

Teachers' Perception of Administrators Who Helped Them Promote Learning

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The American education system is in crisis, and the shortage of school administrators has been cited as one of the main causes because the pool of leadership candidates is stagnant (Beem, 2002; Campbell, 2001; Fisher, 1998; Stanislaus County Office of Education, 2001). Whether this is a myth or reality, a myriad of responsibilities confronts school administrators. In many cases, administrators need to foster synergy in the entire school environment where the physical features of the school, the characteristics of the people, the social interactions, the communication and decision-making patterns, the hierarchical relationships between administrators and teachers provide an effective school culture (Donaldson, 2001). According to Mitchell (2005), the school principal's role is crucial in building school culture and motivating teachers. It is important, then, to gather teachers' perceptions of administrators who helped them promote learning; in particular, to ascertain what administrator attributes and behaviors teachers find helpful in their work to promote learning.

Administrator's Leadership

The definition of educational leadership has multiple connotations (Williams, 2000). Given all the elements that make up an effective administrator, an understanding of the organizational culture shapes the administrator's leadership performance (Blasé, 1994; Donaldson, 2001). However, regardless of culture's impact, the role of the leader is to provide the organization with guidance and vision (Hanson, 2003). When teachers sense a lack of vision or guidance, the leadership is ineffective (Rinehart, Short, Short, Eckley, 1998), the organization suffers (Hanson; Schlechty, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994), and the teachers are unsuccessful (Tschannen-Moran, 2000). In many instances, teachers were astute in identifying attributes and characteristics that are crucial for successful

leadership (Tschannen-Moran). In this study, teachers were asked to identify those administrator attributes and behaviors that they feel contribute to their ability to promote learning.

At the forefront was the administrators' leadership. Schlechty's (1990) and Sergiovanni's (1994) writings identified leadership competence as a crucial component in leadership effectiveness. This includes the leader's ability to maintain a wide-angle view of the organization and be able to generate a cohesive group moving toward student success (Cheng, 1994). Leadership as stewardship (Sergiovanni, 1999) means that leaders can get the necessary legitimacy to lead if they understand their role. Greenleaf (1977) reported that the overall views of leadership roles are based on values and ideas rather than a centralized process. Covey (1992) illustrated that leaders are service oriented, radiate positive energy, believe in others, lead balanced lives, are passionate about life, synergistic, and resilient. As such, this study will probe the perceptions of the practitioners, teachers, to inquire and provide practical advice to administrators for improving school environments, to instill a clear sense of purpose and a strong commitment to success.

Purpose of the Study

The qualities of a good administrator are subject to interpretation. Teachers, in particular, depend on administrators to offer leadership and guidance and to use their management skills to provide a safe learning environment (Blasé, 1994; Hanson, 2003). When teachers see the administrators as weak or lacking the qualities that promote success in the organization, the learning environment suffers. When a positive attitude, kindness, trust, and open mindedness are imbedded in the administrators' persona

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(Josephson, 2003a), teachers, and teaching, are nourished. Administrators can benefit from this study in two ways: (1) the findings can provide information that may enhance and improve their leadership role, and (2) the information can serve as an element to foster systemic change in the organization.

The primary purpose of the study was to determine what administrator attributes and behaviors teachers perceive contribute to their ability to promote learning. If the attributes and behaviors of administrators who were effective in promoting learning can be determined, schools of education can aggressively provide those tools to help their administration graduates to be more in tune with the school culture. In the same way, administrators will have an understanding of their leadership role in providing guidance and vision to the organization.

The Framework of the Study

To probe the attributes and behaviors of administrators, we need multiple interpretations of what these characteristics are. Creswell (1998) pointed out there are a number of effects that influence interpretation, such as the viewpoints of the researcher, the subjects or participants, and the individuals reviewing the study. A phenomenological study was fitting to capture the views and opinions of the teachers. The goal was to study several teachers from various school districts in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties, "to develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (Creswell, 1994, p. 12), to examine the administrator attributes and behaviors that teachers perceive contribute to their ability to promote teaching and learning. The study was also guided by principles and concepts found in the literature on instructional leadership, teacher

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retention, administrative support, teaching effectiveness, staff development, and teachers' perception of administrators.

In undertaking this study, the philosophical framework was guided by Character Education as evident in the six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Josephson, 2003b). These values provide the philosophical framework by which every human being who leads or nourishes the minds of others strives to attain. Without caring and trusting in oneself and others, it becomes very difficult for the leaders to lead effectively (Tschannen-Moran, 2000). These principles of caring and trusting were the foundation of spiritual/religious leadership (Blanchard, Hybels, & Hodges, 1999). We must relish and promote these qualities. The success of an administrator does not depend on a religious belief; it depends on basic characteristics that were imbedded in humankind. Michael Josephson, radio commentator and President of the Character Counts! Coalition captures the essence of the caliber of leaders that can promote learning.

Watch your thoughts because they lead to attitudes.
Watch your attitudes because they lead to words.
Watch your words because they lead to actions.
Watch your actions because they lead to habits.
Watch your habits because they lead to character.
Watch your character because it determines your destiny.

These words of unknown origin remind us that every aspect of our lives, at home and at work, can be improved if we realize the power of making conscious and intelligent choices about our thoughts, attitudes, words, actions, habits and character. As rational beings with free will, our ability to reflect and make choices gives each of us untold power to affect our lives. (Josephson, 2003b)

Good character promotes great leadership; administrators must constantly provide and support a positive environment to promote teaching and learning.

Methodology

The participants responded to three data sources. The researchers conducted semi structured interviews, a rank-order activity, and a self-anchoring scale analysis. The 10 researchers shared the data collected in order to determine the conformability of the various data sources in order to tell the same story.

The interviews followed a protocol of two sets of six open-ended questions designed by the researchers during two class sessions. During the interviews, each participant's answers were audio taped and the tapes were later transcribed and coded for themes. The rank-order activity provided the participants with 14 phrases, such as *promoting teachers' professional growth*, derived from this study's literature review. Each participant ranked the phrases depicting administrator behaviors and attributes. The self-anchoring scale provided a vertical line showing 10 at the top—representing an administrator with ideal qualities for promoting learning—and 0 at the bottom of the page—representing the worst possible administrator who would hinder learning.

The Researchers

A diverse group of doctoral students in the field of education attending a small private Christian university in southern California conducted this study. Four of the researchers were over 50 years old; four were between 40 and 50, one was between 30 and 40, and one was between 20 and 30. The group included six women and four men of various ethnic backgrounds, including seven Euro-Americans, one black, one White-Mexican, and one Indian-Spanish-French-Italian. All except two of the researchers worked in public schools in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties in southern California; the others worked for private Christian schools. The occupations of

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the researchers included three full-time doctoral students, two active classroom teachers (one elementary, and one secondary), and five administrators (two elementary, two secondary, and one district).

As a member of the research group, I am a 12-year veteran in the education profession. After working over 15 years in the telecommunications industry, I joined the profession as an elementary school teacher. After 3 years in the classroom, I was assigned to a school-site administrator position both at the elementary and secondary levels. Presently, I work as a district administrator in a midsize school district. My experience in business and as a classroom teacher, school site administrator, and central office administrator supported my confidence in conducting this study.

Design

This qualitative study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of administrators' contribution to their teaching and learning by identifying those administrator attributes and behaviors that promote learning. The research design was qualitative and explorative (Creswell, 1998). The study used the phenomenological approach described by Creswell (1998) as "primarily an attempt to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied" (p. 275). The study incorporated individual studies by 10 doctoral students in a doctoral research class project. Each researcher selected two teachers (male and female) from K–12 schools (50% elementary and 50% secondary). There were 17 Euro- American and three Latino/Hispanic teachers with 11.2 average years of teaching experience. The 10 researchers designed the research, used the same interview questions and research instruments to collect the data. However, each doctoral student submitted his/her research paper as the final class project.

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The participants I selected were schoolteachers who had extra prep time at least once per week. I contacted the two participants via e-mail and asked if they would volunteer to participate in the study. Both participants had been in the teaching profession for over 5 years; both had worked for more than one district and for more than one principal; and both had worked in multiple job assignments outside the education profession before becoming educators. Before the interviews began, the participants and I discussed and reviewed the research objectives and processes, and I informed the participants that they had the option to withdraw from the process at any time.

The participants selected pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. I conducted two semi structured interviews over a 2-week period, and the participants completed a rank-order activity (Appendix A) after the first interview and a self-anchoring scale (Appendix B) after the second interview highlighting attitudes and behaviors of administrators who were supportive of teaching and learning.

These interviews were conducted face to face for between 15 and 30 minutes at the school site during the teachers' prep period. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Tesch's descriptive method (Creswell, 1994; Glesne, 1999) was used to analyze the data and strategies were derived from the results to address administrator attributes and behaviors. Tesch's descriptive method is the process of conducting qualitative analysis based on *decontextualization* and *recontextualization*. Tesch's method requires a series of steps such as focusing the information collected, asking detailed questions to extract underlying meaning, segmenting topics into groups, organizing topics with codes, using descriptive words to organize the topics into

categories, performing a preliminary analysis, and recoding existing data as necessary (Creswell, 1994).

Analysis of the Data

The interview questions, rank-order activity, and self-anchoring scale provided data that were integrated into the analysis of this study. According to Patton (2002),

The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data. This involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. (p. 432)

The analysis of the data was conducted in four phases. First, each researcher conducted his/her analysis based the techniques taught in class. Second, the researchers worked with a partner to evaluate each other's analyses of the data, resulting in a single outcome. Third, we formed two groups of three students and one group of four students with each group analyzing two outcomes in order to present a single data outcome. Finally, the finished products from the three groups were reanalyzed in a whole-class session.

The interview consisted of sequenced open-ended questions; that is, all participants were taken through the same set of questions, in the same order and in, more or less, the same words. I listened to the audio tapes and then transcribed the content verbatim. Patterns and themes quickly emerged and a summary of the key phrases was charted. The researchers analyzed the data further during several class sessions where categories of phrase-meaning, reoccurring patterns of phrases and words, and the overarching prominent themes emerged.

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The responses from each participant's rank-order activity were charted according to his or her choice of 1 to 10, with 1 ranking as the most important administrator behavior or attribute, 2 next important, 3 next important, and so on. Then, we weighted the ranking numbers as follows: 1 = 5 points, 2 = 4 points, 3 = 3 points, 4 = 2 points, and 5 – 10 = 1 point. The responses from each participant's self-anchoring scale were grouped in two sections. The positive responses (numbers 5 – 10), which represent the ideal administrator who supports learning and negative responses (numbers 1 – 4), which represent the worst possible administrator who would hinder learning.

Findings

The researchers were able to isolate two patterns in the interviewees' answers; namely, advice for principals and appreciated attributes and behaviors of principals. The self-anchoring scale and the rank-order scale provided valuable data to aid the researchers in identifying the seven overarching themes. The seven overarching themes emerged as attitudes and behaviors perceived by teachers as contributing to their teaching and learning. The 20 participants' responses were (1) positive support, personal regard—caring, (2) trust and respect—freedom, does not micromanage, (3) high work ethic, (4) leadership—provides direction, (5) integrity, (6) open mindedness, and (7) accessible and approachable.

Positive Support

First, teachers wanted their administrators to be professionals. A principal's professionalism can be demonstrated through his ability to implement change and have staff work cooperatively without arousing hostility. What he does on a daily basis with his staff and the school environment has an impact on how he is seen as a leader. He

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needs a strong knowledge base not only in administration; he needs to possess broad-based skills and expertise in directing the organization by facilitating the school as a social system and culture. He needs to understand the dynamics of the school as an open system. Thus, understanding and embracing the talents of teachers into the decision-making process.

An administrator was recognized as a “model” when he was able to spend high-quality time with teachers and provide support for their teaching and learning. “If you know someone is having trouble, pair them with a mentor in order to support them and to be effective,” stated Ms. Land, elementary school teacher and 1 of the 20 participants in the study.

A principal who is visible around the school campus is recognized as a leader with confidence and knowledge. “Don’t be a principal that hides behind a door and never sets foot into a classroom. Be somebody who’s going to be out there, visible, and really interested in what’s going on,” stated Ms. Springs, elementary school teacher. Teachers expect the administrator to have a positive relationship with them. Similarly, the administrator should be hands-on, actively involved in what goes on in the classroom and willing to support the teachers by providing constructive feedback. Commented Ms. Cruise, high school teacher,

When administrators do observations, of course they need to point out weaknesses, but instead of just pointing out weaknesses, then, they need to offer ways to correct those weaknesses.

Teachers defined supportive administrators as those who involve them in the decision-making process. “Everyone’s input should be involved in curriculum because

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each teacher has to teach this material,” emphasized Ms. Hampton, middle school teacher.

Trust and Respect

Trust and respect ranks high among the attributes and behaviors that teachers selected as crucial to an administrators' role in promoting teaching and learning.

Teachers expressed a strong position that a leader must be trustworthy. Trustworthiness is a two-way street. In fact, an old adage states that you must give respect in order to gain it.

Honesty is at the backbone of trust; trust and respect are linked with commitment.

Honesty means being clear, specific, and truthful with employees, manager, family, friends, and most importantly, oneself. “I feel supported. I feel valuable when somebody listens to what I have to say and then acts on it if it is a good idea,” stated Ms. White, elementary school teacher.

Earning trust and respect does not mean being a “yes” person. An individual that has self-respect and commands respect from others is not afraid to address uncomfortable issues. “I expect my principal to treat me as a professional, allowing me the freedom to develop into who I am as a professional,” suggested Mr. Soto, elementary teacher.

Building trust must be a clear engagement of the administrator. He must have concern and respect for the people who work for him, actively trying to understand their thoughts and clearly willing to demonstrate interest in the opinions of others. Ms. Austen, middle school teacher, said it best, “My current administrator has recognized my talent, and has admired me for it, and has left me to do what I do.”

High Work Ethic

Work ethics are the principal force by which an individual approaches his job. Similar to trust and respect, the administrator's attitude to promote learning can be demonstrated by his good work ethics. Work ethic is not centered only on coming to work on time or staying after time; it is the constant renewal of one's attitude to become flexible to meet the demands of the job. In a school environment, unlike any other organization, the constant flux, and demands of the customer dictates the day's priorities. If an administrator chooses to ignore the concerns of his staff and constituents, his poor work ethic shows.

Work is regarded by most as necessary toil, a condition reinforced by the industrial and electronic revolutions. One's work ethic, on the other hand, is demonstrated in positive and productive behaviors and attitudes. Administrators must project themselves as role models for teachers, approaching their work in an organized manner. Teachers expect their administrators to encourage them and at the same time provide a learning environment for teachers to focus on teaching.

Author: What would be your advice to a principal who wanted to support teachers in promoting learning?

Bunin: Let them [teachers] focus on teaching. Eliminate as much of the background paperwork and meetings as you can. You let them focus on teaching.

Author: Leave the teachers alone, right!

Bunin: Yes, leaving the teachers alone, but not just doing whatever you want. There must be some accountability. I am talking about the peripheral things, and have as few meetings as possible. Umm, let teachers use their time to be creative ... and ... that sort of thing. I recognize that everybody has a supervisor or boss ... who needs to set the guidelines, but once the rules are set, let people run with them.

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Another indicator of an administrator's attributes to promote learning shows up in how his respect for people and his caring for students guide his work ethics. "The one thing they both [administrators] have in common is that they have a heart for people," suggested Mr. Rockne, elementary school teacher. Building a relationship with teachers, connecting with them, and recognizing them as individuals were positive traits. "Get to know your teachers and get to know what their capabilities are," stated Mr. Maxwell, high school teacher. An administrator should always be accessible or approachable, have an open-door environment where teaching and learning were discussed freely, but above all, the administrator should listen, respect others' time, and believe in and value teachers and staff. The best way to measure these values was the way they approach work.

Leadership

Leadership is not pejorative. Yet, it receives the greatest scrutiny in a school culture. Leadership is not by default. The title does not automatically foster trust and respect. Similarly, *educational leadership* has multiple connotations. A successful leader is constantly working to assure his constituents that their trust is protected. An administrator, as the educational leader, who is positive attitude, low key, unthreatening, flexible, people loving, and fun stands out as an individual with high morale. "I've had principals who have been inspirational in the sense that they have been concerned about student learning," claimed Mrs. Hampton, middle school teacher. Similarly, the administrator who is confident, knowledgeable, a risk taker, and always learning new strategies to improve teaching and learning stands out as a leader. "A great leader encourages others into greatness," said Ms. Garcia, elementary school teacher. Overall, administrators who have straightforward and consistent behaviors were more likely to be

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perceived as a leader who contributes to teachers' ability to promote learning. Ms. Para explained,

One of the nicest outcomes has been working with teachers to create instructional units. One of my principals has allowed us to do team teaching so that we can promote learning across the curriculum? Therefore, I can work with another teacher so that we can promote learning with the classroom curriculum.

"My principal, in particular, encourages us to go to these trainings so we could better serve our students," stated Ms. Darling, elementary school teacher. Teachers recognize administrators' support consistent with providing them the opportunity to attain professional growth. A professional environment that was rich with encouragement and support, allowing teachers to attend conferences and workshops focused on augmenting teachers' knowledge base, has a leader in tune with the pulse of the organization. Mrs. Cruise, high school teacher, stated, "I measure my principal's leadership when he encourages me to attend conferences or whether to do observations or coursework to acquire the skills I need to create a better learning environment." Likewise, a positive school environment fosters creative and can-do teachers. The teacher becomes motivated and takes on new challenges when the administrator gives positive praise. "We as teachers," stated Mr. Grohl, high school teacher, "Start to question whether we are effective, and as superficial as it may be, we need to hear that we are doing okay,"

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Integrity

Integrity is a concomitant of ethical values. A person of integrity is considered honest. Teachers identify administrators' leadership ranging from the ability to plan, with a clear vision, to being able to promote teamwork. A passion for the job and high expectation of those around him is a high measure of an administrators' leadership character. An administrator's integrity and character are qualities that teachers admire. As best said by Mr. Maxwell, high school teacher,

They are the ones who pull all the loose ends together and tie them up in either a bow or make a mess out of them and create some kind of knot that is not useful.

Ms. Para, on the other hand, described a principal who lacked integrity.

He had his cronies – cronies meaning his buddies; the people that he listened to. I sat in a meeting. The assistant principal was sitting next to me. He [principal] starts the meeting. This was long before API (Academic Performance Index) scores. My question to the principal was related to standards. Something to the effect of where we are going in the school, but in the end, what's our outcome? 'What is it we want to say that students have learned?' He completely ignored my question. The assistant principal asked me, 'Are you guys fighting, because he completely ignored your question? That was a valid question?' He was stuck in his ways. His way or his buddies' way, and that's the way it was going to be. I made him look bad because he didn't have any knowledge, then that was too bad. The kids hated him. Besides, he had a drinking problem. He was not accessible. He was not available. He was kind of hideous.

Open Mindedness

"A micromanager is not in the best interest of my program," claimed Mr. Bunin, high school teacher. Most teachers rebel against any sort of management style that scrutinizes every detail of their work performance. Teachers' effectiveness depends on their freedom. The more teachers were micromanaged, the more they resisted new ideas

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and suggestions. Teachers are like artists; they need time and space to be creative. Once they were given the guidelines, they are willing to run with it. An administrator who was able to recognize those qualities in teachers was effective in promoting learning.

Providing teachers' freedom does not mean the freedom to do as they please, it means a willingness to work within the system to implement change. An administrator who sets the guidelines and holds teachers accountable is recognized as promoting learning. In fact, an administrator who is able to hold teachers accountable to the values of the institution and willing to take input and provide positive feedback to the teachers to help them promote learning is highly respected. This can range from a simple praise to helping them through teaching a concept. An administrator tends to be open minded when he provides teachers the freedom to do their work.

He actually walked around the classroom and sort of lectured to the air to show me what good proximity will be and what the effectiveness will be. (Mr. Moses, middle school teacher)

Accessible and Approachable

"They [administrators] are approachable. If you have a concern, if you have an issue, they are approachable," implied Ms. Cruise. Administrators who promote learning share an open-door style and are considered to be open minded and accessible. Teachers identified an open-door system, what Ms. Cruise calls, "approachable" as important to promoting learning. The door can be wide open but the atmosphere can be threatening.

I know that I can go into the office and talk to the administrator and they are going to listen to what I have to say. It doesn't necessarily mean that I am always going to get what I want, but at least I know they have heard me and they are concerned. (Mr. Rockne)

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Learning is fun. The environment should have a comfortable aura about it. The community, students, and teachers should always feel welcome and safe in the school environment. Because the administrator sets the tone, his demeanor should be welcoming and honest. He must carry the air of success that everyone is willing to inhale.

Group Findings from the Self-Anchoring Scale

The group findings from the self-anchoring scale provided viable information about teachers' perception of administrators' positive and negative attributes in promoting learning (Table1). The data collected provided an array of adjectives describing an ideal administrator who promotes learning and the worst possible administrator who hinders learning. The participants shared that administrators who care about them as human beings and educators were effective in promoting learning. In addition, teachers agreed that administrators who were hard working also promote learning.

Insert Table 1

On the other hand, participating teachers shared that the administrators who were inconsistent, inaccessible, uncaring, and unorganized were least likely to promote learning. The overarching insight indicated that the participants were in more agreement on the positive aspects than on the negative, and they made more positive comments about administrators than negative. Therefore, most administrators were doing an acceptable job in promoting teaching and learning in the classroom.

Group Findings from the Rank-Order Responses

The analysis of the rank-order activity also indicated administrators' positive characteristics (Table 2). The rank-order activity responses showed that teachers believe that an administrator who focuses on building trust and respect is more likely to promote learning. Other qualities, such as inspiring, focusing on children, empowering and enable staff, and talking to teachers ranked high on the scale. Surprisingly, administrators who are visible around campus were not perceived by teachers as effective in helping to promote learning. Similarly, teachers who participated suggested that administrators whose characteristics or attitude foster collaboration and/or flexibility did not have a great impact in helping teachers promote learning.

Insert Table 2

Interviewees Profile

I interviewed C. Parra and Al Bunin. Both teachers have been in the profession for over 12 years and have worked in other school districts before settling at the XYZ High School to teach elective courses. They traveled less than 10 miles to work, and collectively, they had worked for 13 principals over a combined 24 years of service. Both participants plan to become administrators.

Ms. C. Para

Ms. Parra was more direct in what she wants to accomplish, but seemed to be able to isolate the barriers that were preventing her from moving to the next level. She stated that she was an experienced, bright Latina who has traveled extensively and was now

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able to work with a diverse group of people. She was confident, and projected herself as an advocate for children.

The first interview took place in Ms. Parra's classroom during her prep time. The classroom layout was a mix of traditional and cooperative groupings. In half of the room, the desks faced forward. On the other side of the room, about four round brownish Formica tables with mix of yellow and blue "used" plastic chairs adorn the room. Next to the cooperative group area were six or eight black Dell computers on students' writing desks. A flimsy desk next to Ms. Parra's desk overflowed with stacks of books and paper and stuff. Among the overlaid stuff on her desk, her brand new black Dell desktop computer hummed. Ms. Parra completed a phone conversation before we sat down for the interview. She was upbeat and as anxious to get started as a movie start waiting for the word—Action! After we went over the IRB, the protocol, and other legalities, the interview began with some silly jittering about my nervousness and about interviewing people. She assured me that everything will be fine, and I asked, "What would be your advice to a principal or administrator who wanted to support teachers in promoting learning?" Ms. Parra's voice weighted, rustic in tone, a kind of scratchy gramophone type; she plunged in,

My advice is to allow teachers to teach each other. You know that old proverb that says if you teach you learn. So allow time for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other."

Ms. Parra stands about five feet three inches with a solid body structure. Her attire was casual, relaxing to say the least. Before I could read the second question, I received an education on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximity. I then squeezed in, "What attributes of your principals or administrators have contributed to your ability to promote learning?"

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“Their attitude and behavior,” she echoed. “That is a tough one, because that almost confer that they have these special attributes and they are learners themselves.” Ms. Parra stated that the main attribute of a principal centers around his open mindedness.

Another attribute of those administrators who helped her promote learning was their insight for staff development and teacher collaboration. She stated,

I guess the number one thing that they have done is to allow me to go to workshops to learn more from other teachers who are using and are promoting learning. They allowed that time, and they adjusted the master schedule so that teachers have common prep periods to work together.

Ms. Para rated her ideal principal that promotes learning an eight on the self-anchoring scale. She identified the ideal principal as one who has the “willingness to change,” a “well-rounded individual who is open minded,” “knowledgeable,” and “collaborative.” On the other hand, she rated the principal who did not promote learning a “1” on the scale. She identified the principal as one who was stuck in his ways, and clearly lacked the ability to work with others.

A week later, the second interview with Ms. Parra was focused. She was cognizant of the types and patterns of the questions, provided short, and focused answers. Her answers from the rank-order activities picked life-long learners, children as focus, empowering teachers, and talking with teachers as her top four behaviors that helped promote learning. Resilient and promote effective climate ranked the lowest on the scale.

Mr. Al Bunin

Mr. Bunin was calm, but had a kernel of apprehension painted in his boyish look. We met during his prep time in the main office conference room. The room was tiny,

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seating fewer than 10 adults. The office phones, staff, and the students' voices traveled through the conference room walls like water through a sieve. We both spoke softly, but the noise from the office echoed off the walls like a passing hailstorm. After the formalities, Mr. Bunin sat in anticipation like a timid schoolboy sent to the principal's office, bewildered as to the cause. The first question was not soon enough! Mr. Bunin became relaxed. His answers were short and focused—no fluff, no chatter! “What attributes of your principals have contributed to your ability to promote learning?” I asked.

“The principal who realizes that he is not the one teaching. I want to say hands off. I don't mean total un-involvement,” he replied.

Al Bunin is about five feet five inches in stature, medium built with a penetrating stare. He is a physical education teacher without looking the part. At 44, he is well groomed and low-key. He glides around campus as a worry-free individual who is willing to help and share his “riches” with students and staff. He is the jack-of-all-trades and is willing to respond to any challenge that his administrators put forth. He believes that his “team-player” persona is ideal for administration work.

He analyzed every question, deliberately pausing as if he was internalizing each word before giving his answers. He stated that an administrator who is open, encouraging, supportive, and focused on his goals and objectives promotes learning. “A good principal will set the course and then allow people to drive it, and I am really looking for that type of a principal,” he stated. Another point that Al Bunin expressed about an administrator who helped him promote learning centered on freedom. Giving teachers direction and the resources and letting them teach. “The principals that I have

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had the most success with are the ones who believed in the program and supported the program via funding, via personal encouragement and inclusion," he declared.

Mr. Bunin ranked his ideal administrator an eight. He stated that the administrator who promoted learning was "open," "encouraging," "supportive," and "focused on literacy." In contrast, his least favorable administrator was "rules driven," "by the book," and "not open to new ideas," and was ranked a 3.

During the second interview, Mr. Bunin was more at ease. His answers were focused and insightful. After the interview, he completed the rank-order activity, selecting "inspiring" as the most important administrator behavior or attribute. Then, he chose "promote effective climate," "talking with teachers," and "building trust and respect" as his top behaviors that promote learning. He also wrote in the other category—"Considering the teacher/student relationship when creating policy."

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine what administrator attributes and behaviors teachers perceive contribute to their ability to promote learning. The interviews, self-anchoring scale, and rank-order scale provided valuable data to aid the researchers in identifying the seven overarching themes. These themes emerged as attitudes and behaviors perceived by teachers as contributing to their teaching and learning. The 20 participants' responses were (1) positive support, personal regard—caring, (2) trust and respect—freedom, does not micromanage, (3) high work ethic, (4) leadership—provides direction, (5) integrity, (6) open mindedness, and (7) accessible and approachable.

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The responses to interview questions designed helped the researchers extrapolate themes and ascertain teachers' perceptions of the administrator behaviors and attributes that promote learning. Teachers provided specific words to explain their opinion; even more importantly, they were able to give examples that painted a clear picture of an administrator who promotes learning.

In the group findings, professionalism and professional support, positive relationship with teachers, kindness, leadership, freedom, and accountability permeated the vocabulary. The participants were open minded and understood the administrator characteristics most helpful to teachers.

Similar patterns were observed in the group findings between the interviewees' responses and the self-anchoring reactions. This was likely to occur because the self-anchoring instrument was completed immediately after the first interview. The participants I interviewed selected the same verb-, adjective-, and noun-phrases they emphasized in the interview responses to align with administrators' positives and negative qualities on the scale.

Another interesting pattern emerged in the group findings from the self-anchoring data. The participants were in more agreement on the positive aspects than the negative. They said more positive things in their ideal administrator descriptions than they said negative things in their worst possible administrator descriptions. Among the 20 participants, only one gave his administrator a 10; similarly, only one administrator was given a "0" as the worst administrator. In one occurrence, a participant scored an administrator "8.5" as the worst while another participant scored an administrator a "4" as the best (Figure 1).

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The rank-order activity used a slightly different vocabulary from the interview and self-anchoring responses. The participants were given a list of 14 phrases, adapted from the literature review, which were likely administrator behaviors and attributes, and asked to weight them (see Table 1). Trust and respect overwhelmingly stood out as a major theme. Overall, the dominant patterns in the three instruments we used provided the overarching themes for the findings in this study.

Conclusions

A school administrator's job is challenging. An administrator must do much more than perform his managerial task. If the people who aspire to become administrators lack the emotional connection to care or trust and respect others, this impinges on helping teachers promote learning. Administrators' interpersonal skills are crucial in promoting learning. On the other hand, if the overarching themes are indicators that identify a small percentage of administrators using different leadership styles (Cheng, 1994) without meaningful results, they need to evaluate their understanding of the culture they serve and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Because over 90% of the teachers in the study viewed administrators in a positive way, it is fair to say that administrators, in a general sense, do promote learning. The administrators had the vision and guidance crucial for leadership to flourish and learning to take place. However, most importantly, the six pillars of character (Josephson, 2003b) that guide the philosophical framework of this study prevail. Every administrator needs to exhibit: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The overarching themes that emerged from this study aligned with the philosophical framework. In fact, there was a clear fit between good character and an effective

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administrator as the cornerstone for building interpersonal skills and promoting learning. Another component of this study, which should not be ignored, is the commitment of the teachers who on a daily basis rally to make learning a high priority. These were teachers feeling a commitment to the community, to students, and to their own futures (Stanford, 2001).

The triangulation of the data increased its trustworthiness, presented innovative ways of understanding the phenomenon, and provided a clearer understanding of the issue. Indeed, a shortage of qualified administrators in the profession may be a contributing factor in the difficulty of getting highly qualified people as applicants. It would be insightful for schools of education to incorporate into their curricula more courses or training in character or strengths education for aspiring school administrators.

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Appendix A: *Rank Order Activity*

Participant: _____ Date: _____
Interviewer: _____

Instructions: If you wish to add a behavior or attribute that is not included in the list, please fill in the "Other" line and then proceed to complete the ranking activity. Please rank the following behaviors and attributes of an administrator in the order that you perceive contributes the most to your ability to promote learning. Rank the top 10, considering #1 as the most important, #2 as the next in importance, #3 the next and on through to the end.

Behaviors and attributes of administrators:

- _____ Talking with teachers/being a good listener/accessible
- _____ Promoting teachers' professional growth
- _____ Fostering teacher reflection
- _____ Empowering teachers/enabling others to act
- _____ Building trust/treating others with dignity and respect
- _____ Fostering collaboration
- _____ Maintaining visibility/management by walking around
- _____ Inspiring—clearly communicating a positive and hopeful outlook for the future/keeping your eye on the goal and modeling the way
- _____ Being a life-long learner
- _____ Nurturing/encouraging the heart
- _____ Challenging/promote an effective and productive learning climate
- _____ Flexibility
- _____ Keeping the children as the focus of every decision
- _____ Resilient
- _____ Other: _____

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Appendix B: *Self-Anchoring Scale*

Directions for the interviewer: First, ask the participant to describe his or her ideal administrator (principal) who promotes learning. This description goes at the top of the scale (at 10). Use the following probe only if the participant is having difficulty responding: What kinds of things do ideal principals say and do to support teachers?

Next, ask the participant to describe his or her perception of the behaviors and attributes of the worst possible administrator (principal) who hinders learning. This description goes at the bottom of the scale (at 0). Use the following probe only if the participant is having difficulty responding: What kinds of things can a principal say and do that hinder and frustrate teachers in their quest to promote learning?

Read the descriptions to the participant and ask him or her to rank two administrators (without identifying whom they are) on the scale and explain the choice of placement (why?).

(Appendix B continues)

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(Appendix B continued)

Please describe, using phrases or adjectives, your ideal administrator (principal) who promotes learning. Secondly, please describe the behaviors and attributes of the worst possible administrator (principal).

IDEAL

10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1

0

WORST POSSIBLE WHO WOULD HINDER LEARNING

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Table 1

Group Summary of Self-Anchoring Scale

Positive Characteristics/Attribute	Responses
Caring/Family environment/Knows teachers	18
Works hard/Willing to go the extra mile	13
Supportive	12
Accessible	8
Organized	8
Negative Characteristics/Attribute	
Inconsistent/wishy-washy/wimpy	7
Uncaring	5
Unorganized	5
Not accessible/available	4

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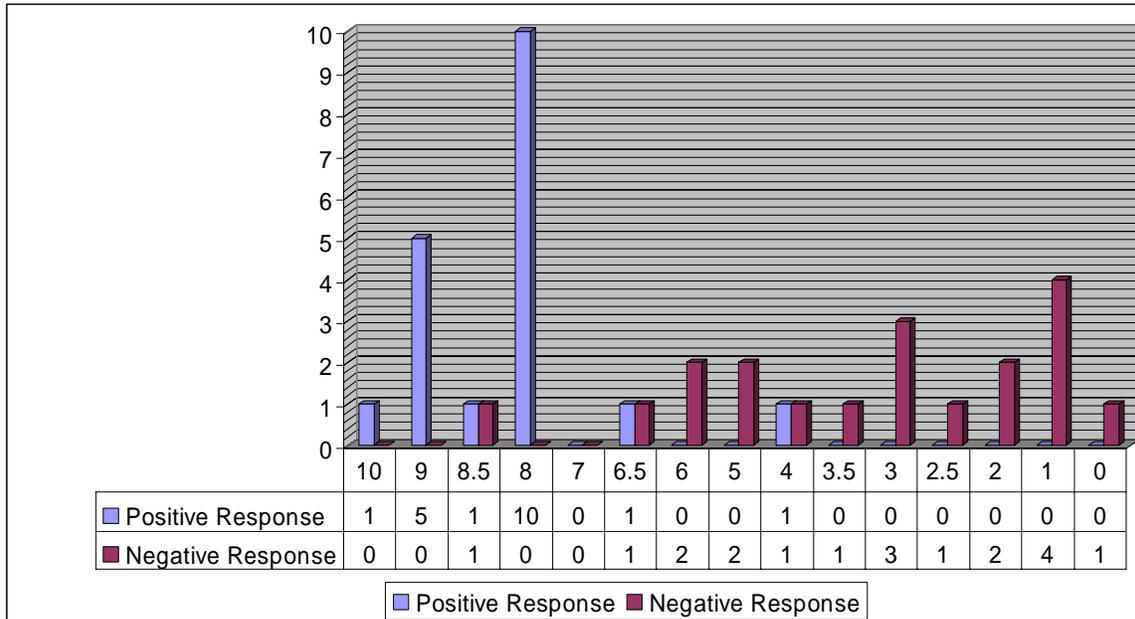
Table 2

Group Summary of Rank-Order Activity Responses

Characteristics/Attribute	Scores
Building trust and respect	51
Inspiring	46
Children as focus	45
Empower/enable	36
Talking with teachers	28
Promote effective/productive climate	19
Nurturing/Encourager	9
Professional growth	8
Visible	8
Life-long learner	8
Flexibility	6
Foster reflection	1
Foster collaboration	1
Resilient	0

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Figure 1: Summary of Positive and Negative Responses



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