

## **The Influence of the Principal in Four Literacy Programs**

**Sharon Pitcher, Ph.D.**

**Towson University**

**Bonnie Mackey, Ph.D.**

**John Decman, Ph.D.**

**University of Houston-Clear Lake**

The role of the principal is dynamic and changing. In fact, changes in the work environment of education have caused both role ambiguity and role overload for school principals. As educational communities demand more data-driven accountability measures, the role of the principal as one who can both articulate and implement the vision of an effective instructional environment for all students and teachers becomes an important factor in student success (Marsh, 1997).

Not only must school principals become knowledgeable instructional leaders but they should also exhibit the characteristics of strong leadership. Such factors include cultivating a community of learners, giving voice to all stakeholders, envisioning key values, and demonstrating personal demeanors to enable all of these somewhat incongruous elements to 'come together' to form an outstanding school (Nadeau & Leighton, 1996).

In a parallel but similar vein, a contemporary educational topic centers around the emphasis upon a standards framework. Influenced by the academic standards movement, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published *NAESP Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do* in 2001. The purpose of those standards is to provide guidance to assist elementary and middle school principals to consider their roles as principals and make improvements that result in high-quality schools. Included in the standards are indicators of what the NAESP believes makes a quality school, and there are six standards relative to what a principal must know and be

able to do if he/she is to provide leadership that enables his/her school to meet those indicators.

The purpose of this research project was to delineate emerging profiles of four elementary school principals within the interface of their administrative roles and the implementation of each school's literacy program. These four principal profiles were then discussed within the context of the National Association of Elementary School Principals' 2001 standards.

### **Review of the literature**

That the principal yields influence within an elementary school is no longer unsubstantiated (Checkley, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1996). Blase and Blase (1999) present findings that suggest that principals who are viewed as effective instructional leaders within their schools use a broad-based approach for teachers' growth and reflection. The principals themselves "embrace the challenges of growing and changing" (p. 370), conceive of teachers not as technicians but as intellectuals, and, above all else, talk freely and openly with teachers about instruction. In a study by Bogler, (2001) teachers reported higher job satisfaction when they were given opportunities for self-development and participation in the decision-making procedures for the school. It was from these aspects that teachers experienced a higher sense of self-esteem and empowerment, which was associated with an increased sense of job satisfaction. In this study, the principal's leadership style was associated with the teachers' satisfaction.

Several studies provide insights into the interrelationship between a principal's role as instructional leader and the academic success of the students. Harcher and Hyle (1996) discovered that effective elementary instructional leaders engaged in various strategies designed to balance power inequities in their school community. They exemplified the use of collaborative power based on trust, respect, and collegiality.

Principals who demonstrate effective instructional leadership and help at-risk students are able to meet students' and teachers' basic/instructional, academic/professional, and

affective needs. In schools where at-risk students are achieving success, principals: (1) support teachers' instructional methods; (2) allocate resources and materials; (3) make frequent visits to classrooms for instructional purposes; (4) solicit and provide feedback on instructional methods and techniques; and (5) use data to focus attention on improving the curriculum or instructional approach (Mendez-Morse, 1991). In addition, Heck (1999) describes how achievement outcomes can be predicted based on teachers' and principals' perceptions of instructional leadership.

Griffith (1999) posits the idea that there are school structural characteristics and student population characteristics that affect the effectiveness of principals. In essence, schools that had a change in the principalship also had a high percentage of students new to the district, a high percentage of minority students, and also a perceived sense of lack of order, discipline, and parental participation. His findings also suggest that the effective school principal uses a combination of leadership styles.

Differing views of the development of a standards framework has attracted attention recently. Louden and Wildy (1999) describe an alternative framework for developing standards, a framework that is based on qualitative vignettes of crucial elements which define the effectiveness of principals in their daily routines.

Representing a more traditional standards framework, the National Association for Elementary School Principals (October, 2001) delineated six standards for “what principals should know and be able to do”(p. 5). These six standards include: (1) Leading schools in a way that puts student and adult learning at the center; (2) Promoting the academic success of all students; (3) Creating and demanding rigorous content and instruction; (4) Creating a climate of continuous learning for adults; (5) Using multiple sources of data as a diagnostic tool; and (6) Actively engaging the community.

Both the research and the NAESP Standards draw a strong connection between the characteristics of the principal, specifically in the venue of instructional leadership, and the success of the school (as evidenced by student achievement). The emphasis on

learning, school climate, and the engagement of various constituents, including teachers and parents, cannot be overstated.

### **Method**

This study evolved out of a larger study designed to examine the reading strategies of second graders in four urban schools using four different reading programs (Altwerger, B., Laster, B, Wilson, G. P., Ayra, P., Martens, P., Renman, N., Mackey, B., Wiltz, N., Pitcher, S., Jin, L. & Lang, D., 2002). The reading programs were designated Direct Instruction, Guided Reading, Open Court, and Balanced Literacy with Open Court Embedded. Additional details from field notes provided more information to define the reading program in the schools (Altwerger et al, 2002).

Ethnographic data were collected in three second grade classrooms at each of the four schools during the language arts instructional time during the Spring semester, 2000. Three second grade classroom teachers from each of these twelve classrooms were interviewed with a seven question protocol interview, plus an open-ended ‘grand tour’ (Spradley, 1979) question about the values of their school’s literacy program and their implementation of the language arts curriculum. (Appendix A).

As the ethnographers observed in the schools, the importance of the role of the principal began to emerge as significant to the way the reading programs were conceived and carried out in the school. A three question protocol interview guide was developed for the principal interview. Members of the research team interviewed the four principals, and these interviews became the focus of this study.

The guiding questions of the principal protocol interview were developed in order to better understand the principal’s role as instructional leader in choosing and implementing the reading program in the school. The following guiding questions were asked at all of the sites:

1. Your school is now using (X) reading program. How did your professional and personal experience influence you toward using this program? What factors in your history influenced you?
2. What is it that you did to institute this reading program? What process did you go through to choose this program? Can you reconstruct the details?
3. What are your thoughts about this program? How does this program meet your expectations? What do you believe about this program and your children's progress?

During the principal interview, the principals were encouraged to respond in a conversational manner, addressing any topics that they felt were important to their school literacy programs. The four principal interviews, along with the teacher interviews, were audiotaped and transcribed.

Triangulation of the data occurred through the phenomenological construction of knowledge as represented in the principal interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. The constant comparison approach was used to analyze the data and to allow emerging themes to develop (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bogdan & Biklen, 2001). Member checking with a follow-up visit during the 2002 school year to each principal added to the rigor of the data analysis.

Within each of the four urban elementary schools, triangulation of the data from field notes, teacher interviews, and a principal interview allowed several themes to form an emerging profile of the principal at each school. At the time the authors were analyzing the data from the principal interviews, the National Association of Elementary School Principals published Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do (NAESP, 2001). The essence of these standards seemed to converge with the emerging themes that were discovered in the interviews. Therefore, it was decided to use these standards as an additional way to analyze the dominant themes that appeared in the four principal profiles.

The first five National Association of Elementary School Principals' standards were the ones that most closely matched the emerging principal profiles:

- Leading schools in a way that puts student and adult learning at the center. (Standard I)
- Promoting the academic success of all students. (Standard II)
- Creating and demanding rigorous content and instruction. (Standard III)
- Creating a climate of continuous learning for adults. (Standard IV)
- Using multiple sources of data as a diagnostic tool. (Standard V)

Our data, particularly the principal protocol interview, did not address the issues related to the NAESP's sixth standard so the researchers were not able to get consistent information about the role of the principal regarding this standard in each of the schools. Therefore, the following standard was eliminated from our analysis:

- Actively engaging the community. (Standard VI)

The authors analyzed the qualitative data (principal protocol interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom field notes) for emerging themes. The themes were then juxtapositioned within the five NAESP standards, defining them specifically to the quality of the reading program in the school and the role of the principal in that aspect. The NAESP “designed this guide to draw direct connections between the quality of schools and the role of the school leader” (2001, p. ix).

### **Findings**

The four schools involved in this study had very different reading programs. The reading programs were designated Direct Instruction, Guided Reading, Open Court, and Balanced Literacy with Open Court Embedded. Thus, the principals will be referred to using the titles of the reading programs.

#### ***Four Principal Profiles:***

##### **Direct Instruction (DI)**

The principal of the Direct Instruction School had been a speech pathologist before going into administration. At the time of the study, she was the principal of the

school for nine years. The school is in the middle of large urban city and the population is very multicultural (45% African American, 12% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 41% White). During the year of the study, the free and reduced lunch percentage was 93.4. The principal shared that she has a large percentage of children in her school for whom English is not the first language.

### **Guided Reading (GR)**

The principal of the Guided Reading School was an elementary and middle school teacher. She delivered Math in-services for the school system before becoming a principal. She also has a Masters degree in clinical psychology. Her school is located on the edge of the city in a county school district. The population of her school is 83% African American, 1% American Indian, 3% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 11% white. During the year of the study, her free and reduced lunch percentage was 53.6. She had been principal of the school for five years at the time of the study.

### **Open Court (OC)**

The principal of the Open Court school was an administrator of the school for three years at the time of the study. She came to the school as an assistant principal and became the principal one and a half years later. Her school, which is in an urban city, had 87.7 % free and reduced lunch the year of the study with 97% of the student population being African American, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic and 1% White.

### **Balanced Literacy with Open Court Embedded (BLOCE)**

The principal of this school had been an intermediate teacher. He had a Masters' degree in reading and had completed doctoral studies in educational leadership but did not complete the dissertation. He had been the principal of the school for ten years, which included supervising a complete renovation of the school a few years before the study. His school which is located in the middle of a large urban city had a 90.1% free and reduced lunch with 98% African American children, 1% Asian, and 1% White

### ***NAESP standards***

In the following section, each standard from the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) framework forms the topic for further data analysis.

**Standard 1: Leading schools in a way that puts student and adult learning at the center.**

In describing this standard, NAESP states that principals should:

- Create and foster a community of learners.
- Embody learner-centered leadership
- Seek leadership contributions from multiple sources
- Tie the daily operations of the schoolhouse to school and student learning goals

The **DI** principal chose Direct Instruction for her school because she held a strong belief that the program would address the needs of her students with language deficits and generational poverty. She felt Direct Instruction had “guaranteed results”. After observing the program on an Indian Reservation, she felt it “teaches children to read despite low language skill and poverty.”

The **GR** principal blended many different philosophies in guiding the leadership of her school. She chose a reading specialist to come to her school and put the reading program in place. She depended on the judgment of the reading specialist and teachers to make program decisions. She shared, “Children should be taught to know and do ... so I’m looking for independence, application, engagement, a lot of higher level thinking where they (the children) have to synthesize a lot of different concepts and skills in order to solve a problem as they explore through an activity or task.”

The **OC** principal did not choose the reading program for her school but accepted the city school system’s leadership in selecting the program for the kindergarten through second grades in the system. She relied on the master teacher’s leadership for making program decisions and often turned to her for knowledge confirmation throughout our interview with her.

The **BLOCE** principal shared at the interview that “As instructional leaders, we have to take the lead.” His school during this school year was part of an initiative to add balanced literacy components to the Open Court program in his school. He shared that

this was the first year that he got involved instead of delegating and observing. The balanced literacy initiative focused the professional development on the school administrators. They then brought the components to their school and did the professional development for the school. He shared that he “became part of the literacy program.”

**Standard Two: Promoting the academic success of all students.**

This standard focuses on the principal articulating a clear vision of the school program, which we are relating to how she/he articulates the vision of the reading program. Also, this standard looks at how the principal works towards providing opportunities to meet high standards and improved achievement of all students. This standard is achieved by developing a school culture “that is flexible, collaborative, innovative and supportive of efforts to improve achievement of all students” (NAESP, 2001, p 19). They also state that “principals can and should make clear statements about what they, as school leaders, believe, which will set a direction for the beliefs the school community articulates” (p. 20).

The **DI** principal chose the program and strongly articulated the value of it. In order to meet the needs of the children in her school, she added after school tutoring and enrichment programs to supplement the Direct Instruction program. All children in the school participated in this extended day program. She shared that she “had a school filled with children with language and vocabulary deficits. I needed guaranteed results. We tried every approach, and then found what was appropriate for these kids.”

The **GR** principal delegated the implementation of the vision (i.e., developing the school reading culture and organizing the school environment to support literacy) to her reading specialist. She supported the effort by buying the necessary materials (leveled texts, professional books, posters). She shared, “Our reading specialist met with the teams of teachers to talk with them about how to set up a classroom that would have the guided reading instruction along with literacy centers and so forth.”

The **OC** principal shared that the system chose the reading program and the principal empowered the master teacher to articulate the vision of it. All of the reading materials were provided by the system. Her vision of Open Court was “Open Court came in like a light. More like lightening. ‘Cause the kids just soaked it up. They don’t feel that there is a word that they can’t say. And that’s a miracle in itself. They’re never intimidated by a word.”

The **BLOCE** principal led the vision of changing the reading program in his school. He also added cultural programs to enrich the experience of the students in his school. The Koalaty Kids Program, which he adopted school-wide, emphasized that all children had to be the best they could be. He spoke to us about how he applied this to himself, too, and his teachers. He put technology throughout the school through grant funding. During the year of this study, he bought professional books, classroom libraries, and literacy center materials for all of the teachers in the school. He shared that before the year of the study, “We were floating along thinking we were okay. It wasn’t until last year that we took a real look at being a balanced literacy school and what we saw just clicked. Before last year I did a lot of delegation. I sat down and said I would do it and it made a difference.”

**Standard 3: Creating and demanding rigorous content and instruction.**

This standard emphasizes hiring quality teachers, observing classroom literacy practices, and demanding rigorous instruction. The principal role here is clearly articulated as an active role of looking at student work, providing instructional materials, and monitoring the alignment of curriculum with standards, school goals and assessments. NAESP suggests that the principal has to be “well-informed about curriculum and instruction” setting the standards and giving teachers useful feedback (p 32).

The **DI** principal had her teachers trained in DI methods and had a DI consultant in the school that observed instruction. She frequently observed during the language arts block. She also recognized the need to supplement DI with more writing and comprehension

instruction. She provided an extended day program for all the children to add this content to the school day.

The **GR** principal hired teachers according to their view of teaching the whole child and not necessarily their background in literacy. She depended on the reading specialist to oversee the literacy professional development in her building with the help of other teachers that participated in summer literacy groups. She shared that she was very proud of the consistency among grades in terms of posters she provided for teaching reading strategies.

The **OC** principal shared that she had less training in Open Court than her teachers so relied on them to teach her. Her master teacher did attend the trainings and she led the implementation of the program. The year before the study the principal lost some of her teachers to another school so she had three new second grade teachers, one of which did not have Open Court training. During our interview, she could not remember the name of some of the Open Court materials that were in the school and she depended on the master teacher to answer many of the interviewer's questions.

The **BLOCE** principal personally supervised the training of his teachers. Either he or one of administrative staff conducted the balanced literacy professional development of the teachers. When he brought in an outside consultant for special training in literacy centers, he provided materials and time during the school day so the teachers could develop the centers and attended the workshop himself. The ethnographer from our study that did the field notes at his school saw him in the classrooms during the language arts block every day she was there. He shared that he spent 90 minutes a day during the language arts block in the classroom and for the first time in many years rolled up his sleeves and got involved in instruction. He also bought professional books and classroom libraries for all of his teachers.

**Standard 4: Creating a climate of continuous learning for adults.**

For this standard, the principal provides time for reflection, teachers planning together, connecting professional development to school learning goals and works to improve his/her own practice. NAESP states that “An effective principal works to provide every teacher and staff member with the tools to learn and improve professionally. Development opportunities are not just for teachers, however, and principals, leading by example, should identify professional development opportunities to improve their own crafts” (2001, p. 41).

The **DI** principal supported training in DI for all of her teachers. She visited a school herself before putting in the program. She sent the teachers to see schools outside the state, had a DI trainer to work on site with her teachers, and had weekly phone conversations with a DI administrator in Oregon.

The **GR** principal visited a school with the model and then invited a reading specialist to come to the school the next year to create the same kind of program. The reading specialist facilitated Professional development in the building. The principal provided time for the grade level teams to meet. The teachers became very involved in developing the program and later presented a professional conferences

At the **OC** school, the teachers and master teachers attended summer training for three to four weeks during the summer. The principal only attended a four day training. The system provided a consultant to visit the school to give support to the teachers and provided opportunities to go visit other schools in the system using OC.

The **BLOCE** principal attended monthly administrators’ meeting centered around balanced literacy. He brought the professional development back to the school. He also provided substitutes so teachers could attend professional development opportunities and have grade level meetings. He emphasized that they had “to tear those walls down and open up, so what we do is have a team.” Grade level meetings were held in different

classrooms so teachers could experience how another teacher created a literacy environment.

**Standard 5: Using multiple sources of data as a diagnostic tool.**

The principals using data to make decisions to improve student achievement is the focus of this standard. This data is used to designing effective classroom practice, make decisions about school's goals, and to evaluate their own practice.

The **DI** principal was extremely data driven. She referred to profiles, percentages, test scores from a variety of sources in our conversations with her. She shared that she uses “data from the tests to tell whether the program is working and what parts aren't”. She also used demographic and community data in order to understand the families in her school community so she could make decisions on all kinds of programs that are needed to support the community needs.

The **GR** principal, also, was very data driven. She spoke at length about the importance of the state tests and how they drove instruction. She asked teachers to keep data on children's reading levels on a quarterly basis that she reviewed with them.

The **OC** principal was somewhat data driven. She shared with our interviewers that first grade CTBS scores were higher than any other grade because “the sounds are introduced”. She also talked about the school systems milestone tests, sharing that 97% of her children passed the first milestone test (these were designed by the textbook company). This high passing percentile “would not have happened without this program”.

The **BLOCE** principal was very data driven. During the interview, he shared test scores and percentages easily without referring to print outs. He discussed how he adopted the Koalaty Kids program and sought grants to provide for deficits that data led him to consider. He also shared how he monitored city-wide milestone assessments and involved his teachers in evaluating this source to make changes in instruction.

### Discussion

After analyzing the principal data using the NAESP standards, some differences in the principals did affect the reading programs in the schools and the success of the second graders in the classrooms. The most important themes of these differences were:

- (1) *who* established and shared the vision of the program
- (2) *the background* of the principal which influenced the role as an instructional leader and
- (3) *how* the instructional leader put the program in place.

The differences in these themes seemed to carry over to the instruction in the classrooms.

In two of the schools the principal was the visionary and the person responsible for the reading program being implemented in the school. The **BLOCE** principal shared with us how he came to lead the change in his school that we saw that year. He shared that for the first time he “pushed up his sleeves” and personally got involved in professional development and monitoring the program. The second grade CTBS scores in his school rose 20 points during this year when he took over the literacy leadership in his building. He was able to sustain this gain for the year after the study. In much the same way, the **DI** principal chose the program for her school and was actively involved with the Direct Instruction personnel to monitor the program. She was not solely responsible for the program and may have influenced the inconsistency of the second grade test scores in her building. In the other two schools in the study, the principals delegated this leadership to someone else on their staffs and did not seem to understand the philosophy of the programs. Our researchers in these schools saw many practices in the classrooms that were not aligned with the programs that the principals professed to have in the building. Since they did not initiate the programs, often what they voiced as important or shared that they directed the teachers to do were not convergent with the premises of the programs. The test scores for the second grade in their buildings were fairly flat-lined during the three years analyzed.

The backgrounds of the principals were closely tied to their role as visionaries in their schools. Two of the principals had expertise in fields related to literacy and their

decisions were grounded in this knowledge. The other two principals shared not having as much background in literacy so they relied on other personnel in the building to provide the leadership. With the suggestions from research on the need for the principal to be an instructional leader in the school, our analysis suggests that the background of the principal places a crucial role in the principal leading the literacy programs in the school.

The **BLOCE** principal had a Master's Degree in Reading and had completed all but his dissertation in Educational Leadership. He shared with our researchers an oral literacy history of his school's transitions from one reading program to another. He was familiar with the philosophy of whole language and pointed out the positive components that he saw as effective. He did agree with his school system to implement Open Court because of the research that he read about the need for explicit phonics and his own analysis of the schools test scores during the whole language era. The year of the study, though, he decided that he had to lead his school in a different way. He transitioned the school to a more balanced approach because he reflected on the programs that came before and realized that there were some good components in each. Professional development on balanced literacy that he was involved in as part of his district administrators' meetings helped him to formulate the direction he wanted to lead his school's literacy program.

The **DI** principal relied on her background as a speech pathologist to decide on the reading program in her school. Her school community included children with limited language background and children from homes where English was not the first language. Having visited a school on an Indian Reservation where Direct Instruction was successful, she decided that this was the program she wanted in her school. Her decision was based on those components of the program that she knew were important to language acquisition.

The other two principals depended on the expertise of others to choose the reading program in their school. The **GR** principal hired a reading specialist who brought the Guided Reading Program to her attention. The **OC** principal followed the leadership of

her school system. Since they personally did not have the background to understand the reading program in their school, many inconsistencies were shared with our researchers about their expectations for the program and how they supervised their teachers. The responsibility for decision making for implementation of the programs in their schools was delegated to members of their faculties. Their knowledge of the research driving the programs was limited. The **OC** principal had a three day training when the program was first put in. The **GR** principal visited a school where the program was in place at the invitation of the reading specialist. We saw inconsistencies within the classrooms of both of these schools on how the programs were carried out in the classrooms. Components crucial to the research-base of the programs were often omitted from the practice in some of the classrooms. The principals may not have understood or realized this.

At the OC school, our ethnographer did not see all of the components of the program in all of the second grade classrooms. In the classroom of the lowest group very little of the Open Court components were successfully implemented on the days that she visited. In the another classroom, rhyming and poetry writing was added to the Open Court program by the teacher. In an observation in another room, 50 minutes was spent on reading three pages of a story and the independent reading component of the schedule never happened which the teacher shared often was the case because of lack of books in the classroom library.

At the GR school, our ethnographer did not observe all of the components of the model that the school professed to have which was based on the work of Fountas and Pinnell as shared in their book, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* (1996). Instead of the flexible grouping model suggested by Fountas and Pinnell, the children in this school were grouped in homogenous groups in accordance with the principal's belief that "ability groups" were best so children could be taught at their instructional level. This is not in congruence with the research the model was based upon. The principal was also influenced by the pressures and practices of the state and local school district, which was based on a "sequence of skills" which again was not aligned with the research that drove the model she suggested that she had in her school. Independent reading which is a

crucial component of the Fountas and Pinnell program only averaged to be four minutes and 15 seconds per day at the GR school. A daily edit component, which was influenced by the state testing program, was added to the program by the school and took a large amount of the language arts block. The ethnographer estimated that the influence of the state mandates took over about 62% of the curriculum in the language arts classes that she observed (Altwerger et al., 2002).

It seems that how the program is implemented in the school also ties directly back to the background and the vision of the principal. The **DI** principal added afternoon programs to meet the needs of the children in her school that the DI program did not address. The **GR** principal did not understand the research underpinnings of the program in her school and was very influenced by state curriculum influences. The **OC** principal depended on others in the school to deal with the needs of the reading program. The **BLOCE** principal provided classroom libraries, literacy center materials and supervised the professional development of his teachers.

The one standard that all of the principals addressed was analyzing data sources which reflects the emphasis on testing throughout schools in our country. They all voiced using test data to make decisions in the schools. The principals could relate some school decisions, which influenced instructional decisions having to do with the school reading program, back to the testing. The **BLOCE** principal and the **DI** principal, though, made decisions on what needed to be done as a result of what the testing data was telling them and their personal understandings of literacy research. The **OC** principal depended on the school system to make the reading program decisions and do the professional development to put the resources in place. The **GR** principal let her decision making for the program be influenced by state pressures which often resulted in conflicting research paradigms being meshed incongruously together in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Our qualitative data analysis generated several themes concerning the principal's influence within the school's literacy program. In education it is often argued that it is

the urban population in which it is the most difficult to elicit student literacy achievements. We would like to suggest that the **BLOCE** principal's understanding of reading instruction and his leadership in being the visionary, the lead professional developer, and the instructional leader in his school had a major influence on making a difference in the literacy development of the children in his school.

In the **DI** school, the principal was an instructional leader but her decision making was based on her experience as a speech pathologist and not on reading research. The **GR** principal let state influences control approximately 62% of what our ethnographer observed being taught in the language arts block in her building (Altwerger et al., 2002). At the **OC** school, the principal gave over her leadership to the school system and her faculty and consequently was not aware of the lack of consistent instruction in her classrooms.

What was learned from this study and from the standards work of the National Association of Elementary School Principals suggests that the principal does need to take both an active and interactive role as instructional leader. Our findings argue that a principal who is an instructional leader with an understanding of literacy research and hands-on involvement in the school with professional development, vision and implementation of the program makes a difference in the neediest of schools.

### **Reflections on the Naturalistic Paradigm and Our Principal Research**

Epistemologically speaking, we are not quite sure that this research on four principals and how they influenced their schools' literacy programs represents a 'pure' portrayal of the naturalistic inquiry paradigm. To be sure, we did gather data from several sources that generated the interweaving of voices from many perspectives to be heard. And, we did triangulate this data, both across data sources (observations, principal interviews, teacher interviews, and literacy and curricula artifacts) and also across four naturalistic settings. In fact, the data were all gathered within the four naturalistic settings (the four elementary schools).

Using our mentors and our experts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994), we employed the constant comparison approach for data analysis. Themes emerged from the data. We attempted to capture the essences of our four principals, in their own words, and through their own belief systems.

The epistemological dilemma arises, however, with our convergence of our themes under the preconceived categories of the six standards as delineated by the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP). As researchers, we usually do not utilize preconceived categories. In this study, though, the major themes of the standards were closely aligned with many of the themes that emerged from our naturalistic analysis. Additionally, the NAESP standards contributed another “eye” to look at the data. For example, Standard 1 suggests the importance of the principal as one who understands and articulates the vision of the school. Considering this aspect helped us to better understand some of the dynamics of the schools that we struggled with understanding. There was a tension in some of the schools and a heartbeat in others that were difficult for us to categorize. The NAESP’S work helped us to better formulate this emerging theme and add clarity to what we saw. Maxwell (1996) suggests that incorporating comparisons and “literature on typical setting of the type studied...make it easier to understand the relevant factors” which assist the researcher in “better identifying the crucial factors and the effect they have” (p. 96). The NAESP Standards captured this typical setting for us and did help us to better understand crucial factors.

Also, as former practitioners within the public school system, we understand the desire to both describe and adhere to a set of standards from which accountability can be credited through the public eye. By using the standards, we found a way to merge our naturalistic understandings with established criteria to create a richer awareness of the role of the principal in promoting literacy in a school. Since we used the standards, our conclusions are situated in understandings in the field of educational leadership as well as literacy.

Perhaps the road of qualitative research has several, less-trodden paths. The value of the inquiry thus rests within the pursuit and the reflection that it inspires as we walk nearer

and nearer toward the nebulous parameters that characterize our “messy” (Merton & Clark, 2002) paradigm.

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