

School Administration Self-Efficacy: Change-Agents in an Environment of Turbulence

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Abstract: This paper looks at the relationship of self-efficacy and principal effectiveness. More specifically, it finds that principals who are more self-efficacious are more likely to foster positive change within their schools.

Public education has been geared towards reformative change and improvement since the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Johanningmeier, 2010). These efforts have been unrelenting and even 30 years later, espoused standards for our schools have not been met. As evidenced by the Obama Administration's attempts to curtail the lackadaisical education system and to reinvigorate efforts to fulfill higher expectations, the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) initiative serves as yet another round of federal scrutiny (McGuinn, 2011). In an attempt to attend to the perceived failures of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) legislation, the local schoolhouse has been placed at the center stage of the national education debate (McGuinn, 2011, p. 139). Our current education model begs for effective administrators, because “good principals are the cornerstones of good schools” and that the ability of schools to succeed is inevitably tied to the competency of the head administrator (Lovell, 2009, p. 2).

A school's performance level either rises or falls according to the principal's education, personality and style. A school's ability to attain success is determined by his/her ability to create a coalition towards raising school achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). As school administrators tackle the challenges of heading reformative change within each school, it is their responsibility and within their power to stimulate, motivate, and inspire. By viewing the community of a school as an entity with a culture that is inevitably tied to school performance, administrators who foster characteristics of positive culture will ultimately influence student achievement.

Self-efficacy relates to a belief system in which an individual believes that he/she is capable of performing a specific task. Although it involves an examination of the beliefs of one's own competencies, it is not the expectation of outcomes (Schunk, 2012). Instead, self-efficacy is a belief system that promotes goal attainment by believing in one's abilities and reacting to obstacles with persistence. A school administrator's self-efficacy has the potential to contribute greatly towards his/her leadership and success. The level of principal self-efficacy is a possible factor contributing to the effectiveness of school administrators. This is the principal's beliefs in his/her own abilities. It involves values, beliefs, and motivations into everyday practice. These concepts are relevant in the field of public education administration because of the requirement for schools to adapt and change in an environment of accountability and high-stakes testing. This paper investigates the question of how high levels of self-efficacy related to principal effectiveness.

Administrators with high levels of self-efficacy believe in their ability to inspire positive change and to motivate others to assume greater responsibility in a school's decision making processes (Schunk, 2012). In this era of increased pressures on educational leaders, a self-

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efficacious principal must be aware of his/her actions and must maintain persistence despite what turmoil may rise. This is not to suggest that persistence alone will determine the success rate of a school administrator, but by applying principles of self-efficacy to school administrative practices, the school community will benefit. For example, a principal who openly conveys the vision and mission to school stakeholders and presents a shared leadership model as a means of reaching those goals is better equipped at achieving reformative change. The determination of reaching the school's mission is reflective of the level of efficacy practiced by the administration.

The practices of the principal and his/her ability are correlated to achievement (Schunk, 2012). Although the capability of the individual does relate to a successful outcome, positive results are greatly influenced by the level of self-efficacy applied. Self-efficacy refers to the personal beliefs one has about a particular ability; therefore, one of the most effective ways of fostering self-efficacious practices is through experience (Schunk, 2012). Making improvements to self-efficacy involves individual success with specific experiences. These achievements may lead to a positive perception of personal ability. Fostering self-efficacy in public education is difficult because new principals may not have the experiences necessary to become more self-efficacious. Even experienced administrators may lack the direction and neglect opportunities for improving self-efficacy. Schunk (2012) stated that those with low self-efficacy might lack the motivation to complete a specific task.

Administrators who lack self-efficacy may rely more on transactional leadership style practices. This leads to lower motivation and achievement for the entire school community (Avolio & Bass, 2003). In order to increase motivation and school performance, self-efficacy must be promoted amongst school administrators. Self-efficacy is tied to beliefs about specific tasks; therefore, a principal who fosters these practices will be able to increase his or her persistence towards specific goals set by the school leadership. By being more self-efficacious, principals will be more likely to confidently take on greater challenges. This is what Pierce and Stapleton (2003) have called a requirement of the 21st Century Principal. By fostering the self-efficacy in school administrators, school leaders will be able to approach “the big challenges ahead of us” (Pierce & Stapleton, 2003, p. 2).

School leaders who are able to exert high levels of persistence are more likely to apply high levels of effort in response to difficulties that may arise. Self-efficacy is related to the level of persistence towards a specific task, which means that it is best learned while being actively involved in challenging activities (Schunk, 2012). It is this determination that better defines the qualities of a 21st Century Principal. In order to provide the appropriate leadership in public education, the head administrator must be persistent and steadfast towards his or her established vision and mission. For example, if increasing diversity education is a desirable mission in a demographically homogeneous school, the principal must motivate the faculty to apply an array of perspectives in presenting material. When confronted with the difficulties of emphasizing the value of diversity in a homogenous community, the educational leader's continual emphasis and unwavering support of a more varied and heterogeneous approach defines a persistent administrator. Through this continual persistence, it is essential that the principal maintain the focus on achievement of the specific goal.

Self-efficacy, and its relation to goal attainment, is contingent upon external as well as internal factors present and influencing the learner (Schunk, 2012). Administrators are subject to a wide range of external influences, which brings special attention to the importance of developing the perceptions of one's own abilities through *internalization*. An educational leader who exhibits high-levels of self-efficacy is therefore in a constant state of adaptive change in

order to best meet the demands of present “social variables.” Schunk (2012) stated that one’s self-efficacy may fluctuate on a particular day due to the external influences on that individual. For a school administrator, these influences may include but are not limited to a school’s specific culture, directives from the school district, or even the requirements of implementing state and federal legislation. Regardless of any uncontrollable circumstances, if the self-efficacy is improved amongst public education administration, principals will become more effective leaders in times of change. Social cognitive theorists suggest two models for self-efficacy: adult models and peer models (Schunk, 2012). Self-efficacy models are examples where learners can improve their perceptions of personal capabilities as well as their persistence towards goal achievement. One such example, adult models, allows for younger learners to learn from adult influences. When children observed adults being challenged in a specific task, and then succeed, these young learners experienced a rise in their own self-efficacy. These students were better able to apply realistic beliefs about their own capabilities (Schunk, 2012). Creating educational leadership models for new principals to learn from by observing veteran administrators could potentially provide avenues for new administrators to avoid some of the pitfalls of their predecessors. This can be applied to both to teaching or administration.

In each instance, where an individual with less experience views one with greater self-efficacy, the result is an increase in the personal beliefs of the person. Because individuals who share similar circumstances are able to observe others in like scenarios and watch them succeed, they increase their own abilities to be more persistent and to succeed. During an adult model, it is important for the older or more experienced person to maintain a positive attitude. Children who observed a model who was confident were more likely to increase their own self-efficacy when compared to models who were pessimistic (Schunk, 2012). In this example, the observers were more impacted by the positive or negative attitude rather than their level of persistence. School administrators who display confidence and are persistent will be more able to increase school performance.

Another example of models and self-efficacy is the peer model. Like the adult model, the peer model allows for individuals to observe and raise levels of confidence but differs in that those involved learn from one another. Self-efficacy is raised in this situation when a task is performed successfully. An example of *coping models* exist when two individuals approach a dilemma with fear and a lack of self-confidence, but manage to overcome the initial challenge (Schunk, 2012). Coping models increase self-efficacy progressively, as the individuals gradually improve their performance. In contrast, a *mastery model* involves the participation of those who demonstrate performance at a measurably higher level of fidelity and confidence (Schunk, 2012). Both coping and mastery models are effective strategies in building self-efficacy.

Observing a peer model was more effective in raising efficacy levels when compared to observing either a teacher model or no model at all (Schunk, 2012). This is relevant to school administration in that principals will learn better by observation and collaboration with other educational leaders rather than relying only on directives from the superintendent. In order to raise an administrator’s ability to become a more effective leader, both adult models and peer models should be utilized.

The *number of models* positively influences an individual's self-efficacy. If more principals begin to apply methods of persistence and are successful in attaining set goals, then the number of models available for observation will increase. A proliferation of visible models could ultimately lead to not only effective but also reformative change in public education. Even

in instances where school administrators are not self-efficacious, through peer-modeling, levels of persistence will increase (Schunk, 2012).

By applying the concepts stated by Schunk (2012), inexperienced school administrators will initially use *coping models*. During coping models process, their feelings and even statements may reflect a lack of confidence, but gradually they will experience success and increase their own self-efficacy. Modeling may lead to the improvement of abilities and persistence towards increasing student performance. Similarly, *Instructional Self-efficacy*: the belief one has in their ability to teach others, allows for individuals to make improvements (Schunk, 2012). Principals who have high levels of self-efficacy must be involved in the instructional self-efficacy process. Therefore, teachers play an important role in the success of public education.

Both *teaching efficacy*, outcome expectations about the consequences of teaching in general and *personal efficacy*, to perform particular behaviors to bring about a desired outcome are determined by the different approaches of teachers (Schunk, 2012, p. 153). Educators who approach self-efficacy positively impact student performance greatly, while those who present materials negatively have the inverse result. Self-efficacious administrators have the ability to not only impact these approaches, but also may contribute to the fostering of the self-efficacy as whole that is exercised by a school. Referred to as *Collective teacher efficacy*, this plays a vital role in the overall impressions and capabilities of students. This can define a school's culture and is a key insight into a community's beliefs and values. Teachers will fill collectively efficacious if they work together in a collaborative manner toward common goals (Schunk, 2012). Schunk (2012) stated that efficacy and health therapeutic behaviors are positively related. Health and therapeutic behaviors is associated with the perceptions and actions that an individual experiences due to a threat (Schunk, 2012, p. 154). For example, those with higher levels of self-efficacy and are trying to quit smoking are more likely to be able to deal with the levels of stress associated with quitting.

Because “self-efficacy affects actions through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes,” schools with self-efficacious cultures will result in greater behaviors among administrators, faculty, and staff (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 3). The greater the health of the community, then the fewer the financial constraints likely to be present through teacher absenteeism, the repercussions of students missing essential lessons, and the better the overall attitude of the institution (Sergiovanni, 2009). Overall, the application of self-efficacy practices can be found in the actions of a school's leader, through modeling and the opportunities available to observe these models, and the methods used to institute greater efficacy school community-wide.

Practices can be improved by tutoring and mentoring but will ultimately be impacted by the desire or desires of individuals involved. Sergiovanni (2009) acknowledges that the schedule of school administrators is full of demands that require extended time and effort. Even if there are models to be used for both adult and peer learning in public education, the opportunities allotted to school leaders are not adequate to meet the need. Additionally, the continual legislative process has created an environment that demands adaptive change among school leaders (McGuinn, 2011). A way to combat these challenges is for principals to become what Waters and Cameron (2007) call change-agents: Those who have the flexibility, knowledge, and beliefs to raise student achievement. Schools that practice greater efficacy reflect the “skills curricula and standards” required of the 21st Century principal and are “critical to effective school reform” (Schunk, 2012, p. 153).

The availability of research relative to self-efficacy and the modern challenges of accountability, responsibility, and the restructuring of school administration are limited. There is, however, adequate evidence to support the modeling of self-efficacy and teaching these practices in public schools. “Goal-setting, level of aspiration, effort, adaptability, and persistence” are all essential qualities of effective educational leaders (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 573). This is especially true for the 21st Century principal who is entrusted with the responsibility of boosting student achievement. Because these qualities go hand-in-hand with self-efficacy practices, and little attention has been given to teaching these models to school leaders, many are unable to be persistent in achieving set goals. The modern-day principal is pulled, pushed and twisted in many directions, and without the ability and forethought to stay the course towards an aspired outcome, adaptive change is nearly impossible (Sergiovanni, 2009). Self-efficacious administrators are better able to fulfill the role of change-agents (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

The presence and operation of a persistent and adaptive leader establishes an environment conducive to learning because these leaders “understand that the change process is a vital quality of all leaders” (Fullan, 2001, p. 29). Education administrators who model self-efficacious behavior establish the work ethic of a school community (Sergiovanni, 2009). School leaders facilitate the attainment of goals through the creation of an environment that fosters the overall performance of the group (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 574). Such a leader will take advantage of the benefits of *coping models* which will raise confidence and capability levels and therefore lead to *mastery models* (Schunk 2012). Because motivating other is a complex process, experienced principals that have the “capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required” for reformative change are best suited to succeed in this educational era (McCollum & Kajs, 2009, p. 29). Principal efficacy is measured through an instrument called the School Administrator Efficacy Scale (SAES).

According to a study conducted by McCollum, Kajs, and Miner (2006) and by use of the SAES, there are eight dimensions of administrator efficacy: (a) instructional leadership and staff development, (b) school climate development, (c) community collaboration, (d) data-based decision making aligned with legal and ethical principles, (e) resource and facility management, (f) use of community resources, (g) communication in a diverse environment, and (h) development of a school vision (McCollum & Kajs, 2009, p. 30). Through this investigation, the authors have taken a theoretical construct and developed a set of practical steps for application in public education. By applying a procedural process to the complexity of self-efficacy, a goal-oriented individual is more likely to engage and confront the challenges posed toward education. Without this confidence and applicable approach, “school administrators will not pursue challenging goals and will not attempt to surpass obstacles that get in the way of such goals” (McCollum & Kajs, 2009, p. 30). To further understand goal setting and the effectiveness of school administrators, the 2 x 2 model of goal orientations presented by Elliot and McGregor (2001) is utilized.

This model divides goals into two different distinctions: mastery and performance. There are two different goal orientations that correlate with goal type, approach or avoidance, which leads to four possible outcomes: (a) mastery-approach (b) performance approach (c) mastery-avoidance and (d) performance-avoidance (McCollum & Kajs 2009, p. 30). These distinctions seek to further define the type of leader and the kind of self-efficacy practices that will benefit the administrator. The study by McCollum and Kajs sampled 312 early career principals and applied the 2 x 2 model and SAES to measure the impact of school efficacy and administrative

success. The results supported mastery goal-orientations with school administrator efficacy. The mastery-approach dimension was determined as the most influential factor in predicting higher levels of self-efficacy among school administrators. Both mastery avoidance and performance-avoidance negatively correlated with principal efficacy. The significance of this study highlights the correlation between goal-orientation and the leadership style practiced by a principal. Additionally, it suggests that administrators should learn to be more aware of their goal-orientations. The investigators indicate a possible utilization of the 2 x 2 model to promote self-assessment and awareness among school leaders.

In an attempt to investigate the consequences of school leader efficacy, this study aimed at student learning and how it is impacted by the leadership exercised at the school (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The performance of school administrators is vital to the level of student outcome (Lovell, 2009). Efficacy is an essential part of understanding the operation of organizations. The 2 x 2 model study conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi found a direct correlation to student learning beliefs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The level of collective efficacy practiced at a public school was tied to student beliefs in the value of instruction and their personal confidence in achievement. Not just administrators, but the collective efficacy of the school leadership directly impacted student achievement. Because principals are the directors and supporters of school leadership activity, their involvement in the facilitation and fostering of greater efficacy leads to greater school success. Greater school achievement is magnified not only by the confidence levels exhibited from principals, but also by the ability of these individuals to be persistent and resilient in spite of obstacles (Fullan, 2001).

A school administrator sets the stage and models appropriate behavior. The resilience evident in this leader is contagious and becomes an established model that the school will further reflect. "When faced with obstacles, setbacks, and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up, or settle for mediocre solutions" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 582). Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities are more likely to revisit challenges and put forth the required effort to overcome obstacles. Because being a school administrator involves a *Stress Cycle*, practices ensuring high levels of self-efficacy will help to deal with "school board relations, politics, personal issues, workload, time crisis management, complying with mandates, high visibility, dealing with angry parents, lack of feedback lack of recognition, and community demands" (Truslow & Coleman, 2010, pp.18-19). With all of these external pressures influencing the leadership practices of school administrators, it is essential that educational leaders respond with high levels of self-efficacy.

Societal, international and local entities are beckoning towards public schools and requiring higher levels of output (McGuinn, 2011). The struggle in itself is to define what role our schools must play in this era of ever-changing demands. Some are certain that education must be a tide that lifts all boats. Others are more concerned with student achievement on high-stakes standardized tests. Change is inevitable; it is the response to this change which will determine the success rate. With school administration modeled after a managerial-style of leadership, potential for growth is limited (Pierce & Stapleton, 2003). This style of control does not support self-reflection, adaptability, or improvement. In order for school leaders to be key-agents of change, they must assimilate practices that promote self-reflection, adaptability, and improvement into their leadership style. Growing the leadership capacity and capabilities in others will lead to greater school success (Northouse, 2013). In response to accountability measures through high-stakes standardized tests, our schools must adopt common sense

measures that meet the challenges of the modern-day educational era. These demands include preparing and improving the ability of students.

Students will best learn through the observation of *mastery models* but have great potential while observing in a *coping model* (Schunk 2012). Public schools can form these instructive models by promoting self-efficacy at the administrative level. As principals model higher levels of efficacy, the efficacy of the school as a whole is raised. Students are then better able to build personal confidence in goal development. Their approach to challenges and persistence towards a desired outcome will be greatly influenced by a school that is more self-efficacious. School leaders who choose to understand the causes and consequences of school leader efficacy will both directly and indirectly influence student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Because this level efficacy is positively correlated with leadership success, greater efforts should be placed on improving school administration practices of goal attainment. With educational leaders setting high expectations for the school and evidenced by their actions towards those goals, the culture of a school will begin to mold to fit those expectation--ultimately influencing and establishing a culture of excellence (Segiovanni, 2009). In order to meet the demands of the modern-day educational era, school administrators must be ready to apply sound practices of self-efficacy.

The idea of school leadership lends itself to thoughts of a hierarchical and a highly managerial style of administrating education policy. This can be attributed to an overbearing influence from lawmakers and the national pull for higher efficiency and effectiveness from our local schools. Despite the implementation of a style of leadership that involves transactional processes alone, educational leaders must utilize alternative models in responding to modern demands (Avolio & Bass, 2003). As the role of principal evolves from system manager to educational leader, we will be better able to recognize a school's head administrator as a change-agent (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Through the implementation of practices that support self-efficacy, educational leaders will rise to the demands and expectations of the modern-day educational era.

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