

Teacher Behavioral Integrity and Student Achievement

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Introduction

The formation of effective learning environments and teacher-student interactions are vital concerns for student achievement (Cheng, 1994). An understudied and potentially significant aspect of teacher effectiveness and learning environments is leadership within the classroom (Pounder, 2008). In the past twenty-five years, the concept of “teacher leadership” has been studied in a variety of educational settings. However, the literature on teacher leadership has focused largely on teachers as leaders from an organizational (school-wide) viewpoint; essentially ignoring teacher leadership inside the classroom (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Furthermore, conceptualizing teacher leadership at the school-wide level instead of developing teachers as leaders within the classroom often involves removing the best teachers from the classroom at least part of the day to fulfill additional responsibilities. Despite the fact that teachers are the front-line of our educational system and have the vast majority of the contact with students, most teachers do not view themselves as leaders (Wilmore, 2007). York-Barr and Duke (2004, p. 288) recommended a different approach: “Teacher leadership work that is focused at the classroom level of practice is likely to show student effects more readily than work focused at the organizational level (e.g. participating in site-based decision making).” Barth (2001, p. 88) defined a teacher leader as “one who has a positive influence on the school as well as in the classroom.” The focus of this paper is exclusively on the relationship between a specific aspect of a teacher’s leadership within the classroom and student achievement as measured by standardized test scores.

Conceptual framework

One aspect of leadership that may assist teachers in building and sustaining credibility as a leader in the eyes of their students is Behavioral Integrity (BI, Simons, 2002). BI “is the perceived pattern of alignment between an actor's words and deeds. It entails both the perceived fit between espoused and enacted values, and perceived promise-keeping” (Simons, p.19). For instance, if the school’s virtue of the month is “Caring” and the teacher assumes the worst intentions and yells at a student for making an honest mistake it would be realistic for students to ascribe a lower level of credibility to the teacher as a virtuous mentor and role model.

The incongruity of a leader’s words and deeds has profound costs on participants and the organization as it causes leaders to be viewed as untrustworthy and undermine their credibility (Simons, 1999). Creed and Miles (1996, p. 19) note that those in supervisory positions instigate the majority of conversations, thus the level of trust or mistrust in their behavior and words will, through conscious and subconscious reciprocation, establish the tone for the relationship. However, a teacher’s BI is not wholly determined by the consistency between their words and actions. Students, especially those struggling in school, often possess cynical perceptions of individuals in authority positions. Students’ negative perceptions may substantially impact how they interpret teacher behavior.

The purpose of this study was to measure the effects of students’ perceptions of their teachers’ BI on their learning, as shown by standardized test scores. Based on the premise that teaching is leading, we hypothesize a positive association between aggregate student perceptions of their teacher’s BI and aggregate student performance on standardized tests.

Methodology

The study included 45 classrooms at an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school in (state). After consultation with administrators and the reading coach at the elementary school regarding students' ability to read and process the questions, only grades four and five at the elementary school were included in the study. Seven of the classrooms in the study were elementary classrooms. Eighteen of the classrooms were middle school classrooms. The remaining 20 classrooms were from the high school. In May of 2010, students filled out a survey to assess their teacher's BI. BI was measured by six questions based on Simons, Friedman Liu and McLean Parks (2007). The scale had an alpha = .91. Only classrooms with a majority of students providing feedback were included in the study. Student names were not collected to preserve student confidentiality. Schools provided average student scores of math and reading for each of the classes.

Results/findings

After controlling for known driving forces of standardized test scores – ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, parental education levels and class size, we found significant relationships between BI and reading scores (beta = .26, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .05$) and math (beta = .26, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .05$). This is significant considering the dearth of studies measuring teacher leadership within the classroom and the lack of findings detailing substantial impact of teacher leadership outside of the classroom (i.e. participatory decision making, department heads, etc).

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature within both teacher leadership and behavioral integrity. This study responds to York-Barr and Duke's (2004) call for research on teacher leadership in the classroom. Additionally, the study applies the concept of BI to both context and outcome variables that have not been incorporated into previous research within agricultural education, or education in general. The inclusion of BI in schools provides teachers with an opportunity to evaluate acquired teaching habits and practices, which if not analyzed, will remain unchanged. With significant relationships found between BI and standardized test scores for both reading and math, further research refining the concept and impact of teacher leadership within the classroom is timely and essential.

Implications/recommendations/ impact on profession

The results suggest there is a relationship between student's perceptions of teachers' Behavioral Integrity and student achievement as measured by standardized test scores. Agricultural Education is in need of ideas for improvement—those that can be effectively implemented. Additionally, these findings may lead to further study involving university faculty within colleges of agriculture. With further investigation, monumental steps can be taken to understand the role of BI in teacher effectiveness and student achievement and educate agricultural teachers and professors on the importance of Behavioral Integrity and teacher leadership in the classroom environment.

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