

Fostering Academic Optimism through Adaptive Schools

Amy H. Stamm

Since the *No Child Left Behind 2001* movement of accountability, numerous experts and researchers have tried to explain what factors impact student achievement. In fact, a great deal of time and emphasis has been placed on why students cannot learn, relating many of the reasons to student's backgrounds, the need for smaller class sizes, more technology, or different school choice options, just to name a few. Additionally, many of the discussions have particularly focused on the variances that are found among schools; however, the greater issues affecting student achievement are the variances within schools (Hattie, 2015). Too often the sense of urgency to address the structural or programmatic aspects supersedes the thought to address the process aspects of a school when working to improve student achievement and meet accountability. Such process aspects as school properties, and the factors that influence them, are often overlooked, yet these are the aspects that educators can control. This paper will examine school properties, specifically the properties of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective faculty efficacy, and faculty trust; to determine if the implementation of the systematic approach of the Adaptive Schools program could potentially lead to improved school properties and improved student achievement for all students.

Background

Today in education, school faculties face many challenges in the form of accountability, funding, community and student culture, rigorous standards, and stringent accreditation requirements. As a result, many experts offer an abundance of remedies and recommendations on how to overcome these challenges, yet often what works for one school may not work for another due to the school's history, culture, and context. School organizations are thought to be nonlinear dynamic systems and therefore cause-and-effect linkages are not easily drawn. The demands and requirements

that rate and rank a school make it vital for educators to recognize variances within schools among teachers so that opportunities are created for educators to learn from one another in a trusting and collaborative environment necessary for increasing student achievement (Garmston & Wellman, 2013; Hattie, 2012; Hoy 2010). Although James Coleman's American Public Schools (1966) study found that schools played a small part in the impact on student achievement and that student achievement rested heavily on the differences in backgrounds of families and communities; researchers such as Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy (2006) have worked to prove that there are school properties that highly impact student achievement while controlling for socioeconomics (SES). Specifically, they identified the academic press of the school, the collective efficacy of the faculty, and the faculty's trust in students and parents as the three reciprocal properties that intertwine together to make an impact on the achievement of all students while controlling for SES (Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith, 2002). Because these three properties reciprocally work together to impact the affective domain of trust, the cognitive domain of efficacy, and the behavioral emphasis of trust and efficacy in academic emphasis, the sense of the possible in optimism creates the positive forces known as school-level academic optimism that is linked to student achievement (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). Academic optimism is a malleable characteristic of schools and teachers. It can be controlled by the school and through the use of a systematic approach. This allows for the culture of the school to become adaptive to meet the needs of all students. A systematic approach that supports academic optimism's three properties is found in Adaptive Schools.

Adaptive Schools and Academic Optimism

In 1988, Garmston and Wellman (2013) introduced Adaptive Schools as means for creating

a collaborative culture in schools. Adaptive Schools utilizes a systematic approach to aid in developing appropriate interventions for improving school climates from becoming adapted to adaptive to meet the learning needs of all students. Recognizing that “school climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures”, their approach puts processes in place to support each of these components to facilitate a positive learning environment (National School Climate Council, 2007).

The Adaptive Schools program is based on “developing strong schools in which collaborative faculties are capable of meeting the certain challenges of today and the uncertain challenges of tomorrow” (Garmston & Wellman, 2013, p. 20). It is designed to develop the members of an organization as collaborators and inquirers in order to form a collective identity and by doing so schools will build a culture that is responsive to the changing needs of students through collective beliefs about learning. The Adaptive Schools model is based on the beliefs that both “things” and “energy” matter. To create a culture that is adaptive, the Adaptive Schools program uses “things” thinking by ensuring that “processes and systems are in place to provide time and structure . . . and then ‘energy’ translates into an intense focus on the ‘how’ by educating leadership teams in the norms of collaboration, facilitation skills, and the four hats of shared leadership—the facilitator, the presenter, the coach, and the consultant” (Garmston & Wellman, 2013, p.218). These leadership skills support the five sources of energy: efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship, consciousness, and interdependence which drive the three properties of academic optimism.

Academic Emphasis

Ultimately, student academic achievement is the one goal that all schools share. Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) define academic emphasis as the extent to which the school is driven by academic success and excellence. It possesses a

reciprocal property through the cyclical means by which the performance improvement results found in student achievement strengthen academic emphasis in school (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). Simply put the more emphasis placed on high obtainable expectations in a school, the more that learning will take place; the more that learning takes place, the more that student achievement will increase. This cycle of academic emphasis joined with collective beliefs that all students can learn and that teachers have what it takes to reach even the toughest of students, creates a positive learning environment that motivates teachers and students towards success.

Collective Faculty Efficacy

In the past, teaching traditionally has been thought of as an isolated profession but research shows that teachers who work collectively and collaboratively foster a collective sense of efficacy which greatly supports student learning (Garmston & Wellman, 2013). “The collective sense of efficacy in a school is the sense that the faculty holds that it has the capacity to achieve meaningful student learning in spite of whatever obstacles may be present that might make learning difficult. It includes an assessment of the collective perception of the school’s capacity for student discipline, as well as for instructional practices” (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teachers’ beliefs drive their behaviors and those beliefs are shaped by the environment in which they work (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Collective sense of teacher efficacy is an important school property, because teachers’ shared beliefs help to define the cultural norms of the school (Bandura, 1993). Adaptive Schools fosters the collective efficacy of a group through its productive, practical set of ideas and tools (Garmston & Wellman, 2013).

Through the systems thinking and five sources of energy mentioned above, Adaptive Schools aims to make teams effective and develop skills that allow members of the team to be informed group members and act as facilitators in all settings. “It takes participants beyond the idea of professional learning communities to the actual

implementation, describing specific ways to weave the collaborative fabric of a faculty, develop group member skills, and acquire the principles and understandings to engage in a continuous cycle of team and individual improvement” (About Adaptive Schools, 2012). This approach fosters a collaborative school where teachers have opportunities to share expertise and perspectives on teaching and learning, examine student data, and develop a sense of mutual support and shared responsibility for effective instruction (Garmston & Wellman, 2013). Teachers in schools where the collective efficacy beliefs are strong see themselves as evaluators who are engaged as thinkers and problem-solvers and know what do next when a student isn’t learning (Hattie, 2012). These teachers believe that all students can learn. These teachers also believe they can do what is necessary to ensure learning, they are willing to be flexible, and they will extend themselves trusting that students and parents will respond in positive ways, which is, with benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Through the Adaptive Schools’ craftsmanship and interdependence sources of energy mentioned above, trust is developed which fosters faculty trust in students and parents.

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students

The type of trust that has the greatest impact on student achievement is the trust in parents and students (Hoy, 2002; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). Although trust is multifaceted, it creates interdependence connecting interests and schools with high levels of trust tend to have faculty who engage in shared decision making, openly and accurately communicate, and exhibit greater citizenship (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Bryk and Schneider (2002) conducted a seven-year study of 400 elementary schools and found that schools with higher levels of relational trust among all parties involved had greater student improvement on standardized tests. Because trust is a fundamental component of human learning and a cooperative process, when members of a school community have common learning goals, trust and

cooperation act as key components for improving teaching and learning (Hoy, 2002). Grounded in collaborative processes, Adaptive Schools sets the foundation for trust through the use of the “Seven Norms of Collaboration” and its cooperative strategies to create a positive climate. The Seven Norms of Collaboration: pausing, paraphrasing, putting inquiry at the center, probing for specificity, putting ideas on the table, paying attention to self and others, and presuming positive intentions go beyond working agreements to build a positive climate, strong group energy, commitment, and effectiveness (Garmston & Wellman, 2013). A positive climate coupled with trust and an emphasis on high academic expectations promotes optimism and success (Hoy, 2002; Hattie, 2012; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Conclusion

It is important to note that with academic emphasis, collective faculty efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents that teachers make a difference. Their attitudes, beliefs about students, teaching, and learning, and their ability to build relationships all have a great impact on student success (Hattie, 2012). Providing teachers with the ideals found in Adaptive Schools offers school communities the tools necessary to control the variances found within school that effect student achievement. Ultimately, it is the expectation that by embracing the five sources of energy found in Adaptive Schools to foster academic emphasis, collective faculty efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students which together lead to academic optimism, schools will be on the path to ensuring student success.

References

- About Adaptive Schools® Seminars. (2012). *Thinking collaborative: Maximizing capacity in individuals and organizations*. Retrieved from <http://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/seminars/adaptive-schools-seminars/>

- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28(2), 117-148.
- Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Forsyth, P.B., Adams, C.M. & Hoy, W.K. (2011). *Collective Trust: Why Schools Can't Improve Without It*. New York, NY: Columbia University Teachers College Press.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Garmston, R. J. & Wellman, B. M. (2013). *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (2nd ed). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publisher, Inc.
- Hoy, W. K. (2002). Faculty trust: A key to student achievement. *Journal of School Public Relations*, 23, (2), 88-103.
- Hoy, W. K., Sweetland, S. R., & Smith, P. A. (2002). Toward an organizational model of achievement in high schools: The significance of collective efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38(1), 77-93.
- Hoy, W. K., Tarter, C. J., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2006). Academic optimism of schools: A force for student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(3) 425-446.
- Hoy, W. K. & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2003). Conceptualization and Measurement of Faculty Trust in Schools. In W.K. Hoy & C.G. Miskel, *Studies in Leading and Organizing Schools* (pp. 181-208). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Macneil, A., Prater, D., & Busch, S. (2009). The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12(1), 73-84. Retrieved from http://donnieholland.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/school_culture_climate_achievement.pdf
- McGuigan, L. & Hoy, W. K. (2006). Principal Leadership: Creating a Culture of Academic Optimism to Improve Achievement for All Students. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5, 203-229.
- National School Climate Council. (2007). *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy*. Available at: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/school-climate-challenge-web.pdf>
- Sarason, S. (1996) *Re-visiting the culture of the school and the problem of change*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 783-805.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., Woolfolk Hoy, A., & Hoy, W. K. (1998). Teacher efficacy: Its meaning and measure. *Review of Educational Research*, 68(2), 202-248.