

The Formation of a Community of Practice to Support Principal Efficacy

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Communities of Practice and Principal Efficacy

Principal efficacy is contingent on collaboration, trust, support and continued learning through professional development (Barth, 2006; Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Principals who work in isolation are not as effective as those who collaborate (Mascall, & Leithwood, 2010; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Currently, few formats exist that support the ongoing and consistent practice of collaboration among school principals and system leaders. A community of practice is a cohort structure that brings together educators of similar roles. The lack of a community of practice or similar structure that promotes collaboration between principals, impedes administrators' ability to share best practices and cultivate trust with and among their principal colleagues and their school staff, children, and parents. (Barth, 2006; Szczesiul, 2014; Umekobo, Chrispeels, & Daly, 2015).

The principal has a tremendous impact on the climate, culture, and efficacy of a school (Barth, 2006). The behavior and effectiveness of principals influences the entire school community; children, staff, parents, the finances and climate of the broader community, central office, and other district schools. According to Barth (2006):

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful,

competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then *these* qualities will disseminate throughout the school community. (p. 8)

Because principals have a large influence on the culture, climate, and learning in schools, determining the key traits of effective leadership and understanding the characteristics of leadership that cultivate teacher effectiveness is important. Hattie's (2009) meta-analyses of research regarding effective principal leadership practice, demonstrated that leadership styles which encourage teacher growth and collaboration, lead to an effect size of $d = 0.71$ on teacher job satisfaction, and an effect size of $d = 0.48$ on student achievement.

Focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability are the four components of the Coherence Framework for Leadership (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This framework highlights effective leadership practices that leverage the right drivers of school reform. Focusing direction is determining a vision and point of departure for change initiatives. Cultivating collaborative cultures involves creating the professional capital to build and enact change in a shared manner. Deepening learning involves innovation and understanding as it relates to desired outcomes. Securing accountability involves internal and external accountability among staff and the implementation of change initiatives. Fullan and Quinn (2016) note that external accountability is contingent on first establishing internal accountability through collaborative practices. Appropriate levels of accountability are vital to school change. Too little or too much accountability constricts a staff's focus or effort, becoming counterproductive to school change.

Frontier and Rickabaugh (2014) claim that effective leadership is compelled by offering a clear vision, empowering others, as well as redesigning the

organization and securing the resources to meet the needs of the staff and support the vision. Meta-analyses conducted on principal leadership practices demonstrated the highest effect sizes that influence teacher effectiveness, which included, “establishing goals and objectives ($d = 0.54$)” and “strategic resourcing (aligning resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals, $d = 0.60$)” (Hattie, 2009, p. 84). Leadership practices that emphasize shared goals and supportive resources are congruent with Fullan and Quinn and Frontier and Rickabaugh.

Principal Effectiveness

The importance of principal efficacy in school communities is noteworthy. Grissom and Loeb’s (2011) research attempted to determine the skills of principals that likely related to student growth. The study included a broad range of instructional and organizational management skills. The analysis determined that organizational management, which is an integral responsibility of principals, correlated consistently with improved teaching and positive student growth outcomes. The results however, were limited in their application and the extant research regarding traits of effective school principals is limited as well. “Unfortunately, existing research does not tell us enough about the skills principals need to promote school improvement, making the design of policies geared towards recruiting and preparing effective school leaders challenging” (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1092). Fuller and Hollingworth (2014) concluded “there are currently no strategies to estimate principal effectiveness that accurately capture the independent effect of principals on student test scores; thus, these current strategies send inaccurate signals to both principals and those who make employment decisions about principals” (p. 466). Moreover, little research regarding the efficacy of principal support programs, and cohort models of support for school leaders exists.

There does exist research regarding principal efficacy as it relates to job burnout, isolation, lack of career and skills growth, and lack of colleagues. These conditions serve to undermine a principal’s well-being and ultimately can impact principal efficacy and the relationships in the school building. The extant research also supports school climate, staff job satisfaction, and student achievement as influenced positively by effective school leadership (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016). Highly effective principals support their school communities, children, staff, and parents, by demonstrating genuine interest and care through behaviors such as listening and empathizing (McEwan, 2003; Sorenson, 2005; Helmer, Holt, & Thompson, 2015). Highly effective principals also engage in continued learning through professional development (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009).

In a cohort model referenced as a community of practice, principals can find support through collegiality that fosters trust (Barth, 2006; Szczesiul, 2014; Umekobo et al., 2015). Communities of practice also promote collaboratively planned professional development opportunities that lead to increased principal efficacy, principal retention, and most importantly, student achievement. The collaborative nature of communities of practice fosters higher levels of transparency and non-judgmental interactions among members. These conditions lead to the cultivation of trust and are supportive of the internal and external accountability described in Fullan and Quinn’s (2016) Coherence Framework. Further, by addressing the problem of poor collaborative practices, school leaders will enhance their own learning through ongoing professional development behind a clear vision and empowerment to build a climate of high trust and the capacity for continuous improvement in their own schools.

Trust Fostered by Principals

The problem of eroding trust can be severely detrimental for the entire school community and most importantly for school children. Baier (1994), asserted that “we notice trust as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 549). As educators prioritize children, the influence of principal efficacy in the context of a trusting environment, on the intellectual, physical, and emotional welfare of children must be emphasized and addressed. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) argued, “When distrust pervades a school culture, it is unlikely that the school will be effective” (p. 585).

As Barth (2006) asserted, principals have a significant influence over the climate and health of relationships within a school. It is important for principals to understand how to cultivate trust in their school communities. Umekobo et al. (2015) studied districtwide cohort models that served the purpose of providing professional development to school leaders and served to foster relationships between and among central office leadership and principals, by considering whether such models supported student learning and improved trust throughout the school. The study found that principals who were members of cohort groups fostered trust in one another and in their own schools. Umekobo et al. concluded the ability to collaborate within a cohort model allowed principals the necessary opportunities to improve their knowledge and practice, and cultivate their base of trust among other principals.

By expanding their base of trust within groups, principals experience increased collaboration and improved relationships in their unique sites. Umekubo et al. (2015) argued:

Our evidence showed how trusting relationships fostered strong collaboration amongst principals and led to higher levels of social capital and intellectual capital, which in turn enabled the schools and cohorts to practice the components of organizational learning. These schools and the district achieved sustained increases in student

achievement. (p. 451)

The research conducted by Umekubo et al. suggested trust is related to schools that offer opportunities for collaboration among leadership and staff, which in turn is strongly related to positive student learning outcomes.

Principal and Teacher Mutual Trust

The efficacy of schools is a responsibility of principals and as such, the trust in schools must be initiated and maintained by school leaders. Morale, as it is impacted by the conditions of the relationships in school buildings, is measured by the levels of trust that exist in those relationships. Helmer et al. (2015) studied the quality of relationships between principals and teachers through principals’ communication with their teachers. The study found that, “The manner in which a principal communicates and the teachers’ perception of campus morale showed a statistically significant relationship” (Helmer et al., 2015, p. 23). Further, face-to-face communication between principals and their teachers was perceived to boost morale and positively influence student learning outcomes, whether the communication was formal or informal (Helmer et al., 2015). “In short, if schools are to realize the kinds of positive transformations envisioned by leaders of reform efforts, attention must be paid to issues of trust” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 585).

High levels of teachers’ trust towards their principals fosters the necessary conditions for student achievement (Bayhan-Karapinar, 2015). Supportive communication between teachers and their principals, fosters trust, which enables teachers to better support their students’ learning. In trusting relationships, principals and teachers work collaboratively, sharing practices in effective organizational structures to the benefit of their students (Bayhan-Karapinar, 2015; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Strong social interactions between principals and their teachers strengthen relationships by designing opportunities to build a caring

environment. Caring can permeate a school building, improving social relationships with all stakeholders, most notably, children. Enthusiasm and teachers' positive attitudes towards their profession are supportive of student learning. Noddings (2005), explained that "a teacher's happiness can affect the classroom climate and therefore affect students" (as cited in Stronge, 2007, p. 22). Stronge (2007) asserted, "Specific teacher attributes that show caring include listening, gentleness, understanding, knowledge of students as individuals, nurturing, warmth, and encouragement, and an overall love of children" (p. 23). For Stronge (2007), care is a teacher attribute that leads to high achievement for all students, whether at-risk or of high ability.

Principal Professional Development

Principal professional development and collaboration are coherent practices that promote principal efficacy. It is important for school leaders to collaborate in order to increase their professional knowledge and competence (Edge & Mylopoulos, 2008). Cohort groups among principals are consistent with appropriately leveraging practices of effective leadership such as collaboration, supporting staff, and deepening knowledge (Umekobo et al., 2015). However, it is challenging for principals to find the time necessary to collaborate with other principal colleagues. Furthermore, there are relatively few studies that have been conducted to examine the connection between principal professional development, principal effectiveness, and student learning, when compared to the volumes of research that exist with teachers in the same regard (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). As has been previously noted, the effectiveness of principals benefits entire school communities. Owings, Kaplan, and Nunnery (2005) observed, principal effectiveness, developed through continued professional training, is a predictor of student achievement. Research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), "suggests that schools simultaneously require effective leaders for their success but that school improvement efforts suffer in part due to a lack of supports for developing such leadership" (p. VII). To this end, school districts

should emphasize increasing principals' efficacy, knowledge, and skills, by making principal professional development a priority. Grissom and Loeb (2011) observed, "Recognition of the importance of principals has led to increased policy attention on attracting and preparing school leaders" (p. 1091). Grissom and Harrington (2010) examined principals' continued professional development as it related to their levels of engagement and their efficacy. Their research found "a significant positive association between principal participation in formal mentoring and coaching and principal effectiveness" (Grissom & Harrington, 2010, p. 585).

Opportunities for principals to reflect on their practice in collegial settings are of high value to principals' development and improved effectiveness (Barth, 1986). Principals' reflection fosters their increased awareness and understanding regarding the relationships in the school, self-awareness of their own behaviors in the context of those relationships, and understanding among principals of their own needs for professional support. Szczesiul (2014) researched the use of protocol-structured dialogue in promoting reflective practices and shared theories of action within leadership teams. These practices and protocols helped principals to focus their understanding of how change works and to deepen their use of reflection to support their collaboration (Szczesiul, 2014).

To better support teacher effectiveness, it is imperative that principals engage in high quality professional development in teacher evaluation. Stronge (2010) contends, "Teachers' instruction has the most proximal relation with student learning, while teacher background qualifications and other educational inputs can at most, influence learning indirectly through their association with teacher instructional performance" (p. 43). Hattie (2009) argued that principals that engaged in, "planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (e.g. direct involvement in support and evaluation of teaching through regular classroom visits and provision of formative and summative feedback to teachers)" (p. 84), had an effect size of $d = 0.74$ on teacher effectiveness.

Stewart and Matthews (2015) examined the need for principals of small, rural districts to improve their skills as evaluators, including principals' understanding of evaluation policy standards. Based on the study results, the researchers declared, "we recommend that district and state administrators and policy makers target small school principals and provide them with needed professional development in order to assist them in an already isolated and overloaded position" (Stewart & Matthews, 2015, p. 59). Principals also positively influence teacher quality by collaboratively deciding on relevant professional development and providing those opportunities to teachers. Hattie (2009) found that principals who participate in teacher development and learning have an effect size of $d = 0.91$ on student achievement.

Principal Isolation

The problem of principal isolation is one that requires attention, as principal self-efficacy and efficacy is influenced by principal happiness (Izgar, 2009; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Beausaert et al., 2016). Izgar (2009) observed a relationship between principal loneliness and depression. Isolation was found to be a predictor of physical and emotional burnout for new principals (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Upon researching the impact of principal burnout on school communities and supporting principals through collegial administrative practice teams, Beausaert et al. (2016) concluded, that the wider school community could be supportive of principals by embracing restructuring of leadership responsibilities among other staff. "Unbundling or repackaging the job responsibilities with an administrative team that shares the leadership of the school could be part of the solution" (Beausaert et al., 2016, p. 347).

Regarding principals' motivation to quit their jobs as it related to principal self-efficacy and burnout, Federici and Skaalvik (2012) concluded, "given the responsibility of school principals for students' education and well-being at school, it is therefore important that school principals develop high levels of competency as well as self-efficacy" (p. 312). The relation of principal self-efficacy and

frequent principal job turnover and the effect of that turnover on school culture and achievement was examined by Mascall and Leithwood (2010). "The findings from this qualitative and quantitative analysis show that rapid principal turnover does indeed have a negative effect on a school, primarily affecting the school culture" (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010, p. 367). This research highlights the importance of fostering principal retention by supporting the conditions that are conducive to reducing principal isolation and increasing positive principal self-efficacy. Collaborative practices, collegial support, and trusting environments are examples of such supportive conditions.

Student Achievement and Principal Efficacy

Principal effectiveness influences student learning (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Effective leadership not only has a positive influence on student achievement, high principal efficacy also supports collective teacher efficacy. Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, and Gray (2004) found "that school processes that promoted teacher ownership of school directions (shared school goals, school-wide decision making, fit of plans with school needs, and empowering principal leadership) exerted an even stronger influence on collective teacher efficacy than prior student achievement" (p. 163). To this end, cultivating teacher self-efficacy through the examination of the necessary leadership practices, characteristics, and skills of effective principals is necessary. Hattie (2009) illustrated that principals who "ensured for an orderly and supportive environment, such as protecting time for teaching and learning by reducing external pressures and interruptions and establishing an orderly and supportive environment both inside and outside classrooms" (p. 84), had an effect size of $d = 0.49$. Within a principals' community of practice, action research can be conducted regarding the various leadership styles highlighted by Hattie's meta-analyses, to improve the conditions for teachers to be at their most effective in their support of student learning and care.

Conclusion

A community of practice, where principals regularly collaborate, share best practices, and support one another as managers and leaders in their own schools, fosters trust among the cohort members that will likely extend into each principal's school. The reciprocal or mutual trust between and among school administration and teaching staff is coherent with increased, effective communication and will benefit the children of each school, leading to their growth in achievement. "Given the innumerable variables that exist in becoming an effective leader in public education, it is noted that learning to be a more sensitive and effective communicator ultimately leads to student success" (Helmer et al., 2015, p. 23).

A principals' community of practice fosters the exploration of relevant principal skills training and professional development that allows principals to become more effective managers and leaders. The everyday management that is an integral responsibility of principals, "can contribute to improved teaching and learning" (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1119). School districts that attend to principals' needs minimize principal job burnout. Stability among school leadership minimizes the relationship that exists between high principal turnover and the negative effects on school culture (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). The characteristics of a principals' community of practice are coherent with supporting principals' professional and social-emotional needs, which are likely to support the retention of talented, experienced principals. Most notably, a principals' community of practice supports effective leadership, which has a positive influence on student achievement by supporting collective teacher efficacy (Ross et al., 2004).

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