

Principals' Perception of Their Roles as Curriculum Leaders: A Comparison of High, Middle and Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine principals' perceptions of their roles as curriculum leaders in high, middle and elementary school levels. This study employs a qualitative design with direct personal interview technique to collect data. Principals from twenty-two high schools, twenty-four middle schools, and thirty-six elementary schools from five school districts in the Atlanta area participated in the study. The research instrument was researcher-constructed with reference to current literature of school curriculum leadership. Principals' responses were coded by categories of curriculum development, organization, implementation, evaluation, and improvement. Emerging themes and recurring patterns of principals' responses were observed. The findings show that principals' perceptions of their curriculum leadership roles had more in common than difference among school levels in all the categories of curriculum development, organization, implementation, evaluation, and improvement.

Introduction

School principals play a significant role in developing, organizing, implementing and evaluating school curricula to ensure that the curricula meet all the student needs. A school principal's role as a curriculum leader has become more and more important because of the accountability movement, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, and budget cuts at all levels (Finkel, 2012). School curricula need to be challenging enough to engage students in the learning process and motivate them to meet high levels of academic achievement (Roelke, 1996). Besides, school principals need to check that the school curricula cover the contents of the mandated statewide testing at all school levels (Ediger, 2014). Wiles (2009) claimed that school curriculum leadership is shared among principals, assistant principals for curriculum, team leaders, department heads and lead teachers. Weber (2010) listed five reasons for the need of curriculum leadership at school: Curriculum leadership provides opportunities: 1) to clarify curriculum issues; 2) to develop and empower future leaders; 3) to support continuous improvement; 4) to establish learning goals; 5) to improve alignment.

To be an effective curriculum leader, a school principal needs to be knowledgeable about past and present curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Glasper, 2018). Glatthorn and Jailall (2009) also addressed that "strong, intentional leadership in curriculum development is a necessity for strong instructional leadership" (p. 188). Other daily initiatives a school principal could take to be an effective curriculum leader include: learning from other school leaders; making time for classroom observations; and creating open dialogues with parents and staff (Adkins-Sharif, 2019).

This study will disclose the self-perceptions of school principals in their roles as curriculum leaders. Through the findings of this study, the roles of the principals as curriculum leaders at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels will be better clarified with reference to their current practices. The findings of this study will also assist policy makers and educational leadership preparation programs in examining the strength of components on curriculum leadership within their programs of high school, middle school and elementary school leadership. Through the principals's self perceptions from different school levels, practitioners will have a better understanding of the foci of responsibilities at the school level to which they are assigned.

The following major research question served as a guide to the development of the study:

- How do high school, middle school and elementary school principals perceive their roles as curriculum leaders in curriculum issues of their respective levels?

The following research sub-questions are also developed in support of the major research question:

- How do high school, middle school and elementary school principals perceive their roles as curriculum leaders at their respective school levels in the area of:
 - a. Developing curriculum?
 - b. Organizing curriculum?
 - c. Implementing curriculum?
 - d. Evaluating curriculum?
 - e. Improving curriculum?
 - f. Supporting faculty?
 - g. Acquiring curriculum resources?
 - h. Involving community in curriculum issues?
 - i. Identifying outstanding curriculum?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of the school principals concerning development, organization, implementation and evaluation of school curriculum relating to their roles as curriculum leaders in high school, middle school and elementary school levels. Principals' perceptions at high school, middle school and elementary school levels will be compared to see if there are similarities and differences among them.

Theoretical Framework

The development of this study is based on the theoretical framework of perceptions originally initiated by Beatty (2022) and Erikson (1968). Their unique exploration of individual and comparative perceptions provide a solid foundation on which this study is designed.

The theory of Beatty (2022) on interindividual differences in perception states that differences in individual brain structure or factors such as culture, upbringing and environment have effect on the perception of humans. These effects on perception include individual's past experiences, education, values, culture, preconceived notions, and present circumstances. She summarizes the three major influences on social perception as the characteristics of 1) the person being perceived, 2) the particular situation, and 3) the perceiver. The theory of interindividual differences in perception is significant to this study because it supports the notion that each school principal's

unique background of education, experiences and cultural values influences his/her perception of the role as a curriculum leader in school.

Erikson's Theory of Human Development (1968) includes eight stages describing the physical, social, emotional and mental characteristics of each stage from early childhood to old age. Four of these stages relate to the children's stages of learning development. The *Autonomy vs. Doubt* stage and the *Initiative vs. Guilt* stage of child development (3 to 6 years old) display the learning behaviors of children in Pre-school to Kindergarten. The *Industry vs. Inferiority* stage of children development (6 to 12 years old) illustrates the learning behaviors of children in primary and elementary grades. The *Identity vs. Role Confusion* stage discusses children developmental characteristics in relation to learning in junior and senior high school levels (12 to 18 years old). Erikson recommended that parents and educators need to work with children in regard to the developmental characteristics of different stages to provide them with meaningful learning experiences. Erikson's development theory serves as a framework for this study because school principals as curriculum leaders work with teachers at different levels to develop curricula to suit the best of the children at different school levels.

Review of Related Literature

School Principal and Curriculum Leadership

A school principal's role to serve as a curriculum and instructional leader in school has been clearly identified by McDermott (1984) and Ediger (2002). The Wallace Foundation (2013) further developed the five key responsibilities of a school principal in playing his or her curriculum leadership role: 1) shaping a vision of academic success for all students; 2) creating a climate hospitable to education; 3) cultivating leadership in others; 4) improving instruction; and 5) managing people, data and processes. Glatthorn (1987) asserted, "One of the tasks of curriculum leadership is to use the right methods to bring the written, the taught, the supported, and the tested curriculums into closer alignment, so that the learned curriculum is maximized" (p. 4).

A principal as school curriculum leader will exert strong leadership to support the school dynamic curriculum by helping staff and any curriculum workers contemplate and select a curriculum design to suit the student needs (Dufour, 2002; Ediger, 2014; Garner & Bradley, 1991; Lee & Dimmock, 1999). To serve as an effective curriculum leader, Shellard (2002) has pinpointed that a principal must have skills in observation, analysis, improvement of teaching, learning theory, and approaches to instructional planning. Their curriculum leadership skills could be improved by professional development (Boston et. al. 2017; Townsend et.al. 2018).

Cole-Foppe (2016) studied the teachers' perceptions of school principals as curriculum leaders. The findings of the study indicated that teachers perceived principals to have devoted insufficient amount of time in school curriculum matters. The school principals in the study also concurred that they could have done more in their role as curriculum leaders. Cardno (2003), identified the factors that militate against the principals' curriculum leadership role were those of high administrative workloads and external agency demands. Alsaleh's study (2019) also disclosed that school principals' curriculum leadership role was hampered by centralized government structure.

However, Kleidon (2018) and Ng et al. (2015) found that principals felt that they were not well prepared to serve their roles as curriculum and instructional leaders even though they had received some training. In the study of Naidoo and Petersen (2015), principals mainly interpreted their roles and functions as school principals to be purely managerial. The findings of Sasson's study (2016) indicated school principals were only moderately involved in instructional

leadership activities. Shaked (2019) also reported that school principals demonstrated limited direct involvement in curriculum leadership.

A three-stage backward design curriculum model with school principal leadership was developed by McTighe and Thomas (2003). The three stages are identifying desired results, analyzing multiple sources of data, and determining appropriate action plans for student achievement. This model of curriculum leadership clearly outlines the principals' understanding and their duties as school curriculum leaders.

Principal's Role in Developing Curriculum

Principals need to carefully identify the unique needs of the local school, grade level, classroom, and individual student. Beach and Reihartz (2000) stated that principals play a key role in curriculum development as they prompt teachers to reflect on key questions and select appropriate activities for individual student needs. All the school principals are given the state core curriculum standards to comply in the development of curriculum. They are held responsible for leading their schools to tie their school curriculum to the state standards (Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012). Principals need to develop school curriculum based on data and resources to set the direction of their schools and improve instruction (Louisiana Department of Education, 2016). Oliva (2001) claimed that the school statements of aim and philosophy actually reflect the common needs of students. The five types of needs are: 1) the needs of the students in general, 2) the needs of the society, 3) the needs of special students, 4) the needs of particular communities, and 5) the needs derived from the subject matter (Oliva, 2001).

Principal's Role in Implementing Curriculum

Many authors favored the exercise of shared leadership in implementing school curriculum. Gaustad (1995) claimed that the principal should encourage and promote a cooperative, collegial working atmosphere. George (2001) supported the cooperative idea to secure a buy-in of the teachers through study groups, action research teams, vertical learning committees, and leadership teams. Fraint (2002) also thought that the cooperative approach would put traditional and nontraditional teachers together as a team in implementing the curriculum. But, Gideon (2002) was more cautious in taking the cooperative approach. He stated that teacher collaboration needed to be developed over time to be effective. School principals must encourage teachers to constructively use their team planning efforts to consistently renew or revise strategies over the course of the academic year. Mayfield (2018) and Zhang and Henderson (2018) found that the principals' collaborative efforts in curriculum issues would empower teacher leaders to co-lead the instructional programs at their schools, leading to robust changes in principals' instructional leadership practices (Thessin, 2019). It was found that school principals as instructional leaders adhered to the following practices: prioritizing classroom visits, helping teachers use data, acknowledging teachers' work, providing for teachers' professional development, working collaboratively with teachers, and distributing leadership to teachers (Sowell, 2018). In Hoyte-Igbokwe's study (2018) principals were found to provide professional development opportunities to teachers to facilitate curriculum implementation.

Principal's Role in Evaluating Curriculum

Six requirements were presented by Garner and Bradley (1991) for principals who want to evaluate and maintain dynamic curricula: 1) convey to others what has been accomplished; 2)

formulate an evaluation plan; 3) use multiple criteria for evaluation; 4) use evaluation to improve curriculum; 5) ask for teacher and student feedback; and 6) use the evaluation results to make modifications or adaptations in the curriculum. They stated that “the main purpose of evaluation is to collect data to assist in the determination of meeting goals and to assist individuals in making logical and defensible decisions regarding curricula” (p. 421). Oliva (2001) also agreed that curriculum evaluation help to determine changes that need to be made to the curriculum. Ittner, Hagenauer and Hascher (2019) studied school principals’ readiness for curriculum changes. The results of the study indicated that curriculum evaluation help principals to openly and positively implement the curriculum in school.

Differences in School Principalship

Principals’ perceptions of their roles and daily responsibilities in school could differ because of their racial and/or cultural backgrounds. Hagan, Shedd and Payne (2005) explained in their study that variation in principals’ perceptions of injustice could vary among different racial and ethnic groups. They asserted that, in comparing the perceptions of injustice, White Americans, African Americans and Hispanic Americans differ significantly because of the different racial and ethnic environments in which they are situated.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) explained the different reactions by school principals by referring to their principle of the situational leadership. The principle states that effective leadership style is task-relevant, and successful leaders are those who adapt their leadership style to the readiness of the individual or group they are serving. Effective leadership could be different depending on the task, job, or function that needs to be accomplished. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situational_leadership_theory - cite_note-hersey1977-3

In comparing principalship by school level, Wallace Foundation (2013) found that elementary school principals interacted more in the educational process than secondary school principals and that principals’ engagement in instructional leadership was higher in elementary schools than secondary schools. The same study also discovered that elementary school principals involved more with parents in the children’s learning processes than secondary school principals because parents in secondary schools were less engaged in school activities.

Summarizing the review of current literature, the authors found that there are few empirical studies on school principal perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as school curriculum leaders. Comparative study on the principals’ perception of their curriculum leadership by school level is none. It is important that the differences in roles and responsibilities as curriculum leaders at different school levels be clearly identified so that potential and practicing principals will focus on the specific issues of their school level. The significance of this study is justified.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative design by taking advantage of the direct personal interview technique as a means of data collection. Qualitative research investigates research issues of how, what, and why in situations calling for in-depth exploration to provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). These research procedures create descriptive data through individuals who express themselves in written or spoken words and observable behaviors (Hatch, 2002). This study solicits the school principals’ perceptions on curriculum matters at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels as they voluntarily participate to express their

feelings and thoughts toward curriculum leadership. The interview technique (the careful asking of relevant questions) is the most important data collection technique a qualitative researcher possesses (Fetterman, 1998). As it has been remarked by Patton (2002), researchers interview people to find out those things they cannot directly obtain through their personal observations. Through interviews, the researchers will have first-hand information about the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of the interviewees.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in high schools, middle schools and elementary schools of five school districts (four county districts and one city district) in the Atlanta area. The city district has a student population of 52,000 whereas the student population of the four county districts ranges from 93,000 to 180,000. The percentage of White students in all the school districts is approximately 45. Black, Hispanic, Asian and students of other races form the other 55 percent. (See Table 1 for school district demographics.) High schools (Grades 9–12) and middle schools (Grades 6–8) in the study are departmentalized whereas all the elementary schools are organized in self-contained classes. Besides the school principals, the assistant principals, the academic coaches and the department heads are also involved with curriculum administration.

Table 1

School District Demographics – Student Population and Race

District	Student Population	Race				
		White %	Black %	Hispanic %	Asian %	Others %
City	8,624	20	37	38	2	3
County 1	178,527	22	32	31	11	4
County 2	96,133	11	62	18	7	2
County 3	110,878	37	31	22	6	4
County 4	92,334	28	42	15	12	3

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement – Georgia School Grades Reports (2019)

Participants

A total of 82 school principals were involved in the study consisting of 22 from high schools, 24 from middle schools and 36 from elementary schools. They are all from five school districts in the Atlanta metropolitan area. The demographic information of the school principals are cited in this section for the readers' reference. Though the intent of this study is not to analyze the impact of these demographics on the principals' self-perception, the inclusion of the principals' demographic information will help readers have a better understanding of the principals' background so that we know what majority groups they represent.

Thirty high school principals were randomly selected from five school districts in the Atlanta area and were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-two (73.3%) of them agreed to participate in the study by face-to-face personal interviews. Of all the 22 principals, 12 of them (54.5%) were

males and 10 (45.5%) females. Fourteen of them (63.6%) were White and eight of them (36.4%) were Black. Sixteen school principals (72.7%) have had one to 10 years of experience as principal and six (27.3%) have had more than 10 years as principal. Sixteen of them (72.7%) have earned their Education Specialist degree in educational administration. Six of them (27.3%) have earned their Master's degree in educational administration. (See Table 2: School Principal Demographic Information.)

Forty middle school principals were randomly selected from five school districts in the Atlanta area and were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-four (60%) of them agreed to participate in the study by face-to-face personal interviews. Of all the 24 principals, 10 of them (41.6%) were males and 14 (58.4%) females. Thirteen of them (54.2%) were White and 11 of them (45.8%) were Black. Twenty school principals (83.4%) have had one to 10 years of experience as principal and four (16.6%) have had more than 10 years as principal. Ten of them (41.7%) have earned their Master's degree in educational administration. Ten of them (41.7%) have earned their Education Specialist degree in educational administration. Four of them have earned their doctoral degree in educational administration. (See Table 2: School Principal Demographic Information.)

Fifty elementary school principals were randomly selected from five school districts in the Atlanta area and were invited to participate in the study. Thirty-six (72%) of them agreed to participate in the study by face-to-face personal interviews. Of all the 36 principals, nine of them (25%) were males and 27 (75%) females. Twenty of them (55.6%) were White and 16 of them (44.4%) were Black. Twenty-five school principals (69.4%) have had one to 10 years of experience as principal and 11 (30.6%) have had more than 10 years as principal. Eight of them (22.2%) have earned their Master's degree in educational administration. Seventeen of them (47.2%) have earned their Education Specialist degree in educational administration. Eleven of them (30.6%) have earned their doctoral degree in educational administration. (See Table 2: School Principal Demographic Information)

Table 2

School Principals' Demographic Information by Level and by Category. (Participating principals from 22 high schools, 24 middle schools and 36 elementary schools.)

School Level	Gender %		Race %		Degree Earned %			Years as Principal %	
	Male	Female	Black	White	M.Ed.	Ed.S.	Ph.D.	1-10 Years	11 Yrs. or More
High	54.5	45.5	36.4	63.6	27.3	72.7	0	72.7	27.3
Middle	41.6	58.4	45.8	54.2	41.7	41.7	16.6	83.4	16.6
Elementary	25.0	75.0	44.4	55.6	22.2	47.2	30.6	69.4	30.6

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement – Georgia School Grades Reports (2019)

Research Instrument

The data collection instrument was researcher-constructed for direct personal interviews with the school principals. The contents of the questionnaire are developed with reference to current literature on school curriculum leadership. The instrument includes a principal's demographic data section and nine open-ended questions relating to the principals' roles in different aspects of curriculum leadership. Principals' demographic section was added because they would help

readers understand how their background could possibly influence their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as curriculum leaders. The first draft of the instrument was sent to a panel of six school principals, two from each school level, to check for the validity. They were asked to review the instrument against the purpose of the study and provide recommendations for improvement in the contents, the language, and the format of the instrument. As a result, the original 12 questions were reduced to nine. The language of the questions was revised per recommendations of the panel. School principals who served on the panel did not participate in the study. The final version of the research instrument is included in Figure 1 in the following.

Gender: _____ School Level: _____

Highest Degree Earned: _____ Years as School Principal: _____

Interview Questions:

A. How do you perceive as principal your role in the following curriculum activities?

1. Developing the curriculum
2. Organizing the curriculum
3. Implementing the curriculum
4. Evaluating the curriculum
5. Improving/changing the curriculum
6. Supporting the faculty
7. Acquiring resources in support of curriculum
8. Involving the community

B. What are the characteristics of an outstanding curriculum?

Figure 1. School Principal Interview Questionnaire

Data Collection

The researchers scheduled appointments to interview the school principals relating to their curriculum leadership in school. A copy of the questionnaire was sent to the principals before the appointments to allow the principals time to look up information and prepare the answers for the researchers during the interview. The hour-long interviews were audio-recorded. All the audio-recordings were transcribed by hand into written passages for review. For reliability purposes, the transcripts were cross-examined by the researchers for clarity and confirmation. The codes independently derived by different researchers were cross-checked for consistency of interpretation (Gibbs, 2007).

Data Analysis

All the principals' responses were examined by the types of questions asked and were coded by categories of curriculum development, organization, implementation, evaluation, and improvement. Open coding was used to examine, compare, break down, conceptualize, and categorize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The coding process breaks down or reduces data to manageable segments to generate themes and categories (Schwandt, 2007). At the completion of the interviews, codes were developed from data that were collected. The categories of codes were

carefully examined to gain general emerging themes and recurring response patterns of the school principals. For the purpose of reporting, all the school principals were identified by number. At the high school level, principals were numbered from H Principal 1 to H Principal 22. At the middle school level, principals were numbered from M Principal 1 to M Principal 24. At the elementary school level, principals were numbered from E Principal 1 to E Principal 36.

Results

The qualitative data collected in this study were systematically analyzed. As a result, themes from the qualitative data emerged to provide answers to the research questions of the study. The major findings of this study are presented in the following in the order of the research sub-questions:

Principal's Role in Developing the Curriculum

All the high school, middle school and elementary principals indicate that the school curriculum in Georgia is developed by the Georgia State Department of Education and passed on to the school district for implementation. The school district offices map the curriculum to ensure that it meets the standards before forwarding it to the schools. School principals usually play a supervisory and supportive role to make sure that the curriculum committees with all the department heads implement the curriculum by following the state and district guidelines. The principal's role is to check that the curriculum contents cover all the subject areas required for program completion (H Principal 11) while meeting individual student needs (H Principal 19; M Principal 3; E Principal 13).

Principal's Role in Organizing the Curriculum

The principal's role in organizing the curriculum is "to support head teachers in scheduling, pacing, matrix, mapping, and assessment issues of curriculum implementation" (H Principal 14). Most of the middle school and elementary school principals concur. School curriculum organization also includes "revising the curriculum areas for vertical and horizontal alignments to meet the student needs" (H Principal 13). Some middle school principals (M Principals 1 and 10) and elementary school principals (E Principals 4, 5 and 25) also agree. While high school principals urge the teachers to work with the state and district level specialists to seek for approval of curriculum organization (H Principals 4 and 7), middle school principals (M Principals 18 and 19) and elementary school principals (E Principals 28, 30, 34 and 35) remind teachers to meet the student needs in curriculum organization.

Principal's Role in Implementing the Curriculum

School principals at all three levels hold their teachers accountable for their instructional approaches while giving them leeway in achieving their goals (H Principal 8; M Principals 4, 5 and 9; E Principals 5, 10, 11, 18 and 20). As stated by H Principal 1, the three school curriculum implementation approaches are "expectation, pressure, and support." These approaches are clearly expressed by M Principal 24 as "Monitor implementation through direct teacher observation, web blogs, monitor student achievement with teachers, provide resources for teachers to find supplemental maters, staff development and support interdisciplinary units." E Principal 22 also agree by stating that "We implement the curriculum by providing professional growth for our

teachers, observation of good practices, evaluation of teacher performance, and by keeping teachers aware of alternative instructional strategies to meet the student needs.”

School principals at the elementary school level have emphasized that their curriculum implementation approach is unique (E Principals 2, 7, 8, 9, 16, 26, 27 and 32). Because of the one teacher classroom instructional setting, elementary schools have taken a team approach to curriculum implementation by establishing grade level teacher teams for discussing and sharing effective strategies to meet student needs.

Principal's Role in Evaluating the Curriculum

All the principals at the three school levels examine end-of-year state testing data for their schools to assess achievement of curriculum goals and objectives and state standards mastery. H Principal 7 also suggests the need for class observations to verify constructive classroom activities in high schools. Class observations are also confirmed by M Principals 5, 11, 16, 20 and 21 of middle schools and E Principals 14, 25 and 32 of elementary schools. The principals will provide feedback to the teachers after the observations along with recommendations for improvement if needed. Several high school principals feel that a part of curriculum evaluation is a review of how curriculum supports the goals and objectives of the school (H Principals 1, 2, 8 and 19). However, almost all the elementary principals are committed to grade level curriculum committees to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum in the teaching and learning process.

Principal's Role in Improving the Curriculum

Principals at all three levels have indicated that they do not have the authority to improve the curriculum forwarded to them from the state and the district. As stated by H Principal 13, his role is “to ensure that curriculum is implemented effectively and to voice their recommendations to the decision-making body.” H Principal 15, M Principal 5 and E Principals 20 and 25 also agreed to it. As in curriculum implementation and evaluation, principals and teachers in elementary schools take a team approach to discuss how the curriculum could be improved to better serve the students (E Principals 1, 4, 5, 7, 13, 20, 32, 33, 35 and 36). Principals help collect data to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and make recommendations for improvement (H Principals 18 and 19; M Principals 8, 14 and 15; and E Principals 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 27 and 33).

Principal's Role in Supporting the Faculty

Many school principals at the three school levels have made it clear that they support the faculty by making themselves accessible in responding to faculty requests. They visit classrooms and attend department meetings to provide feedback (H Principals 4 and 19; M Principals 18 and 22; E Principals 1 and 11). They also offer professional development opportunities to teachers for their pedagogical advancement to align with the school goals and objectives (H Principals 1 and 14; M Principals 19, 20 and 25). At the elementary school level, all the school principals lean heavily on promoting professional development as a way of providing learning opportunities for the advancement of the teachers' knowledge and skills.

Principal's Role in Acquiring Curriculum Resources

School principals support their teachers by acquiring resources they need for instructional activities. They encourage their teachers to use the state and district appropriations plus the local school activity funds (H Principals 7 and 9; M Principal 14; E Principals 3 and 16). They also look

at federal, state and local grants for funding student learning activities (H Principals 11 and 14; M Principals 1, 3, 9, 10, 14 and 15; E Principals 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12, 14 and 22). In addition, many elementary principals perform resource needs assessments and budgets. They are also busy working with school business partners and parent teacher associations for donations to support the needed student activities in curriculum implementation. As E Principal 25 puts it, "It's just a matter of involving the stakeholders and building partnerships with the community as a whole and establishing rapport and relationships with community businesses."

Principals' Roles in Involving the Community in Curriculum Issues

In general, school principals are devoted to promoting school and community relationship. H Principal 9 and M Principal 3 proposed a survey to parents relating to curriculum issues to understand the parents' perspectives. H Principal 22, M Principals 9 and 17, and E Principals 13, 21, 25 and 27 state that they invite parents to serve on curriculum committees. However, in matters of curriculum, school principals at the middle school and elementary school levels seem to work more actively with their communities than high school principals.

H Principal 4 even stated that parents are more interested in classroom instruction than school curriculum. In middle schools and elementary schools, principals are very busily connected with the school communities such as the school council, school partners, citizens advisory committees, parent teacher associations, and local government departments. They hold frequent PTA meetings, open schools and parent curriculum workshops to get the parents acquainted with the learning processes of their children at school. Monthly newsletters of school activities are delivered to parents to keep them informed of what is going on at school. Additionally, middle and elementary school principals indicate that volunteering programs are established in their schools to invite parents and community leaders to come and share their experiences with students in support of the school curriculum.

Principal's Indication of an Outstanding Curriculum

Principals of all three school levels consistently look for curricula that meet the students' individual needs (H Principals 13, 14, 15 and 20; M Principals 6, 8, 11 and 14; E Principals 3, 4, 7, 8, 15, 23, 32 and 35). As claimed by H Principal 6, two of the significant elements of an outstanding curriculum are "relevance and rigor." M Principals 2, 4, 12, 14, 18 and 24 also confirmed that an outstanding curriculum needs to be relevant to daily lives, in-depth and challenging to the students. E Principals 4, 7, 8, 10, 14, 20, 25, 26 and 34 also agreed that an outstanding curriculum needs to be rigorous and challenging to meet the needs of the students. Many middle school principals (M Principals 8, 9, 12 and 24) and elementary school principals (E Principals 10, 23, 29 and 33) emphasize that vertical alignment is an outstanding characteristic of the school curriculum at their levels. Some principals also indicate that an outstanding curriculum should consider the inclusion of global perspectives and the use of technology in all disciplines (H Principals 2 and 7; M Principal 11, 21 and 24; E Principals 10, 16 and 30).

Discussion

School principals in this study were very responsive to the interview questions and generated rich data for the study. The findings of the study were interesting and significant and are worthy of discussion as follows.

First, H Principal 19, M Principal 3 and E Principal 13 stated that curriculum development needed to achieve the goal of meeting the student needs. These special comments reflect the same viewpoints of Beach and Reihartz (2000) and Oliva (2001). Most principals in this study also claimed that an outstanding curriculum has to engage the students and meet their individual needs. Garner and Bradley (1991) stated that school curriculum needed to be evaluated to determine if the goal of meeting student needs is attained. Several principals in this study also agreed with Garner and Bradley.

Second, in curriculum organization, H Principal 13 recommended “revising the curriculum areas for vertical and horizontal alignments to meet the student needs.” Glatthorn, as early as 1987, asserted that the principal as the curriculum leader could bring the written, the taught, the supported, and the tested curriculums into closer alignment to maximize learning. Weber (2010) also identified the opportunity for improved curriculum alignment as one of the five reasons that schools need curriculum leaders. M Principals 1 and 10 and E Principals 4, 5 and 25 also strongly agree with Glatthorn and Weber.

Third, the findings of this study indicate that principals at all levels strongly support their teachers in curriculum implementation. They hold their teachers accountable for their instructional approaches while giving them the flexibility to achieve their goals. The three curriculum implementation approaches of “expectation, pressure, and support” by H Principal 1 are unique. These approaches are reflecting the collaborative effort between principals and teachers for successful implementation of school curriculum (Gaustad, 1995; George, 2001; Mayfield, 2018; Sowell, 2018; Thessin, 2019). The principals at all levels in this study promise to provide feedback to the teachers after the classroom observations. Oliva (2001) also urged principals to serve as mentors to the teachers. School principals at all three levels in this study support their teachers in searching for external resources for curriculum activities. They encourage their teachers to take advantage of the state appropriations as well as apply for other state, federal, and private foundation grants for professional development activities.

Fourth, with reference to an outstanding school curriculum, H Principal 9 in this study makes a strong point that the two significant elements of an outstanding curriculum are “relevance and rigor.” In addition, many school principals of all three levels in this study have expressed their far-sightedness in looking beyond test results as indications of curriculum success. They even explore the inclusion of student character, behavior, and life attitude development as the outstanding features of a school curriculum.

Fifth, the findings of the study by Wallace Foundation (2013) indicated that elementary school principals were more engaged with the communities in school curriculum issues than secondary school principals. This is somehow in agreement with the findings of this study that high school principals were less involved with the community in curriculum matters. However, middle school principals in this study were as enthusiastic as the elementary principals in involving the community in deciding on curriculum issues.

Sixth, the studies of Naidoo and Petersen (2015), Sasson (2016), and Shaked (2019) have indicated that school principals in their studies had limited involvement in curriculum issues. However, quite the contrary, school principals of all levels in this study have demonstrated their enthusiasm to serve as school curriculum leaders. This is shown in their exerted effort in supporting their faculty in developing, organizing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum.

Seventh, the situational leadership theory by Hersey and Blanchard (1977) explained the different reactions of school principals that effective leadership style is task-relevant, and effective leadership could be different depending on the task, job, or function that needs to be accomplished.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situational_leadership_theory - cite_note-hersey1977-3. The findings of this study have shown that school principals at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels could handle the curriculum issues at their school differently. This is in line with the situational leadership theory by Hersey and Blanchard.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to its design as a qualitative research of interview approach. Other research designs such as quantitative or mixed-methodology could yield different results. The study is also limited to the location of its research site in the Atlanta area. Studies involving larger geographical areas could make their findings more generalizable. Additionally, the roles of school principals as curriculum leaders in this study are examined through the self-perceptions of school principals. Perceptions from other stakeholders such as teachers, parents and community leaders could bring in additional viewpoints.

Future Research

Future studies could involve a quantitative approach or a mixed method approach to explore the principals' perspectives of their curriculum roles at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels. School principals from many states could bring in different viewpoints of curriculum leadership. Besides, consideration can be made to a cross country approach to compare school principals' perceptions of their curriculum leadership role at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels. Other studies could be designed to involve teachers, parents, students and community leaders in soliciting their perceptions of principals' roles as curriculum leaders.

Conclusion and Implication

The findings in this study have shown that principals in high schools, middle schools and elementary schools put individual student needs as a top priority in developing the school curriculum. They recognize that they need to follow the state core curriculum and the school district directions in curriculum implementation. However, the principals also know that there are windows for continued curriculum improvement through evaluation. Principals in this study have identified their strategies in working in partnership with their teachers for curriculum implementation and development. The findings of this study have further confirmed the different roles of the principal as a curriculum leader in school. Middle and elementary school principals pay more attention to vertical and horizon alignment of curriculum whereas high school principals check more carefully on the curriculum coverage of the graduation requirements. Additionally, elementary school principals employ a grade level team approach to curriculum organization, implementation and evaluation while high school and middle school principals are leaning on a departmental approach to manage school curriculum issues. Moreover, school principals at middle and elementary school levels seem to indicate more initiative than high school principals toward working with the communities in school curriculum issues.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that because of the difference of educational goals at the high school, middle school and elementary levels, school principals of different levels have expressed their perceptions of focusing on the tasks they are assigned to accomplish. In shaping the educational policies of different school levels, policy makers need to consider the findings of this study that represent the true voices of school principals at their own levels. In reviewing the

findings of this study, practicing and potential school principals can share these findings with one another to discuss the focus of the key curriculum issues that challenge their leadership.

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