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A Principal's Role in a Teacher's Journey

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Abstract

An English teacher in a rural West Virginia high school recounts her principal's role in her successful passage from novice to self-efficacious teacher-leader, recognized as state teacher of the year in just 6 years. Theory is addressed; implications for teachers and principals and suggestions for research are discussed.

Introduction

What drives a novice who "just feels fortunate to have a job" to become a teacher-leader and risk-taker? It is that "can do" quality an effective teacher demonstrates each time she explores a method or strategy to meet student needs, develops and teaches a new course, heads a committee, speaks for the first time at a conference, or defuses a difficult parent situation. It is the belief that she can prepare students for a century in which future jobs are yet unknown.

Bandura identifies self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (1997, p. 3). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs serve in "the effort teachers invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration;" efficacious teachers "are more open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2002, p. 2).

Many teachers leave the profession during their first 5 years. This exodus affects student achievement, taxes declining budgets of school districts responsible for recruiting, and places responsibility upon principals who must then hire, train, and retain teachers.

Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan (Confirmation, 2009) stated that great schools cannot exist without great principals, and that great principals attract, maintain, and nurture talent: "Where you see great leadership from the principal's seat, you see real stability within their workforce." This case study chronicles the development of a novice teacher whose principal, in nearly a textbook demonstration of effective leadership, provided tools that resulted in her growth into a highly efficacious teacher-leader who beat the odds by staying in her job and acquiring the most prestigious award for a teacher in her state. Blase and Kirby advocate for teachers' perspectives, since these have "largely been ignored in the administration literature" (2009, p. ix). This work voices the experience of an award-winning teacher, Sarah, who attributes her success to the leadership of a transformational principal.

Literature Review

A review of research shows relationship between principal leadership and teacher self-efficacy. A Turkish study of more than 300 teachers correlated principals' leadership to teacher efficacy, concluding "when

the school principals demonstrated instructional leadership behaviors, teachers' perceptions about their self efficacy grew stronger" (Calik, Sezgin, Kavagaci, & Kilinc, 2012, p. 2501).

Principals develop competence and efficacy by providing leadership that connects with novice teachers on personal, cultural, and instructional levels (Roberson & Roberson, 2009; Ross, Vescio, Tricarico, & Short, 2011). Principals help teachers develop efficacy related to classroom management and professional growth (Wilson, 2012). School culture, shared leadership, and teacher efficacy are linked (Williams, 2010). A principal's own capacity for self-efficacy has positive impact upon teachers' efficacy, as well (Nikolas, 2013).

Transformational principals: share leadership; develop vision and culture; express sincere praise and recognize professional strengths; model effective behaviors; cultivate teacher participation in governance, decision-making, planning, course design, data-driven decisions, and shared leadership; develop autonomy related to professional trust of teachers' abilities and capacities; support teachers materially and financially; empower teachers; employ authority ethically and appropriately; and are models for reflective practice (Blase & Kirby, 2009). A study on work conditions found that principals empowered teachers by protecting time, leadership, professional development; communicating high expectations; providing information; motivating through praise; and communicating vision for the community (Nethels, 2010).

Principal leadership has formative implications for novice teachers (Elliott, Isaacs, & Chugani, 2010). Novices' self-efficacy is related to early career professional learning, support, and personalized mentorship from principals (Wilcher, 2014). Principals' contributions may affect retention of early career teachers (Elliott, Isaacs, & Chugani, 2010). A project touted to be the largest survey of American teachers reports that respondents identified supportive leadership as one of the most important factors keeping them in their schools (Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010).

Beginning

Sarah: When I arrived, the school culture was struggling. Students were marginally disciplined and unchallenged, fights were common, test scores were low, teachers were leaving, and those who remained felt undervalued and isolated.

I was a first year teacher hired in July to begin work in August. A new principal was appointed; a highly successful veteran school-leader whose previous assignments required he "save" failing schools. I just felt fortunate to have a job and anxious to begin; I did not know that my relationship with my school and principal would shape my path so wholly.

Empowerment: a Learning Community

Sarah: At the first meeting teachers reviewed, revised, and contributed to the development of the school handbook, determining student rules and disciplinary practices. We set standards and norms under our principal's leadership. Those democratically developed rules were supported by administration uniformly and consistently, freeing us to teach. My principal set a tone of leadership for teachers, asking us to lead staff development sessions in areas of our expertise, charging us to contribute at meetings. He supported sound curricular and disciplinary decisions.

I saw my colleagues displaying expertise, teaching each other, and knew I would be asked to demonstrate my best practices, speak up in staff meetings and in professional development, and make logical decisions about teaching and learning. My principal asked my opinion though I was a first year teacher. From my first year my ideas were valued. I was a partner in creating a successful school. I was not merely expected to follow a curriculum or play only by others' rules; when goals were set for me, I was able and excited to achieve them.

School culture shifted from "us and them" to a "we" focus. Teachers felt ownership of the school; we had a clear understanding of where we were going and how we would get there. This applied to teacher-student relationships, too.

We generated solutions and developed school goals and common belief statements. Our principal considered our input about scheduling, course and lesson design, and professional development. Departments interviewed candidates for positions and made recommendations to our principal, who trusted us to decide whom to hire. He offered collaborative planning time, encouraged teamwork, and fostered co-designed courses and curricula based on state standards and students' needs and interests.

I taught courses collaboratively with colleagues; two teachers and our students in one classroom, co-planning and re-evaluating based on student needs. We accommodated different learning styles and addressed students' needs through individualized instruction and creative lessons. My colleagues and I knew we could turn our school around; we were empowered to do what worked.

In effective schools “teachers are expected to be active members in their professional communities,” co-planning and sharing curriculum, developing and sharing a common philosophy (Langer, 2009, p. 56). In successful classrooms, “efficacious teachers feel competent, capable, and can connect student success to classroom practice” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2002, p. 2).

The tone set by administrators and colleagues clearly affects teachers' efficacy. School climate is a factor in teacher self-efficacy attributed to: supportive administration, collegiality, and focus on students. An effective school is comprised of cohesive members with shared goals to meet students' needs. According to Fullan, “Building relationships is the resource that keeps on giving” (2002, p. 8).

To bring about a collaborative work environment supportive of shared decision-making, the leader “must embrace and promote the concept of teacher empowerment [...] by providing the opportunity for teachers to mutually determine the direction of the organization.” (Enderlin-Lampe, 1997, p.154).

Building Self-Efficacy

Sarah: Effective professionalization is “characterized by teachers' ability to select the topics they want to learn more about and the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues”(Nieto, 2009, p. 10). I sought professional development activities—working with the National Writing Project, seeking travel opportunities, etc. My principal encouraged me. He wrote recommendations, provided release time, and urged me to share my experiences. He found me opportunities, too. For example, our principal funded NCTE's Reading Initiative, led by a colleague who was one of my mentors.

As a second year teacher I attended summer training for Advanced Placement English. We had never had an AP English program, and creating one opened up possibilities for students. After a successful and supported first year, my confidence grew. I learned to trust myself as an instructional decision maker. My school community would not let me fail.

Hoy, in an interview with Shaughnessy, asserted “the first years of teaching may be critical to the long term development of teacher efficacy,” and “some of the most powerful influences on the development of teachers' efficacy beliefs are mastery experiences during student teaching and the induction year” (2004, p. 155). High expectations and opportunity, along with trust and support, provide conditions in which new teachers may achieve mastery.

Becoming a Teacher-Leader

Sarah: A formative experience in my career came from a conversation when my principal asked me “What would your dream school look like?” This discussion led to the conception and design of an experimental course that highlighted the possibilities for an alternative in which students and teachers are co-learners, creating together information and products that reach a wider audience than the classroom. Four teachers from different subject areas and a group of students worked to create publishable products relevant to our community. Our experiment culminated in a joint presentation to a national teachers' group in Washington DC, where our students participated alongside teachers as co-presenters.

Under the design of an innovative leader willing to trust teachers, collectively our school became a place of opportunity. My principal trusted teachers to make judgments to benefit students, without prescription or a pre-determined format. This applied to his attitude toward students, as well, who were afforded technical, community, and creative opportunities.

I was supported from my first year, when I was awarded the countywide “Mary Linn Fox Memorial New Teacher of the Year.” Each summer, I participated in meaningful professional development: AP training workshops, a National Writing Project fellowship, traveling as part of the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund program. These experiences opened more doors: serving on a local university’s National Writing Project leadership, working as a co-director teaching in a summer institute. In 2006, I was recognized as county teacher of the year and in 2007 became state teacher of the year. This led to different opportunities: state and national conferences, service on state leadership, Space Camp, Smithsonian Teacher Ambassadors. In 2008 I achieved National Board Certification my principal’s support and encouragement. Later, in 2009, I applied to doctoral programs, and my principal provided me the same encouragement, writing application recommendations and employment references after I earned my PhD in 2013. In my short career, I had rich experiences that many teachers never have. Part of this was due to my own initiative, yet part was due to my school’s climate and my principal’s willingness to see the best in me and to nurture my skills and talents. He was as invested in my development as a person as he was in my development as a teacher.

In Spring 2007, my principal and I presented at a conference for West Virginia school administrators. Our topic addressed ways principals can encourage and enable teacher success. Some of the lessons we shared follow.

Implications for teachers

- Be open to new ideas and willing to share
- Develop an attitude of partnership
- Invite others to participate in your classroom
- Be involved with professional organizations
- Seek mentors and mentor others
- Treat others with respect; maintain professionalism
- Be active in leadership, curriculum, and meaningful professional development
- Celebrate success and seek to remedy failure

Implications for Principals

- Build a culture that nurtures leadership
- Relinquish authority
- Trust and empower teachers
- Include others
- Share responsibility for failure
- Give credit for success
- Support and encourage teacher-leaders
- Redefine the role of principal as instructional leader to facilitator of a community of leaders

Conclusion

There is no one means of nurturing teacher efficacy as teachers bring their own strengths, levels of commitment, and passions for the profession. Sarah’s chronicled experiences and growth relate well to Bandura’s four sources of self-efficacy:

- Mastery experiences—direct experiences, successes/failures
- Physiological and emotional arousal: as facing a task—excitement at a new task can only come when we are supported
- Vicarious experiences—observing other successful teachers—accomplishments modeled by someone else, accomplishments made with support of colleagues
- Social persuasion—pep talks, performance feedback, consistent, continual, constructive feedback and written observations of practice (1997, p. 127)

These sources, evident in Sarah's school, link several decades of literature on teacher leadership and the role of principals. Effective principals work to develop learning communities and promote the growth of relationships. They listen and communicate clearly and model and encourage reflective practice. They demonstrate a willingness to give over control while maintaining productive ongoing discussions of teaching and learning within the context of shared goals. They celebrate and promote meaningful staff development. They offer visible, supportive encouragement to teacher-leaders as they lead (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

There is much to gain in training principals to support teachers in their development and to facilitate leadership qualities and promote feelings of confidence and self-efficacy. Teachers who are confident, supported, and know they can succeed are more apt to build stronger teacher-student relationships and to stay in the profession (Berry, Darling Hammond, Hirsch, Robinson, & Wise, 2006).

The events that Sarah describes are recorded in journals she has kept throughout her career. She is a reflective practitioner who relates these opportunities and encouragement to her principal and his successful nurturance of both school culture and people. Sarah is not alone, however; her case supports research findings that supportive administrators can grow successful, self-efficacious teacher-leaders.

Implications for future research

The limitation of this case study is related to its focus upon one teacher. Future research may reveal more connections between principal leadership and teacher efficacy through focus on a variety of leadership styles and larger groups of teachers.

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