Teacher Perceptions of Characteristics of an Effective Instructional Leader

Jessica Reese
Concordia University-Chicago

Denise Glasgow
Concordia University-Chicago

Art Safer
Concordia University-Chicago

Tamara Korenman
Concordia University-Chicago

This basic qualitative research study examined teacher perceptions of characteristics of effective instructional leadership. The purpose of the study was to determine what instructional leadership styles teachers identified as having the most impact on improving their own instructional skills. Previous research on instructional leadership has shown a gap in the teacher's perspective on the leadership styles they find most effective in helping them to learn. Eleven teachers with five or more years' experience working under at least three different principals participated in a semi structured interview research design. This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of the leadership qualities of their principal. The results showed that effective instructional leaders are principals who possess strong characteristics of both transformational and situational leadership.

Keywords: leadership styles, instructional leadership, teacher's perspectives

The purpose of this study was on teacher perceptions of the characteristics of an effective instructional leader. The study may lead to a better understanding between teachers and principals, and identify what teachers are looking for in a principal. This research study may also help teachers to understand the current roles of principals, which could lead to greater understanding and better relationships that foster collaboration to improve school outcomes and school climate. Teachers' perceptions of a principal's ability to be an instructional leader require that the principal possesses leadership skills that highlight their ability to lead change (Grissom et al., 2021). Baptiste (2018) found a direct correlation between principal leadership styles and work performance of teachers.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of the leadership qualities of their principal. The study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are teachers' perceptions of how principals adjust their leadership to meet individual teachers' instructional needs?

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of how principals lead teachers to improve their instructional skills?

Research Question 3: What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of principal leadership styles on teachers' motivation to grow as effective instructors?

Theoretical Foundations

The study utilized the theoretical frameworks of transformational theory (Farnsworth, n.d.) and situational leadership theory (Ghazzawi et al., 2019), According to Farnsworth (n.d.), transformational leadership is the ability to influence others to achieve a common goal. As an instructional leader, a principal works to create change in a building to improve student performance (Shaked, 2018). Imran et al. (2016) described transformational leadership as inspiring others to find new solutions. Duncan (2020) linked leadership influence to organizational climate. Leaders are looked upon to transform the atmosphere to achieve the work that needs to be done. School principals need to develop positive relationships with staff to create an environment of trust and willingness to change.

Situational leadership is defined as merging a directive with a supportive leadership style (Ghazzawi et al., 2019). This style requires leaders to discover the abilities of their followers in order to determine how much support each employee needs. School leaders should be fully aware of the abilities and needs of all their employees. Situational leadership involves developing relationships with individuals to create an approach for presenting information, delegating work, and providing feedback on success (Asana, 2021).

Review of Literature

Grissom and Loeb (2011) elaborated that by stressing that the effectiveness of the school leader was more important to the success of the school. Whitaker (1997) stated that part of being an effective instructional leader requires creating the environment that supports teaching and

learning through all aspects of a school building functions. Effective instructional leaders are needed to motivate teachers to improve their teaching and learning. It is not an easy task to encourage teachers to move away from the status quo. Therefore, it is important for principals to create an environment that is safe and encourages a learning environment of collaboration and cooperation amongst all parties involved (Alimuddin, 2010).

Transformational leadership was first introduced in 1978 by Burns. According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership is a process in which "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (p. 24). Baptiste (2019) added that transformational leadership is the ability to influence the behaviors of employees in order to affect productivity. The effectiveness of the school in carrying out the mission of change requires the school principal to be an effective leader (Bafadal et al., 2019). This in turn affects teachers' commitment, self-efficacy, and attitudes towards their job. The characteristics of a transformational leader include being able to motivate others to change, having highly effective communication styles, and the ability to influence others to change their way of thinking (Anderson & Sun, 2017).

In 1969 Hershey and Blanchard introduced the life-cycle behavior model. Later, this model transformed into situational leadership. This style requires leaders to change their management style based on the ability of employees and their knowledge base about a given task. The benefits of this style include considering both the individual and environmental needs (Walls, 2019). The person leading can be flexible. Instead of using a single approach for all, the leader makes modifications to suit the individual. Situational leadership focuses on how the followers perceive the behaviors of their leaders (Ruslan et al., 2020). Based on the need, the situational leader uses coaching, directing, delegating, or supporting to work with an individual at their level of need (Blanchard, 2008). Instructional leadership requires principals to work with teachers of various grade levels and years of experience. Unlike transformational leadership that is more structured, situational leadership approaches each situation with flexibility and levels of support for each individual teacher (Walls, 2019). Teachers need to learn and grow just as much as their students do to keep up with the latest best practices. Principals use situational leadership to meet teachers where they are by creating a supportive environment based on the basic needs of everyone (Ruslan et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

This study was carried out utilizing qualitative research design. Qualitative research is used to gain in-depth knowledge in a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using this design, the study explored behaviors and beliefs through in-depth interviews. According to Bhandari (2020), qualitative research involves collecting nonnumerical data, often by using "what" or "how" questions. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research focuses on the participants' personal perspectives and their own subjective views. This research design was chosen because it is useful in examining how people think about experiences and what meaning they create for them (Merriam, 2009). The study employed purposeful sampling because it sought to understand a central problem requiring rich details.

The purposeful sampling size for this study was 11 teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Creswell (2013) suggested collecting extensive details from a few individuals;

therefore, the researcher recruited from one local school district for ease of accessibility and known high principal turnover. A local school district with six elementary buildings was selected by the researcher. The district was a suburban school district 90 minutes from New York City in which most families commuted to work every day. The criterion of working under at least three principals was established to gather teacher perceptions of several leadership styles. Once potential participants responded, the researcher provided informed consent forms to be signed for participation in individual interviews.

The first form of data was collected through unstructured interviews. Using an unstructured approach allowed the researcher to deviate from the original script as needed to ask follow-up questions or request clarification. Since it is very important that the questions being asked to encourage the participant to share as much as possible about their experiences, the researcher designed the interview questions based on the study phenomenon to ensure that participants reported experiences that aligned with the research questions.

One-on-one interviews consisting of semi structured questions were the form of data collection for this study. Interviews were conducted via Zoom meetings. This format allowed the researcher to record the interview and collect a transcript of the interview. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and provided to the participant for member checking.

Eleven participants were interviewed using eight unstructured questions. Each question was aligned with one of three research questions. Before any interviews took place, participants signed a consent form that contained detailed information about the study. Each interview lasted approximately one (1) hour and was conducted via Zoom. This provided the researcher with both a transcript and a recording of the interview. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants in the presented data. Transcriptions from the interviews were sent to each participant to be checked for accuracy.

Once transcripts were checked by participants the coding process began. Through reading the interview transcripts numerous times, common statements and key words were identified to create an initial list of 21 different codes. These codes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Coding Table

Code	Meaning
B	Boundaries
CS	Consistency
V	Vision
TM	Teamwork
ID	Individuality
CL	Climate
CN	Confidence
D	Dictates
IK	Instructional knowledge
OD	Open door
CM	Communication
L	Listener
M	Motivated

Code	Meaning
FD	Feedback
S	Supportive
T	Trust
P	Professionalism
MD	Modeling
TF	Teacher first
SL	Shared leadership
C	Collaboration

The coded data was then examined for emerging patterns based on common statements or key phrases. Key themes and subthemes were developed to help identify important information that was used to create an outline of participant statements.

Participant's Demographics

Table 2 lists the teachers' years of experience, the number of principals they worked under, and how many districts they worked in.

Table 1
Participants

	Years of Experience	Number of Principals Worked Under	Number of Districts Taught In
Mary	34	11	4
Tina	23	3	1
Linda	15	3	1
Beth	25	8	2
Carol	27	14	4
Sue	30	6	2
Ann	14	4	1
Nancy	34	8	1
Wendy	19	6	1
Ellen	30	11	1
Kate	22	8	4

Results

Embedded in the three research questions were three themes and eight subthemes that emerged from the data analysis from the participant transcripts. The first theme was *leadership characteristics.* Having a clear vision, leadership styles, and professionalism were the subthemes under leadership characteristics. The second theme was based on *instructional growth*, with motivation and feedback as the subthemes. The last theme was *building community*; climate and culture, support, and teamwork were the corresponding subthemes.

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of how principals adjust their leadership to meet individual teachers' instructional needs?

Participants identified many different leadership styles that led them to feel successful in having their instructional needs met. It is important for teachers to feel that they are being treated as individuals, and the feedback, support, and resources provided by the principal are based on the personal needs of each teacher. This matches a situational leadership approach. Teachers also noted that their instructional needs were met when the principal's leadership style represented both situational and transformational leadership characteristics.

Theme 1: Leadership Characteristics

Teachers look for a leader who is firm with a clear set of nonnegotiable expectations. Tina said:

The leadership style needs to be warm and welcoming and understanding and firm. You know, a nonnegotiable drive for improvement and effective skills in a classroom to ensure every student grows.

Subtheme 1.1: Clear Vision

Teachers want to know their principals' vision and expectations. They want a principal who models clear expectations for all. Teachers expressed the need for a principal to clearly communicate exactly what they want and to follow through with ideas and initiatives.

Ellen believes her ability to improve instruction is affected by the principal having realistic expectations. What occurs in the classroom changes daily, if not minute to minute. A principal who is respectful of these challenges is one who still remembers what it is like to be in the classroom.

Subtheme 1.2: Leadership Styles

The teachers were very confident about which leadership styles supported them and helped them to grow. Leaders need to be confident, creative, and consistent. Principals recognizing and adjusting to the differences between teachers and their needs was very important.

Two teachers reported struggling with the concept of the principal as an instructional leader. Ellen feels that she is the instructional leader because she is the one in the classroom every day, leading instruction. After clarifying how and why a principal is an instructional leader,

Ellen stated, "I would see the instructional leader as someone who leads the instruction of the teachers in our building and brings in new ideas."

Subtheme 1.3: Professionalism

Professionalism in some form was discussed by each of the 11 teachers. They stressed the need for boundaries and consistency regarding what is expected of teachers. When discussing professionalism, participants always linked it to a negative experience.

Having boundaries is a large part of being professional. Carol feels that the more modern principals today want to try to be friends with their staff. She had a principal who wanted to be "girlfriends" with everyone. Carol claims to be "old school," and prefers a boss "who is over me." Carol wants a leader who sets the boundaries by being nonjudgmental and disregarding public opinion. She wants an independent thinker who is not influenced by everybody. She stated, "It's not a popularity contest."

RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions of how principals lead teachers to improve their instructional skills?

The participants' responses mentioned very specific principal actions that had both positive and negative effects on teachers' ability to improve instruction. Feedback considered not constructive and/or negative in nature hinders teachers' ability to grow. On the other hand, honest feedback from the principal (including what needs to be improved and how to improve) has the greatest impact on teachers. It is also important for teachers to feel confident that their instructional leaders believe in them by giving them time to improve, model what they want, and recognize their efforts. Many situations that teachers experienced negatively affected their ability to improve their instructional skills. Teachers do not respond well to someone who lacks the experience or credibility to lead them. Someone with little or no teaching experience who rises to a position of authority does not have the skills or background knowledge to truly understand what it is like to be a teacher. Principals who lack clearly defined professional boundaries are also a deterrent to teachers' growth. Several teachers described how principals who want to be friends with the staff lack the ability to be objective. This creates strife and division amongst the staff.

Theme 2: Instructional Growth

A pattern quickly emerged among all participants about what they need to grow instructionally. Teachers expressed the need to be able to trust the principal. Principals must have an open-door policy and must be available when needed. Teachers also expressed a desire to feel that principals in turn trusted them to do their job and do what was best for students.

Subtheme 2.1: Feedback

Teachers found feedback to be both powerful and important. Whether it is positive or negative, teachers rely on having feedback to grow as a professional.

Feedback was mentioned as a strong need for eight of the participants. Constructive criticism is welcome, and teachers feel that guidance and support help to make them better teachers. Teachers want a principal who uses evaluations the way they are supposed to be used. Linda has experienced evaluations in which the principal did not have any feedback to give. The principal felt that everyone was learning so everything must be great. Ellen says she has had past principals who used the evaluations to "attack me personally and say how much they don't like me."

Subtheme 2.2: Motivation

Teachers identified feeling motivated when they are being heard, feeling like part of the team, and a principal who has a collaborative approach. Motivation had connections to leadership styles and feelings that a principal believed in the teachers' abilities.

Carol described how a principal who motivated her was one who encouraged her all the time. She felt she could easily talk to him without judgment. He gave great personal and professional advice. Ann shared a story about a motivating experience she had with a principal. She does not like public speaking but felt it was something she needed to overcome. She felt confident when a leader encouraged her to try. The push was all she needed to feel tremendous pride afterwards.

RQ3: What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of principal leadership styles on teachers' motivation to grow as effective instructors?

All participants stressed the importance of having a positive climate and culture in a building, and pointed to the principal as the defining factor for creating either a negative or a positive climate and culture.

Theme 3: Building Community

Relationships formed by creating a positive working environment allow teachers to want to work alongside their principal. Half of the teachers maintained that they could still be effective if the culture of the building was negative, but it would be difficult. A principal who dictates was listed by several teachers as a top contributor to negative climate and culture. All 11 teachers worked with at least one principal at a school where they perceived the learning environment to be negative.

Subtheme 3.1: Support

Teachers shared a lot about the need for their principal to be available and visible. Teachers want a principal who is supportive and responsive to what they need in school and understands what goes on in their personal lives as well. Beth, Ellen, and Wendy want a principal who is supportive, and recognizes what it takes to be a teacher and to be their "cheerleader." Wendy talked about how hard and taxing it is to be a teacher. Principals need to recognize how much "we have on our plates. We really want to feel supported."

Subtheme 3.2: Teamwork

Teamwork and collaboration constitute a large part of teacher morale, motivation, and how they feel about the principal's instructional leadership. Leadership styles are heavily embedded within this theme.

Collaboration was a common theme among several teachers when they discussed motivation and personal instructional growth. Both Nancy and Mary expect an effective leader to demonstrate teamwork by creating an environment of give and take. Nancy felt that open dialogue helps to see the other's perspective and creates better mutual understanding. Beth expects the leader to collaborate with the staff in order to meet goals.

Part of teamwork is the ability to bring teachers to a common ground. Ann feels there is a range of teaching perspectives and it's hard to get everybody on the same page. Ellen and Ann pointed out that having a principal who brings new ideas and resources helps teachers to improve their instructional skills.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative research study on teachers' perceptions of characteristics of effective instructional leaders provided insights into what is needed for teachers to feel confident that their principal could improve their school through teaching and learning.

An interesting finding of this study was the lack of true understanding of the role of the principal as instructional leader. Teachers responded in terms of what leadership styles they prefer, how climate and culture motivates them, and the importance of being part of the dialogue for improvement. However, teachers did not share how the principal provides the training and professional development for improvement in instruction. In general, the principal was seen as the person who creates the environment in which teachers can be effective. These findings provide a layout for more discussions amongst teachers and principals to continue finding ways for all stakeholders to be effective.

The instructional leadership framework used in this study aligned very well with the three research questions and the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Effective instructional leaders are principals who possess strong characteristics of both transformational and situational leadership.

Implications for Practice

Among participants in this study, the years of teaching experience along with the number of principals with whom teachers have worked created a clear picture of what teachers want in an effective instructional leader. This study creates an opportunity for open dialogue amongst teachers and principals. Leadership styles, motivation, and climate and culture are all important to creating a shared vision within schools.

Aspects of both transformational leadership and situational leadership were identified in this study. A principal's approach to how they lead is highly influential in teacher growth and effectiveness. According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership is a process in which

"leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (p. 24). "Helping each other" is a key phrase. The study revealed the need for collaboration and teamwork for teachers to feel motivated to grow and try new approaches.

Situational leadership characteristics were also identified in this study. According to Ghazzawi et al. (2019), situational leadership is defined as merging both a directive and a supportive leadership style. This style requires leaders to discover the abilities of their followers to determine how much support each employee needs. Situational leadership behaviors are needed for teachers to feel confident that they are receiving the support they need personally to grow. It is important to recognize that all teachers need different levels of support, and that this support should be given in the form of feedback and how the principal communicates.

This study may be helpful for examining current trends in teacher retention and the lack of students choosing the teaching career path. Teachers in this study expressed the need to feel recognized for the hard work that goes on in the classroom and contended that they are not prepared for the current expectations placed upon them. One teacher even observed that she did not sign up for the current demands placed upon her. The results of this study need to be examined to determine if college teacher training programs are preparing future teachers for the real work that occurs in schools.

This study targeted the perspectives of teachers who have been in the classroom more than five years. The average number of years of service was 26. The teachers described positive experiences they had with leaders, but the negative stories they shared might offer a true picture of why schools are losing educators at an alarming rate. The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in previous research on instructional leadership from the teacher's perspective about the leadership styles they find most effective in helping them learn. Cansoy (2019) showed that teachers' overall job satisfaction and their involvement in decision making are closely related. Teachers expressed their need to feel heard and respected by being included in the decision-making process through collaboration with their principal. In a 2016 study by Callahan, teachers listed several reasons they were dissatisfied with working conditions. Lack of administrative support and decreased autonomy in the classroom were listed, both of which teachers reported in this study. The results of this study may help school districts and principals to adapt current practices to improve school climate, encourage greater collaboration, and improve school outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

A recommendation for a future study would be to replicate this study using different school populations. School districts of a larger size or in different parts of the country could provide different teacher perspectives. Diverse student populations and different socioeconomic classifications may provide different insights into the effectiveness of instructional leaders. Replicating this study with first-year teachers may also provide a different perspective that could lead to the creation of a different approach not only to teacher training, but also to principal leadership training. Another recommendation would be to replicate this study with both principals and teachers and include a focus group.

This study could be expanded to look at individuals who have left the teaching profession early. Current trends show a huge decline in individuals entering the teacher workforce and

leaving within a few years. Examining the reasons individuals leave the profession and how these relate to teachers' expectations of instructional leaders may provide insight.

Current trends also show a huge discrepancy among people of color entering the teaching profession. Replicating this study with current teachers of color may provide a different perspective about why teaching is not being chosen as a career by this and other targeted demographics.

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