

Preparation of Pre-Service Teachers in Institutions of Higher Learning to Practice Instructional Leadership with at-Risk Students in K-12 Education

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Abstract

Studies mention that institutions of higher learning prepare teachers to exercise leadership in all schools, but what has not been clear is the nature of leadership, pre-service teachers learn from these institutions to practice later in their vocation particularly, with students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education. For example, a quick survey of courses offered in programs of teacher preparation at universities and colleges in the State of Ohio and many other states, tends to reveal that there is hardly a leadership course on offer to pre-service teachers. In developing this article, content and comparative analysis of existing literature is conducted, to determine the nature and skills of leadership that can be taught in institutions of higher learning to pre-service teachers for use in K-12 education. As part of education reform, the researcher develops, a conceptual framework, which is embedded in (a) challenging the process (b) encouraging the heart for others to act, (c) leadership, a serving relation and (d) modeling the way, for understanding instructional leadership and delineating pedagogical practices that would enhance the wellbeing of students at risk of academic failure. The study concludes that reform of the public schools should go beyond tinkering at the edges or scratching the surface in order to realize substantive pedagogical transformation. In the U.S., public education can be re-organized such that teaching and leading, as core functions of instructional leadership, are the teacher's prerogative in the classroom so as to facilitate learning, meet standards, ensure student achievement, and advancement of social justice in educational administration.

Keywords: At-risk student; Instructional leadership; Educational administration

Introduction

Studies mention that institutions of higher learning prepare pre-service teachers to exercise leadership in all schools (Anderson, 2002) but what has not been clear is the nature of instructional leadership these institutions prepare teachers to exercise especially, regarding students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education (Keegan & Crescenta, 2006; Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus, 1996; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). While “there has never been a time in the life of the American public school when we have not known all that we needed to teach all those we chose to teach” (Edmonds 1979, p. 3), negligible attention appears to be paid to the investigation and development of the nature of instructional leadership that teachers could provide, regarding students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education (Madaus, 1991). Edmonds (1979) asserts that “[i]nequity in American education derives first and foremost from our failure to educate the children of the poor” (p. 2). Consequently, the achievement gap among certain demographic subgroups of K-12, remains as an unresolved existential issue.

However, a growing body of research (Brandt, 2000; Sinclair & Ghory, 1987; Chirume, 2009; Noddings, 2003; Kim, 1994; Kohl, 1994, Senge, 2010; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014) suggests that schools that reorganize themselves as culturally inclusive, learning communities can provide high quality education addressing student at-riskiness. In this article, the author, drawing from a critical and comparative analysis of extant literature on instructional leadership, establishes a theoretical framework for understanding instructional leadership and pedagogical practices that can be used in the advancement of the wellbeing of vulnerable students in K-12 schools.

Statement of the Research Problem

Various studies report a chronic disparity in racial and ethnic learning outcomes (Conant, 1961; Cooksar&Persell, 1991; Plucker& Burroughs, 2010; Kucsera&Orfield, 2014) in K-12 education. The “achievement gap” between minority students and mainstream students continues to create a grave concern, which over time has resulted in a growing body of literature (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Peng & Hill, 1995; Winerip, 2011). Ladson-Billings (2000) charges that teacher preparation is culpable in the failure of teachers to teach African American students effectively. Nieto (2000) does not declare Nor are we preparing teachers to teach Hispanic students or children living in poverty, or other politically and economically disenfranchised groups (pp. 214-215). According to Webb and Norton (2003) what is at stake for the American system of public education in the twenty-first century is meeting the needs of students from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds.

A study that involved 90 school administrators and 120 teachers (Chirume, 2009) found a mean response score of 2.23, which by far, showed the most disagreement, on whether, overall, teachers and principals felt that their college preparation had equipped them with leadership tools to deal with students at risk of academic failure. Kim (1994) noticed that although some teachers feel a deep need to help their students, “they feel an overwhelming sense of inadequacy” (p. 19). Such teachers do not have the social capital that allows them to make useful contributions to advance the success of at-risk students. They feel they lack both the training and the social structure in the school system to enable them to cope with conditions regarding vulnerable students.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to identify a conceptual framework for understanding the concept of instructional leadership and enhancing the professional practice of teachers with students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education. In pursuant of this purpose, the article closely examines available data on instructional leadership vis-à-vis the role of principals and teachers regarding at-risk students. The article further discusses evidence of substantive instructional leadership and pedagogies, to which institutions of higher learning can expose and immerse teachers to practice later with a realistic prospect of success in advancing the wellbeing of at-risk students in K-12 education. In their research, Burbules and Torres (2000) suggest that schooling must situate every learner, irrespective of ethnic background, in an immediate and familiar social context to meet the needs of identity, affiliation, affirmation, and citizenship in order to optimize learning and individual development. In social science, the purpose of research is gathering of data to test new ideas or to refute old ones or both (Kangai, 2013) in a dynamic of advancing knowledge and pedagogy. The resulting new knowledge may change how we think, act, and talk about the nature of a social phenomenon, in this case, instructional leadership. Such a social transformation may result in substantive edification of individuals and up-lift society as whole.

Research Question

What core elements of instructional leadership curriculum can institutions of higher learning include in teacher preparation programs to improve the leadership and professional practice of teachers regarding students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education?

Research Design and Methodology

This article adopts a non-experimental research design which utilizes methodologies of content analysis, and constant comparison of existing quantitative and qualitative data from extant literature to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the nature of instructional leadership that teachers can practice to enhance the wellbeing of students at risk of academic failure, in K-12 education. Eisenhardt (1989) posits that when constructing theories from social research, it is of paramount importance to compare the emergent concepts or theories with what the extant literature says. Exploring literature that conflicts with the emergent theory most likely enhances confidence in the trustworthiness of findings and the recommendations of a study for social practice.

On the other hand, literature discussing comparable findings is important too. It ties together underlying similarities in phenomena not typically associated with each other (Eisenhardt, 1989). Instructional leadership, typically associated with principalship, is a concept in this article, being investigated as teachers’ activities in schools with students at risk of academic failure.

Eisenhardt (1989) argues that the result of this approach is often a theory demonstrating a higher conceptual level of articulation, with stronger internal validity, and wider theoretical implications.

Eisenhardt (1989) explains that tying the emergent constructs, theories to extant literature is crucial in theory building. In this way, the results that usually rest on a small number of cases can become evidently more acceptable and useful to society.

In content analysis, Ragin (2011) explains that social research involves the interaction between ideas and evidence in understanding a given phenomenon. The four key ideas that are being examined in the light of evidence from existing literature on instructional leadership include (a) challenging the process, (b) encouraging the heart for others to act, (c) leadership, a serving relation, and (d) modeling the way, as constituting a conceptual framework for understanding and enhancing the practicing of instructional leadership with students at risk of academic failure in K-12 education. In making sense of evidence from research Ragin (2011) further explains that, researchers create new knowledge for social practice by revising concepts, and extending the practice of new ideas in the service of society.

The Theoretical Framework

The overarching conceptual paradigms that provide analytical tools for investigating leadership practices in this study are constructivist and critical theories. Davison and Dell (2003) argue that these theories offer epistemological concepts with intense explanatory power regarding educational leadership, which is a requirement of the trustworthiness and believability of this study. A brief outline of each of these theories is provided below.

Constructivist Theory and the Role of Instructional Leadership

Instructional space is framed by teaching and school activities. In that space, according to constructivism, teachers and students apply ideas and experiences to existing knowledge, challenges, beliefs and values in order to create new knowledge in a learning process. The process continues as a complex instructional activity (Vygotsky, 1978) in and outside of the classroom.

From a constructivist standpoint, the teacher provides a learning climate promoting situations for hands-on experience, experimentation, critical thinking, and problem solving. These are avenues for students to find self-knowledge and to understand their world (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Knowledge creation is, therefore, a shared responsibility of teachers and students. As in the constructivist teaching and learning settings for individual classes, the school environment can be created to enable all faculty members and students to share the responsibility for general school administration (Davison & Dell, 2003).

A constructivist perspective attempts to establish whether stakeholders are empowered to share opportunities and responsibilities in utilizing personal expertise and resources to solve challenges confronting the school and issues facing individuals (Davison & Dell, 2003). When teachers are trusted and they discover things about students and their well-being that outsiders never would have imagined, these teachers—if they want to—can catalyze the development of their students toward future success (Block, 1993). On that note, Godwyll (2003) concluded that teachers have the potential to identify problems and can illuminate instructional areas that outside researchers would not normally identify. These observations underscore the idea that teachers occupy a unique position to deliver instructional leadership that can deeply touch the lives of their students even those students who are at risk of academic failure.

Critical Theory and the Role of Instructional Leadership

In the troubled teaching and learning environment, educators are constantly faced with the dilemma of either remaining emotionally uninvolved or responding to their students' despondency. Watkins (1986) asserts that a critical approach to scientific inquiry on the concept of leadership focuses on forces that underlie the processes of the construction of reality in educational organizations. According to Edmonds (1979); Mayaske, Okada, Beaton, and Wisler (1973), Weber (1971) studies on instruction must concentrate on investigating school variables such as instructional leadership as opposed to student body variables. Studies that have dwelt on the later variables have tended to support the status quo in education and have tended to conclude that the victim is to blame for lack of instructional improvement.

Edmonds cites “The Equal Educational Opportunity Survey” conducted by Coleman and the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement [which] concluded “ that family background was the greatest single cause of variation in pupil performance” hence schools have insignificant influence on students’ performance.

However, for the purpose of instructional improvement, critical inquiry has undermined all certainties regarding the status quo of proliferating events and arrangements in today’s school system by providing insight into and alternative narratives about the educational institutions (Bolman& Deal, 1997).

Critical scholars such as Apple (1982), Bernstein (1990), Bourdieu (1977), Capper (1993), Foster (1986), Maxcy (1991), and Watkins (1986) emphasize the role of human agency in looking at possible ways in which members and clients behave in their organizations. In education, for example, a critical approach to inquiry offers the possibility of understanding an educational administration that helps the school community realize (i.e., human urgency) how elaborate and efficiently devised organizational plans can also create sites of exploitation and manipulation of organizational members (Watkins, 1986). Human beings form organizations to meet their social needs. However, too often those institutions distance themselves or become hostile to some of their stakeholders. That is why Apple (1982) and Bernstein (1977) argue that the main consideration of instructional leadership constitutes resolving how power penetrates educational settings and how this energy shapes the social structures that distribute and evaluate knowledge to the advantage of some, but at the expense of others. The question of leadership is at the center of all these paradoxes.

According to Watkins (1986), much research has revealed that the uncritical facile employment of the term “instructional leadership” and institutional rules and policies have tended to obscure the seduction and subversion carried out in the name of school administration. Those in powerful management positions can reduce leadership to concealed forms of exploitation, deception, and segregation. For example, the traditional school principal could structure the school environment so that language, discourse, and practice are disconnected from the fears, pain, and welfare of certain students the school should be serving.

Instructional Leadership at a Crossroad

Instructional leadership has a complex background in the research literature. Muijs and Harris (2002) observe that the dominant discourse about educational leadership does not include any serious consideration of the concept of “teacher leadership.” A meta-analysis by Harris (2003) brought him to the conclusion that to some, teacher leadership is heresy, to others it is a fantasy, and yet to others, it is a possibility with enormous potential for instructional improvement. The hierarchical school system that delineates leadership responsibilities, with the top office vested with the highest authority, clearly creates a barrier for teachers to be viewed as leaders in the community of learners (Glickman, 1998; Harris, 2003). Although it is apparent that the head as a solitary dynamic leader is inadequate for the new directions in educational reform, this model is ubiquitous and still persists.

The hero paradigm premised upon leadership by a ranked individual reinforces the top-down nature of school leadership. This means that leadership is equated with status, authority, and position (Gronn, 1999). In these circumstances, Wasley (1991) discusses the difficulty educators have in defining teachers as leaders. Virtually all informants in his research have never been asked to define teacher leadership as a useful concept in improving instruction. Often instructional improvement has been defined and conceptually associated with the influence of principals through their teachers. In that setup, teachers are not leaders but, rather, an appendage of the principals.

A teacher nominator in Anderson’s (2002) study commented that teachers were not leaders in the community. Their “roles are not prominent in the community as they used to be at one time” (p. 4). In schools, teachers are walking in the shadows of their principals. This is why, to some people, teacher leadership is heresy.

To others, teacher leadership is regarded as “fantasy” (Harris, 2003, p. 318). Substantively though, teacher leadership suggests that leadership is an institutional resource available to stakeholders in structures moving away from command, control, and prediction, towards empowerment, acknowledgment, and creativity (Block, 1993). In the latter structures, leaders in appointed positions relinquish power, purpose, and privileges to which others have effective access (Block, 1993). However, this is not what leaders have been trained to do. They have been trained to delegate responsibility and not authority (Block, 1993; Covey 1991; Senge, 2000). In that case, distributed leadership becomes “nothing more than informed delegation” (Harris, 2003, p. 319).

Besides, the practice of delegation leaves the choice to act residing in the appointed individual, with teachers reacting to his or her whims instead of responding and doing the right things for students (Kim, 1994; Kohl, 1994). In these circumstances, teacher leadership, at best, remains an ad hoc activity and not a systemic institution-wide experience (Woodrum, 2004). At every turn, such structures militate against teachers taking on leadership in response to the needs of individual students (Anderson, 2002; Harris, 2003). Under these circumstances teacher leadership remains a pipe dream.

Those who look at teacher leadership as a possibility acknowledge the serious view that goes along with this perspective. Hart (1995) observes that teacher leadership has been seen in the context of teacher leadership roles. These roles are created to enable the teachers to work as part of the organizational structure. There is no dispute in the literature that these arrangements have led to some teachers exercising some form of leadership. Harris (2003) believes that leadership of this kind leaves its substance as a marginal activity within the schools. Such arrangements leave the praxis of leadership as a monopoly of the chosen few. Those few are not in touch with the daily lives of the students.

In the view of this research, leadership does not function optimally because the term “teacher” has been put in front of it. Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) stress that teacher leadership occurs only when teachers command and feel they have the power to intervene deliberately and conscientiously in the daily lives of their students. In that way, teachers can exercise their influence over the beliefs, actions, and values of students within the school organization, that is, the experience that engenders a substantive change of meaning in the term “teacher leadership.” Substantive practice of teacher leadership has far reaching implications in the way organizational change is understood, experienced, enacted, and secured in a school (Gronn, 2003).

Harris (2003) asserts that distributed form of instructional leadership implies that teachers have the agency to lead change and to guide systemic organizational development and improvement. For those with conventional views of leadership and those in formal leadership, Harris (2003) conveys a point that the talk about distributed leadership is not just an issue of semantics; it calls for conventionalists and those in formal roles to experience a paradigm shift in order to attain a new mindset receptive to redistributed leadership. A critical reflection of empirical work and literature on teacher leadership provides an important initial point for understanding the nature, purpose, and trends in teacher leadership mired in dilemmas as invisible forces take their toll on at-risk students. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) write that research and practical effort must be undertaken to increase sources of knowledge, encouragement, and support for teachers to take responsibility for students’ successful learning.

Discussion of the Current Paper

A Critical and Comparative Analysis of Instructional Leadership and at-risk Students

A critical reflection of empirical work and literature on instructional leadership appears to provide an important initial point in understanding the nature, purpose, and trends in teacher leadership. Over the last five decades, the literature on school leadership has examined instructional leadership as principalship, on one hand, and at a later stage, teacher leadership, on the other, in relation to instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Gullatt and Ballard (1998) distinguish between the two philosophical conceptualizations. The former relates to the Effective Theory of Teaching, which is promoted by the neo-traditional practitioners. The latter relates to the Reflective Theory of Teaching sponsored by the neo-progressive practitioners (Murphy & Hallinger, 1987). The Reflective Theory of Teaching emphasizes the role of teacher leadership in a pedagogical context. In that context, teachers exercise a leadership prerogative to respond to the needs of individual students (Gullatt & Ballard, 1998). In contrast, the Effective Theory emphasizes certain teaching practices that derive from outside experts. This school of thought resulted in The Effective School Movement, which flourished during the 1980s and continues to be advanced by its proponents in the research community.

The Effective School Leadership Theory

The Effective School Theory attributes improvement in teaching and learning to the efficacy of actions performed by persons in formal roles of authority rather than organizational conditions (Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003). In the era of central accountability and high-stakes testing, the application of the Effective School Theory is prevalent in the American public school system (Karp, 2003). Murphy (1988) criticizes the current education system for not heeding the calls to undertake an educational leadership paradigm shift.

Anyon (1994) notes that, to date, administrators, teachers, and students' interactions occur in a fairly controlled and centralized hierarchy with a unitary chain of command from the principal down to the students.

The principal uses a set of formal rules, not just to govern the performance of subordinates, but also as a means to foster and secure loyalty from everyone in the school organization. In this model of asymmetrical power relations, power flows out of the organizational hierarchical positions. The principal has power over everyone and his or her power radiates down to the students. The teacher exercises power over the students by demanding their close adherence to procedures and school rules.

The socialization of the students in the political organization of a school district, in which dominance cascades from the top and compliance is demanded from the bottom, causes a troubling experience for at-risk students (Anyon, 1994). The situation hinders the teachers' ability to use their associations with students to better educational relationships.

Reflective Movement and Instructional Leadership

Reflective movement theorists view the existing model of instructional leadership as paternalistic, archaic, and dependent on docile followers (Burlingame, 1987; Polplin, 1992; Sheppard, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Sergiovanni (1991) argues that with competent and committed teachers, the traditional forms of instructional leadership are inappropriate. Rather, from a staff position, school heads should be concerned with providing material and technical resources and services in support of teacher initiative and responsibility in instructional matters (Glanz & Neville, 1997). Such an approach is consistent with educational transformation that seeks to professionalize the teaching profession.

As in other fields, the professionalization of teaching would include recognizing teachers as the main instruments of student success, bringing the divided worlds of teaching and leading together in a conceptually sophisticated and strategically powerful way (Crowther, Kaagan, Furguson, & Hann, 2002). Conceptualizing teaching and leading as simultaneous activities promotes the metaphor of adulthood. Education can be viewed as an experience of accompaniment of students --by adults--on their way toward adulthood. Students, however, must not be lost along the way. Through promoting teacher leadership, high-quality instruction with the power to hold and retain at-risk students can be made available in all classrooms (Kim, 1994).

Unlike the notion of instructional leadership as principalship, Rosenblum, Louis, and Rossmiller (1994) believe that instructional leadership, as teacher leadership is an inclusive concept, compatible with teachers and students who enjoy a distinctive empowered contact. The head of a school invests resources in teachers so that they can take leadership of instructional educational programs (Painter, 2001; Prestine & Bowen, 1993). The investment manifests itself in both the teachers' formal and informal roles. In their formal roles, empowered teachers can reach out to those in authority without restraint in order to provide their students with empowered contact. In their informal roles, teachers would interact as community leaders with other adults in the school community. In this sense, to be an adult is to be a leader. As adults, teachers and principals are co-leaders (Block, 1993) who encourage and inspire each other; collectively, they improve their professional practice (Feldman, Tung, & Quimette, 2004; Kannapel & Clements, 2005) and the lives of their students.

Indeed, little evidence links students' lives with principalship (Gullatt & Ballard, 1998; Marks & Printy, 2003). While it is believed that principals understand the big picture and are responsible for the productivity and overall health of their schools, evidence shows that principals whose working space is outside the classroom have not been as effective as teachers in influencing students, even when they are armed with the best information systems and technologies.

Teachers possess critical information about their students and how they learn (Hallinger, 1992; Sykes, 1990). At the same time, Frieman (1993) reported that at-risk students would study better in school if their teachers were aware of the adversities of their personal lives and acted accordingly. In an empowered capacity, teachers could, based on information about their students, deliver high-quality instruction, with the power to retain at-risk students. Empowerment would improve the teachers' work lives, and increase student retention and achievement (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993; Maeroff, 1988; Schlechty, 1990).

A Conceptual Framework of Instructional Leadership

In order to understand the concept of instructional leadership, the current paper explores each of the four factors selected from extant literature, namely, challenging the process; encouraging the heart for others to act; leadership, a serving relationship and modeling the way.

Challenging the Process

Good teacher educators, who see their alumni struggling in economically linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, must ask themselves what they are doing or not doing that contributes to the teachers' failure to educate students from diverse backgrounds (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004, p. 214).

Nieto (2000) argues that teacher educators must be willing to challenge the process, share the blame and keep placing diversity, and multicultural education "front and center" in the pre-service pedagogy; they must ask themselves deep and critical questions as a way of helping pre-service teachers see culture, their own as well as their students' (Nieto, 2000, p. 180), as a prerequisite for culturally responsive teaching. This pedagogy entails recognizing and creating a space for the social capital that these students bring from their diverse backgrounds (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004, p. 214).

It means allowing classrooms to be terrains for celebrating different cultures as parallel but equally complex systems of attitudes, beliefs, and norms of living and understanding the world. If teacher training colleges or universities fail to empower teachers with the social capital of the "dispossessed," then the void in the social capital and teacher expectations will prevent teachers from responding to students' at risk of academic failure, and the problem of achievement gap would persist, thus, limiting opportunities for the expansion of social justice in education.

Goodlad (1990) writes that there are "certain institutionalized features of America's educational system that function as barriers to knowledge especially for poor and minority students" (p.1). For most part, these features are not part of our reflexive consciousness. These features become invisible but veritable forces in the public school system that operate minority students. Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth (2004) elucidate the foremost issue that affects minority students in the public school system. Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth claim that because the majority of the teacher educators and teachers in the schools are essentially limited to English proficiency; they possess elaborated code and mainstream social capital, but lack the social capital and pedagogy of the marginalized.

Indeed, the latter constitutes essential components of understanding and engaging students at risk of academic failure. Ladson-Billings (2000) charges that a lack of instructional leadership and the practice of selective pedagogy have forced poor students to divorce themselves from their cultural heritage and concomitant knowledge forms when they enter the classroom door. Edmonds (1979) argues that "we grow pernicious" when we define cultural and linguistic deviation from our norms, "culturally deprived" (p 11). The discrepancy in social capital turns out to be an invisible force causing many disadvantaged students to experience difficulties and dilemmas that will result in academic failure.

Encourage the Heart for Others to Act

Human and spiritual dimensions need to play a huge part in determining the attitude and behavior of teachers (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002) toward the students at risk of academic failure. Therefore, this dimension must intentionally and eminently become an important part of the teacher preparation program at university. Teacher educators place emphasis on the role of values, symbols and spirit encouraging the heart for others to act. This is how these aspects of learning can give meaning and purpose in teaching and leading at-risk students in and outside classrooms of this great nation's schools. The human spirit is an inner resource that teachers draw upon to respond to "what they can obviously see in a suffering" student's eyes (Kim, 1994, p. 21). This is how teacher preparation programs plant the seed for teacher leadership and appropriate behaviors in practicing social justice, and other propensities such as capacity for human agency.

The role of human agency in educational leadership is reflected in the constant ability of an educator or group of educators to interrogate the social structure of the educational system, and the school in particular, and to identify negative forces working against the well-being of some students as compared to others (Capper, 1993; Forster, 1986; Maxcy, 1991). Social structures of the school organization, such as rules and regulations, must not be allowed to ossify into inflexible forces that prevent or disempower teachers from helping at-risk students. For teachers to be sufficiently empowered so that they can rise to the challenges of redeeming students from pain and academic failure, they need to continually develop distinctive capabilities in the area of leading as they teach in their classrooms. Leading means taking such steps and making decisions that lead to the edification and not degradation of the integrity of the person of the individual who needs help with their school work (the student at risk of academic failure).

Kim (1994) emphasizes the need for teacher preparation schools to prepare teachers enough to reflect and believe in their inevitable and vital leadership role to respond to the students' call. In Kim's study, students said that if their teachers were aware of the family's situation, then they "would be able to study better in school" (p. 10).

A properly prepared (educated) teacher is someone who is equipped with a palette of leadership skills and an ability to identify students who are capable of learning but not able to do so due to one or more invisible forces inherent in the interlocking structure of the school structure.

Leadership: A Serving Relationship

Leadership is the human element of the school organization that creates a better learning environment in a serving relation with students. Children, families and school communities need servant leaders. Servant leaders literally and metaphorically serve the best interests of diverse students and families in school communities. Bolman and Deal (1997) explain that leading in a serving role implies a profound and challenging responsibility for leadership to recognize and acknowledge the diversity of felt needs, predicaments dilemmas and concerns of students and of families. To families and students at risk of academic failure, the gift of servant-leaders is love and caring.

For students at risk of academic failure, love is largely absent in schools. Caring for students at risk of academic failure begins by knowing those who are at-risk of academic of failure. This implies, listening, understanding and accepting. This occurrence progresses through a deepening sense of appreciation, respect, and ultimately love. Love is the willingness of instructional leaders to reach out to students on the axis of pain and path to academic failure. Instructional leaders do so by opening their hearts. An open heart is vulnerable. Confronting vulnerability allows instructional leaders "to drop their masks, meet heart to heart and be present for one another" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p347).

In those voluntary moments teachers and their charges experience a sense of unity and delight in human exchanges that hold the soul of community in a better school environment (Whitmyer, 1993). Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) assert that what sets leadership apart from other relationships is that, when it works well, it enables people to collaborate in their line of service through shared values and goals of their organization's mission, and vision for the common good. In education, this helps each educator and each student to attain a sense of accomplishment.

Modeling Instructional Leadership; Its Nature, Practices, and Skills

Modeling the way in dealing with student at-riskiness and the attendant problem of achievement gap requires the application of instructional leadership methods in the practices of public schools. Instructional leadership stands out as an attitudinal construct, which can be measured through four dimensions, namely, teacher involvement, teacher change agency, teacher collaboration, and teacher knowledge bases for diversity, for instructional improvement (Chirume, 2009). The researcher wanted to find out if these dimensions as subscales were correlated attributes of instructional leadership. In a test of relationship, a Pearson Correlation matrix of data reflected in table 1 emerged.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient between sub-scales

		1	2	3	4
1. Tr. Involvement	Pearson Correlation	1	.591(**)	.458(**)	.546(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	219	219	219	219
2. Change Agency	Pearson Correlation	.591(**)	1	.413(**)	.531(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	219	219	219	219
3. Tr. Collaborate	Pearson Correlation	.458(**)	.413(**)	1	.392(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	219	219	219	219
4. Knowledge bases for diversity	Pearson Correlation	.546(**)	.531(**)	.392(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	219	219	219	219

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation coefficients among the sub-scales (attributes) show that attributes are positively correlated, r_{12} (219) = .591, $p < 0.01$, r_{13} (219) = .458, $p < 0.01$, and r_{14} (219) = .546, $p < 0.01$. In the same study, a multivariate analysis of the same data yielded results shown in table 2.

Table 2: Rankings of Means for Dependent Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tr. collaboration scaled upon # of items	219	2.25	5.00	4.3721	.50420
Tr. involvement scaled upon # of items	219	2.17	5.00	4.2595	.47998
Tr. agency scaled upon # of items	219	2.50	5.00	4.0091	.45565
Knowledge bases for diversity scaled upon # of items	219	2.14	5.00	3.9778	.44198
Valid N (listwise)	219				

Each of the dimensions will now be explored to illustrate the nature, practices and skills embodied in the concept of instructional leadership, beginning with teacher involvement.

Teacher Involvement

In a multivariate analysis (Chirume, 2009) the role of teacher involvement in the lives of students attracted a favorability mean score of 4.26, as shown in Table 2. This was the second highest mean score among the four dependent variables. This high level of agreement is consistent with the calls by researchers in this field for teacher involvement in the lives of troubled students. Noddings (1992) draws attention to the enormous and relentless social changes currently affecting young people and their families to which the pedagogy of care would make a difference. Kim (1994) remarks that research seems to point to the fact that getting deeply involved in students' home problems is effective, "but it is draining and painful and sometimes it may seem better for everyone not to rock the boat" (p. 22). Kim admits that every situation is different, but he wonders what kind of impact or difference it would make. To this end, Frymier (1992) writes that data have shown that where those students at risk of academic failure were given instructional attention, their academic condition improved and differed from that of students in a similar predicament but were not given substantive attention. Kim (1994) declares that the position of a teacher in a school is a difficult and challenging one. However, it is inevitable that students "are going to ask their teachers for help [and] to seek their protection" (p. 12).

This is the hard and curious part of a teacher's job. Literature reveals that one of the reasons why teachers choose not to be involved with students' problems outside of class is the possibility of burnout. Kim (1994) found that sharing concerns about troubled students with colleagues, friends, and family members, (in a professional manner), does help in preventing burnout. Hence, teacher collaboration is one of the important steps in teacher leadership (Coyle, 1997). Wasley (1991) says that teacher leaders encourage one another to change and to do things they, as individuals, would not ordinarily do without the influence of the others. Teacher leaders abandon their privateness and engage in collegial collaboration and peer interactions (Lemlech & Hertzog, 1998) to improve and change the lives of their students; and thus, cultivating conditions amenable to enhancing social justice.

Teacher Change Agency

Teacher change agency is another role of teacher leadership dynamics regarding students at risk of academic failure. This role attained the third highest mean score of 4.01, as shown in Table 2. This statistic shows that educators are clear that teachers ought to become substantive leaders of change in the lives of their charges. Wassermann (1985) found that teachers, in some cases, are the only consistent people in the lives of students and, therefore, it makes perfect sense that teachers are an indispensable link to helping students at risk of academic failure. Kim writes that teachers "can actually help [students] from slipping further backwards" (p. 25). Kim (1994) found that teachers who make a difference take leadership in helping students face their problems. Those teachers who lead in their classrooms are change agents. According to Covey (1991), change agents improve almost any situation that they face.

Covey (1991) observes that in team endeavors, teachers synergize with each other. Each educator overcomes and complements his or her weakness with the strengths of others (Marks & Printy, 2003). Collegiality among teachers helps each fellow member to gain a perspective on dealing with troubled students (Kim, 1994).

Consequently, teachers share ideas on identifying, recognizing, and accepting the troubled students' feelings. Thus, teachers find ways not to destroy but to build up the students' sense of security and wellbeing. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) insist that individuals collaborating with one another; can overcome barriers and get essential work done of helping students on the path to academic failure to change.

Teacher Collaboration

In a study by Chirume (2009) the concept of teacher collaboration was the most supported and recognized leadership role with a mean score of 4.37, as shown in Table 2. This is an important finding in view of the fact that in research literature dealing with a troubled student is cited as one of the most difficult teacher leadership responsibilities. It is in this responsibility that teacher training schools possess the greatest potential to make a difference in the lives of the nation's children at risk academic failure by equipping pre-service teachers with outstanding tools and disposition to make a change. It makes sense for educators to display a positive attitude toward collaboration with a colleague, one's family member, or both in order to have a perspective on how to deal with a troubled student.

Research literature reveals that school structures that are diversely populated tended to be more supportive toward teacher collaboration (Darling-Hammond, 1988). Chirume (2009) found that 88.1% of the respondents agreed that dialogue among diverse teachers tends to increase their abilities to cross cultural boundaries to help students at risk of academic failure. Lack of significant ethnic diversity in some schools and teacher preparation colleges may be a limiting factor on the efficacy of faculty collaboration. Researchers found that teachers (as well as students) are socialized within cultures formed by multilayered professional communities in school districts that included minority groups. Gallucci (2003), Hill (2001), and Spillane (1999) found that professional communities affect new teachers' beliefs and practices. Studies have shown evidence that, professional communities with a sound mix of members from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds helped members to learn from each other and cross cultural boundaries much to the advancement of the student well-being. These communities also enhance opportunities for teachers to improve the quality of their professional life and develop their knowledge bases for diversity and sense of social justice.

Teacher Knowledge bases for Diversity

The forth role of teacher leadership is the development of knowledge bases for diversity. In this researcher's study, this role had the lowest mean score of 3.98, as shown in Table 2. Troen and Boles (2003) write that students in U.S. classrooms hail from a diverse range of cultural, national, and ethnic backgrounds.

The Southern Education Foundation (1996) notes that with minority students in the classrooms, training and retaining teachers who represent minority groups and the cultural differences that students bring to the classroom is an important way of addressing minority students' needs and also creating a community to share cultures in a school. The presence of minority educators both in universities and in schools is not just good for providing a point of contact for minority students. One of the lessons learned from the studies carried out by the Southern Education Foundation is that if more non-minority students were exposed to good minority teachers, then United States would have easier times in dealing with racial crises. More people would be able to communicate across the racial divide having been exposed to competent people who were different from them (The Southern Education Foundation, 1996).

As teachers reflect, and dialogue with peers, they learn to take charge the responsibility for student learning. In modeling the way, Troen and Boles (2003) hold that teacher leadership is "the notion that teachers could and [and] can change education for the better by assuming leadership roles without leaving the classroom" (p. 8). In a study by Chirume (2009) 95.9% of the informants believed that educators' knowledge of the student's culture is useful to effecting instructional improvement. Commenting on why a diverse teaching force was needed in the American public school system, the Southern Education Foundation (1996) says that, "teachers, if they are in the classroom in all colors and culture, can help bind us together despite our many differences" (p. 7). Troen and Boles (2003) notes "Public schools are the great democratizing force in our society" (p. 80).

Troen and Boles (2003), and Day (2000) argue that teachers play a vital role in the development of students. Whatever students learn and experience in their early years of life influences their views of who they are and their world. These experiences affect their current success (or lack of it) in school, later at work, and always in their personal lives.

According Edmonds (1979) the inequalities imposed on students by their neighborhood, their home and their peer environment must not be carried along to become the inequalities the students confront adult life after finishing school. A diverse teaching force will create favorable conditions for optimizing teacher involvement in advancing student wellbeing in the public school system. Sleeter (2001) reviewed 80 studies and concluded that recruitment, training (educating), retention of a more diverse pre-service pool, along with inclusion among teacher educators of people who bring knowledge, experience, and dispositions to pre-service teachers to enable them to teach well and bring leadership in culturally diverse schools, were among the promising strategies.

As the demographics of the United States as a whole, becomes more diverse, matching and complementing the skills of teachers of minority and dominant backgrounds, as well as underrepresented groups in all institutions and at all levels of society so as to reflect the national racial texture in the population, can help address students,' and the nation's needs for the twenty-first century human development. This will also help create a community in every public sphere to share cultures and expand the experience of social justice.

As addressed above, leadership qualities grow through formal learning, reflection and practice. And in summary, instructional leadership can be defined as a simultaneous act of diminishing the impact of negative forces and magnifying positive forces of change on the lives of students in a constantly shifting environment. Teacher leadership plays a pivotal role in providing access to education, student participation, success and completion student rates, in an environment (in and outside the school) of continuous flux, change and reaction (Bush, 2003). Figure 1 that follows, among other things, captures the essence of instructional leadership regarding students at risk of academic failure.

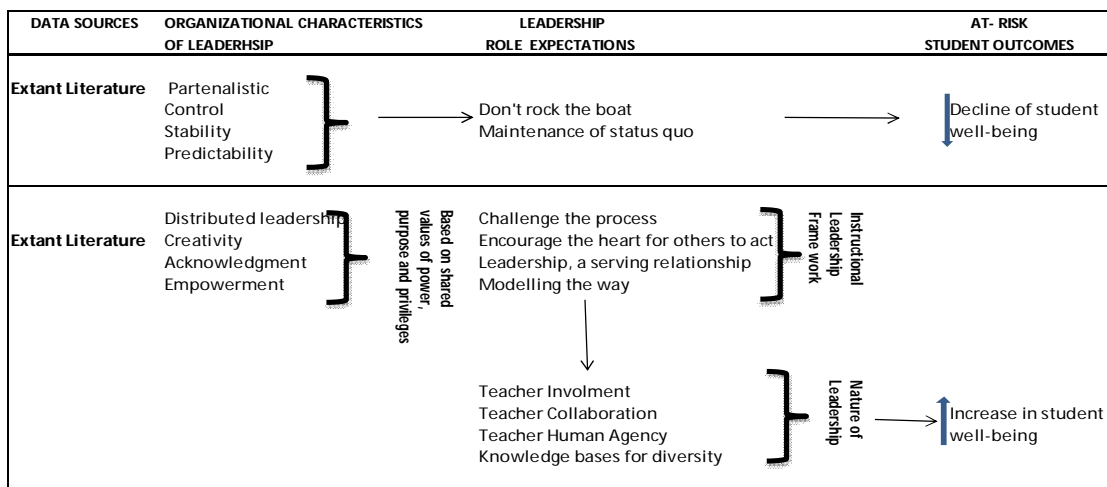


Figure 1: Teacher Leadership Dynamics and Student Well-being

Conclusion

In the final analysis, there is nothing better than powerful teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers to equip them with instructional leadership to transform and improve education for at risk students in public schools, which are concomitantly supported by allied policy and societal structures favorable for continuous teacher professional improvement. Given this conclusion, the article recommends that, the public education system should be organized such that teaching and leading, as core functions of instructional leadership, are the teacher's prerogative in the classroom so as to facilitate learning, meet the standards, and ensure the advancement of the wellbeing of all students.

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