SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND READING COMPREHENSION IN VENEZUELA

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Abstract

This 2004 study addresses the critical issue of teaching and school leadership in Venezuela, a developing country, currently facing severe socioeconomic, political and educational dilemmas. The project's research identified how school leaders (principals) could create and sustain an environment in which teachers embraced students' reading comprehension strategies. The results indicated that high school teachers and school leaders lacked knowledge about global reading comprehension strategies of metacognition, prior knowledge, inference, vocabulary, and text structure. A program for teacher enrichment was started. The findings also showed that principals' self-perceptions of their leadership differed from how their teachers perceived them.

KEY WORDS: Reading comprehension strategies, transformational leadership, school leader, teacher training, Venezuelan educational system

INTRODUCTION

This research study, funded by a Fulbright Scholarship Grant, stems from several reliable sources indicating the low state of Venezuelan students' reading abilities and the weaknesses of the training received by Venezuelan school administrators. School leadership and reading have become the most relevant concerns in some societies, especially in developing countries. Venezuela has not escaped from these global issues. According to the book How in the World do Students Read? (a report released by The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), all developing countries tend to have lower achievement levels than the industrialized nations. In general, their economic position is weaker and they lack long-standing literacy traditions. The report indicates that Venezuelan students “scored at chance levels or below, indicating virtual non-reader status” [IEA, 1992, p.18]. It showed that Venezuelan fourth grade students had the lowest achievement among all countries researched. The Venezuelan student performed in the lowest five percent of the least capable students from Finland, Hong Kong, and United States, countries with the highest scores. Even more dramatic, five percent of the best Venezuelan students scored lower than the average students from Finland, Hong Kong, and United States. The achievement level of ninth grade Venezuelan students is one of the four lowest of the sixty-four countries in the study, higher only than Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

In 2000, the Department of Pedagogy of the Universidad de Los Andes (Venezuela’s third largest public university), determined that most students identified “knowing how to sound out words” as the primary strategy to become good readers. The report by the Center for Research on Reading, Writing and Innovations in Education indicated that reading in areas such as science, mathematics, and social studies demanded skills beyond those used in the early grades. It also pointed out that students often lost interest in reading, as they got older. Large numbers of secondary students were at risk of reading failure. These students required reading instruction targeted to their needs; secondary school teachers had limited time for implementing reading strategies, unless such strategies were required by the national curriculum.
imposed by the government [Greaney, 1996]. Also school administrators lacked the appropriate tools to offer guidance to promote and support changes at the classroom levels.

Paul Constance [1999] reported the results of the First International Comparative Study run by UNESCO’s Latin American Laboratory for Assessing Quality in Education. Eleven countries participated in the study. With the exception of Cuba, the results were discouraging. On average, students correctly responded to only forty-eight percent of the math questions and sixty-two percent of the language questions. Venezuela, one of the region’s highest income countries, was among the poorest performers in both areas.

Fogarty [2003] maintained that literacy matters at any grade level and in any content area. Reading comprehension strategies such as metacognition, prior knowledge, inferencing, word meaning, and text structure must be used to promote comprehension and understanding of narrative and expository texts. These strategies became the basis for investigating and assessing the status of the knowledgebase of instructional leaders and high school teachers in the metropolitan area of Caracas and Miranda State.

Literature identified many types of deficiencies in this educational system such as political campus involvement by faculty and students, multiple irregularities of the school calendar due to the lack of financial resources, limited technological access, restricted classroom environments, high levels of bureaucracy, unmotivated faculty, and unprepared students.

THE STUDY

The study focused on principals as instructional leaders and how they could effectively motivate teachers to use reading comprehension strategies to increase the academic achievement of their adolescent students. The objectives were (1) to determine the reading level of high school students, (2) to measure the effectiveness of the school administrator’s leadership skills to motivate teachers to use reading comprehension strategies in their lesson planning; (3) to investigate the status of the knowledge-base of middle-school and high school teachers on reading comprehension strategies; (4) to improve reading instruction across content areas through sustained professional development; and, (5) to propose a professional development plan based on Trainer-of-Trainers model.
Action research was used as the research design (see Figure 1). Mills [2000] states that Action Research is a systematic inquiry by teachers, or other individuals in an educational setting; information is gathered in order to improve the ways their particular educational setting operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. Action Research has gained support in education because it (1) encourages change in the schools, (2) fosters a democratic involvement of many individuals in approaching education, (3) empowers individuals through collaboration on projects, (4) positions teachers and other educators as learners who seek to narrow the gap between practice and their vision of education, (5) encourages educators to reflect on their practices, and (6) promotes a process of testing new ideas. The study followed the practical Action Research model by Schmuck (1997) in researching a specific school situation (leadership and reading comprehension) with a view toward improving practice.

THE READING COMPREHENSION MODEL

The Strategic Teaching and Reading Project Model is an instructional improvement and professional development project using the five strategies previously mentioned as a foundation for improving teaching and learning. It was created by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory in 1994, as a response to urban education needs. The NCREL is one of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education to improve U.S. schools. The North Central region includes the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The researcher adapted the instrument and made modifications based on cultural arguments. The Proyecto para el Enriquecimiento de la Lectura Estrategica [Strategic Reading Enrichment Project] known in Spanish as PELE involves the strategies of Metacognition, Prior Knowledge, Vocabulary, Inference and Text Structure.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The professional development segment of the study encouraged self-reflection and group inquiry into teachers’ and school leaders’ practices. The professional development plan included five phases: (1) building a knowledge base, (2) observing models and examples, (3) reflecting on current practices, (4) changing practice, and (5) gaining and sharing expertise. Phase 1 and 2 were completed in 2004 under supervision of the researcher. Phases 3, 4, 5 were scheduled for 2005, supervised and monitored by a team formed in each school. Each of the seventeen school teams consisted of the principal, counselor, and five teachers from different subjects.

Phase 1. Building A Knowledge Base

Teachers and school leaders read and understood how recent research is changing traditional reading instruction. The activities suggested, but were not restricted to: conducting needs assessments, attending awareness sessions, and attending interactive workshops. For this study, teachers and school leaders attended two hour-long awareness sessions, twenty-one hours of interactive workshops on reading comprehension strategies, eight hours on leadership behavior, and eight hours on team building.

Phase 2 Observing Models and Examples

Teachers and principals heard examples of strategic reading and instruction. These examples helped clarify and expand their workshop discussions on interactive reading. Suggested activities included: coaching and mentoring, examining classroom artifacts, watching videos and listening to audio examples of team teaching. For this study, they watched videos about best reading practices and they examined classroom artifacts.

Phase 3. Reflecting On Your Own Practice

Each teacher and school leader was to develop an individual plan for self-change of current practice; they were to use their readings and their own analysis of examples. Suggested activities were: keeping a journal, participating in case discussions, and networking. This phase, to start in January 2005, was intended for teachers to self-monitor their own practices which they had instituted in Phases 1 and 2 under the researcher who left on October 31, 2004.

Phase 4. Changing Your Practice

This phase was to be put into operation about April 2005. Teachers and school leaders were to plan for change after evaluating how well Phases 1-3 were working for them and for the students. Some suggested activities included: participating in study groups or learning groups, attending institutes, creating support groups, participating in instructional seminars, conducting action research in their classrooms or school-wide.

Phase 5 Gaining and Sharing Expertise

This phase was expected to take place at the end of the school year in June of 2005. Teachers and school leaders were to focus on institutionalizing what they had learned about strategic reading and transformational leadership, both in their own classrooms and throughout their school. Suggested activities included: team planning, developing curriculum, assessing current needs, and setting future goals.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were chosen through cluster sampling that identified twenty high schools in the Equal Educational Opportunity [EEO] program run by the Venezuelan higher education institution, Universidad Simon Bolivar. The EEO attempts to elevate the achievement level of high school students in mathematics and language arts. The EEO also provides a springboard to students with low performance scores who cannot be admitted to highly competitive universities. Each high school selected for this study had different numbers of faculty and staff members. Three schools were dropped because of conflicting schedules. The seventeen schools participating had 35 school leaders and 750 middle and high school
teachers from multiple disciplines. Each school formed a team of seven members who worked with the researcher from January to October 2004.

STUDY INSTRUMENTS

The self-evaluation checklist (Figure 3) included eight items asking for basic concepts related to the five reading strategies of metacognition, prior knowledge, vocabulary, inference, and text structure. Based on these strategies, the study examined the knowledgebase of principals and teachers on reading comprehension strategies across content areas at all high school grade levels.

FIGURE 3
SCORING KEY FOR THE SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

ANALYSIS OF DATA

All participants who attended the initial session to learn about the study received the self-assessment form. Responses were categorized and tabulated. In order to be included in the final listing, an item had to have a frequency of 10 or greater, which equated to being listed by approximately 10% of the total sample (N=785). All items were included. Three items were categorized under Metacognition, one item under Prior Knowledge, two items fell under Inference, one item in Vocabulary, and two items under the category of Text Structure. Figure 4 shows the results based on the responses obtained from teachers prior to being trained on reading comprehension strategies. In fact, the pre-data collected indicated the subject's knowledge base and served as the basis for the full or partial implementation of the training.
This analysis reflects the ineffectiveness of the Venezuelan teacher-training program. More than 50% of teachers did not possess knowledge of reading comprehension strategies. One of the major reasons is the lack of reading instruction courses in the various curricula from colleges of education in Venezuelan higher education institutions. The three major universities responsible for training teachers in the country are the Central University of Venezuela, the Pedagogical University (Teacher College), and Los Andes University. Other private universities are also centers for training teachers such as the Catholic University and the Metropolitan University. In examining the current education curricula of these universities, it was found that 75% do not include reading instruction courses for high school teachers. Elementary school teachers have only one course on reading.

The same lack of reading methodology training was true for the school leaders. Venezuela has neither a system of certification of principals nor a formal training program. Some universities offer master’s degrees in Educational Management with the purpose of training teachers to become higher education faculty. There is no provision in the Venezuelan legal system to regulate the training and certification of principals. A Venezuelan principal has to have a teaching degree, but there is no requirement regarding the number of years of experience in teaching or administration. Voices from the field indicated that most principals are political appointees.
FIGURE 5
GLOBAL RESULTS OF READING COMPREHENSION TEST
ALL TEACHERS & LEADERS WHO TOOK THE PRE-TEST

LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

There is a general consensus that strong school leadership is an essential characteristic of an effective school [Ubben and Hughes, 1987]. However, as Rossow [1990] notes, research studies have taken different approaches in attempting to delineate which aspects of leadership have the most influence on a school’s effectiveness. While some studies have focused on the contextual areas of leadership, others have concentrated on the personality traits of leaders. In this study, the transformational leadership model was the basis of examining the leadership actions of Venezuelan educational leaders. Transformational leadership ideas are credited to James McGregor Burns [1978]; he applied them to the political arena. Bernard Bass [1985] added to this theory by conceptualizing three major types of leadership with levels of activities: laissez-faire had one activity, transactional had three, and transformational had five. A transformational leadership expands the transactional activities of simple exchanges, negotiations, and coalition building by affecting follower motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Transformational leaders have strong personal values and beliefs [Hoy and Miskel, 2005].

RATING LEADERSHIP

Thirty-five school leaders received the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). The questionnaire uses 45-items to describe observable leader behavior. Respondents were between 40 to 56 years old. 65% were female and 35% were male, all had less than 5 years of experience as school administrators. Fifty-nine percent had masters’ degrees, some unrelated to educational leadership, and 25.41% did not have any postgraduate coursework. The findings revealed that school leaders saw themselves as transformational leaders, while teachers evaluated their leadership actions as transactional. The following table shows the evidence collected through the MLQ.
TABLE 1
VENEZUELAN SCHOOL LEADERS BEHAVIORS MEASURED BY MLQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laissez-faire</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>.294</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is relevant to examine the laissez-faire leadership rating. According to Bass [1998], this type of leadership shows an absence of transactions with followers. It is the most passive and least effective among of the three types of leadership. Teachers posited that their leaders exhibited laissez-faire behavior. The scale of the MLQ ranges from 0 (the least amount of expressed leadership behavior) to 4 (the most behavior expressed). A rating of 1 demonstrates not making decisions, avoidance of responsibilities, no actions taken, ignorance of duties, not engaging with faculty and students, etc.

FIGURE 6
TYPE OF LEADERSHIP RESPONSES BY LEADERS AND TEACHERS

The Transformational Leadership Model forms the basis of a sustainable leadership system. In it, leaders stimulate others to view their work from new perspectives, generate an awareness of the mission, develop colleagues to higher levels of ability, and motivate them to see beyond their own limitations [Bass, 1985]. In this sense, Venezuelan educational leaders need to reinforce and work more in their transformational behavior in order to make their school organizations highly effective and productive. In order to excel, most programs associated with the schools need the hand of a transformational leader. To be successful, a reading initiative at the high school level must be supported by a transformational leader who is able to envision high achievement levels of students. Conditions of the school environment such as the lack of material and financial resources, the deficiency of teacher preparation programs, the need for safety and security, are some factors that prevent school leaders from becoming effective transformational leaders. Unfortunately, nothing is being done to alleviate these conditions.

THE TRAINING PROGRAMS

The study comprised three types of training programs: Reading Comprehension, Transformational Leadership, and Team Building.
THE READING COMPREHENSION TRAINING

This section consisted of twenty-one hours in two and one half days. All teachers were invited to participate. The middle and high schools principals signed an agreement with the researcher/trainer to cancel their classes for three days to carry out the training on site. Some schools had training on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, so that the schools needed to be closed for just one day. A total of 750 teachers were trained, including school administrators and counselors. The large number of teachers who did not complete the twenty-one hours of training, as required by the research study, was eliminated from the study. Some teachers could not complete the training because of the workload they carried. In Venezuela a teacher works in two and sometimes three different schools in order to make a decent salary. Often, teachers work in public schools during the morning and then teach in private schools in the afternoon and evenings.

The 30-page Strategic Reading Training Manual designed by the researcher/trainer contained five reading comprehension strategies, each with three hands-on training activities. It also incorporated graphic organizers or visual representations to help the teacher understand student comprehension processes. For example, the graphic organizer Concept of a Definition was a map about learning and expanding vocabulary. Other graphic organizers explained comparisons and contrasts, causes and effects, problem solving, analogies, classifications, and sequencing, among others.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING

All school principals and the assistant principals attended this training. During sixteen hours of training, administrators were exposed to the theory of transformational and transactional leadership. A 20-page manual designed by the researcher/trainer contained fifteen interactive activities that asked for comparing and contrasting between transformational and transactional leadership behavior and or actions. Transformational actions were to be put into practice in the school in order to support the implementation of the Strategic Reading Project. School leaders received the training at the host university.

TEAM BUILDING TRAINING

The eight hours in this training constituted the last piece of the series of training sessions that were needed to equip all schools with highly qualified individuals who could oversee and monitor the Strategic Reading Project. Each school named seven members, including the principal and or an assistant principal and the counselor. The teams were trained in communication processes, building connections, networking, conflict resolution, and leadership. They also received further training with the five reading comprehension strategies to help them reinforce the implementation. They committed to direct their future efforts to implement the Strategic Reading Enrichment Project in their schools as a way of raising students’ comprehension skills and, thereby, improve student achievement levels. A website was created to offer support and an open forum for discussion after the researcher’s departure. Some of the transformational leadership qualitative actions the teams were to undertake in January of 2005 included:

- To conduct a need assessment of the institution
- To develop an action plan
- To infuse the PELE (reading enrichment) strategies across content areas
- To initiate an internal informational campaign to introduce PELE
- To implement a Reading Rally to create enthusiasm for reading among students
- To sustain an internal plan only for vocabulary development
- To rescue institutional identity
- To create a permanent discussion forum on the importance of teaching reading across content areas
RESULTS

The time horizon of the study did not permit to report on definitive changes in the skill level of teachers and leaders as a result of the training. No post-test was administered. The skills building were to continue on a voluntary team basis. The training conducted during the study was designed to compensate for the diagnosed deficiencies through systematic exposure to the training objectives. This exposure to accepted strategies was expected to moderately equip teachers and leaders to deal with instructional, reading, and leadership issues.

Similarly, it was expected that the reading level of the students in the participating schools would increase through the increased competence of the teachers and leaders. At the present time, Venezuela does not use standardized tests that obtain information about reading abilities of students.

A search of the literature did not reveal any other research projects in underdeveloped countries, including Latin America, which blended programs of teaching reading and school leadership skills to support literacy goals.

CONCLUSION

School leaders and teachers can promote, through their work high academic achievement and positive social climate in the classroom. In Venezuela, additional and in-depth work is still needed in the areas of shared workspaces, teaching materials, teaching methodologies, best practices, healthy school environments, collaboration, and partnerships. This study identified many of the deficiencies and difficulties facing Venezuelan teachers and school administrators. One of the major resources of a country, affecting its vitality, is the literacy of its citizens. Any country desiring to compete scholarly and economically, needs to create an educational system to educate K-12 students to become literate (to read and write critically).

This study revealed that teachers and school leaders in Venezuela lacked sufficient knowledge on the five universal reading comprehension strategies. The study opened a door to more cooperation between these teachers/leaders and higher education institutions, especially with those institutes responsible for teacher training. While the participating teachers and school leaders orally expressed their desire for students to become competent, lifelong learners, study data showed, they had little knowledge about how students acquire reading motivation and competence. They did not use the students’ metacognition (thinking about your own thinking). If an individual knows how to process information for maximum comprehension, then learning can be engrained and retention of knowledge solidified. In the same vein, inferring or reading between the lines explains what the author means, but doesn’t directly state. Texts often have different meanings to different readers. Each reader uses a mental model and process to figure out meaning. Inferences can be generated if the student mentally reconstructs the scenario by putting together the words of the text with prior knowledge. In the data examined, there was no evidence that the process of inferring was known and used by teachers and school leaders. The teachers followed orderly rules based on background experiences and social relations. Analysis of teacher answers to questions on vocabulary and text structure revealed that teachers did not understand that the text provides clues to meaning, which, when used in conjunction with a reader’s prior knowledge of the topic and the text, results in inferences.

Maria Carbo [2000] wrote “What Every Principal Should Know About Teaching Reading” and she formulated seven premises that are supported by this researcher. They are: (1) children learn from modeling; (2) it’s natural for children to enjoy reading and to be motivated to read; (3) learning to read should be easy and fun; (4) good readers spend time practicing reading; (5) active participation by parents promote literacy; (6) literacy rich environments increase reading motivation; and (7) stretching students with high-level reading materials increases reading abilities.

Recent research studies on effective organizational leadership in both the educational and the corporate arenas have provided unusually consistent findings that offer guidance for principals who want to promote and support change at the classroom level [Sergiovanni 1999; Bolman and Deal, 1998; Bass, 2000]. Collectively, these studies of new leadership approaches focus on the needs to emphasize instructional leadership; develop organizational cultures that promote innovation and experimentation rather than risk reduction through inaction; support increased autonomy and empowerment of people throughout the organization, change reward structures and, perhaps more importantly, focus more on
establishing broad-based, proactive consensus around a clear and consistent vision of the organization’s mission and purpose [Gil-Garcia and Riggs, 2001].

Based on the study’s findings, the onsite visitation to schools, and on school administrators’ interviews, the author believes that Venezuelan school leaders do not recognize the key role staff development must play in developing a learning-focused, high-achieving school. Participating school leaders did not provide appropriate staff development opportunities to their teachers. Opportunities such as building a knowledge base, observing models and seeing examples, reflecting on one’s own practice, change one’s own practice and gain from and share with others expertise and experiences. These components were part of the research design and resulted in successful professional development for participants. Together, the principals and teachers actively created a staff development program that is collaborative, authentic, reflective, and perhaps most important, is designed to address student learning needs.

In conclusion, three major educational issues permeate Venezuelan educational middle and high school classrooms. First is the inconsistency of teacher’s knowledge of reading instruction, as revealed by qualitative and quantitative data. This lack of knowledge may be impeding student learning and comprehension. Second, uncertified school leaders across the nation are illegitimatizing the effectiveness of the instructional process. During interviews, the thirty five school leaders participating in this research study admitted that they obtained their position because of their classroom expertise, but that they had not been formally trained to be principals. The third issue deals with socio-economic conditions and the teaching environment of schools, most of which are at critical poverty levels. There are no materials at all grade levels, there is a lack of basic audiovisual equipment, buildings and the infrastructure are inadequate or inappropriate, safety and security systems are deficient, a high polarization among faculty and staff mirrors the political spectrum of the country, the Ministry of Education is not trusted to be able and to be willing to promote profound changes, and teachers are unmotivated because they receive salaries of less than $400 per month when the national inflation rate is 60%.

**FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

What will bring about better practices in reading instruction and in instructional focus in the Venezuelan classrooms? What will truly allow learning to occur and students to succeed in the Venezuelan educational system? How can teachers become more effective and more knowledgeable about up-to-date teaching practices? What can teachers do to help low-achieving Venezuelan students? How can colleges and universities help in improve teaching training programs? How can unions and stakeholders unite to demand higher levels of preparation for principals? These, and many other questions, have yet to be answered. Self-reflection by all professionals involved, including this researcher, may promote change and yield results.

For Venezuelan education to be effective the school environment needs to be safe and secure, students and teachers should be physically comfortable; suitable materials and supplies should be available, parents and other community members should supportive the teachers. The critical component for a student’s success and satisfaction comes from highly trained and able teachers who use a variety of strategies, know the kind of questions to ask to motivate students, implement different activities to encourage students to use advanced thinking, and make quality decisions on a daily basis to sustain and maintain a healthy climate for learning.

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