RESEARCH REVIEW

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Study focuses on principal practices that influence student achievement

▶AT A GLANCE

Principal practices influence student achievement, and identifying those that influence student achievement guides principal development and decision-making.

▶THE STUDY

Hitt, D. & Tucker, P. (2016). Systematic review of key leader practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(2), 531-569.

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In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Killion explores a recent research study to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.

▶WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

Twenty-eight principal practices arranged in five domains positively influence student achievement. Researchers unify three existing frameworks of concrete, research-based principal practices associated with student achievement into a single one for use by researchers and practitioners. This study identifies and synthesizes "peer-reviewed, empirical research on how leader practices influence student achievement, which, in turn, provides evidence on how school leaders should direct their efforts" (p. 532).

STUDY DESCRIPTION

The study synthesizes and unifies over 40 years of research on principal effectiveness and its relationship with student achievement into a single framework that identifies 28 behaviors categorized into five domains. The emphasis on practices rather than characteristics makes this work particularly useful to those leading principal preparation and ongoing professional learning programs. The practices delineate specific "actions or 'bundles of activities' in which principals should engage each day to influence positive student outcomes, particularly learning" (p. 532).

QUESTIONS

Researchers sought to answer two questions in their extensive review of the literature on the impact of principal practice on student achievement. They are: "What are the findings from the field regarding effective leader practices, and how can these findings be synthesized to represent what we know in the aggregate?" (p. 542).

METHODOLOGY

Hitt and Tucker applied an earlier conceptual framework for conducting a literature review that is guided by a set of essential questions about purpose, concepts, sources, search procedures, data analysis, presentation of findings, implications, and limitations.

Their review of the literature between 2000 and 2014 resulted in identifying four frameworks, two from previous reviews of the literature. Three of the four frameworks were used to construct the new unified framework. They included the Ontario Leadership Framework, Learning-Centered Leadership Framework, and the Essential Supports Framework. The fourth framework failed to provide sufficient detail about practice beyond the domain level to be useful in identifying specific practices.

In the design of the unified framework, researchers analyzed 56 peer-reviewed empirical studies to verify the empirical base for each study and to cross-reference practices in the existing frameworks.

ANALYSIS

Researchers, based on their analysis

▶WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTITIONERS

This study provides those who lead professional learning for aspiring, new, or inservice principals the core content for their programs. Much of the previous research on principal effectiveness and its relationship with student achievement has focused on characteristics or attributes. This study emphasizes the practices to emphasize in shaping principals' daily work. It directly relates to several of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

Leadership: The first standard this study connects with is the Leadership standard. It emphasizes the practices of principals associated with serving professional learning of staff and being leaders of learning within their schools.

Learning Communities: This study also serves to highlight the significance of the role of leaders in creating the structures and supports within their schools to ensure that the culture promotes continuous learning and collective responsibility. This directly relates to the Learning Communities standard.

Outcomes: The third standard this study supports is the Outcomes standard. It delineates the essential content focus for professional learning on school leadership by identifying those behaviors that are associated with student achievement.

The use of this research for the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning for aspiring, novice, or practicing principals will require it to integrate all the Standards for Professional Learning to have its intended impact.

Two domains, Building Professional Capacity and Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning, delineate those practices of principals who contribute to the development of their staff and invest in their own. The behaviors associated with these domains emphasize how principals demonstrate through their actions their commitment to their own learning and their staff's. The practices included in these two domains are listed above.

DOMAINS AND PRACTICES MOST RELEVANT TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Building professional capacity	Creating a supportive organization for learning
• Selecting the right fit. • Providing individualized considerations. • Building trusting relationships. • Providing opportunities to learn for whole faculty to include leader(s). • Supporting, buffering, and recognizing staff. • Creating communities of practice. • Engendering responsibility for promoting learning.	• Acquiring and allocating materials and resources for mission and vision. • Considering context to maximize organizational functioning. • Building a collaborative process for decision-making. • Sharing and distributing leadership. • Tending to and building on diversity. • Strengthening and optimizing school culture. • Maintaining ambitious and high expectations and standards.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.

of the 56 empirical studies, cross-referenced the practices specified within each framework to understand their semantic variations, find common practices within each framework, and identify the outliers. All behaviors included in the existing framework were included in the new framework.

After examining the practices, the researchers clustered them into five domains and constructed new labels for the domains that accurately, yet succinctly, represented the overarching category of practices included. Researchers used three criteria for clustering the practices.

RESULTS

After examining the practices, the researchers clustered the practices (called dimensions) into five clusters (called domains) and constructed new labels for each domain that accurately, yet succinctly, represented the overarching category of practices included.

Researchers used three criteria for clustering the practices: the presence of the practice across all three frameworks, the indirect impact on student achievement through influencing the organizational context, and indirect influence on student achievement through influencing routines and responsibilities associated with teaching.

LIMITATIONS

Researchers acknowledge a few limitations in the study. Primary among them is the language used to describe and categorize the behaviors in the original four frameworks.

Hitt and Tucker may have inadvertently misinterpreted the language used within the original studies leading to a potential bias, they indicate. A concomitant limitation may emerge in Hitt's and Tucker's choice of language to describe their framework.

Another limitation is that the organization of the practices into five domains and the presentation of those domains may imply a hierarchy or significance to the practices when there is no desire to do so.

The study occurred concomitantly with the most recent revision of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. As such, the domains are not directly aligned with the new standards adopted in 2015. ■