

Developing Principal Leadership Assessment Instruments: The Necessity and Challenges

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“I can respect any person who can put their ego aside and say, I made a mistake, I apologize, and I am correcting the behavior.”

–Sylvester McNutt

PRINCIPAL leadership evaluation and assessment, one of the crucial means for managing and monitoring principals, is of vital significance for principal professional development, the enhancement of principal leadership capability, the optimization of the principal accountability system, and school improvement (Wang, 2016; Han, 2019). At the level of personal growth, principal leadership assessment can provide school leaders with formative and summative feedback, which is beneficial for their professional development (Murphy et al., 2011). At the level of school management, it helps the principal identify the gaps between the existing practices and expected outcomes to make informed decisions for school improvement and development (Goldring et al., 2009); in the meantime, principal leadership assessment with definite results enables other school administrators to understand clearly the goals set for the school and principal, contributing to the development of a climate of collective accountability (Murphy et al., 2011) and the improvement of school governance. Overall, well-designed and properly implemented principal leadership assessment can effectively enhance organizational performance and help select qualified school leaders (Murphy et al., 2011).

The development of effective principal leadership assessment instruments was initiated in the 1980s. The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) by Porter et al. (2008) are the best-known among them. The PIMRS assesses the effectiveness of principal leadership behaviors in three dimensions: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and developing a positive school learning climate (Hollinger & Murphy, 1985). In the past 40 years or so, the scale has

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been widely used and examined by researchers and is deemed a reliable instrument for assessing principal leadership. Yet, it has its limitations with its neglect of the contextual variables of the school and the role of teachers' agency (Hollinger, 2003). The VAL-ED is a learning-centered, 360-degree assessment, focusing on school leadership that improves student academic achievement. The assessment is based on a conceptual framework of six core components and six key processes. The core components include high standards for student learning, rigorous curriculum (content), quality instruction (pedagogy), culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and performance accountability. The key processes are behaviors that principals can employ to enact the six core components: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring (Porter et al., 2008). Contrary to the said two assessments based on principal positive behaviors, Burkett (2020) adopted an inverse approach and developed the Principal Effectiveness Assessment Kit (PEAK) by looking at traits that define ineffective principal leadership. This instrument assesses the state of a principal's leadership by five key themes relevant to ineffective principal leadership including a lack of professionalism and ethics, limited leadership skills, lack of teacher and student advocacy, limited listening and communication skills, and a poor school culture and climate. However, the U.S. education context of the aforementioned assessment instruments may constrain their usage in other countries. Many researchers have sought to create localized principal leadership assessments in line with the circumstances of their own countries. For instance, Brown and Chai (2012) developed the Self-Assessment of Leadership of Teaching and Learning (SALTAL) according to New Zealand education needs, which evaluate principal leadership in the following dimensions: knowledge and skills for leading teaching and learning; commitment to ensuring positive learning outcomes for all students; collaborative leadership; and ethical leadership.

Despite the multiple instruments designed for advancing school leadership evaluation, various challenges emerged in their implementation practices. Some researchers noted the bias in the purpose of current assessments that emphasize leadership discipline over school improvement as well as the ambiguity of assessment focus - on principal or school performance (Wang, 2016). Moreover, the majority of these assessments are self-report evaluations (Brown & Chai, 2012), leading to their lack of objectivity. This is because, compared with the third-party observation or external evaluation, the self-evaluation is subject to biases such as self-enhancing tendencies (e.g. not reporting aspects which make the evaluator feels bad about the evaluatee) and social desirability tendencies (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002), compromising the effectiveness of assessment.

For further exploration of more reliable and effective principal leadership assessment instruments, it is of critical importance to identify core elements of principal leadership. *Essential Elements of Principal Leadership: A Literature Review of Leadership Qualities of Primary and Secondary Principals* in this issue is a systematic survey on key leadership qualities of primary and secondary principals based on a review of 60 journal articles in English and Chinese. These qualities, summarized in the dimensions of personal traits, the capacity to influence people, and the ability to make sustainable organizational improvements, are subject to little geographical and temporal influence, representing general expectations and requirements for basic education school principals from the global education world (Chen & Chen, 2024). While this study has provided a qualitative lens for understanding principal leadership, the issue of how to establish a scientific, quantitative assessment framework for more accurately gauging the principal's leadership capacity is pending further research. Furthermore, the literature drawn on by this survey includes both qualitative and quantitative studies, which give us different perspectives for probing leadership qualities. Nevertheless, certain amounts of prudence and careful discrimination are necessitated when incorporating their research results in the creation of principal leadership assessment scales since those qualitative studies contain the research-

ers' subjective interpretations and personal experience, which may undermine the validity and objectivity of the scale in development.

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