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Principals' Strategies for Successfully Closing the Achievement Gaps in their Schools

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One of our greatest educational challenges is reducing the achievement gap between successful and less-successful students. The achievement gap is usually discussed in terms of dramatic differences in graduation rates and the academic achievement between white and minority students such as Hispanics (Waxman, Padrón, and Garcia, 2007). Research in this area typically looks at school districts and/or schools that do better than others in reducing the gaps between groups of students. There are fewer research studies, however, that focus on achievement gaps within schools and classrooms. These “within” school educational disparities often are greater than the differences between schools or school differences (Waxman et al., 2007).

Recently, there has been an increased interest on focusing on what successful school principals do in order to increase students’ academic achievement and graduation rates (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Schargel, Thacker, and Bell, 2007; Waxman, MacNeil, and Lee, 2006). Research has begun examining principals’ work, perceptions, and attitudes because principals’ behaviors have been found to influence student learning and teachers’ behavior (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). Several other major national and international studies also have highlighted the need to focus on principals’ perceptions and attitudes toward leadership (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Schargel, Thacker, and Bell, 2007; Sheen, 2005).

The present study examines the strategies that principals use to close the achievement gaps within their schools. Many current school-reform strategies and programs are developed by advocates of particular agendas rather than by school-based educators such as principals. Many principals, however, have experienced a great deal of success in their schools, yet often they are not listened to (Fullan, 2001, 2005). There are very few studies that focus on specific strategies or approaches that principals use in their schools to narrow the achievement gaps between their successful and less successful students. The present study, however, focuses on the importance of principals’ views and perceptions and examined the successful strategies they use to close the achievement gaps in their schools.

Methods

The data from this study is based on a larger project that focuses on public school principals’ attitudes and perceptions related to their leadership functions (Waxman, MacNeil, and Lee, 2006). A convenience sample of 311 principals from a large metropolitan area in the southwest region of the U. S. responded to a questionnaire (i.e., cognitive interview) that covered several topics including the strategies that principals found as successful in closing the achievement gap in their schools.

The questionnaire was administered by graduate students in the Educational Leadership program at a major, urban doctoral-granting university located in the south central region of the U.S. As part of the principal’s certification course requirements, students were trained on how to administer the instrument and required to interview a specific number of current public school principals. The survey instrument was designed specifically for this purpose and includes both qualitative and quantitative questions.

Principals' cognitions and perceptions have been found to be reliable and valid, and the use of cognitive interviews improves quality of principal responses (Desimonte and Le Floch, 2004).

A test-retest reliability of the instrument was conducted with a 10% sample of principals who answered the questionnaire a second time (after about a two-month period) and the results reveal a relatively high consistency of responses ($r = .86$). Inter-coder reliability also was conducted with a 10% sample for the coding of responses (i.e., categorizing of responses) and the results revealed a high level of agreement (Cohen's kappa = .94).

Results

Principals' responses were categorized in the following seven areas: (a) tutoring, (b) remedial, pullout programs or interventions, (c) effective teaching strategies, (d) analyzing achievement data, (e) teachers' professional development, (f) mentoring, and (g) parental involvement.

The most prevalent strategy that principals reported using was tutoring. Nearly a third of the principals (32%) indicated that they used a type of tutoring to narrow the achievement gaps in their school. They generally said that they used tutoring during school hours, but many said they used tutoring programs after school and several said they used them on Saturday. One principal, for example, said, "We used Title I, Title III, State Compensatory, and Accelerated Reading and Mathematics Funds to offer tutoring during school hours, after school, and on some Saturdays." Another principal said, "We tutor by objective. We look at the strength and weaknesses of each student and tutor students in their areas of weakness." Another principal stated, "We use Saturday tutorials to identify students' weaknesses and then match each student to their appropriate program of need."

The next most prevalent strategy reported by principals (22%) was remedial and pullout programs. One principal, for example, said, "We have several remedial mathematics and reading classes that we use for lower-achievement students." Another principal said, "Title I funding has allowed for additional long-term substitute teachers to teach a handful of students needing extra assistance through a pull-out program." Most of these remedial programs that principals reported focused on the acquisition of basic skills.

The third most prevalent strategy reported by principals (15%) was the use of effective teaching strategies. These included strategies like using individualized instruction, differentiated instruction, and small group instruction. One principal said, "The achievement gap issue has built up our knowledge of other cultures and trends as we look for ways to close these gaps. We try to look at teaching and learning styles in order to make learning more student centered." Another principal said, "Teachers need to be differentiating and teaching using the different multiple intelligences because everyone learns in different ways." Most of the teaching strategies that principals reported were student centered as compared to the traditional whole-class, direct instructional model.

Analyzing achievement data and focusing on specific student areas of weakness was another prevalent strategy reported by principals (14%). One principal, for example, stated, "The achievement gap will always exist, but we need to assign master teachers to work with those students who are most in need, provide them with additional time, and take a team approach to review assessment data and make appropriate adjustments. Another principal said, "We are using available achievement data to develop a plan to address the needs of low-achieving students." Another principal said, "We are

constantly providing teachers with achievement data that shows their students' strengths and weaknesses."

The remaining strategies reported by a few principals included (a) professional development (8%), (b) mentoring (4%), and (c) parental involvement (4%). In terms of professional development, several principals stated that they are providing more teacher professional development in their school. A few principals also mentioned that they have developed mentoring programs to help students' socio-emotional needs. Finally, for parental involvement, a few principals mentioned that they are providing classes for parents to help them learn how to help their children with reading and mathematics.

Discussion

The results from this study reveal that tutoring is the most prevalent strategy that principals report using to close the achievement gaps in their school. This is not surprising, however, given that tutoring is mandated under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Kimmelman, 2006). Principals also report the importance of using effective teaching strategies such as individualized, differentiated, and small group instruction to narrow the achievement gaps. These strategies may be especially effective because they are more student-centered and alleviate the detrimental effects of the direct instructional, "pedagogy of poverty" model that has been prevalent in many urban classrooms across the country (Haberman, 1991; Waxman, Padrón, and Arnold, 2001; Waxman, Padrón, and Garcia, 2007).

Some of the unanticipated findings we found were that very few principals reported using parental involvement to narrow the achievement gaps. We also were surprised that none of the principals mentioned using technology or technology-based programs as a catalyst for closing the achievement gaps in their schools.

Although there is ample evidence regarding the devastating effects of poverty on students' learning that accentuate the achievement gaps (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004), there also is research that indicates that principals' behaviors influence student learning (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). Many states, school districts, and individual schools are more effective than others in overcoming the challenges they face due to the students they serve who are economically disadvantaged (Greene, 2005).

Schools are experiencing success in a variety of areas, but these lessons are being learned at the individual level and "nobody else knows." The tacit and explicit knowledge being squandered is enormous (Fullan, 2001). Schools are not very good at sharing success strategies. Fullan (2001), Barth (2001), and others argue that knowledge sharing is generally not a core value in schools; schools have built up structural and cultural barriers to sharing. The present study of principals' perception of successful strategies for closing the achievement gaps within their schools has several implications for research and educational practice. Principals, for example, report a number of valuable strategies that they successfully use to close the achievement gaps. In addition to tutoring, the use of student-centered instruction may be one of the important "breakthroughs" that many principals are using (Fullan, Hill, and Crévola, 2006).

Further research should investigate if there are differences on the strategies that principals report by individual principal characteristics such as gender, years of experience, and ethnicity. Similarly, the

type of school (e.g., elementary or secondary, high- or low-poverty, high- or low-achieving) that the principal is in may yield interesting comparisons that are noteworthy. Finally, additional research is needed using more systematic, randomized samples as well as longitudinal and experimental designs that can test whether these reported strategies actually reduce the achievement gaps within school.

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