

Title: Promoting Reading Improvement: A Case Study of Exemplary Elementary Principals

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### **ABSTRACT**

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if there were commonalities in the approaches of ten elementary school principals in the state of Florida identified as “success stories” in leading reading improvement in their schools in 2002 shortly after enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* at the national level and the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative at the state level. A secondary purpose of the study was to determine the principals’ levels of readiness for self-directed learning.

Several commonalities were noted, and in a qualitative analysis of selected interview questions, five major themes emerged: Philosophical Framework, Human Resources, Programs/Strategies, Use of Data, and Use of Federal and State Initiatives and Information. On the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78), the principals’ scores were exceptionally high, comparable with those of the top entrepreneurs in the United States.

The overarching conclusion of the study centers on the identification of these exemplar principals as “educational entrepreneurs” who employ innovation, teacher empowerment, shared leadership, and reliance upon data to lead reading improvement in their schools.

## Introduction

Reading is the key that opens the door to opportunity. The ability to read determines a student's success in the curriculum, and is a vital skill carried forward into adulthood. The unfortunate reality is that many students never gain the level of reading skills they need to function productively in society.

Focusing on improvement of reading skills has become a mandate across the country. This mandate is exemplified in the Reading First program in the United States as part of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (US Department of Education, 2001a) and the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative.

Best practices in reading have been outlined in several major reports: the report of the National Reading Panel (2000), the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) report on 30 years of reading research, a summary document released by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 2001) and the California reading task force report (CSU, 1995). There is a wide variety of information that may bewilder a principal whose area of expertise may not lie within the reading area.

In an interview in the National Association of Elementary School Principals' (NAESP) publication entitled "No Principal Left Behind" (Ferrandino, 2003), then U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige outlined the concerns of elementary principals as they attempt to carry out the requirements of new legislation, and the fear that there may be such a concentration on curricular improvement and professional development for teachers that principals will not receive the support they need to "play a key role in any improvement model at the school level" (p. 53).

## **The Role of the Principal in Leading Reading Improvement**

The role of the principal has evolved; in the past, an educator became a principal by promotion, but there was no requirement for a specific leadership credential. In following this metamorphosis, researchers have documented the growing need for principals to be curricular leaders, reducing the emphasis on management skills in isolation.

The changing role of educational leaders is not confined to the United States. In the United Kingdom, Jones (1999) utilized a case study approach to determine that principals' roles have changed from instructor to management head. However, this change is viewed as a role expansion rather than a role restriction. The educational leaders had been able to focus much more on curricular issues at the expense of management responsibilities in the past; now, they are given more of the managerial and leadership roles to embrace while still maintaining their strong curricular involvement. "This has resulted in a new model of primary headship; the concept of a new professionalism is proposed"( p. 335).

Ubben, Hughes and Norris (2001) outline the concept of the principal for the present and the future. Their book is organized around the new Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) model standards developed specifically for school leaders. They mention leadership and management; they discuss leadership theory and present models for learning communities. There are chapters devoted to decision-making and school improvement. But what is most telling is the emphasis on school curriculum and promoting student achievement. More consideration is given to these topics than had previously been done.

In her book, *The Principal's Guide to Raising Reading Achievement*, McEwen (1998a) focuses on the importance of reading achievement in describing the urgency of the current situation in our schools. She examines the research in reading, and provides methods for reading remediation in grades K through 8. McEwen encourages the principal to examine his/her beliefs about reading, and provides a recommended reading list, list of related websites, and an instructional effectiveness resource list for the principal's self-education about the process.

In summary, the sweeping requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001) have many implications for state and local education agencies, particularly for assessment and staff development. Principals must be familiar with the reading process and how to encourage their staffs, both professional and paraprofessional, to maximize staff development opportunities for the betterment of the instructional delivery to all students. Principals must be able to mobilize the families and community to participate in their school's improvement.

As the instructional leaders of their schools, principals are on the front lines to demonstrate improvement and attainment of those mandated goals, but professional development and guidance for principals in leading reading improvement have been rare. With a large number of principals nearing retirement age, as well as with the increased expectations for student achievement, a long work week, and an exodus to better-paying positions in the private sector, the applicant pool for the principalship is shrinking nationwide. Those who remain committed to the elementary principalship need assistance in determining the most effective approaches to achieving reading improvement in their schools.

Principals can benefit from a roadmap, targeted to help them through their organizational change process. A study of how certain elementary school principals have successfully negotiated the path can create such a roadmap for other principals to follow. Examining the approaches of those who have been named as exemplars in leading reading improvement in their schools, before the recent legislative push, could reveal important principles and practices that could be incorporated into professional development programs for principals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there are any commonalities in the approaches of ten elementary school principals in the state of Florida who have been identified as “success stories” in leading reading improvement in their schools. By inquiring into the practices of exemplar elementary principals in Florida, this study sought to determine what factors were important in leading reading achievement. The secondary purpose of this study was to determine the principals’ level of readiness for self-directed learning and compare their mean score to that of other groups.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods. Participants responded to an in-depth interview protocol and an assessment instrument. All data were self-reported.

### **Participants**

The purposeful sample for this study was composed of ten elementary school principals, each from a different school district in Florida, who were identified as “success stories” at the state level in leading their schools’ improvement in reading achievement. The ten school principals who were selected by the Florida Department of

Education had demonstrated “marked progress” in leading reading improvement, even though neighboring schools with similar demographics were not making appropriate progress.

The principals, who all agreed to participate, indicated that their selection was due to a significant gain in their school’s reading scores, despite their school’s at-risk demographics. Most reported a high percentage of students normally considered to be more likely to have low reading achievement: students who qualified for Federal free/reduced lunch (indicative of low socioeconomic status), students with a high rate of school mobility, and a high percentage of minority/Limited English Proficient students. Despite these daunting demographics, in most cases, their school’s grades, according to the state of Florida’s *A+ Plan* for grading schools (*A+ Plan for Education*, 1999), moved from D or F to A or B.

In the nominating process of the exemplar principals, consideration had been given to those principals who had achieved significant improvement even before the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative had been introduced statewide. It is possible that inherent within those principals was a degree of self-directed learning which would have prompted them to begin their improvement process on their own.

### **Research Questions**

After reviewing documentation from the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative, as well as research regarding reading achievement and school reform initiatives, the researcher formulated questions from commonalities in the content of the research. The following question was initially explored:

1. Is there a discernible pattern of characteristics linked to reading improvement among principals who have been recognized as exemplary in leading reading improvement in their schools?

An additional research question and a *post hoc* hypothesis were formulated based on a central theme that emerged from the data. The principals had also been asked to respond to the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78) as a part of the data collection process for another study, but it became evident that their readiness for self-directed learning was quite pertinent to this study as well. This next research question and *post hoc* hypothesis were added after the qualitative data were analyzed:

2. Do the exemplar elementary principals perceive themselves to be highly self-directed learners?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78) scores of the principals who have been recognized as leading reading improvement in their schools and the *SDLRS* adult mean.

## **Instrumentation**

### **Interview Protocol**

The *Interview Form for Elementary Principals* was developed by the researcher. It was reviewed by an expert panel for content, vocabulary and structure; suggested changes were incorporated into the final format. “Validity is greater when the interview is based on a carefully designed structure, thus ensuring that the significant information is elicited (content validity). The critical judgment of experts in the field of inquiry is helpful in selecting the essential questions” (Best & Kahn, 1998, p. 322).

The *Interview Form for Elementary Principals* is comprised of eleven questions. First, the elementary school principals' length of administrative experience and types of educational experiences were determined. The remainder of the interview explored approaches to improving reading achievement; information regarding district and/or state support for elementary administrators; and descriptions of how their districts and their schools were implementing the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative.

The assessment utilized was the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS)* (Guglielmino, 1977/78). This scale is composed of 58 items utilizing Likert-type scoring, designed to assess individual attitudes, values, skills and personality characteristics descriptive of self-direction in learning. The self-scoring form of this instrument is called the *Learning Preference Assessment (LPA)* (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991). This title is used when discussing the scale with subjects in order to avoid response bias.

An internal reliability of .87 (Cronbach alpha) was reported for the pilot instrument as well as the 58-item version used today. Most published studies on populations over twenty years old report reliability figures ranging from .72 - .92. Finestone (1984) and Wiley (1981) reported test-retest reliability coefficients of .82 and .79 respectively. A split-half Pearson product moment correlation with a Spearman-Brown correction produced the highest reliability figure of .94 (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991), based on a population of 3,151 individuals from the United States and Canada.

Despite some criticisms of the *SDLRS*, (Brockett, 1987; Field, 1989; Straka & Hinz, 1996), the vast majority of studies have supported the reliability and validity of the

instrument (See, for example, Delahaye & Smith, 1995; Durr, 1992; Finestone, 1984; Graeve, 1987; Guglielmino, 1997; Hassan, 1981/82; Long & Agyekum, 1984; McCune & Guglielmino, 1991; McCune, Guglielmino, & Garcia, 1990; Posner, 1990, 1991; Roberts, 1986; Russell, 1988). The *SDLRS/LPA* is by far the most widely used quantitative instrument in the study of self-directed learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Overviews of research using the instrument can be found in Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and Delahaye and Choy (2000). It has been translated into French, German, Greek, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Finnish, Italian, Portuguese, Malay, and Afrikaans (Delahaye & Choy, 2000).

## **Data Collection**

### ***Pilot Study***

The *Interview Form for Elementary Administrators* was pilot-tested with a sample of three (3) elementary school principals from the local area. The only revision made to the *Interview Form* consisted of adding Question 11: “What are your recommendations for assisting other elementary principals in Florida to lead reading improvement in their schools?”

### ***Interviews***

A letter was mailed to each of the selected elementary school principals to explain the purpose of the study and elicit their participation, along with a consent form stating that participation was voluntary. All subjects ( $N=10$ ) agreed to participate in the study, and appointments were arranged for the researcher to travel to their worksites in Florida counties across the state in order to conduct face-to-face interviews with each participant.

A copy of the *Interview Form for Elementary Principals* was sent to each participant to read in advance of the interview.

First, the interviewer gathered data on the participants' gender, age, ethnicity, educational background, and educational experiences. Three of the interview questions were open-ended, with allowances made for follow-up questions for a more in-depth understanding of the responses. Follow-up probes were utilized to clarify participants' responses. The participants were also asked to add any information and reactions that may not have been covered in the researcher's questions or probes. Each interview took between 60 and 75 minutes to complete. The interviews were transcribed and sent to each participant for member-checking to ensure accuracy of their responses. After the interview transcripts were returned, or confirmatory emails sent by each participant, all data collected for that participant were placed in a folder and assigned a numerical label corresponding to the participant's coded identifying information.

### ***Survey Form***

The *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78) survey form was sent to the participant approximately two weeks after the interview was conducted. After the surveys were received by the researcher, all data collected relating to each participant were placed in a folder and assigned a numerical label corresponding to the participant's coded identifying information.

### **Data Analysis**

In the first stage, as noted, the open-ended questions from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively, case by case, to glean any patterns, themes or commonalities among them. Each transcript was reviewed by the researcher, question by question, with

attention given to any key words or phrases emerging from the review. Key words or phrases were defined as those which were the same or similar in content, such as “parents,” “parent involvement,” “parent conferences,” “inviting the parents to ‘Family Fun Night.’” These key words or phrases were assigned a color code to aid in the indexing and sorting of the data for analysis of any commonalities among all of the interview transcripts.

In the second stage, the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78) was scored, with the raw scores converted to percentiles and readiness levels. The results were coded as numerical data and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. In the scoring protocol, items left blank are coded as 3, the middle response; tests with 5 or more unanswered items are discarded. A mean was derived from the sample in order to facilitate comparison with a national sample of adults as well as with specific occupational groups studied previously.

### **Researcher Bias**

In qualitative research, researcher bias must be considered in the gathering and analysis of the data, particularly through the interview process. It is the researcher’s responsibility to objectify, to the greatest extent possible, the data-gathering process. “The danger of interview bias is constant. Because the objectivity, sensitivity, and insight of the interviewer are crucial, this procedure is one that requires a level of expertness not ordinarily possessed by inexperienced researchers” (Best & Kahn, 1998, p. 322). The researcher who conducted the interviews is a school psychologist by both training and practice, and is experienced with interviewing techniques; therefore, researcher bias was reduced.

## RESULTS

### **Demographics, Educational Background, and Experience of the Sample**

The study used a purposeful sample, which included all of the elementary school principals ( $N = 10$ ) from the state of Florida who were identified as “Success Stories” at the *Just Read, Florida!* Leadership Conference of 2002. Gender, age, ethnicity, years of experience as professional educator, years of experience as principal, and degrees held/areas of certification were documented for each subject in the first question of the interview. Of the participants, 6 were female and 4 were male. The ages of the study participants ranged from 36 to 46+. Of the participants, 7 were White and 3 were Black.

The participants reported multiple degrees and areas of certification. The bachelor’s degree in elementary education was reported by the largest number (8). Of the five graduate degrees at the master’s level, the master’s degree in Educational Leadership/Administration/Supervision was reported by the largest number (5). Three participants had earned doctoral degrees, two in Educational Leadership and one in Business/Finance. Twelve participants reported additional areas of certification; only one was in the area of Curriculum.

The participants were asked if they had participated in specific training in reading instruction prior to becoming an administrator. Only one participant had earned a degree in Reading (Master of Arts). Most reported that they had only one or two reading courses in their undergraduate degree programs, and some inservice workshops in Reading throughout their education careers.

The participants’ years of experience in the field of education were reported to range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 34, with a median of 25.5. The years of

experience as principal of the school where the success was achieved were reported to range from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 8, with a median of 5.5. All participants reported experiences as a principal and assistant principal, and most reported elementary teaching experience.

### **Summary**

***Research Question 1:*** *Is there a discernible pattern of characteristics linked to reading improvement among principals who have been recognized as exemplary in leading reading improvement in their schools?*

When examining the interview data qualitatively, five common themes emerged. The first major category was a philosophical framework that described the common beliefs driving the principals' improvement efforts. The subthemes from this first category were: core beliefs related to principal's responsibility for leadership (shared leadership and creation of a shared vision, teacher empowerment, strong role of the principal as a change agent, role of the principal as a curriculum leader), core beliefs related to the centrality of the teacher's role (importance of teacher's role, teacher empowerment, and recognition of teachers' contributions), and core beliefs about reading improvement (importance of reading, belief that all can learn, high expectations for students and teachers, and importance of parent involvement, consistency of approach to reading, and importance of discipline and attendance in promoting reading improvement).

The next major theme that emerged from the data analysis concerned the human resources involved in the improvement effort. The subthemes found within this category include: quality of staff, and professional development (importance, teacher empowerment, recommended methods: modeling/mentoring/coaching, professional

learning communities, university connections, classroom visitations, and off-site visitations).

The third theme that emerged in the data analysis concerned the specific programs, strategies and interventions involved in the principals' improvement efforts. The subthemes included: curriculum and programs, strategies/interventions (creating excitement about reading, access to books and other reading material, supplemental instruction/individual tutoring/small-group instruction, parent involvement, incentives for students, and scheduling), and funding/finance.

The fourth major theme emerging from the qualitative examination of the data concerned the use of data in the principals' improvement effort. Subthemes included: data, assessment, progress monitoring, and data analysis. The fifth theme that emerged from an examination of the data involved Federal and State initiatives and requirements. Subthemes included: AIP/AYP/NCLB/DIBELS, *Just Read, Florida!*, FCAT, and Reading Components.

***Research Question 2: Do the exemplar elementary principals perceive themselves to be highly self-directed learners?***

*Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (Guglielmino, 1977/78) scores of the principals who have been recognized as leading reading improvement in their schools and the SDLRS adult mean.*

The exemplar principals' group mean for the *SDLRS* fell within the High range, indicating a highly developed readiness for self-directed learning and a willingness to determine their own needs as well as to plan and implement their own learning, rather than relying on structured, other-directed learning plans. Research has indicated that those who have developed high self-directed learning skills tend to perform better in jobs requiring high degrees of problem-solving abilities, creativity, and change (Durr, 1992;

Guglielmino, Guglielmino & Long, 1987; Roberts, 1986). Their mean score was among the highest ever recorded as a group mean for the *SDLRS* in its 28-year history. There was a significant difference between the group mean of the exemplar principals and the national adult mean.

The elementary principals' mean score was also compared to the means derived from a meta-analysis of college students and professionals, a group of entrepreneurs, and a group of top female executives. The exemplary elementary principals' *SDLRS* mean was significantly higher than those of each of the other groups: meta-analytic mean ( $t=11.00, p<.000$ ); entrepreneurs ( $t=5.27, p<.001$ ); and female executives ( $t=2.7, p<.02$ ). Table 1 describes the comparison study groups with regard to size of sample, group mean, standard deviation, and whether or not the differences in the group means are statistically significant.

Table 1. Comparison of Mean *SDLRS* Scores of Exemplar Principals with Other Groups

Study	N	Mean	SD	Significance
Exemplar Principals	10	267.8	11.53	----
Meta-analytic <sup>a</sup>	4596	227.7	----	Yes**
Entrepreneurs <sup>b</sup>	162	248.6	18.70	Yes**
Female Executives <sup>c</sup>	19	257.8	14.69	Yes*

<sup>a</sup>McCune, S.K., Guglielmino, L. M., & Garcia, G. (1990). Adult self-direction in learning: A preliminary meta-analytic investigation of research using the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale. In H. B. Long & Associates, *Advances in self-directed learning research*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education. (Included 29 studies: mean age, 37.5; female, 66.2%; male, 33.8%; mean educational achievement, 14.4 years of formal schooling; 62% of the subjects were students).

<sup>b</sup>Guglielmino, P. J. & Klatt, L. A. (1994). Self-directed learning readiness as a characteristic of the entrepreneur. In H. B. Long & Associates, *New ideas about self-directed learning* (pp. 161-174). Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education.

°Guglielmino, L. M. (1996). An examination of self-directed learning readiness and selected demographic variables of top female executives. In H. B. Long & Associates, *Current developments in self-directed learning* (pp. 11-22). Norman, OK: Public Managers Center, University of Oklahoma.

\*p<.02. \*\*p<.001

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### ***Conclusions***

The sample population of this study was limited to ten elementary school principals in the state of Florida who were already identified as “Success Stories” at the state level. The size of the study group is very small; participation of the sample population in this study was voluntary. Therefore, while the study may reveal important directions for future research, generalization of these results should not occur with any other type of educator group, or for any other geographical area.

The primary value of this research was the identification of commonalities in the elementary principals who were exemplars in leading reading improvement in their schools. Three overarching themes emerged: Educational Entrepreneurship; Expecting, Supporting, and Recognizing Teacher Excellence and Involvement; and Reliance on Data.

### ***Educational Entrepreneurship***

The most striking conclusion from all of the data was that exemplary principals were “educational entrepreneurs.” These exemplar principals had begun their improvement efforts during the period of time when the state of Florida’s grading system for schools was begun, but before the federal *No Child Left Behind* and the state’s *Just*

*Read, Florida!* initiatives were in place. Two principals reported that their improvement initiatives began in 1997-1998, before the *Just Read, Florida!* Initiative.

Their interview and survey responses indicated that they had received little or no support at the state level, and that, as a group, they conducted their own research, initiated professional development, required consistency and quality from their staffs, and involved the parents and community in their change effort. They did not depend on district or state initiatives to begin their innovations. One principal stated: “We received very little from the state level. We did what we did on our own and through the support of the district itself.” Another principal responded: “No, you improve because you need to improve—and you want to.”

In the area of district support for their reading achievement efforts, all participants acknowledged that they were able to benefit from support provided, whether characterized as only “minimal” or “tremendous.” Funding and provision of professional development for teachers was the major method of district support reported by the participants. However, funding for professional development for principals was reported in only two cases. Interestingly enough, no participants felt short-changed by the lack of professional development opportunities provided for them by their districts; they were satisfied that their faculties and staffs were able to receive training. The exemplar principals appeared to be “self-starters” who relied on an informal system of finding their own mentors to assist them as they began their school leadership careers; they built their own network of collegial support. One principal indicated that there was no formal mentoring program in the district when s/he first began as a new administrator: “...there was no set mentor program in our district at all...you make your own collegial support.”

They were not afraid to initiate innovations at their schools, and supported other staff who engaged in innovation. The qualitative findings which led to the conclusion that the principals were educational entrepreneurs are supported by the principals' scores on the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (Guglielmino, 1977/78). Based on the results of a Delphi study using an expert panel, Guglielmino (1978) described the highly self-directed learner:

A highly self-directed learner, based on the survey results, is one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her own time and set an appropriate pace for learning, and to develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal-oriented. (p. 73)

The exemplary principals exhibited many of these characteristics.

Guglielmino (1993) also reported a “strong positive relationship between high levels of readiness for self-directed learning and high levels of performance on the job. These relationships were even stronger in jobs which required high levels of creativity or involved a high rate of change. In addition, as management levels rose, levels of self-directed learning rose.” (p. 233). Top entrepreneurs and corporate executives have the highest scores recorded to date on *the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* in its 28-year history. However, this study sample of educational exemplars achieved an even higher mean score than the entrepreneurs and executives studied in the business world. In examining this finding, one may conclude that a high level of readiness for self-directed learning contributes to success in leading such a change effort. Interestingly,

some of the exemplar principals reported incorporating business leadership methods with sound educational practices to achieve marked improvement.

***Expecting, Supporting, and Recognizing Teacher Excellence and Involvement***

The second recurring theme, unanimously supported by all exemplar principals, underscored the importance of expecting, supporting, and recognizing teacher excellence and involvement. All of the principals nominated staff members who had made exceptional contributions to their schools' reading improvement efforts; none took credit by themselves. Many mentions were made of the need to make professional development available to all staff members, prioritizing the funding to enable this to occur, carving out time within the school day as well as during the summer, and utilizing out-of-district staff development as incentives. Several principals modeled the importance of professional development by participating with their staffs in school-wide training efforts.

The teacher, the teacher, the teacher! I believe in providing the resources for teachers to do the best that they can do in teaching...But it doesn't make a bit of difference if the teacher (a) doesn't buy in, (b) doesn't commit, and (c) doesn't go in and do it...We had the greatest number of staff development hours logged for the district...just under 4,000 staff development training hours among us...But it IS the teacher. Now, I have to hire the teachers and I make it very clear...You have to agree to involvement in professional development, you have to agree to commitment to what the research says are the most effective strategies in teaching and to learn them and utilize those in your classroom...I expect teachers to commit to having an intern and working with that intern side-by-side so that we are promoting and putting out the best of the best in beginning teachers. Then I have expectations that you are going to be a team person, you are going to commit to the school's philosophy, you're going to be involved in the life of the school, not just your classroom...

Shared leadership was an important part of their improvement efforts. The principals acknowledged that the creation of leadership teams at their schools increased the level of buy-in to their change effort, and provided a synergy of thought for driving their reading improvement. Several principals mentioned specific support personnel, such as school psychologists, school social workers, and speech teachers, as important to their efforts in leading reading improvement.

The level of trust in the leadership team was partly due to the high level of teacher expertise at those schools. The principals maintained a high level of expectation, not only for the students, but also for the teachers. They sought out teachers with a high level of training, experience and expertise. Many of the exemplar principals reported that they had a high relative percentage, when compared with other schools in their districts, of teachers possessing National Board certification. They did not tolerate marginal teachers who may have been part of an inherited faculty; they worked with those teachers to either improve or find employment elsewhere. As one principal explained: “My goal is to have the best possible people serving students and if they can’t do that then they can work somewhere else. I have nothing against them personally, I just don’t want them working at my school.”

The most potent recognition and rewarding of teachers appeared to be through involving them in the planning and decision-making process for school improvement rather than relying on consultants to tell them how to improve or adopting a pre-planned process. One principal stated: “I would not dictate to them...[I said,] You’re an educator, you’re a professional and just because I happen to be the leader that wants to accomplish something great for the students, I don’t have all the answers. I allowed that to happen

and then they just embraced it.” Several principals created special opportunities for recognizing teacher contributions to a change/improvement effort. One principal related, “I recognize teachers just as I do students...We have ‘Thank Goodness for Teachers Day’...” Others recognized teachers’ efforts through newsletters, bulletin boards, and public and private commendations.

### ***Reliance on Data***

The third conclusion arising from examination of the data was that the exemplar principals relied upon data to help make decisions about funding, programs, and progress monitoring. All of the exemplar principals mentioned the use of data and assessment in their interviews. The use of data not only involved the consideration of student assessment data, but also provided the means for the measurement of professional goals set by the teachers. Administrators, members of leadership teams and parents were able to utilize data in the selection of appropriate reading programs, and in the evaluation of those programs’ effectiveness.

Teachers were able to use the data for monitoring the progress of students and determining the effectiveness of interventions; students were able to be grouped more flexibly and parents were able to be more informed specifically as to their children’s achievement. Data analysis assisted in time management and in scheduling and teacher planning. Related to the use of data was the use of technology. All principals relied on technological currency in order to remain abreast of data trends. They acted as data coaches to their staffs, and sought to empower the staff with ownership of their students’ performance data.

### ***Recommendations for Practice***

The literature review and examination of the study data document the importance of a model to guide elementary principals in leading reading improvement efforts at their schools. Principals would need to become informed, through staff development and self-directed activities, about best practices in reading instruction, data analysis, and in leading organizational change within their schools. Several of the principals believed strongly that the formation of professional learning communities within their schools provided the impetus and “buy-in” for initiating reading improvement, even before the requirements of the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative. Principals who are unfamiliar with this process could review DuFour’s (2004) recent article, among others, that outlines how to begin this process with their staffs.

Kotter (1996) wrote about the relationship of lifelong learning, leadership skills, and the capacity to succeed in the future. In his citation of a twenty-year study of 115 students from the Harvard Business School class of 1974, one of the characteristics that was most striking to him was that of “Lifelong Learning”...[defined as] “Willingness to seek new challenges, willingness to reflect honestly on successes and failures” (Kotter, 1996, p. 179). This characteristic, translated for school leadership at the district and school levels, would be a starting point for building capacity within the organization, and be one of the keys to identifying and developing good educational leaders.

A pool of aspiring administrators needs to be developed, with teacher-leaders targeted who have specific training in reading curriculum and who are relatively young, thereby ensuring more longevity for successful instructional leaders. Those who remain committed to the elementary principalship need assistance in determining the most effective approaches to achieving reading improvement in their schools. “Our nation

faces the challenge of retooling current principals and superintendents while preparing a new generation of school leaders to take their places” (Levine, 2005, p. 5).

Principals are in a very good position to recognize and encourage leadership among their staff, particularly if there is a system of shared leadership or leadership teams in place. Those staff members should be encouraged to aspire to school leadership positions, and be given opportunities to practice leadership skills. Principals should also be open to the possibility that some of their best staff members may have to leave their school in order to realize their leadership aspirations, and be supportive of such moves, despite the loss to the principal of a valued staff member.

Preparation for the role of school leader may need to begin at the university graduate-studies level, as educators seek the credentialing required by school districts to hold school leadership positions. When the study participants were asked if they had participated in specific training in reading instruction prior to becoming an administrator, only one participant had earned a degree in Reading (Master of Arts); one participant reported specific coursework beyond the typical undergraduate requirements in curriculum; and the remainder reported only one or two undergraduate courses in reading. The participants had to educate themselves, after becoming principals, about good reading programs and instructional practices. Their high levels of self-direction in learning led them to seek out the information they needed to effect meaningful change in their schools.

University programs for the preparation of school leaders have been criticized in Levine’s (2005) report: *Educating School Leaders*. “The findings of this report were very disappointing. Collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of

all the programs at the nation's education schools. This is distressing not only because of the magnitude of the jobs that principals and superintendents must perform, but also because of the large number of school leaders who will need to be hired in the next decade" (Levine, 2005, pp. 13-14).

A majority of the exemplar principals who were interviewed for the current study reported connections with universities for research and practices. They took the initiative to make those connections for assistance with their reading improvement efforts. The universities can create an opportunity, if they have not already done so, to adjust their school leadership programs to better reflect the current realities and look toward the future. With a well-researched program, patience and persistence, stakeholders will see the value of the change effort. As one of the exemplar principals explained:

We are in a business—and our business is to educate kids. The kids are our stocks, and when our stocks go up, our parents are happy, the business community is happy, the neighborhood community is happy, teachers are happy—all the 'stockholders' are thrilled when the stocks go up. And the biggest stockholders that are thrilled are the kids. The students are so proud—but we have to set this high expectation for our kids. I think in the past we were so busy not doing that—saying, well, he'll never learn to read—because he has this, this, and this and I said, yes, all kids will learn to read in this school. We have non-negotiables...this is something that WILL happen for all of our students.

### ***Recommendations for Further Research***

A model for successful elementary principals would include, by objective measure, a method to differentiate those "self-starters" who will be "pioneers" and galvanize their staffs into appropriate action. The exemplar principals had begun their improvement effort during the period of time when the state of Florida's grading system

for schools was begun, but before the federal *No Child Left Behind* and the state's *Just Read, Florida!* initiative were in place. Their interview and survey responses indicated that they had received little or no support at the state level, and that, as a group, they conducted their own research, received and initiated professional development, required consistency and quality from their staffs, and involved the parents and community in their change effort. They did not depend on district or state initiatives to begin their innovations.

Further research is needed to determine the specific tools and methods that elementary school principals in Florida need to lead reading improvement at their schools. Further exploration of levels of readiness for self-directed learning among current and aspiring school leaders also appears to be merited.

### **Summation**

When this study was first undertaken, the researcher proposed that principals could benefit from a roadmap, targeted to help them through this change process. A study of how certain elementary school principals had successfully negotiated the path could create such a roadmap for other principals to follow. Instead, what developed from the research findings became, not a map, but a vehicle. The philosophical framework became the frame and body of the vehicle. The human resources, particularly the principals themselves, were the drivers, taking the lead in scanning the landscape, gathering and evaluating data, setting goals, and making decisions about where to go, not unilaterally, but in partnership with their passengers. The programs and strategies were the engine of the vehicle, capable of generating a lot of horsepower. However, without a transmission and driveshaft, the power of the engine cannot reach the wheels to propel

the vehicle forward. The use of data became the vehicle's transmission and driveshaft, translating the power of the programs and strategies engine into the forward motion of the wheels and body of the reading improvement vehicle. The various federal and state policies may act, in turn, as either billboards and rest stops, or potholes and barriers to their reading improvement effort.

In a rapidly changing environment, principals and superintendents no longer serve primarily as supervisors. They are being called on to lead in the redesign of their schools and school systems. In an outcome-based and accountability-driven era, administrators have to lead their schools in the rethinking of goals, priorities, finances, staffing, curriculum, pedagogies, learning resources, assessment methods, technology, and use of time and space. They have to recruit and retain top staff members and educate newcomers and veterans alike to understand and become comfortable with an education system undergoing dramatic and continuing change. They have to ensure the professional development that teachers and administrators need to be effective. They have to prepare parents and students for the new realities and provide them with the support necessary to succeed. They have to engage in continuous evaluation and school improvement, create a sense of community, and build morale in a time of transformation. (Levine, 2005, p. 12)

Guglielmino (1993) reported a “strong positive relationship between high levels of readiness for self-directed learning and high levels of performance on the job. These relationships were even stronger in jobs which required high levels of creativity or involved a high rate of change. In addition, as management levels rose, levels of self-directed learning rose” (p. 233).

Perhaps what is needed is not a roadmap for others to follow. Instead, what may be needed is a method to identify and develop school leaders who can create a path to

success, using resources where they are available and innovating and inventing when they are not.

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