A Longitudinal Analysis of Principals’ Instructional Leadership Behaviors

Introduction and Purpose: Educational leadership researchers and policymakers have firmly established that school instructional leadership is integral to school success (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Instructional leadership, defined here as “the practice of making and sustaining connections to the instructional unit (i.e., the interaction of teacher, students, and material) that enable instructional improvement” (Coldren & Spillane, 2007, p. 371), has recently garnered renewed research interest (Spillane, Parese, & Sherer, 2011) as the modern standards and accountability movement progresses with the advent of No Child Left Behind policies and the addition of federal Race to the Top provisions and incentives at the state, district, and school levels. The standards movement has been defined by the following characteristics: high expectations, curricular alignment and coherence, assessments to measure learning, decentralized decision-making, professional development, and accountability sanctions (Hamilton et al., 2008). It is not yet clear how increased accountability measures have affected principals’ instructional leadership behaviors (Normore, 2004). Research in this area, consisting of primarily small-sample qualitative studies of elementary, urban principals, and cross-sectional quantitative survey designed studies of principals (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Riehl & Firestone, 2005), reveals how principals have reduced academic rigor (Gardiner et al., 2009), focused more on basic skills and remediation (Ladd & Zelli, 2002), and have experienced a significant amount of role conflict and a perceived lack of control (Mintrop, 2012) as instructional leaders as principals attempt to assume more direct instructional control in their buildings to improve student performance in the accountability era (Millward & Timperley, 2010). While some limited research has been done to determine how instructional leaders have also been influenced by state policy contexts (Marks & Nance, 2007), district contexts (Datnow, 2005), and school-level contexts (Hallinger, 2011); such as building grade levels (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008), students’ socioeconomic status (Goldring et al., 2008), and geographic/demographic locations (Louis, Thomas, & Anderson, 2010) more study is needed regarding how principals’ instructional leadership behaviors have been affected over time during the modern standards and accountability era while considering multiple, overlapping, interactive, and interrelated factors of contextual influence at the state, district, and school levels. There is a gap in the literature, which requires more longitudinal investigation and complex analysis of principals’ instructional leadership behaviors, in a variety of contexts, during the modern standards and accountability era.

Research Questions: 1) What are the relationships between elementary, middle, and secondary public school principals’ instructional leadership behaviors, federal and state level standards, and accountability policies, during the development and implementation of No Child Left Behind; 2) Does this relationship represent a change, and to what extent, in elementary, middle, and secondary public school principals’ instructional leadership behaviors over time, from a period just prior to the implementation of No Child Left Behind policies (1995), to the most available wave of data collection (2007); and 3) Does this relationship between instructional leadership behaviors and accountability policy differ among elementary, middle, and secondary public school principals over time, according to their particular state/district policy environments, local school demographics, and geographic contexts?

Theoretical Framework: This study employs an antecedent direct-effects theoretical model of principals’ instructional leadership behaviors (Bossert et al., 1982; Knoeppel & Rinehart, 2008) which asserts that school leaders are influenced by many factors which could influence their behaviors, such as policy context, school and district context, and other professionally related variables of interest. Outcome measures are divided into a five domain instructional leadership
behavior model framework (Krug, 1992): defining mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting instructional climate. This study measures each of the five domain behaviors via the concept of organizational coupling (Weick, 1976), or the a principals’ control over the instructional unit (control levels termed as tight or loose), as an outcomes-behavior dependent variable measure (Orton & Weick, 1990) to explain principals’ behaviors and professional engagement with differing state and district levels of accountability (Marks & Nance, 2007) in a variety of school-level contexts (Pitner, 1988; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011).

Methods/Data sources: This longitudinal, naturalistic, trend design study uses four waves from two linked, extant, self-report, coded, restricted-use text-file data sets conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics; the Schools and Staffing Survey, or (SASS) (NCES, 1995/1999/2003/2007), and the Common Core of Data or (CCD), containing a national, stratified sample total of 9,893 principal respondents, from a sampling frame of 88,266 public elementary, middle, and high schools in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The SASS survey contains three linked independent, parallel, survey sub-sections: United States’ Public School Principals’ Survey Questionnaire Instrument, Public Schools Instrument, and Public School Districts Instrument. This data provides structure and common variables to analyze principal responses which are contained within states, districts, and schools; broken down by grade level, geographic location, demographics, size, and are measured across time at different stages of NCLB accountability policy evolution and implementation (Marks & Nance, 2007). Using selected data sources, theoretical frame, and previous research on school accountability and principals’ instructional leadership behaviors (Ladd & Zelli, 2002; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006), this study utilizes two-level hierarchical non/linear modeling (HLM 7) (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & du Toit, 2011) to analyze principals’ instructional leadership behavior outcomes (Cooley & Shen, 2003; Marks & Nance, 2007), and determine principals’ tight or loose coupling instructional leadership behavior levels at the building level (Orton & Weick, 1990). A total of 47 survey question item variables taken from the SASS are organized by the researcher into five separate domain specific, instructional leadership outcome dependent variable clusters (Krug, 1992). These measures will be compared across five Level I independent variable school-level demographic control clusters (geographic location, racial demographics, students’ socioeconomic status, school size, and school grade levels) over the span of NCLB policy development and implementation (1995-2007). A total of 16 nested items organized into three accountability level clusters (low, medium, high) are used as Level II hierarchical model statistical antecedent control variables to account for state/district level accountability and policy variations which may also interact with effects and variations at the principal/school level (Marks & Nance, 2007).

Contribution to Theory and Practice: This study can inform the discipline of educational leadership and future leadership program development by exploring how administrators enacted their work over time in different school contexts, within larger policy systems, during one of the most significant policy shifts in education. This study builds upon and is situated within the work of Marks and Nance (2007), Lyons and Algozzine (2006), Cooley and Shen (2003), and Ladd and Zelli (2002)—proposing here that instructional leadership is indeed not a “monolithic or unitary practice” and is enacted by principals in response to changing professional expectations in different ways and in differing contexts (Spillane & Burch, 2006, p. 99). Principals do not work in a vacuum and varieties of changing external policy and environmental factors shape their ongoing instructional leadership practices. Additional research in this area will contribute to our understandings of how policy affects principals’ instructional leadership.