Research Paper

The hidden social curriculum in primary schools: Interactions between new teachers and primary school principals

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this study was to investigate the hidden social curriculum in primary schools with a focus on the interactions between the new teachers, the teachers graduated from Farhangian University, and the school principals. This study was conducted via a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. The study population included 108 student-teachers who were freshman students at Farhangian University during the academic year 2012-2013 and are now serving as new teachers in Mashhad. A total of 25 teachers were selected as the study participants to participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by thematic coding. The findings revealed four inclusive themes and 21 organizing and 62 basic themes based on the observed hidden social curriculum in primary schools. The results showed that despite their many years of work experience, a large number of the principals do not have the knowledge and skills required of a school principal.

Keywords: *Farhangian University, Hidden Curriculum, Primary School, Principal, Social Climate*

Introduction

A large number of studies show that the social climate at schools can significantly contribute to the development of prejudice (Allbright, and Hough, 2020), the level of cooperation, work commitment, sense of community and belonging to the school (Daggol, 2019), job satisfaction, professional growth and citizenship-organizational behavior (Sari and et al., 2019; Akar, 2018; Ashrafi and Zainabadi, 2017), intrinsic motivation and sense of self-efficacy (Reaves and Cozzens, 2018), in-role and out-role behaviors (Yasini, 2016), burnout (Kaya and Selvitopu, 2019), frequency of teachers' relocation and resignation (Grissom and Bartanen, 2018). Furthermore, the behaviors of the school principals can influence the teachers' attitude toward their job (Zainabadi, 2011), their organizational silence (Durnali, M. Akbasli and Dis, 2020), quality of performance (Eckert, 2019), professional development and job satisfaction (Ashrafi and Zainabadi, 2017) and even their participation in improving the school affairs and presenting of new ideas (Ozen, 2018). Nevertheless, the cited studies have not dealt with the essence of the hidden social curriculum at schools, which is especially influenced by the behaviors of the school principals. Some researchers (such as Lacireno-Paquet, Bocala and Bailey, 2016; Martinez and Tadeu, 2018; Baptiste, 2019; Mirkamali, 2018) believe that school principals play an important role in shaping the schools' social climate. It is imperative to delve deeper into this issue, especially in the case of new teachers graduating from Farhangian University, as this particular university is responsible for educating professional teachers in Iran, and the quality of the social climate in schools can threaten the survival and professional development of these new teachers in the Iranian education system. The purpose of the present study was thus to investigate the hidden social curriculum in primary schools with a focus on the interactions between new teachers and the school principals.

Methodology

This research was conducted via a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. Semi-structured interviews were held with the participants for gathering data. To understand participants' experiences of the hidden social curriculum in the school environment, they were asked to describe in detail their recurring experiences (whether positive or negative) about the principal directly or indirectly conveying his expectations, values, and attitudes about interacting with other people in the school (including the principal, other colleagues, students, etc.). Each interview lasted one hour on average, and the data obtained were analyzed in four steps. In the first step, the researcher read the whole text of every interview to get familiarized with its contained

ideas and to carry out initial coding based on the research question. In the second step, some themes were first extracted from the coded parts of the text, and by comparing the text of each new interview with all the previous ones, some of the previously-extracted themes were refined and changed. In the third step, the discovered themes were placed in three categories based on their degree of abstraction and generality, including inclusive, organizing, and basic themes. In the last step, a network of themes was drawn to explain the relationship between all the themes. Lincoln and Guba's criteria (1985) were also used to determine the reliability of the research.

The participants included 25 student-teachers studying at Farhangian University (Shahid Hasheminejad Campus of Mashhad) in academic year 2011-2012 who currently (2021) serve as new teachers in Mashhad. The participants were selected purposively by chain sampling using two criteria.

Results

The descriptive findings revealed that most school principals in the research setting were experienced women working in primary schools in rural areas. The findings derived from the interview with new teachers also showed that their interactions with the school principals conveyed a hidden social curriculum consisting of several items that were both positive and negative. The positive hidden curriculum entailed the direct and indirect conveyance of attitudes, values and expectations from the principals to the new teachers, which, based on the lived experiences of the new teachers, are considered a facilitator of effectively doing their job in the school. Conversely, the negative items in the hidden curriculum, which also involved the direct and indirect transmission of attitudes, values, and expectations from the principals to the new teachers, were considered a significant barrier to effective performance in the school environment based on the lived experiences of the new teachers. Figure (1) presents the general findings in the inclusive and organizing themes.
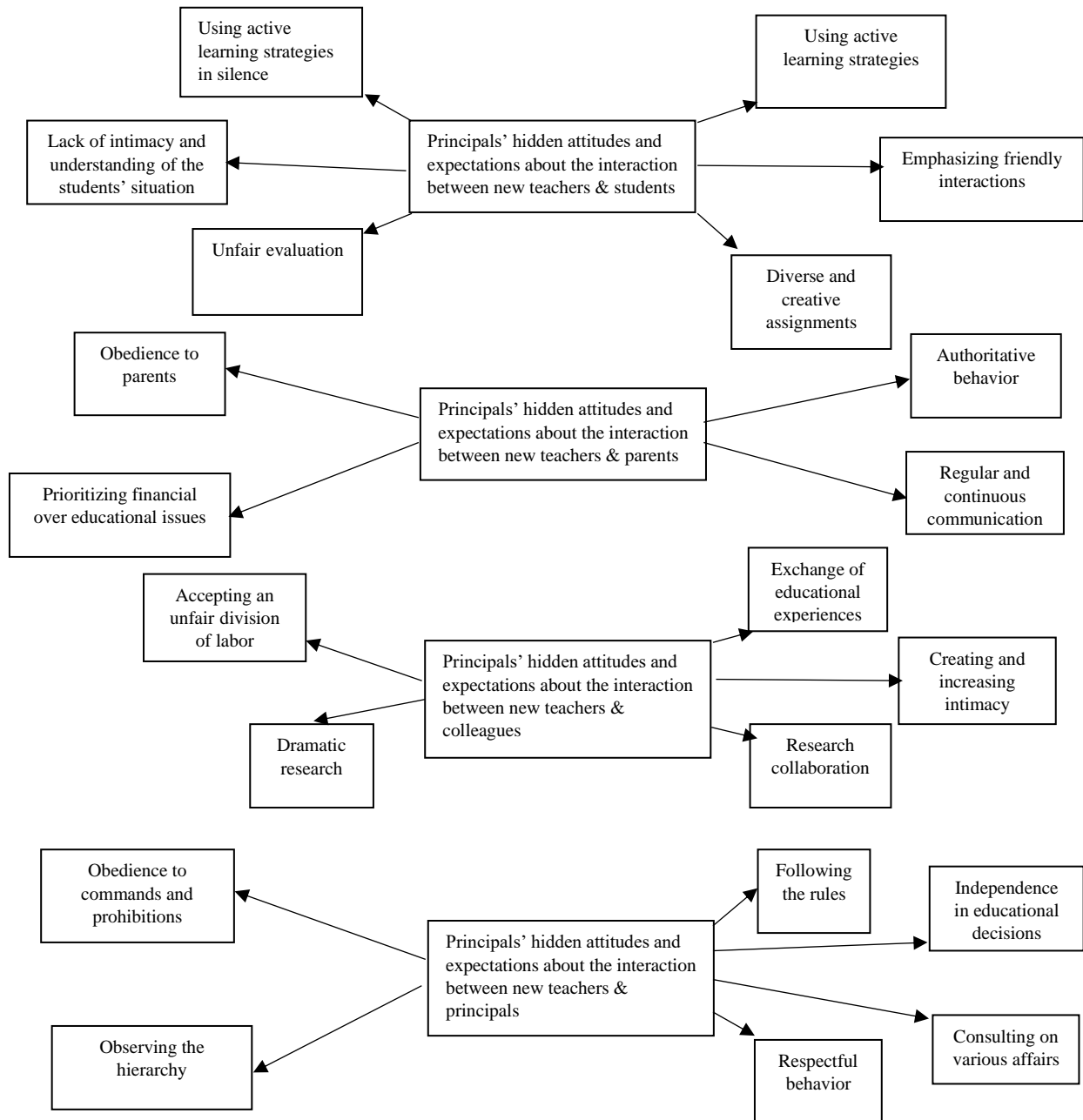
Using active
learning strategies
in silence

Lack of intimacy and
understanding of the
students' situation

Unfair evaluation

Principals' hidden attitudes and
expectations about the interaction
between new teachers & students

Using active
learning strategies

Emphasizing friendly
interactions

Diverse and
creative
assignments

Obedience to
parents

Prioritizing financial
over educational issues

Principals' hidden attitudes and
expectations about the interaction
between new teachers & parents

Authoritative
behavior

Regular and
continuous
communication

Accepting an
unfair division
of labor

Dramatic
research

Principals' hidden attitudes and
expectations about the interaction
between new teachers &
colleagues

Exchange of
educational
experiences

Creating and
increasing
intimacy

Research
collaboration

Obedience to
commands and
prohibitions

Observing the
hierarchy

Principals' hidden attitudes and
expectations about the interaction
between new teachers &
principals

Following
the rules

Independence
in educational
decisions

Respectful
behavior

Consulting on
various affairs

Figure 1. A comparative network of the themes related to the hidden messages (positive and negative) conveyed
through the interaction of principals with new teachers in primary schools

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this research indicated that school principals convey a variety of hidden positive and negative messages to new teachers through the social environment or milieu that they create. Also, since teachers need to get positive feedback from principals in order to continue their cooperation and secure their position in the school (Ghorbankhani, Salehi and Moghadamzadeh, 2019), the hidden massages conveyed can affect not only the teachers' performance but their students' performance as well.

The findings of the research can be discussed from several viewpoints. First, despite having a lot of experience in school management positions, most principals were "lacking the knowledge and skills required of a school principal" and had created an unfavorable (closed) social climate in their school. Meanwhile, many researchers (such as Mirkamali, 2018, and Lacireno-Paquet, Bocala, and Bailey, 2016) consider human skills an important prerequisite for effective management. Second, school principals who formed an open social climate in the schools were very confident in the new teachers' abilities. In contrast, all new teachers working in schools with a closed social climate stated that there was an attitude of distrust about the teachers' knowledge and expertise on the part of their school principals. According to Terek et al. (2015), teachers who have a higher level of education and professional performance expect more understanding and respect from their colleagues, but frequent exposure to unprofessional behavior from the principals leads to a decrease in their confidence and motivation and can even cause their abandonment of the teaching profession. Third, although all school principals expected the new teachers to show respect toward them and obey their commands, depending on the social climate of the school in question, this expectation often had different motives. For instance, in schools with a favorable and open social climate, the managers expected respect because they wanted to maintain the school order and ensure its smooth running, but in schools with a poor social climate, managers expected this respect from the new teachers just as a gesture of subservience to their authority and power. Fourth, many of the hidden messages conveyed were the result of the principals' independence in decision-making.

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