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PRINCIPAL'S ACTUAL AND IDEAL TIME ALLOCATION TO CRITICAL SCHOOL MANAGERIAL TASKS IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the way principals spend their time and how they would like to spend their time in the accomplishment of certain critical school management functions. The study was part of a more comprehensive research project designed to gather empirical evidence concerning relevant aspects of effective principal leadership, and to examine how they relate to school success in Singapore. This particular paper only reports preliminary findings describing the tasks to which principals actually allocate more time and the amount of ideal time that they would like to devote to these tasks during typical week at school.

Randomly selected primary and secondary school principals (n=96) participated in the study, and completed the Time Allocation of Principals (TAP) survey initially developed by Gorton & McIntyre (1978) and more recently refined by Pellicer et al (1988). This instrument is designed to rank order the following nine tasks areas where principals plan and actually use time in their weekly schedule: Program development, personnel, school management, student activities, Ministry's activities, community activities, planning, professional development, and student behavior.

Preliminary findings indicate the following: whereas principals would prefer not spend so much time on *school management activities* (weekly calendar, office, budget, correspondence, memos, etc.), this is the task area where they actually spend most of their time; primary and secondary principals agree that *program development* (curriculum implementation & instructional leadership), *personnel management*, and *planning* are the three most critical task areas to which they should be devoting most of their time; primary principals report actually devoting more time than secondary principals to the *MOE Office* (meeting, committees, reports, etc.).

Introduction

Over the years, analyzing what effective school principals do has been the object of much interest by researchers. Like managers in other realms of life, school principals are typically very busy people. As evidenced by the pioneer work of Mintzberg (1973), the work of managers is consuming and involves many behaviors. From his research, we know that the work of managers is highly fragmented, and typically covers a wide variety of tasks.

In educational research examining the school principal's tasks, the emphasis has initially been on management processes that appear to be relevant for successful school management. Effective principals were expected to be involved in planning, organizing, leading, controlling, and the like. Then, the focus shifted to lists of competencies and proficiencies that effective principals ought to possess. More recently, the attention of researchers has been on what principals are expected to do to achieve *desirable outcomes* for their schools and students. Another recent avenue has been pursued by Stewart (1982) when she described the roles of school principals in

terms of *demands*, *constraints*, and *choices*. *Demands* are of course things school principals must do. *Constraints* are set by the community's standards and values as well as by the availability of resources (financial, material, and human), and effective managers are able to cope with such constraints. But in the end, principals can make *choices*. They have some degree of flexibility and autonomy in their own institution, and may choose to do what they believe is best for their own school. The fact is the leadership practices vary considerably from one principal to another, and as stated by Sergiovanni (1995), "it is in the area of choices that the opportunities for excellence exist".

A study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and reported by Sergiovanni (1995) revealed that effective principals use their time differently and focus on different school tasks. Furthermore, the results reported by NASSP showed that effective principals *actually* devote their energy to those tasks areas that they *value as most important*. In other words, according to this like research, there is little difference between ideal time allocation to several school tasks and the actual time that principals do allocate to these same areas of responsibility.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this research was to gather empirical data concerning relevant dimensions of effective school principal leadership in Singapore. More specifically, the purpose of this particular study was to assess the views of primary and secondary school principals with regards to several critical school tasks.

The following research questions guided the investigation:

- (1) Which areas of responsibility do school principals perceive to be more important?
- (2) As they consider their weekly schedule of activities, to which school tasks do principals actually devote more time?
- (3) Are there differences between primary and secondary school principals with regards to ideal and actual allocation of time to specific school tasks?

Primary and secondary school principals in Singapore constituted the target population for this study. At the time of the study, there were 193 primary and 147 secondary school principals in this population for a total of 340 principals.

Two proportionate samples (110 + 60) were randomly selected from this population. At first, a stratified random sample of 110 subjects was selected as follows: 70 from the primary level – proportionally from government and government-aided schools, and 40 from the secondary level –proportionally from government, government-aided, and independent schools. After approximately twelve weeks, in an attempt to increase the total number of returned instruments, a second random sample of 60 subjects were also proportionally drawn from the primary and secondary pools of principals.

At the end of this process, 96 principals (n = 96) had responded for a 57% rate of return. The breakdown of subjects was as follows: 68 principals from primary level and 28 from the

secondary level; 44 male and 52 female principals. The average age was 49 years old, and the average experience as principal was 7 years.

An adapted version of the *Time Allocation of Principals* (TAP) was used to assess how much time principals would ideally like to devote to various important school tasks, and how much time they actually allocate to these same tasks. This survey instrument was initially developed by Gorton and McIntyre (1978) and later refined by Pellicer et al (1988). The instrument is designed to rank order the following nine task areas where school principals spend time in a typical weekly schedule at school:

1. Program development: Curriculum implementation and instructional leadership
2. Personnel management: Evaluation, advising, conferencing, and recruiting
3. School management: Weekly calendar, office, budget, correspondence, memos, etc.
4. Student activities: Meetings, participation, supervision, and planning
5. MOE office activities: Meetings, committees, conferences, reports, etc.
6. Community relations: Parents' groups, advisory groups, parent conferences
7. Planning: Weekly, monthly, annual, and long-range planning
8. Professional development: Reading, conferences, workshops, mentoring, coaching
9. Student behaviors. Discipline, attendance, and meetings.

Results and Discussion

Results will be presented in sequence with the four research questions:

- (1) As they consider their weekly schedule of activities, to which school tasks do principals actually devote more time?
- (2) Which areas of responsibility do school principals perceive to be more important?
- (3) Are there differences between primary and secondary school principals with regards to ideal and actual allocation of time to school tasks?
- (4) How do other *ex post facto* variables such as experience as a school principal, tenure as principal at the same school, gender, and academic qualifications affect the principals' ideal and actual rankings of school tasks?

Table 1 shows the rankings by primary and secondary principals of tasks where they *actually* spend time during a typical week in school.

For the total sample of 96 participants, the rankings are as follows:

- (1) school management; (2) personnel management; (3) program development; (4) student behaviors; (5) planning; (6) MOE office activities; (7) professional development; (8) student activities; and (9) community relations.

Table 1
 Ranking of School Tasks in Terms of Actual Time Allocation

Principals' Tasks Areas	Total Sample	Primary Principals	Secondary Principals
Program Development	3	3	4
Personnel Management	2	2	2
Planning	5	5	5
Professional Development	7	7	6
School Management	1	1	1
Student Activities	8	8	7
Student Behaviors	4	6	3
Community Relations	9	9	9
MOE Office Activities	6	4	8

Rankings illustrated in this table are relatively similar for primary and secondary school principals. However, t-tests on mean rankings from all subjects reveal significant differences between primary and secondary level principals for two areas: *MOE office activities* ($p > .003$) and *student behaviors* ($p > .039$). Primary school principals spend significantly more time than do secondary school principals on *MOE office* related activities (4th vs 8th rankings). This finding requires further investigation. It is probably easier to understand why secondary level principals actually spend significantly more time in the area of *student behavior* (discipline, attendance, meetings). They ranked it 3rd in importance while their primary counterparts ranked in 6th.

Table 2 shows the rankings by primary and secondary principals of tasks where they *ideally* like to spend more time.

For the total sample of 96 participants, the rankings are as follows:

(1) program development; (2) personnel management; (3) planning; (4) professional development; (5) school management; (6) student activities; (7) student behaviors; (8) community relations; and (9) MOE office activities.

Table 2
 Ranking of School Tasks in Terms of Ideal Time Allocation

Principals' Task Areas	Total Sample	Primary Principals	Secondary Principals
Program Development	1	1	1
Personnel Management	2	2	2
Planning	3	3	3
Professional Development	4	4	4
School Management	5	5	6
Student Activities	6	6	5
Student Behaviors	7	7	7
Community Relations	8	8	8

This table indicates that primary and secondary level principals not only agree but have a clear idea of what they should be doing and how time should be spent in leading their school. Representing the interests of the community and of MOE ranked 8th and 9th respectively and are therefore not considered priority tasks areas. In other words, this may be an indication that school principals would prefer more autonomy from parents and from MOE officials, and be able to concentrate, in their own professional judgment, on school matters that they perceive to be more relevant to their job, particularly curriculum and instructional leadership, personnel management, and planing.

The next table illustrates interesting differences between actual and ideal rankings of task areas.

Table 3
Comparison of Ideal and Actual Allocation of Time to School Tasks

Task Areas	Primary School Principals			Secondary School Principals		
	Ideal Time	Actual Time	Difference	Ideal Time	Actual Time	Difference
Program Development	1	3	2	1	4	3
Personnel Management	2	2	0	2	2	0
Planning	3	5	2	3	5	2
Professional Development	4	7	3	4	6	2
School Management	5	1	4	6	1	5
Student Activities	6	8	2	5	7	2
Student Behaviors	7	6	1	7	3	4
Community Relations	8	9	1	8	9	1
MOE Office Activities	9	4	5	9	8	1
	Difference Total 20			Difference Total 20		

Table 3 compares the ideal and actual allocation of time for both school levels. As stated earlier, whereas principals relatively agree on how time should be spent, as a group, they are not capable of devoting the time they would like to several areas of responsibility. Primary level principals report spending considerably more time than they would prefer on *MOE Office* activities (meetings, committees, reports, etc.), and to *school management* activities (weekly calendar, office, budget, correspondence, memos, etc.).

Presumably, they would prefer to give more attention to *program development*, *personnel management*, and *planning*. Secondary school principals also report falling short of devoting the time they would like to these same three priority task areas. Like principals at the primary level, they also report spending too much time on *school management* activities. They also would prefer to give less time than they actually do to *student behavior* activities.

The results of the first stage of this study concur with previous findings: in general, principals spend “less time on program development and planning than they would like and more time on student problems and working with the central office than they think they should” (Sergiovanni, 1995).

Conclusions

Principals actually devote their energy to those task areas that they *value as most important*. Both primary and secondary level principals rank the following tasks as *critical areas of responsibility* (1st to 4th rankings): There is little difference between ideal and actual time allocation to the following school task areas:

- Program development
- Personnel management
- Planning, and
- Professional development

In reality, however, they are unable to devote as much time as they intend to on the above four critical areas except for the area of *personnel management*. As shown in the tables, rankings of school tasks in terms of actual time allocation illustrated in the tables are relatively similar for primary and secondary school principals. This may reveal a phenomenon that principals feel some frustration. Ideally, they want to spend much less time on *school management* (5th for primary principals and 6th for secondary principals), but this area takes most of their time (ranked 1st for both primary and secondary principals). The *difference* is quite obvious—4 for primary and 5 for secondary school principals. Another example is that they want to spend more time on their *professional development* (ranked 4th for both primary and secondary school principals), but in reality they have much less time to spend on this area (ranked 7th for primary principals, and 6th for secondary principals).

Previous research reported by Sergiovanni (1995) has shown that successful principals use their time differently than unsuccessful ones. *Real* and *ideal* time allocations of successful principals correspond fairly well, and they seem to be able to delegate more effectively, allowing them to focus on what they perceive to be critical areas of responsibility. Further investigation and analyses are needed to examine whether the findings of this study support those of previous research conducted by other researchers (for example, Sergiovanni).

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