

Title: Reel Principals: A Descriptive Content Analysis of the Images of School Principals Depicted in Movies from 1997-2009

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Historically, most school principals in the movies have been depicted as autocrats, bureaucrats, buffoons, and/or villains. The purpose of this study was to determine if these stereotypical characterizations of school principals prior to 1997 have continued in films from 1997-2009, or if more favorable images have emerged that accurately reflect how the position of school principal has evolved.

This content analysis was a mixed method study whereby both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. Some of the unit of analysis content was counted to explain specific qualities, traits, and behaviors of school principals. Data was also qualitatively analyzed to explain the professional representation of principals in movies from 1997-2009.

The results of this content analysis revealed that movie images of principals have not changed significantly in recent years: principals do not tend to have major roles in the movies; most principals are still depicted as stereotypical autocrats, buffoons, and bureaucrats; and the image of the school principal is that of a middle-aged, white male of average weight and height, who has a receding hairline or is bald. He dresses in conservative, drab clothing and typically wears a suit or a sport jacket that is brown, gray, or black with a white or cream-colored dress shirt and a nondescript tie.

Noteworthy is the emergence of the democratic principal in 20% of the movies that were reviewed for this study. The democratic principal exhibits behaviors and qualities that researchers have linked to successful schools; behaviors such as, being visible in the school, firm on discipline, a good communicator, seeks input from stakeholders, nurtures positive relationships, and knowledgeable about curriculum and instructional practices. The democratic principal is often shown taking on the bureaucratic school system in an effort to provide valuable opportunities for students.