant principalship adequately prepares individuals for the role of the principalship by comparing principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification on practiced leadership skills as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire. Current campus administrators in Texas public schools are required to hold an EC-12 principal (or equivalent) certification among other requirements; this includes principals and assistant principals. The assistant principalship is one of the least researched topics in education, which may contribute to a lack of professional development for new campus administrators (Fields, 2002; Goodson, 2000). The lack of research into the assistant principal's role in educational leadership "allows for ineffective use of this position as a leadership development tool and makes it a particularly difficult role to fulfill" (Fields, 2002, p.

43). This research seeks to add to the limited literature on assistant principals by comparing principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification on practiced leadership skills as measured by Kriekard's competencies questionnaire.

What we know of the principalship is that it requires more than a focus on teaching practices and learning strategies, but also "requires individuals to be future oriented, open to a morphing educational climate, and the ability to use the symbolic and cultural aspects of schools to produce excellence" (Madden, 2008, pp. 2-7). Yet, research indicates that the assistant principalship position does not provide adequate training or preparation for the principalship (Brown & Rentschler, 1973; Fields, 2002; Goodson, 2000; Mertz, 2000; Worner & Stokes, 1987). While on the job training has its merits, this study was interested in the comparison of leadership skills practiced by principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification in the areas of management of schools, leadership in staff personnel, community relations, instructional leader, student activities, pupil personnel, and total competencies as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire.

Murdock (2006), Murdock, White, Hoque, Pecotte, and You (2003), and Murdock, Hoque, Michael, White, and Pecotte (1997) have noted the growing Hispanic population in Texas public schools and connected it with the need for solid leadership in Texas schools to address the particular challenges this growing population brings. The research has indicated that by 2040, the Hispanic population will be the largest ethnic population with the least education and most dependence on social/government assistance programs. Texas Education Agency (2012) data indicates that the Hispanic student population has the second lowest achievement rate on state assessments and the largest number of individuals, who are not meeting college readiness standards. It is imperative that public schools have strong leadership in order to "provide an appropriate and relevant education for this rising Hispanic population" (Murdock, 2006, pp. 137-148). Individuals who assume the principalship need to be ready to take on the challenges of the rising Hispanic population and have experience in closing the achievement gap with this sub-group (Murdock, et al., 2003, pp. 160-168).

Dufour (1999) believes the principalship requires: leadership with a shared vision and values, the ability to empower stakeholders to take action toward the accomplishment of goals, the ability to measure themselves on their ability to achieve goals, the ability to provide teachers with information, training and parameters to make good decisions, and the ability to provide guidance toward organic solutions (pp. 12-17). It is assumed that assistant principals are developing the knowledge and skills necessary to live up to these requirements. However, research suggests that the assistant principal position is a poor training ground for the principalship and lacks the associated instructional leadership qualities needed to lead a successful school (Brown & Rentschler, 1973; Fields, 2002; Goodson, 2000; Mertz, 2000; Worner & Stokes, 1987).

The assistant principalship is a crucial position in schools and is seen as the primary training ground for the principalship (Madden, 2008, pp. 2-7). While this sentiment is resounded anecdotally in many schools, the question is the same: are assistant principals being prepared to assume the principalship? The purpose of this study was to determine if the assistant principalship adequately prepares individuals for the role of the principalship by comparing principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification on practiced leadership skills as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire. By this comparison of skills practiced, it can be determined what skills the assistant principalship develops and needs to develop for the principalship. School districts can use this research to help

rectify deficiencies in the skills assistant principals are acquiring and need to acquire in order to be successful future principals. The null hypotheses for this study was: There are no significant differences between principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principalship certification on practiced leadership skills in the areas of management of schools, leadership in staff personnel, community relations, instructional leader, student activities, pupil personnel, and total competencies as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire.

This study was delimited to the geographic region of South Texas. This study was delimited to principals and assistant principals who hold the EC-12 principal certification and the leadership skills they practice that are important to certification. The study was also delimited to the principals' and assistant principals' skills as measured by Kriekard's (1985) competencies questionnaire.

This research is a pre-experimental quantitative study using a survey design and a static-group comparison with two non-equivalent groups. The survey was mass distributed to campus administrators who held the EC-12 principal certification across South Texas using Survey Monkey. This included over 800 campus administrators (Texas Education Agency, 2010). An e-mail giving the basic explanation of the research was sent out with a link to Survey Monkey. There were separate links for administrators who were principals and administrators who were non-principals, though the surveys were similar. The respondents were sent reminders to complete the survey by e-mail; after two weeks. The response rate was 16.1% with 129 respondents, and the researcher utilized all responses received (Van Voorhis & Morgan, 2007, p. 44).

### **Instrumentation/Reliability/Validity**

A questionnaire, which was originally used by Kriekard (1985), adopting a five-point Likert scale format, was utilized. Kriekard developed this survey using information from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Principals' Task Inventory, the Performance Evaluation of Education Leaders (PEEL), and a competency listing for principals developed by Norton and Kriekard (1987) in 1980. The questionnaire developed covered six competencies of principals: "management of the school, leadership in staff personnel, community relations, instructional leadership, student activities, and pupil personnel" (Kriekard, 1985, pp. 66-73). Kriekard, for his study, had alphas ranging from .85 to .93.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive and inferential statistics in the form of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized to compare variables (French, Macedo, Poulsen, Waterson, & Yu 2008).

## Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

### *Descriptive Statistics for Positions by Item*

Leadership Skills	M	SD	M	SD
<u>Management of Schools</u>				
Organizes, coordinates, & delegates authority	1.2	.08	1.7	.12
Understands and accepts scope of authority	1.2	.12	1.3	.07
Assumes responsibility for the development and/or completion of reports, records, and written communication desired or required to facilitate the work of the school and school district	1.4	.14	1.3	.08
Sets standards, communicates and monitors standards for orderly maintenance of school facilities	1.4	.13	1.5	.09
Reports on nature and cleanliness of the building and its maintenance to district	1.4	.10	1.7	.11
Requests and pursues districts or central resources for maintenance and repair of school plant	1.6	.16	1.8	.13
Coordinates and oversees use of facilities by community groups (ex. Church, recreation, or other purposes)	1.9	.15	2.4	.18
<u>Leadership in Staff Personnel</u>				
Selects, assists, supervises, and evaluates both certified and classified personnel	1.2	.08	1.3	.07
Deals with conflicts that arise among teacher-student-parent-support staff relationships	1.1	.06	1.4	.10
Follows established district procedures for selection of new staff members	1.1	.05	1.5	.13
Makes decisions involving faculty member and/or other staff personnel where appropriate	1.1	.06	1.5	.16
Accepts responsibility for the evaluation of staff competence	1.1	.07	1.4	.07
Observes teachers' classroom performance for the purpose of evaluation and/or feedback to teacher	1.2	.07	1.3	.07
Uses systematic and effective evaluation procedures	1.4	.10	1.4	.08
Provides feedback to teachers concerning their performance	1.3	.08	1.3	.08
Evaluates the job performance of custodial, secretarial, or other support staff	1.3	.08	1.5	.12
Establishes orientation for new teachers/staff	1.3	.09	1.6	.10
Encourages involvement of staff professional organizations and supports involvement in workshops and classes	1.5	.11	1.8	.14
Participates in professional growth activities, attends professional meetings, reads professional journals, takes classes, or attends seminars on relevant topics	1.3	.09	1.5	.11
Assumes personal responsibility for his/her own professional development	1.3	.09	1.4	.07
Encourages the staff to develop, pursue, and continually evaluate its major educational goals and specific objectives	1.3	.08	1.5	.10
<u>Community Relations</u>				
Deals with community groups in a manner that promotes better understanding and goodwill	1.6	.09	2.1	.16
Communicates effectively with parents and other school patrons to secure favorable understanding and support for the school and its program	1.3	.09	1.4	.08
Seeks to know the parents and to interpret the schools program to them	1.4	.10	1.5	.08

Uses various methods for making positive contact with the community	1.5	.11	1.9	.15
Communicates with the public the nature and rationale of various school programs	1.6	.10	1.8	.15
Demonstrates professional leadership in the community	1.4	.09	1.7	.14
Participates in various community agencies and concerns not solely academic	2.4	.18	3.0	.18
Responds to requests for input or ideas on various community programs and activities not directly involving the school	1.7	.13	2.7	.18
Responds to requests for information or help from various community groups, agencies, etc.	1.8	.12	2.6	.19
<u>Instructional Leadership</u>				
Initiates activities to improve instruction	1.3	.10	1.6	.10
Keeps oneself informed about new techniques and how they might affect various staff elements	1.4	.10	1.6	.09
Facilitates staff involvement in program development	1.6	.12	1.8	.12
Encourages staff to search for and implement new programs	1.5	.10	1.7	.12
Constantly works to equalize educational opportunities for all students	1.3	.10	1.6	.09
Contributes to the definition and clarification of the educational goals and objectives of the school district	1.5	.15	1.6	.10
Serves on district-level curriculum and policy committees	1.9	.17	2.8	.20
Prepares and implements the master schedule	1.5	.16	2.2	.17
Resolves conflicts in class schedules, works with data processing, and teacher to effect solutions	1.4	.11	2.0	.16
<u>Student Activities</u>				
Supervises and administers student organizations	1.6	.12	1.9	.18
Develops and coordinates students activities (athletics, debates, academic UIL, etc. with other schools in and out of the district)	1.9	.13	2.2	.18
Reviews the number and nature of student activities or establishes a system to review and eliminate or add activities	1.8	.13	2.4	.19
Meets with leaders of student organizations	1.8	.13	2.4	.19
Encourages and secures parent involvement in student activities as participants and chaperones	1.8	.13	2.3	.19
Confers with coaches and other activity leaders to insure space, time, and resource requirement for various activities	1.8	.15	2.0	.18
Supervises and administers the extra-curricular programs	1.8	.13	1.8	.16
Plans facility use and maintains a master activity schedule	1.6	.14	2.2	.19
Assumes responsibility for development and implementation of necessary schedules involving students, staff, community facilities, and equipment	1.6	.14	1.9	.15
Approves, oversees, and works with student fundraising efforts/exercises	1.6	.11	2.5	.19
Assumes responsibility for students management procedures	1.5	.10	1.6	.12
<u>Pupil Personnel</u>				
Cooperatively establishes procedures for developing and maintaining a high level of positive student behavior	1.5	.09	1.3	.07
Organizes a system whereby discipline problems are handled	1.3	.09	1.3	.07
Monitors disciplinary actions involving students to insure the process is followed	1.3	.09	1.3	.07
Finds and develops programs to reduce absenteeism, tardiness, and behavioral problems	1.4	.11	1.9	.14
Manages and supervises the attendance procedures	1.5	.11	1.6	.12

Provides teachers with formal/informal procedures for keeping and reporting attendance	1.5	.11	1.6	.12
Provides for effective counseling and guidance services for students	1.6	.10	1.7	.11
Insures appropriate use of community agencies and refers students with special needs	1.6	.09	1.8	.15
Monitors the racial, sexual composition of student groups and the compliance of the school with the provisions of Title IX	1.6	.11	2.0	.16

\*M= Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

The Likert scale was scored as follows, 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. A lower Mean demonstrates a better practice of skills. For the following items there appeared to be a larger difference with Principals scoring better in the areas of: Management of Schools (delegation of authority, overseeing the use of facilities by community groups), Community Relations (promoting goodwill with community groups, participating in community agencies, giving input or help for community programs), Instructional Leadership (serving on district level committees, preparing a master schedule), Student Activities (reviewing student activities, meeting with student leaders, encouraging parent involvement, scheduling student activities, student fundraisers), and Pupil Personnel (reduce absenteeism). There was also a reverse with assistant principals scoring better in the areas of: Management of Schools (completion of reports in running the school) and Pupil Personnel (maintaining positive student behavior). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics responses per item, between principals and assistant principals.

A pattern appeared to have evolved between the two groups. While both groups' mean scores ranged in the strongly agree area, Principals scored better than the Assistant Principals in each leadership skill area. Both the Instructional Leadership and Student Activities skills set have a difference of four points, Community Relations has a difference of three points, Leadership in Staff Personnel and Management of Schools only a difference of two points, and Pupil Personnel has a difference of one point; in all instances the Principals scored better than the Assistant Principals. Data displayed in Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics responses between groups per leadership skill set, between principals and assistant principals

Table 2

*Mean and Standard Deviation for Sub-total of Leadership Skill by Position*

Leadership Skills	Principal		Assistant Principal	
	M	SD	M	SD
Management of Schools	10	3.3	12	4.0
Leadership in Staff Personnel	18	4.0	20	6.2
Community Relations	15	3.6	18	6.5
Instructional Leadership	13	3.6	17	5.7
Student Activities	17	5.2	21	9.0
Pupil Personnel	15	4.2	16	6.0

\*M= Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

### Inferential Statistics

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the Box test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices was significant and the homogeneity hypothesis was rejected,  $F(21, 14086) = 2.41, p = .000$ . Green and Salkind (2011) caution the interpretation of the Box's test, as a significant result may be due to violation of the multivariate normality assumption for this test. However due to the robustness of this test, the MANOVA was continued recognizing the possibility of the violation.

A MANOVA was conducted and significant differences were found between the two positions, principal and assistant principal, on the dependent measures, Wilk's  $\Lambda, F(6,70) = 2.25, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .16$ . The strength of relationship between the position of the administrator and Leadership Skill sets as assessed by  $\eta^2$ , was strong with the position factor accounting for 16% of the variance of the dependent variable.

Analyses of Variances (ANOVA) were conducted as follow-up tests to the MANOVA. When using the ultra-conservative Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the .008 level. The ANOVA for the leadership skill, Instructional Leadership, was significant,  $F(1, 75) = 11.2, p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .128$ . The effect size was .13, indicating that approximately 13% of the position was due to the Instructional Leadership skill set, which is considered a large effect size. The principals scored significantly better ( $M= 12.9, SD = 3.6$ ) than the assistant principals ( $M=16.8, SD =5.7$ ), meaning that the principals practiced Instructional Leadership skills more often. A strongly agree was recorded as 1 and a strongly disagree was recorded as 5. No other significant differences were found, however, when the less conservative method was utilized three other sets of significant differences were found (Leadership in Staff Personnel, Community Relations, and Instructional Leadership) with moderate effect sizes, as displayed in table 8 (see below). The ANOVAs, utilizing the ultra-conservative Bonferroni method, for Management of Schools ( $F(1,75) = 4.1, p = .046$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ), Leadership in Staff Personnel ( $F(1,75) = 4.4, p = .039$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ), Community Relations ( $F(1,75) = 6.1, p = .016$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ), Student Activities ( $F(1,75) = 5.1, p = .027$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ), and Pupil Personnel ( $F(1,75) = 2.0, p = .165$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ) were not significantly different because their significance levels exceeded the required level of .008; data displayed in Table 3. It should be noted that the effect size of all but Pupil Personnel can be interpreted as being of moderate size and therefore the conservative Bonferroni method might be questioned in this instance.

Table 3

*ANOVA using Bonferroni Method of Between Subjects Effects of Administrative Position*

Source	Dependent Variable	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$
Administrative Position	Management of Schools	1,75	57	4.1	.05	.05
	Leadership in Staff Personnel	1,75	131	4.4	.04	.06
	Community Relations	1,75	190	6.1	.02	.08
	Instructional Leadership	1,75	274	11	.001	.13
	Student Activities	1,75	308	5.1	.03	.06
	Pupil Personnel	1,75	56	2.0	.17	.03



## Recommendations

Results of this study may be beneficial to principals as they examine their role as a mentor to their assistant principals and other campus administrators. Specifically, the number of opportunities assistant principals have to practice and develop their Instructional Leadership skill set. Additionally, school districts can use these results to develop effective professional development activities, experiences, and mentoring programs for prospective and current campus administrators. Further, graduate programs in Educational Administration and Educational Leadership can use the results of this study to help assess the effectiveness of their programs especially as it relates to teaching leadership skills to its students and refine their practicum curriculum to help students gain leadership skill experience prior to graduation.

Finally, the Department of Education in states including Texas can use the results of this study to support administrative development programs at the state and local level that emphasize the development of campus administrative leadership skills. Conclusions of this study support that the assistant principalship appears to be receiving better training and experiences to assume the principalship than in the past, but there remains room for growth in this critical professional development area.

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