

Chapter 46

Exploring the Impact of School Leadership on Student Learning Outcomes: Constraints and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to explore the various models proposed in the literature related with the impact of school leadership on student academic achievement. In doing so, and drawing mainly from the mediate and indirect models, the chapter also discusses the role of various intermediate/moderate variables that facilitate the impact of principal leadership on student-learning outcomes. Results from a qualitative exploratory study that took place in Cyprus are also presented. This study developed a framework of school principals' actions and strategies that teachers considered as effective in relation to improving their quality of teaching and student outcomes. Some of the problems related with measuring the impact of school leadership on student achievement, such as issues of conceptual and operational definitions of school leadership and methodological issues in research design are also elaborated. Finally, implications for policy and practice on school leadership are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

School leadership is internationally recognized as being a key factor for improving quality in education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). The concept has been narrowly defined, focusing on leadership functions directly related to teaching and learning (Leiberman, 1995; Kruger & Scheerens, 2012), and broadly defined, referring to all functions, actions and strategies that contribute to student learning (Sheppard,

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1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In trying to define school leadership, others referred to the concept as direct or indirect. School principals who implement direct leadership are actively involved in the instructional enterprise of the school. Kleine-Kracht (1993) found that the direct leadership activities are the immediate interactions of principals with teachers and others about the classroom, teaching, student performance and curricula. On the other hand, principals who exercise indirect leadership, support efforts focusing on improving academic attainment through non-instructional approaches. Glasman and Heck (1992) support that indirect school leadership may focus on “such activities as decision-making, developing a vision and school purpose, setting goals, communicating expectations for performance, “gatekeeping” with parents and other community interests, and monitoring the work activities at the school site (p. 11).

Nevertheless, across all definitions and frameworks school leadership is directly or indirectly related to the processes of instruction and learning where school principals, teachers, learners, and the curriculum interact. In order to better understand the relationship between leadership and student achievement, during the last three decades, researchers have developed various models, referring to direct, indirect and reciprocal effects (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995).

Researchers in the earlier studies were using models in which the relationship between leadership in schools and outcomes at the student level was measured as a direct causal link. More recently, researchers started to use mediated-effects models, which hypothesize that leaders achieve their effect on school outcomes through indirect paths. Throughout the years, various potential mediating variables have come to light, including the mission of the school, educational vision and goals, staff motivation, teacher classroom practice, and student engagement (e.g., Kruger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Pounder et al., 1995).

Although considerable conceptual and methodological progress has been made, little is known about the paths through which school leaders can enhance organizational structures, the interplay with contextual factors and ultimately improvement of student outcomes (Kruger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). From this perspective, in order to enhance further our understanding of the nature and impact of school leadership, this chapter aims to:

1. Describe the various theoretical models of the way school leadership impacts on student outcomes.
2. Discuss the contradictory results of previous studies and meta-analyses exploring the impact of school leadership on student outcomes.
3. Explore the main conceptual and methodological issues that could explain the contradictory research findings. Issues of definition, research design, instrumentation, data analysis and identifying and measuring appropriately intermediate / moderate variables, under the indirect effects model, are discussed.
4. Present the findings of a qualitative exploratory study searching for effective school principals' actions and strategies.
5. Elaborate on the implications of the existing knowledge-base and research findings for educational policy and provide suggestions for future research.

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