

School Efficacy and Educational Leadership: How Principals Help Schools Get Smarter

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Abstract: Schools become learning communities when both teachers and students exert extraordinary commitment and performance. When shared leadership between administrators and teachers is fostered, students benefit academically. This is called *school efficacy*. In this action-research paper, two principals in low-performing, high-poverty urban schools share their recommendations for fostering higher student achievement, making their respective schools smarter.

Schools work best when students engage in robust learning. Robust learning is a condition in which students can easily navigate around the content area and begin to frame their own inquiry questions about the discipline. Robust learning occurs in a school climate of extraordinary commitment and performance (Sergiovanni, 2001) on the part of both teachers and students. Of course, this kind of learning community is a paradigm. How do schools become learning communities? One way is by creating higher achieving schools, called school efficacy, through collaborative problem solving (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Mackey, 2000).

Purpose

This paper will take a snapshot of the educational philosophies of two principals: one, an experienced urban high-school leader; the other, a less experienced urban elementary-school leader. Both administer low-performing, inner-city schools. Both are trying to make their respective schools smarter through the development of discourse communities among teachers (Tschannen-Moran et al., Uline, 2000) and shared leadership processes between teachers and administrators.

Conceptual Framework

School efficacy is another name for smarter schools. It derives from two other established constructs in cognitive psychology: *self-efficacy* and *teacher efficacy*. *Self-efficacy* is a person's belief in his/her ability to overcome the difficulties inherent in performing a specific task in a particular situation (Bandura, 1982), e.g., learning how to drive a car. *Teacher efficacy* is a belief or conviction a teacher has that he or she has the capacity to positively affect student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Bandura, 1977). School efficacy is an extension of an educational psychology definition usually applied to a person, now being associated with an organization.

Standing as a bridge between *teacher efficacy* and *school efficacy* is the concept of *collective efficacy*. *Collective efficacy* is the intentional, coordinated, and effective interactions of administrators, teachers, and students which results in students working with more intensive focus and responsibility and teachers working with increased clarity on the school's mission (Goddard & Goddard, 2001).

Following the findings of pioneer learning theorists Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, new understandings of cognitive development stress the social nature of knowledge.

Knowledge learned in isolation often remains inert, whereas knowledge learned in social situations is both contextualized, and, to varying degrees, transferrable by the learner to new problem-solving situations. However, the learning of complex subject matter or the flexible adaptation of knowledge to new problems and settings takes time.

Lambert (1995) gives us a definition of “constructivist leadership” which is applicable to *school efficacy*: “. . . leadership as involving a reciprocal process that enables members of a school community to construct meaning that leads toward a common purpose . . . building capacity among people and in schools” (as cited in Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 157). Rost (1991), too, defines leadership as “. . . an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect mutual purposes” (as cited in Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 157). In both of these definitions, the roles of followers and leaders are intertwined and often blurred. Effective leadership entails shifting back and forth between the roles of leader and learner without discomfort, as situations often evolve in complex school organizations.

Let us look then at the vision, perspectives, and thoughts of two different inner-city principals in very challenging urban settings as each leader attempts to improve his school by making it smarter through the development of teacher discourse communities.

Method

This paper takes a qualitative, ethnographic approach (Wolcott, 1994) to viewing two urban, inner-city principals: one, an experienced high school leader; the other, a less experienced elementary school leader. Data were collected through two focused interviews. Eleven questions were asked of the high school principal; eight questions were posed to the elementary school leader. Each interview lasted approximately three-quarters of an hour. The interviews were conducted in Spring 2003 at the respective school sites. The framework for the interview responses to questions was a *Change Facilitator Style Inventory (CFSI)*, developed by Hall & Rutherford (Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 339). The CFSI includes seven behaviors. The responses are categorized as fitting within five of the seven behaviors on the inventory. The principals are identified as Principal A, high school; and Principal B, elementary school.

Findings

Two principals exhibit extensive inner-city education experience.

Brief Biographies of the Principals

Principal A. I graduated from segregated public schools. I attained a B.A. and a Masters in English Education. I was hired in 1971. I was a language arts teacher for eight years. Then I was a guidance counselor for eight years, the last two as guidance chair. In 1987 I was appointed to my first position as an assistant principal in opening a new magnet school. In 1991 I was appointed as the AP for curriculum and instruction at a traditional high school in the inner-city. In 1992 I was hired as the principal of a middle school in the inner-city. In 1995 I was appointed the principal of a very large inner-city high school. In 1998 the Superintendent asked me to take my present position. This is my fifth year.

Principal B. I went through public schools. I then went to the local community-college. After that I transferred to a four year university, graduating with a B.A. in education. I got my Masters with a specialist degree and certificates in ESOL, Gifted, and Educational Leadership. I taught ten years at an inner-city elementary school. I was an AP at a different inner-city elementary school for the next six years. I have been the Principal at my current elementary school assignment for the last two years.

Vision

In inner-city schools, socialization must be established before intellectual purpose can be realized in a classroom setting. The principals talked about how relationships—between teachers, and between teacher and student—were important ingredients to creating a climate for learning.

Principal A. The flavor of the school I would not change...We have a pretty balanced population ethnic-wise...we have all the sub-groups represented - except we don't have a whole lot of white students....Even though the school is in a 'tough' neighborhood, the kids seem to accept differences in other kids much better than at some schools. Our built-in alumni are really interested in our school, and that is a strength. I am about changing cultural mentalities and expectations which too easily accept mediocrity. The biggest roadblock to achievement in this school is not being here! You have to learn how to grow as a team.

Principal B. I would never change the teachers that we have here. I wouldn't change the history either. The school is over 50 years old. We feel good - take pride in being in this community. ...I stress to teachers that we are going to take the kid where he/she is at and work with them - try to meet all their needs - move them forward.When you start collaborating you allow the teacher to be empowered. The teachers here could teach anywhere....It's the people who make a school and the principalship sets a tone for the building....'We're all in this together.'

Structuring the School as a Workplace

Students in inner-city schools need to develop study habits and patterns so that they can build persistence in doing intellectually challenging work. Students respond positively to reading, writing, and thinking tasks that challenge them when teachers establish daily reading, writing, mathematics and science habits.

Principal A. We have had an attendance problem at this school, and it's the biggest roadblock to achievement. But, it's more than what's happening at home....it's a mentality that says, 'we can do a lot of things that are more important than school; eventually we'll get to school.' This is a cultural mentality. We need to change the culture. A danger in a struggling school is the teacher who gets in a rut: 'These kids can't; they didn't really know this, so I can't start that.' I tell teachers: do not teach to the lowest level in your class; raise those expectations!

Principal B. What we have to do is make everyone accountable. On the other hand, I don't think one grade should make or break a kid - one test - I don't see that at all. But teachers need to be looking and monitoring as never before so that the gap won't get so big. To do well in inner-city teaching, it is not a matter of lack of intelligence. It is being able to relate to the environment and the kids. Even the most ineffective teachers, if you set goals for them, they will step up to the plate.

Structuring Involvement with Change

Effective teachers love to teach. Anything other than instruction is often seen by teachers as a distraction. Shared decision-making and governance works best when teachers feel they are involved with change from its inception, not included in planning and decision-making after direction has been started unilaterally,

Principal A. I walk around the school a lot; as an administrator you cannot sit down and plan your day like a teacher; you're always leaving spaces to deal with people....I'm the person who ties things all together so I have to know when to give some and when to take some: with parents, teachers, APs, and students...but you turn things over to key people and meet with them periodically....I don't expect to continue to do the same thing and expect the same result.

Principal B. You want, as a principal, to empower your teachers so that they will carry on whether you are here or not....We need to build in motivation for teachers to become quality teachers....the bottom line is this: if you are fair, if you are a fair leader, people are going to follow you.

Sharing of Responsibility

Sharing responsibility is an ambiguous, complex and uncertain process. Not every teacher has leadership skills nor wants to take on leadership responsibility. Likewise, teacher leadership has many different definitions.

Principal A. You can't run the school by yourself. You start the job thinking everything has to be in your hands - because you are responsible. Where I have grown is in delegation - letting go of things. You need to turn things over to key people and meet with them periodically. Everybody has some weaknesses - me included. When someone has a strength, you work with them on their weaknesses. Sometimes you put up with it for the results you get from what they do that they are strong in. In working with people, you have to wait to see if they recognize they have a need.

Principal B. The best possible scenario is that I motivate the troops, and then the teachers grow and the kids grow. Universities should be placing more student-teachers in inner-city schools for the experience. The teaching jobs are in the inner-city. Anyone who sits in my chair and is on a power trip will have serious problems because people will see right through that! The hardest thing I've had to learn as a principal is to 'let go' - the more you allow people to serve, the more power you have, and the more you learn as a person.

Decision Making

Principals and teachers must adapt to change as a daily, flexible occurrence for school efficacy to thrive.

Principal A. My basic philosophy is that kids need structure, so if you do things by example you can help students.... You have to adjust everything to fit the people in the building.... Being able to build a team only comes with experience. It does not come naturally.

Principal B. I just see myself as a little wiser. I try to keep 'high energy,' sit back and reflect: 'how can I do better.' I can never get on a high horse. There is always room for improvement.

Conclusion and Educational Implications

The two principals can be seen as *learning* leaders rather than *instructional* leaders (Dufore, 2002). They are principals who focus on advancing student and staff learning. They increase the knowledge the school possesses as an organization through collaboration of staff. Several implications flow from these observations in a time when many complain that the public schools are a bureaucracy that nurtures a culture of inertia.

Leadership Excellence Means Striving to be Innovative

A principal should be a risk-taker. This stance will likely threaten someone, somewhere in a position of political power within the school system. On the other hand, doing what is necessary to get ahead will probably entail implementing procedures as faithfully as possible so as to stay out of trouble. (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 255).

Raising Student Academic Achievement Means Emphasizing Success

The credentials roadmap for principals to attain licentiateship tends to emphasize procedures rather than performance. Principals should become more entrepreneurial in their outlook about leadership and less afraid of accountability in terms of connecting their performance to the achievement of their students (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 255).

School-site Administrators Should Exercise More Autonomous Leadership

Regional and central office bureaucracies tend to squelch the creative impulses of school-site administrators and prevent them from emerging. As it is, school principals have less control over their staffs, resources, and discipline policy than they have ever experienced (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 255).

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