

CHAPTER 6

CONCEPTUALIZING AND VALIDATING A MEASURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

The school principal has been long recognized as a critical element of an effective school. Consequently, researchers have attempted to identify specific characteristics of effective school principals for decades. One aspect of principal behavior that has been neglected by researchers is the level of principal support of teachers. Yet, teachers consistently report that the level of support principals provide has a significant impact on their effectiveness and job satisfaction. This study tested an existing measure of principal support based on House's (1981) theory of social support. It produced a 16-item valid and reliable operational measure of principal support, the Principal Support Scale (PSS). The study also generated and refined the concept of principal support with two related dimensions—expressive and instrumental. Expressive support is the degree of emotional and professional support teachers perceive, while instrumental support is the extent to which teachers perceive their principal as providing support in terms of time, resources, and constructive feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Few would question the assertion that it is critical for principals to be supportive of their teachers to enhance student learning. Studies link principal support to teachers' job satisfaction, morale, attrition, absenteeism, and turnover (Baker, 2007; Balkar, 2009; Blasé & Blasé, 2006; Wynn, Carboni, & Patall, 2007). In order to further study principals support of teachers in relationship to other school variables, such as achievement and overall teachers' job satisfaction, a valid and reliable operational measure of principal support, which aligns with social support theory, was developed and tested. Principal support of teachers is defined as: demonstrating appreciation; providing adequate resources and information; maintaining open, two-way communication; supporting a collegial climate; offering frequent and constructive feedback; and offering appropriate professional development opportunities (Bonzonelos, 2008; Littrell & Billingsley, 1994).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the 1970s, the study of social relationships and health emerged in a field of scientific research on "social support" (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). The focus of the analysis was on the relationship between social support, and health and stress because the absence "of positive social relationships leads to negative psychological states such as anxiety or depression" (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 311). Pinneau (1975) reported that support, especially from supervisors at work, was related to lower level of worker's job stress. A study of stress-health relationships (House & Wells, 1978), found a lack of correlation between social support and health, except for supervisor support of workers. This line of research generated interest in creating working environments that would reduce employee stress and lead to greater job satisfaction. Researchers noted types of social support, such as instrumental (task-oriented) and expressive (social-emotional) support that could enhance the "quality of working life" for employees (House, 1981; LaRocca, House, & French, 1980). Furthermore, House (1981) argued that supportive behavior from supervisors had the potential to not only reduce stress, but also "enhance organizational effectiveness" (p. 126).

House conceptualized social support as having four possible dimensions: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (1981). *Emotional support* involves "empathy, caring, love, and trust," which he considered to be the most important (House, 1981, p. 24). *Instrumental support* involved behaviors that directly help the person accomplish the

task at hand. An example of instrumental support is helping others with their work when providing them with tools and directions needed to accomplish the job. These two types of support created a connection between the person giving the support and the person receiving it.

Informational and appraisal support, conversely, were viewed as without affect; employees were provided only objective information. *Informational support* is “providing a person with information that the person can use in coping with personal and environmental problems” (House, 1981, p. 25). It builds the skills or provides other factual knowledge that enables employees to do better job. This kind of support also provides information about job benefits such as health care and sick leave. *Appraisal support* provides data for self-evaluation. This type of support generates information directly associated with a workers performance; this feedback enhances reflection on their job progress (House, 1981). House viewed emotional and instrumental support as having a stronger affective connection with the individual than informational and appraisal support.

Using this four-dimensional framework, House found that all four dimensions of social support had a significant effect on worker job satisfaction. He urged supervisors to think about what they value, and reward in the workplace and urged that supervisors involve groups of workers when planning and organizing work activities (House, 1981).

Littrell and Billingsley (1994) employed House’s conceptual framework of social support to create constitutive and operational measures of social support in schools, specifically the principal’s support of teachers. They constitutively defined emotional support as showing appreciation, keeping open lines of communication, encouraging colleague support and recognizing teacher’s ideas. Instrumental support is providing resources that teachers need to perform their duties. Informational support, on the other hand, is providing information and professional development for teachers to work effectively. Finally, appraisal support is providing frequent and constructive feedback about teacher performance (Bonzonelos, 2008). In sum there are two general dimensions of principal support: instrumental support (providing information and feedback about the task) and expressive support (providing social and emotional support).

The effect of principal support on teacher job stress, satisfaction, school commitment, health, and intent to stay in teaching was confirmed in their study (Littrell & Billingsley, 1994). The findings supported House’s conceptual framework and introduced the perspective to the study of schools. Principals’ support was positively related to teacher performance. Emotional support was the primary, significant predictor of job satisfaction, school commitment and teacher’s health and informational support was a secondary source of satisfaction. Appraisal support was

important in teacher growth, whereas instrumental support contributed to teachers' commitment.

LITRELL'S MEASURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

Littrell adapted House's scale to measure the four dimensions of administrative support described in House's theory. The Littrell instrument contained 40 items, ten items for each dimension of administrative support: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. Teachers were asked to rate statements, related to the various types of support, using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). She developed and field tested the instrument. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the four dimensions. Alpha levels ranged from .48 to .93 (Littrell, 1992). Unfortunately, the reliabilities of several of the scales were weak, which called to question its utility for use in further research. Moreover, no factor or component analysis was performed in the original study.

A REFINED MEASURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

The next phase of this investigation was to improve the measure: a two-step plan was developed and executed. First, the original 40-item Littrell Principal Support Questionnaire (PSQ) was tested in a small pilot study. Second, based on the analysis, items were deleted and refined and a Principal Support Scale (PSS) with good psychometric properties was developed.

Principal Support Questionnaire

A pilot sample of 118 teachers in 24 schools was used to collect data using the PSQ. Researchers visited 24 schools and collected data from teachers individually. A substantial number of teachers agreed to participate and completed the 40-item questionnaire.

Next all the items were coded and subjected to an exploratory principal component analysis with oblimin rotation to evaluate the component structure of the questionnaire. Using the criterion of eigenvalue greater than one, four factors were identified. After several iterations in which items were eliminated based on either low loadings or high loadings on multiple factors, the final simplified scale had four principal support components, which were called emotional, professional, appraisal, and

instrumental support. These were the same as House's and Littrell's original aspects of social support with one exception. Their measure of informational support was renamed professional support, which better captures the meaning of the dimension in the school context.

The 40 items were reduced to 16 items that provided a parsimonious and reliable scale with four dimensions. The reliabilities of the measures of each dimension were high: Cronbach's Alphas were .94 for emotional support, .93 for appraisal support, .88 for instrumental support, and .87 for professional support. All of the dimensions had factor validity, that is, all items for each dimension were theoretically consistent with their constitutive definitions. In brief, the principal support measure was reduced from 40 to 16 items and provided much stronger reliability coefficients than Littrell's original PSQ. Because the intent of the original study was to compare special education teachers with regular classroom teachers' perceptions of support, the wording on a good many items seemed inappropriate and sometimes dated. For example, the item, "The principal provides opportunity for me to attend workshops, conference, and to take courses" was changed to "The principal provides opportunities for me to grow professionally." The item, "The principal participates in child study/eligibility/ IEP meetings/ parent conferences" was dropped because it was too special education oriented and, not surprising had a much lower component loading. In sum, a quarter of the remaining items had to be reworked. The new 16-item scale was renamed the Principal Support Scale (PSS) and is found in Table 6.1.

The Principal Support Scale

Now with a refined scale, the PSS, attention turned a new and more comprehensive sample of schools as well as a change in the unit of analysis. To this point all of the analyses were done at the teacher level. Our current analysis focused on the school as the unit because interest was with the overall degree of principal support in schools, that is the unit of analysis was the school.

The 16-item PSS was administered to 1,276 teachers in 34 high schools. The data were collected in person by a team of researchers. Although participation was voluntary, virtually everyone present at faculty meetings returned usable questionnaires. To check the appropriateness of the new instrument, a principal axis factor analysis was performed using the criterion of eigenvalue greater than one for factors. The four components identified in the pilot study, which mirrored House's original framework, combined into two more general factors. The finding was not surprising because it is consistent with the general research on leadership. For exam-

Table 6.1. Dimensions and Items of the PSS

<i>Emotional Support</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My principal gives me a sense of importance that I make a difference 2. My principal supports my decisions. 3. My principal trusts my judgment in making classroom decisions. 4. My principal shows confidence in my actions.
<i>Instrumental Support</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My principal provides adequate planning time. 2. My principal provides time for various nonteaching responsibilities. 3. My principal provides extra assistance with I become overloaded. 4. My principal equally distributes resources and unpopular chores.
<i>Professional Support</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My principal gives me undivided attention when I am talking. 2. My principal is honest and straightforward with the staff. 3. My principal provides opportunities for me to grow professionally. 4. My principal encourages professional growth.
<i>Appraisal Support</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My principal offers constructive feedback after observing my teaching. 2. My principal provides frequent feedback about my performance. 3. My principal helps me evaluate my needs. 4. My principal provides suggestions for me to improve instruction.

ple, Bales (1954) identified task and social leaders and Etzioni (1961) called the basic functions of any group or collectivity instrumental and expressive; thus the two factors were labeled instrumental support and expressive support. Professional support and emotional support comprised the general construct of *expressive support* whereas *instrumental support* was composed of appraisal and instrumental support. Thus, the four aspects of the social support of the principal were captured in two basic school dimensions: expressive support and instrumental support.

The results of the factor analysis of the new sample are summarized in Table 6.2. The eight items of emotional and professional support all load strongly on Factor I, which was called expressive support. The eight items of instrumental and appraisal support all load on Factor II, which was called instrumental support. The cumulative variance explained by the two factors is 79.94%. Thus, both of the factors have high reliabilities; the reliability for the measures of expressive support and instrumental support are both .95. Thus the PSS has two major dimensions. Expressive support is comprised of both professional and emotional support, and instrumental support is composed of appraisal as well as instrumental support (see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2. A Two-Factor Varimax Solution for the 16-item PSS

	<i>Factor I</i>	<i>Factor II</i>
EXPRESSIVE SUPPORT		
Emotional Items		
Gives me a sense of importance that I make a difference.	.822	
Supports my decisions.	.825	
Trusts my judgment in making classroom decisions.	.694	
Shows confidence in my actions.	.735	
Professional Items		
Gives me undivided attention when I am talking.	.774	
Is honest and straightforward with the staff.	.848	
Provides opportunities for me to grow professionally.	.700	
Encourages professional growth.	.893	
INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT		
Instrumental Items		
Provides adequate planning time.		.811
Provides time for various nonteaching responsibilities.		.809
Provides extra assistance with I become overloaded.		.720
Equally distributes resources and unpopular chores		.683
Appraisal Items		
Provides data for me to reflect on following classroom observations.		.652
Provides frequent feedback about my performance.		.735
Helps me evaluate my needs.		.755
Provides suggestions for me to improve instruction.		.574
Eigenvalue	11.312	1.478
Cumulative Variance	70.701	79.937
Alpha Coefficient of Reliability	.954	.955

DISCUSSION

This research has been successful in generating and refining the concept of principal support, which has two related aspects – expressive and instrumental. Expressive support is the degree to which teachers in the school view their principal as providing emotional and professional support. Instrumental support is the extent to which teachers perceive their principal as providing support in terms of time, resources, and constructive feedback to effectively accomplishing the teaching task.

An Instrumental and Expressive Framework

This framework for examining principal social support is consistent with Parson's imperative functions for all social systems (Parsons, Bales, & Shields, 1953). Parsons theorized that if organizations are to prosper and succeed they must successfully deal with the basic functions of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. Accordingly, schools must solve the problems of accommodating to their environments, setting and implementing goals, maintaining solidarity and preserving a unique value system. That is, effective schools must meet the instrumental needs of adaptation and goal achievement as well as the expressive ones of social and normative integration (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). The conception of principal social support is clearly consistent with this formulation; its primary focus is instrumental and expressive support activities.

The contribution of this research is that it provides a reliable and valid measure of principal social support. The reliabilities of the measures for expressive and instrumental support are both very strong. The factor analysis of the PSS demonstrated support for the construct validity of the scale; all specific items of the measure align with the underlying theoretical construction. In other words, the items fell into one of the four predicted categories of support—emotional, professional, instrumental, appraisal—which in turn defined the two dimensions of expressive and instrumental support.

Implications for Research

The PSS provides an operational measure of an important construct that should be related to a number of school properties and outcomes. The role of the principal has been considered and integral component of effective schools for decades (Bossert, 1988; Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Stedman, 1987). A primary function of the principal is to

← Au: Check spelling on Shields. Ref has Shils.

← Au: Stedman 1979 not found in References

support their teachers, both in terms the teaching task and their social and emotional well being. The PSS provides a reliable measure for mapping both these essential functions.

Moreover, the conceptual perspective of social support yields a heuristic framework that should guide a significant research agenda. Consider just a few research questions:

1. To what extent does the principal's social support of teachers related to student achievement? Is there a direct or indirect relation between social support and achievement?
2. Does social support generate a culture of academic optimism in terms of collective efficacy, collective trust, and academic emphasis?
3. Does the social support of the principal enhance satisfaction and well being? Is social support related to job satisfaction and life satisfaction of teachers?
4. To what extent does perceived social support of the principal generate strong organizational citizenship behavior and commitment?
5. To what extent does perceived social support of the principal create a climate of organizational justice? Distributive and procedure justice?
6. Is the social support of the principal a necessary condition of the willingness of faculty to change? To innovate?
7. To what extent does perceived social support of the principal generate a healthy school climate? Open school climate?
8. Is the social support of the principal a necessary condition for risk taking behavior of teachers?
9. To what extent does perceived social support of the principal facilitate professionalism in teacher behavior?
10. To what extent does perceived social support of the principal a necessary condition to build professional learning communities?

The preceding list is simply an example of some of the initial research questions that are in need of attention. Consider this chapter an invitation to join in the investigation of the antecedents and consequences of principal social support.

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