Why Don't They Do What I Say? The Different Ways Principals and Teachers Conceptualize Time

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Abstract

This research study explored principals' and teachers' conceptualizations of time-sensitive language as it is used to set tasks for faculty and staff in K-12 schools. Data from online surveys sent to 259 principals in Northern Indiana and Southwestern Michigan was analyzed and compared to similar surveys sent to teachers in the same region. A follow-up survey was sent to principals to determine the implications of areas of convergence and divergence between responses across the two populations. Implications for the use of time-sensitive language in oral and written communication between leaders of K-12 schools and teachers are discussed.

Why Don't They Do What I Say?

The Different Ways Principals and Teachers Conceptualize Time

Educational research has provided limited (Streshly & Gray, 2010) evidence that the

policies, procedures, and styles of building-level principals in K-12 education have an impact on

student achievement, especially in relation to their interaction with the faculty and staff in their

buildings (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Additionally,

principals' sense of collective efficacy also indirectly correlates to student achievement

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). An important component of principals' impact is their ability to

communicate effectively with staff members, as expressed by Ershler (2007).

Previous Research

In the extant literature of principal effectiveness, the ability to communicate well with

faculty, students, parents, and other educational stakeholders is a desired trait that is frequently

referenced (Ershler, 2007; Pierson & Breedson, 1993; Ryan, 2007; Schulte, Slate &

Onwuegbuzie, 2010). For the purposes of this publication, we follow Friend and Cook (2013) to

define communication as "the management of messages with the objective of creating meaning"

(p. 29). Generally the research on communication in school administration has focused on big-

picture aspects of communication from a wide-range of perspectives, including how the entire

process of communication is approached by school leaders. For example, in reviewing historical

metaphors for the superintendency, Kowalski (2005) examined expectations for and types of

communication of school leaders from the perspective of various metaphors used to describe the

position of superintendent since the early 1900s. A characteristic of these expectations included

information flow (i.e., top-down or multidirectional), which has varied depending on the

educational culture of the eras reported. Over time, the expectations for school administrators in

relation to both the types of information to be communicated and the constituencies to and for whom information is conveyed have changed, necessitating, Kowalski argued, a greater emphasis be placed on communication competencies in the field of educational administration preparation programs.

Communication and Trust

In relation to the communication competencies that Kowalski promoted, trust is a theme that often appears in the literature on communication and educational administration. Fullan (2003) provided six bulleted points on communicative trust for administrators, including: sharing information, telling the truth, admitting mistakes, giving and receiving constructive feedback, maintaining confidentiality, and speaking with purpose (p. 66). Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, and Chrispeels (2008) dedicated an entire study to the process of building district-school trust, finding that a key component of effective administrative-school relationships was a sense of trust that communication across the contexts would be received, valued, and conducted with a shared sense of purpose.

> Communication emerges as either the best friend or the worst enemy of efforts to develop and implement coordinated, focused structures for school improvement. Ongoing dialogue and "sense-making" creates and recreates staff focus, allowing it to be consistent yet dynamically respond to changes in the environment. On the other hand, poor communication leads to individual sense-making that over time veers in diverse directions and begins to fray the edges of the focus, ultimately leading to its dissolution. (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006, p. 6, as cited in Chhuon et al, p. 271)

Poor communication in the context of the study by Chhuon et al (2008) included a lack of trust among the members of the faculty and the district office. A similar necessity for trust in communication can be expected in exchanges among and between principals and their staffs (Fullan, 2003).

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication, as enacted often through verbal interaction between principals and others, has also been a common point for examination in the field. How principals communicate, not just what they communicate, has been a point of interest in many of these studies. For example, Pierson and Bredeson (1993) examined the use of humor in principal's communication with their faculty, finding that humor was used in many cases to soften the blow of difficult news, create a positive school climate, personalize school and professional work, and to convey a sense of professional empathy.

In an earlier study, Bredeson (1988) conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews, observations and documents over a period of five months with five different elementary and secondary principals (two women and three men), to examine the relationship between their individual leadership styles and their communicative exchanges. As a result, the researcher found that, regardless of leadership style, all participants valued an "open door policy" for communication, effective listening skills, and, although formal forms of communication were available (for example written bulletins, memos, and faculty meetings), each preferred more informal, direct, and personal communicative contexts. Although, due to individual leadership style, the ways the principals in the study may have approached each of these aspects of communication may have manifested in seemingly different ways, it is valuable to note that even the most structured principal in the group still preferred more personal interaction with her

faculty over more formal modes of communication. Bredeson attributed this preference held by

each of the participants to a desire for social interaction. The authors of the study presented in

this publication suggest that in addition to the social benefits of direct interaction with faculty,

this preference for more informal communication may also have been a result of the perception

that it may be easier to communicate effectively with another person when there is an

opportunity for that person to actively co-construct meaning through questioning, prompts, and

clarification.

Communication Formats

As alluded to in the previous sections, communication can take multiple forms.

Commonly referenced models of communication include *linear*, *interactional*, and *transactional*

(Friend & Cook, 2013). Linear communication is one-way, or top down, and similar to the forms

of communication manifested by school administrators in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as

described by Kowalski (2005), and in many ways still existent today. In a linear model of

communication, information is essentially released to the recipients with no opportunity for

exchange of ideas or clarification. Examples of linear communication in educational

administration contexts may include handbooks containing faculty and staff policies, if the

handbooks were developed with little to no input from individual members of the related faculty

and staff.

In her study of principals' communication and school improvement efforts in Norway,

Arlestig (2007) described two different types of meetings held in one of the schools studied.

Each serves as a useful example of the communication types described in this section. The first,

demonstrates a linear approach.

The information flow in Middletown school is based on organization-wide

communication. Monday morning begins with a 20-minute informational meeting

led by the principals. Nearly all teachers attend these meetings. Communication is

one-way—from the principals to the teachers—with little time for questions. One

of the interviewed teachers compared the meeting to a shopping list; "It is just to

tick off the items," she said. (p. 266)

This Monday morning meeting demonstrates a linear approach to communication in that

the principals set the agenda, provided memos and agendas for the teachers to follow along, but

that, given the short amount of time, little opportunity was provided for exchange of ideas or

even clarifying questions from the listeners.

Interactional communication, as the label might indicate, includes more of an exchange

of information than the linear approach; however, this exchange mainly serves the purpose of

ensuring that the listener has received and understood the sender's message. This type of

exchange in an educational setting may appropriately be exemplified through a different

description of morning staff meetings in a study of principal leadership in Norway by Presthus:

Every morning the principal and the rest of the staff had a short 10-15

minutes [sic] meeting in the staffroom. The main intention with the meeting was

to exchange current information with all. Before the meeting the principal would

put down keywords for what he would present in a meeting protocol, and

afterwards he added the keywords for with the others had given information

about. . . .[There were not many] discussions in the morning meetings. The aim

was to give information and to solve acute problems there and then. . . A last,

maybe not intended function was that just before and after the meetings, the

principal got all kinds of questions or comments and had a lot of smaller

conversations. (2006, p. 93)

In this example, the principal again followed a specific agenda, which he set, and

information was provided to the faculty in attendance. The main difference between this example

and the one from Arlestig (2007) was the incorporation of additional keywords and information

provided by the members of the faculty. Although one has to question the productivity of

informational exchanges occurring in a 10-15 minute period, because the faculty were expected

to participate and contribute to this meeting, Presthus' example invokes a more interactional

communication format.

Finally, transactional communication formats include co-construction of knowledge by

all participants that occurs as messages are both sent and received (Friend & Cook, 2013). An

example of a transactional communicative event might include an *ad hoc* committee meeting in

which several educational stakeholders convene to collaborate on an issue, using problem-

solving approaches to define, organize, generate and evaluate potential approaches and solutions.

Communication as Conveyance of Ideas

As is evidenced by the studies cited in the previous sections, the term communication

encompasses complex ideas ranging from how ideas are communicated to how communication

processes convey power (Fairclough, 1995) and group membership (Gee, 1996). Using a

discourse analysis approach, and following the linguistic tradition of theorists like Bakhtin

(1986), Ryan (2007) used discourse analysis procedures to examine the ways principals'

identities influenced their attempts to engage in dialogue within their educational communities.

Each of the principals in the study again referenced effective communication as an integral part

of their position. Although not the focus of the research, one particular identity adopted by the participants bears directly on our study: the role of clarifier.

Clarifier, in Ryan's (2007) study, was a term used to describe the principals' expectation that an important part of the job was to make "sure that the messages that they conveyed to their various constituencies were clear" (p. 359). For these principals, clarity included simplicity and accuracy in messages, as "administrators frequently acknowledged that there were many ways of interpreting their messages. Some found that they could not take for granted that groups and individuals would interpret them in the same way that they themselves did" (p. 361). The concept of clarity has both philosophical and practical implications for educational administrators, and ultimately, can be traced back to the concept of trust. If messages from administrators are not accurate, or clear, in essence their trustworthiness is placed into question. If communication and trust are critical components of being an effective administrator, as the literature cited in this review suggests, then it is incumbent upon principals (and educational researchers) to examine ways in which conceptual disconnects in communication may be the result of lack of congruence between the ideas conveyed and received. In other words, it is relevant to look at language at even the word or phrase level to examine how miscommunication based on differing connotations of meaning may occur.

Understanding that communication is a complex concept, we chose to begin by looking at principals' communication through the lens of clarity at a more fundamental, word/phrase, level. As principals are required to generate and disseminate ever-larger quantities of data and information (Kowalski, 2005), it is crucial that information that they distribute be conveyed accurately and interpreted in ways that align with the principals' intent. Common linguistic phrases, especially those invoking metaphors and idioms may be interpreted in different ways,

based on culture or experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), for example. As such, inclusion of these seemingly common words or phrases may ultimately lead to communication disruption rather than the conveyance of ideas.

For our examination, we focused on one type of message that principals are often charged with conveying – concepts of time. When figurative or non-specific language is used to convey abstract notions like time, the possibility of misunderstanding or miscommunication increases. Our study sought to better understand whether the language principals used to convey time aligned with the interpretations of their faculty and staffs.

As such, the research questions that we developed for our study were:

- Do principals have similar expectations for tasks when using the same time-sensitive linguistic terms and phrases?

- Do teachers' conceptualizations of time-sensitive language resemble those of administrators?

- What insight does knowledge about conceptualizations of time-sensitive language held by principals and teachers provide?

Methods

The study we conducted consisted of electronic surveys distributed to K-12 building administrators and teachers over a period of three months in a two-state region in the Midwest. The survey data reported here was part of a larger study on principal and teachers' use of language and conceptualizations of the roles of school administrators.

Data Collection

In 2003, Withers and Lewis published a survey instrument designed to examine school administrators' conceptualizations of time-sensitive language. The purpose was to facilitate more

effective dissemination of information from school administration to parents, faculty, staff, students and the community, and it has mainly been used in professional development settings. At the time of our study, we were unaware of empirical research using this instrument. The guiding hypothesis behind the survey was that principals and the members of the groups to whom the principals are responsible for communicating information may have different conceptualizations the connotative meanings of specific words and phrases used during communication.

Our electronic survey, based on Withers and Lewis (2003), was sent to 259 principals and assistant principals in the spring of 2012. Principals were asked to rank the immediacy of response expected from staff when commonly linguistic terms or phrases were applied in communication. Terms analyzed included: *ASAP, Right Away, Soon, Get it Right Back to Me, Take Your Time, Later,* and *This is an Emergency, Always, Seldom, Rarely, Frequently*, and *Regularly* (See Appendix for the entire list survey items). Later, a similar version of this survey, designed for teachers, was sent to the same group of principals for distribution to their faculty and staffs. Both surveys were analyzed for areas of congruence and divergence in conceptions of time-sensitive tasks. Data from individual principals was analyzed in comparison to their peers, as well as in relation to the teachers' responses.

Responses were received from a total of 77 principals, a response rate of 32%. Of the 77 administrators who responded, two ($n=2$) indicated that they had not been employed as principals in the previous 24 months, so their responses were omitted from the data analysis. One participant ($n=1$) began the survey but did not complete any of the questions, so a total of 74 responses were analyzed. A total of 150 teachers submitted survey responses. Of the 150 who responded, seven ($n=7$) indicated that they had not been employed as teachers during the

previous 24 months, so their responses were not included in the data analysis. Given the

snowball method used for sampling the teachers, and the confidential design of the survey and

recruitment protocol, unfortunately, we are unable to determine what the teacher response rate

for the surveys was. Figure 1 below provides a snapshot of the demographics for the principals

and teachers who responded.

	Principals (*n=74*)				Teachers (*n=143*)*			
Gender	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	35		39		31		110	
Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-+	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-+
	7	30	25	11	35	41	37	29
Highest Degree Earned	Bachelor's	Master's	Specialist's	Doctorate	Bachelor's	Master's	Specialist's	Doctorate
	1	50	21	2	63	76	4	0
Years as Administrator/ Teacher	< 3	3-5	6-9	10+	< 3	3-5	6-9	10+
	18	11	19	26	20	15	20	88
Students in Building	1-299	300-499	500-999	1000+	1-299	300-499	500-999	1000+
	5	27	29	13	10	32	52	49

*Note. *Two teachers did not respond to the gender question and one did not respond to age.*

Figure 1. Study participants

Analysis and Findings

Paired *t*-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analyses were run based on the 20 time-

sensitive words and the variables; *Gender, Age, Degree, Years as Administrator, Years in*

Education and *Students in Building* for Teachers, and Principals. Most importantly, paired *t*-tests

were run for all 20 time-sensitive words between Teachers and Principals.

Principal Analyses. Paired *t*-tests were run for the variables; *Employed as an*

Administrator and *Gender* with only one time-sensitive word showing any statistically

significant difference between males and females. Table 1 demonstrates that females regard *Get*

Right Back to Me as more urgent than do males.

Table 1

T-tests comparing principal gender and time-sensitive phrase Get Right Back to Me

Gender	*n*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Male	35	1.542	0.657	2.532	70	0.014
Female	37	1.216	0.417			

Note. Means: 1=in less than one hour, 2=this same week, 3= before the middle of next week, 4= before the middle of next month and 5=anytime is okay.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were run for the variables; *Years as an*

Administrator, *Years an Education Person*, *Students Enrolled*, *Age* and *Degree* with no

statistically significant differences found between any time -sensitive words based on *Age*

and *Degree*. The variable, *Years as an Administrator*, however, did show one statistically

significant difference with the time-sensitive word *High Priority* (see Tables 2 and 3) as did

the variable *Years an Education Person* (see Tables 4 and 5). The variable, *Students*

Enrolled also found a statistically significance but with the time-sensitive word *Right Away*

(see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 2

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for years administrator and High Priority

Source	Sum or Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Between Groups	2.447	3	0.816	3.376	0.023
Error	16.428	68	0.242		
Corrected Total	18.875	71			

Table 3
Averages for years administrator and High Priority

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Min	Max
Less than 3	17	1.706	0.588	0.143	1.404	2.008	1.000	3.000
3-5 years	8	1.250	0.463	0.164	0.863	1.637	1.000	2.000
6-9 years	19	1.263	0.452	0.104	1.045	1.481	1.000	2.000
10+ years	28	1.286	0.460	0.087	1.107	1.464	1.000	2.000
All years	72	1.375	0.516	0.061	1.254	1.496	1.000	3.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a statistically significant difference between groups indicating less than 3 years administrating and the rest of the grouped years; *3-5, 6-9* and *10+*. New principals believe *High Priority* to be less urgent than seasoned principals.

Table 4
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for years education person and High Priority

Source	Sum or Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	3.140	3	1.047	4.524	0.006
Error	15.735	68	0.231		
Corrected Total	18.875	71			

Table 5
Averages for years education person and High Priority

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Min	Max
Less than 3	1	3.000					3.000	3.000
3-5 years	1	2.000					2.000	2.000
6-9 years	4	1.250	0.500	0.250	0.454	2.046	1.000	2.000
10+ years	66	1.349	0.480	0.591	1.231	1.467	1.000	2.000
All years	72	1.378	0.516	0.601	1.254	1.496	1.000	3.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a statistically significant difference between groups *less than 3* and the two groups *6-9*

and *10+*. Again, respondents with fewer years in education understood *High Priority* to be less

urgent.

Table 6
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Students Enrolled and time-sensitive phrase
Right Away

Source	Sum or Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Between Groups	1.513	3	0.504	2.774	0.048
Error	12.542	69	0.182		
Corrected Total	14.055	72			

Table 7
Averages for Students Enrolled and Right Away

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Min	Max
1-299	4	1.500	0.577	0.289	0.581	2.419	1.000	2.000
300-499	28	1.214	0.418	0.079	1.052	1.376	1.000	2.000
500-999	29	1.379	0.494	0.092	1.192	1.567	1.000	2.000
1000+	12	1.000	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
All	73	1.260	0.442	0.517	1.157	1.363	1.000	2.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a statistically significant difference between groups *500-599* and *1000+*. This means

the larger the building, the more urgent R*ight Away* is interpreted.

Teacher Analyses. Paired *t*-tests were run for the same variables as for principals

(*Employed as an Administrator* and *Gender*) with several time-sensitive words showing

statistically significant differences between males and females (see Table 8). In each of these

time-sensitive words females regarded the meaning of the words or phrases as more urgent than

did males.

Table 8

T-tests comparing teacher's gender and time-sensitive variables

	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Low priority						
Male	23	4.087	0.996	2.406	113	0.018
Female	92	3.522	1.011			
Usually						
Male	24	2.792	0.833	1.987	110	0.049
Female	88	2.477	0.643			
Every Once in a While						
Male	24	4.000	0.417	2.152	55.008	0.036
Female	90	3.767	0.637			
Regularly						
Male	24	2.833	0.816	2.817	112	0.006
Female	90	2.367	0.694			

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were run for the variables: *Years as a Teacher*,

Years an Education Person, *Students Enrolled*, *Age* and *Degree* with no statistically significant

differences found between any time-sensitive words of *Years as a Teacher*, *Years in Education*,

or *Degree*. The variable, *Age*, however, did show statistically significant differences with three

time-sensitive words (see Tables 9 through 14). The variable, *Students Enrolled* also found a

statistically significant difference, but with the time-sensitive word *First Thing* (see Tables 15

and 16).

Table 9
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Teacher Age and time-sensitive word Soon

Source	Sum or Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	4.253	3	1.418	4.424	0.006
Error	36.527	114	0.320		
Corrected Total	40.780	117			

Table 10
Averages for Teacher Age and Soon

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Min	Max
25-34	27	2.333	0.620	0.119	2.088	2.579	1.000	4.000
35-44	32	2.031	0.595	0.105	1.817	2.246	1.000	4.000
45-54	35	2.200	0.531	0.090	2.018	2.383	1.000	4.000
55+	24	1.792	0.509	0.104	1.577	2.007	1.000	3.000
All	118	2.102	0.590	0.054	1.994	2.209	1.000	4.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a significant difference between groups *25-34* and *55+*; and *45-54* and *55+*, which

means that older teachers believe *Soon* to be more urgent than younger teachers.

Table 11
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Teacher Age and time-sensitive phrase Take your Time

Source	Sum or Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	8.157	3	2.719	2.873	0.039
Error	107.910	114	0.947		
Corrected Total	116.068	117			

Table 12
Averages for Teacher Age and Take your Time

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
25-34	27	3.778	0.801	0.154	3.461	4.095	3.000	5.000
35-44	32	2.844	1.051	0.186	3.465	4.223	2.000	5.000
45-54	35	3.600	1.063	0.180	3.235	3.965	2.000	5.000
55+	24	3.125	0.890	0.184	2.745	3.505	2.000	5.000
All	118	3.610	0.996	0.092	3.429	3.792	2.000	5.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a significant difference between the age group *35-44* and all other groups. Overall, most

older teachers (45+) believe *Take your Time* to be more urgent than younger teachers, however

the *35-44* age group rated *Take your Time* more urgent than any other group including the

younger *25-34* age group.

Table 13
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Teacher Age and time-sensitive phrase Low Priority

Source	Sum or Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	10.697	3	3.566	3.572	0.016
Error	111.811	112	0.998		
Corrected Total	122.509	115			

Table 14
Averages for Teacher Age and Low Priority

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
25-34	27	4.185	0.921	0.177	3.821	4.550	2.000	5.000
35-44	31	3.387	1.022	0.184	3.012	3.762	2.000	5.000
45-54	34	3.559	1.021	0.175	3.203	3.915	2.000	5.000
55+	24	3.500	1.022	0.209	3.069	3.931	2.000	5.000
All	116	3.645	1.032	0.959	3.457	3.836	2.000	5.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase. *Means: 1=In Less than One Hour, 2=This Same Week, 3= Before the Middle of Next Week, 4= Before the Middle of Next Month and 5=Anytime is Okay.*

There is a statistically significant difference between groups *25-34* and *34-44*. The difference

here in meaning is the *25-34* group thinks of *Low Priority* as meaning the *Middle of Next Month*

while everyone else believes *Low Priority* to mean *Before the Middle of Next Week*, Again,

older teachers believe *Low Priority* to be more urgent than younger teachers.

Table 15
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Students Enrolled and time-sensitive phrase First Thing

Source	Sum or Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	2.259	3	0.753	3.097	0.030
Error	27.960	115	0.243		
Corrected Total	30.218	118			

Table 16
Averages for Students Enrolled and First Thing

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Min	Max
1-299	7	1.857	0.378	0.143	1.508	2.207	1.000	2.000
300-499	27	1.407	0.501	0.096	1.209	1.606	1.000	2.000
500-999	42	1.262	0.445	0.0687	1.123	1.401	1.000	2.000
1000+	43	1.419	0.545	0.831	1.251	1.586	1.000	3.000
All	119	1.387	0.506	0.046	1.295	1.478	1.000	3.000

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

There is a statistically significant difference between groups *1-299* and *500-999*. In general, the

larger the school the more urgent *First Thing* means.

Principal vs. Teacher Analyses. Paired *t*-tests were run between *Principals* and

Teachers for each of the 20 time-sensitive words and phrases with three instances of statistical

difference found (see Table 17).

Table 17

T-tests comparing teacher with principal and time-sensitive variables

	n	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
ASAP						
Principal	73	1.411	0.523	2.404	190	0.017
Teacher	119	1.244	0.431			
First Thing						
Principal	73	1.644	0.510	3.403	151	0.001
Teacher	119	1.387	0.506			
Low Priority						
Principal	73	4.010	0.935	2.569	164	0.011
Teacher	117	3.641	1.029			

Note. The lower the mean the more urgent the word or phrase

In each case teachers found these time-sensitive words or phrases to mean something more urgent than did principals. There were no cases found where principals rated any of these time-sensitive words statistically more urgent than what teachers rated them.

Findings and Discussion

As stated in the literature review, the three research questions that we developed for our study were:

- Do principals have similar expectations for tasks when using the same time-sensitive linguistic terms and phrases?

- Do teachers' conceptualizations of time-sensitive language resemble those of administrators?

- What insight does knowledge about conceptualizations of time-sensitive language held by principals and teachers provide?

Research Question 1: Do Principals Have Similar Expectations for Tasks when Using the

Same Time-sensitive Linguistic Terms and Phrases?

Statistical analysis of the data indicate that there are few statistically significant

differences in interpretation of the majority of the time-sensitive words and phrases surveyed. In

other words, general interpretations of the language are consistent within the group of

administrators with respect to *Age*, *Gender*, *Degree Level*, *Years in Education*, *Years as*

Administrator and *Size of School*. The few variations that did occur, however, seem to indicate

that younger principals and (perhaps not coincidentally) principals with fewer years in education,

sense that something that is *High Priority* is less urgent than their colleagues with more years of

experience. This interpretation of the phrase *High Priority* as less urgent for younger, less

experienced educators seems to hold true in other settings as well. In principal development

programs (educational leadership), when the survey was administered in an informal setting to

candidates in those programs, responses indicated a lesser sense of urgency than older, more

experienced principals sense of the phrase (Watson, 2011).

In the principal data, the only phrase that seemed to generate a statistically significant

differing interpretation among principals across gender lines was *Get Right Back to Me*. In this

case female administrators believed that the phrase was more urgent than their male counterparts.

This finding is also congruent with findings in informal surveys conducted in our educational

leadership principal development programs: female candidates responded to the survey phrase

Get It Right Back to Me as being more urgent than did the male candidates (Watson, 2011).

Lastly, the size of building in which the principals worked did not seem to produce

statistically significant differences among the principals, except for the in the case of *Right*

Away, where data analysis showed that principals in larger buildings saw *Right Away* as more

urgent than principals in smaller buildings. Conversely, candidates in principal development programs interpreted the phrase *Right Away* on the survey with the same degree of urgency regardless of the building size (Watson, 2011). This variance might be attributed to the addition of greater responsibility being added to a principal's workload in a larger student enrollment building, but not necessarily adding additional responsibility to the teachers work load in larger student enrollment buildings.

Overall, however, given initial list of 20 time-sensitive words and phrases presented to principals, analysis showed that the principals were generally consistent, excepting the terms and variables previously noted, with their perceptions of urgency in relation to the language they use. This finding indicates that educational stakeholders communicating with principals and administrators can be reasonably assured that the time-sensitive language used by different administrators conveys similar expectations for urgency. However, even without statistically significant variations relating to demographics and urgency, there still may be a wide-range of expectations within the group that may lead to impaired communication.

For example, twenty-six percent of the principals indicated that *Later* meant "this week" while 21% meant "the middle of next month". This illustrates that the intended message of *Later* is not consistent across the group. The range of expectation is between one week and one month, which represents a considerable difference in time. Although there was no statistical significance relating to the age, experience, or other demographic information regarding the principals to indicate which principals are likely to interpret *Later* to mean "this week" versus "next month" we thought the relatively even split of interpretation across was worthy of note.

Research Question 2: Do Teachers' Conceptualizations of Time-sensitive Language Resemble Those of Administrators?

Analysis of the data from the teacher surveys showed that female teachers perceived a greater sense of urgency than male teachers in four of the time-sensitive words/phrases presented. As was the case with the principal survey, there were no cases in the teacher survey where males' sense of urgency was stronger than females'.

Although there were no statistically significant differences in relation to *Years in Education* and sense of urgency, *Age* did seem to play a factor in differing senses of urgency in the cases of *Soon, Take your Time,* and *Low Priority.* In these three cases where statistically significant differences were found, older teachers nearly always believed the terms and phrases to be more urgent than their younger colleagues. As with the principal survey, the sense of urgency seems to increase with more experience, although experience in the principal survey is identified in relation to education, and in the teacher survey experience refers to chronological age.

For instance, as teachers matured, they found the phrase *Take Your Time* to be more urgent than younger teachers. Each age group from 35-44 and older found the phrase to be more urgent than the *25-34* age group. In looking in more detail at that phrase, there existed a statistically significant difference in the interpretation between the *35-44* age group and all other age groups. While the current study was not designed to figure out why this might have occurred, principals may wish to consider these results when communicating with different age groups of teachers within their buildings.

Finally, as with the principal survey, analysis of urgency based on *Size of School* revealed that in a single case showing a statistically significant difference, the larger the school, the more urgent a term was interpreted. In the case of the principals, the only term to show any statistically significant difference was *Right Away*. Within the group of teachers, the term was *First Thing*.

When comparing the teachers' responses directly with the principals', findings showed statistically significant differences in interpretation of time-sensitive terms: *ASAP, First Thing,* and *Low Priority.* In each of these cases the teachers found the terms to be more urgent than did the principals. It is also relevant to note that two of these terms, *First Thing,* and *Low Priority* also showed that the older a teacher is, the more likely he or she is to consider these terms urgent. As a result, it would seem beneficial that as principals evaluate their communication habits, they pay particular attention to their own sense of urgency relating to the time-sensitive words they choose, and consider their intended messages in light of potential expectations of their teachers given possible differences based on age and experience.

Research Question 3: What Insights Does Knowledge about Conceptualizations of Time-sensitive Language Held by Principals and Teachers Provide?

As indicated in the review of literature, communication is a complex process that encompasses various methods, processes, and structures. For principals to survive in their positions, they must be able to interact personally with their faculty and staff (Bredeson, 1988), build trust in communicative practices (Chhuon, et al., 2008; Fullan, 2003), and communicate ideas clearly (Kowalski, 2005; Ryan, 2007), and they must be skilled at doing so in a variety of formats (Arlestig, 2007; Presthus, 2006) including linear, interactional, and transactional communicative modes (Friend & Cook, 2013). Given the findings from this research, we recommend that administrators contemplate the meaning and impact of the time-sensitive words they use when communicating with each other and with their teachers, and how something as seemingly minor as selecting a commonly used word or phrase may lead to confusion or unintended results based on individual interpretation of the language itself. This is especially true when considering *Gender*, *Experience*, and *Size of School*. For example, administrators may

benefit from carefully evaluating the clarity of time-sensitive language used in their school

calendars, e-mail messages, meeting agendas, handouts, power-points, faculty/staff handbooks

and other written materials.

Limitations and Future Research

During the development, implementation and analysis of the study, several limitations

emerged. Due to the nature of the study design, response rate for participating teachers was

unknown. In addition, future versions of this research should consider including a design to

explicitly tie principal responses directly to the responses from teachers in their buildings in

order to determine if there is greater congruence for the connotation of time-sensitive language in

contexts where the participants have an established relationship. Finally, the authors recommend

that further research be conducted to inspect in more detail the statistically significant differences

that occurred in the areas of age and experience of both teachers and principals, gender

differences and enrollment size of the principal's building.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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According to Keil, (2005) "communication is the glue that holds a school and its

constituents together" (p.31). It is a process that involves much more than simply sending and

receiving a message, and, yet, effective communication is seen as one of the essential

components of successful building leadership in the school setting.

This research study attempted to explore convergent and divergent interpretations of

commonly used linguistic terms and phrases denoting time in order to contribute to the larger

conversation regarding administrators' communicative processes and skills. Conscious work

with communications on behalf of the building principal can create new possibilities when it

comes to effective communication between them and their teachers (Arlestig, 2007), which will

lead to improved student learning in the classroom.

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Appendix: Sample Questions and Structures from Principals' Language Survey

To gain an understanding of your concept of common terms used by building principals, please click on the response that most closely communicates what you meant to express when you used that word or phrase in your written or verbal communication.

When I say the word or phrase in the left hand column, it means that I need a response (select one bullet only for each word or phrase):

	In less than one hour	This same week	Before the middle of next week	Before the middle of next month	Any time is ok
ASAP	○	○	○	○	○
Right Away	○	○	○	○	○
Soon	○	○	○	○	○
Get it right back to me	○	○	○	○	○
Take your time	○	○	○	○	○
Later	○	○	○	○	○
First thing	○	○	○	○	○
High priority	○	○	○	○	○
Low priority	○	○	○	○	○
This is an emergency	○	○	○	○	○

When I say the word or phrase in the left hand column, it means that whatever I am talking about happens or should happen at least every (select one bullet only for each word or phrase):

	hour	day	week	month	year
Always	○	○	○	○	○
Seldom	○	○	○	○	○
Often	○	○	○	○	○
Rarely	○	○	○	○	○
Usually	○	○	○	○	○
A lot	○	○	○	○	○
Every once in a while	○	○	○	○	○
Regularly	○	○	○	○	○
Frequently	○	○	○	○	○
Almost never	○	○	○	○	○