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Educational Leadership and the Continued Need for Minority Academic and Professional Organizations in the Obama Age

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Introduction

Educator preparation and development is a major concern in our current school system. Educators are being challenged with higher demands and requirements in preparing our future generations for the 21st century. Becoming a highly qualified teacher in today's educational system is dependent, in part, by how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues. The ability to share with others and collaborate for the purpose of providing instruction that is conducive to enhance student development is critical given the many demands that are being put upon the system.

Having the opportunities to work with colleagues and building administrative leaders can be extremely challenging. Much of this facilitation is dependent upon the principal and other school administrators being flexible and accommodating in providing collaborative work time; to be a part of the learning process; and to be open to the diffusion of leadership roles.

Distributed Leadership and collaborative learning with professional development initiatives are attributes that could serve school systems well in creating a positive school-wide climate and culture built upon common languages, beliefs, and values that establish a level of excellence in student preparation. In order to increase the depth of implementation of professional development initiatives focused on pedagogy and improvements in student learning, a distributed leadership framework involving multiple learning-centered leaders has been reported to produce positive effects (Sherer, 2004). There are only a few studies that provide qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the impact of distributed leadership practices on the implementation of professional development initiatives designed to improve school effectiveness and student achievement (Copeland, 2003; Harris, 2004; K. Leithwood et al., 2002). This study focuses on providing a long-standing call for research effort to examine the relationship between distributed leadership, collaboration between teachers and administration, and school improvement through a professional development initiative.

Prior Research

Prior research suggests that barriers exist between shared school-level decision making and individual teachers' pedagogical practices (Griffin, 1995). Explanations for research that educators do not engage in discussion and shared decision making on classroom-level teaching practices can be partially accounted for in the context of the school system itself and how these systems historically have functioned in isolation. Five themes emerged from Griffin's (1995) study that prevented the advancements of pedagogical practices in schools trying shared leadership and collaborative efforts.

Teacher beliefs about their own competence.

Teachers did not question their own pedagogical expertise. Results indicate that the teachers involved in this study were doing well in their interactions with their students, even though none of the teachers who were interviewed over the course of three years had any intimate knowledge of what occurs in the

classrooms.

The persistence of the culture of isolation.

Teachers cited the privacy of practice as a reason for not attending to pedagogy as an aspect of shared decision-making. The culture was described as one of isolation, where the principal, teacher leaders, and teachers did not inquire about what occurs in the individual classrooms due to respect for each other and the understanding that individual professionalism will not be questioned.

Politesse prevails.

Teachers were uneasy to discuss teaching practices with colleagues due to the perception of hurt feelings or unwanted tension among the staff. Griffin (1995) suggested that this action can be taken to stand for an absence of attention to what good teaching is or might be.

Uncertainty about excellence.

Teachers believed there were no grounded teaching models better than others. Further, teachers in the study rarely discussed actual teaching methods and there was no consensus concerning good teaching. They did not believe that some teaching practices could/should be considered better than others.

Information and decision-making overload.

Teachers believed that they were working at the limits of their time and available enthusiasm. Taking on more school-wide issues and other decision-making duties would be too much for them to function effectively.

Griffin observed that little thought and attention had been given by teachers toward the affects of shared decision-making and collaborative efforts in furthering personal and professional growth in instructional features. Griffin (1995) suggested that the school culture plays a critical role in how effectively and efficiently school improvement can occur.

In the four schools investigated in this study, culture including common belief systems and language were investigated as a context in understanding the impact of distributed leadership, collaboration, and team learning in each school. This study identifies common themes among the four schools on how these collaborative attributes affect the school climate, as well as staff and student development. Furthermore, comparisons are made between the barriers of shared decision-making and classroom pedagogy described in prior research and the findings of this study.

Methods and Procedures

This qualitative study focuses on understandings of eight teachers concerning how distributed leadership, collaboration, and team learning has affected school improvement through the positive implementation of a school-wide professional development initiative. The school-wide initiative used in each of the four schools is a comprehensive school reform model called Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (C.L.A.S.S.). The C.L.A.S.S. Model is a framework and philosophy aligned with academic mastery, character building, and positive social interactions for student preparation in the

workforce.

A group of independent evaluators selected four elementary schools from a pool of seventy-five schools based upon their level of implementation of the C.L.A.S.S. Model. In all four schools, the level of implementation of this common professional development initiative was rated exemplary by the evaluators. In addition, each of the four schools was identified as utilizing shared decision-making where school leadership responsibilities were shared with a variety of school employees.

All four schools in this study were similar in size and socio-economic level. None of these schools were considered failing or under probation with regards to student academic achievement; all were in good standing with their district and State requirements.

Interviews were conducted onsite by the researchers at each school. A follow-up questionnaire was completed by each teacher several weeks following the onsite interviews.

Results

All four schools in this study were selected based upon their exemplary level of implementation of an instructional process called the C.L.A.S.S. Model. This model represents a systemic approach toward student success using teaching strategies that bridge together academic mastery, character building and positive social interactions. Two keystones to this model are The Life Goals and Lifelines. These character traits are designed to build common language throughout the school as a means to set behavioral expectations and social interaction standards.

It is within this context that teachers from each school described how their school had established trust and a non-threatening environment in a relatively short amount of time and how this change in climate allowed the teachers to open their classroom doors to their colleagues to embrace collaborative efforts to improving teaching practices.

Samantha (all names used in this report are pseudonyms) described their environment this way:

“Establishing common language throughout the building. I believe this simple yet vital part is key to implementing anything new. When the teachers and staff adopted common language – our school literally just began to sound different.” “The way we talked to each other and how we collaborated with each other fundamentally changed.” “We began to trust each other more which really helped in our communication.”

Joe explained how this common language transferred to student development:

“The fact that everyone in our building uses the common language of our lifelines and life goals has been the greatest impact on our students. No matter where they go in our building, they are reinforced. They have become a way of life for the students as they are implemented daily through our staff. You have to have everyone on board... down to the custodians.”

Within this context of common language, five themes evolved as critical components in successfully implementing the C.L.A.S.S. professional development initiative.

Principal Allows Teachers to Have a Voice and be a Co-Learner with the Teachers.

All of the teachers interviewed expressed that the principal's leadership played a crucial role in the successful implementation of the model. Labeled as the most important attribute of the principal was the ability to give teachers a voice in the decision-making process. Never was the initiative described as a mandate from the top down or something that was required to do. Amy puts it this way:

"The principal supported all of our decisions but she did not mandate anything to be implemented. I think she was very intentional about this decision. She knew if the teachers bought into this idea on their own they would be more likely to take a vested interest in it down the road."

Fullan (2008) suggests that if you wish to change teachers, help them and enable them to find a way. You must identify problems without stigmatizing the people experiencing them. As a change strategy, bullying backfires.

The teachers also indicated that the principal was a co-learner along with the teachers. Crowther (2009) describes this new role for the principal as one that fosters communities of people working together so that their collective intelligence results in creation of new knowledge that enhances classroom instruction. Terry stated that:

"Our principal is always a part of the learning process. Whenever there is something new to discover, she will take an active roll to understand it along with all of us. It makes us feel good that we have a leader who is willing to not only create a shared vision with us, but who takes the time to be there with us in understanding the teaching strategies."

Senge (1990) refers to this alignment as team learning. When a team becomes more aligned, such as through a professional development initiative with a principal acting as a co-learner, a commonality of directions emerges, and individuals' energies harmonize. There becomes less wasted energy and a synergy emerges. There develops a commonality of purpose, shared vision, and an understanding of how to complement one another's efforts. Eventually, the shared vision becomes an extension of the teachers' personal vision.

Classroom Teacher is an Opinion Leader.

Within each school, there was at least one classroom teacher who was identified among their colleagues as a person who was passionate about the professional development initiative. This person modeled the strategies in the classroom and unselfishly shared these strategies with others in a non-threatening way. Rodgers (1995) labels this type of interaction as opinion leadership. Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individual's overt behavior or attitudes informally with relative frequency. This informal leadership is not a function of the individual's formal position or status in the system. Opinion leaders earn their leadership through technical competence and social accessibility. Harold described their identified school opinion leader this way:

"Having Sharon in the building has also helped to incorporate the C.L.A.S.S. Model. She shares ideas and the things she creates and is very proactive about helping people implement the program."

All of those interviewed described their opinion leader in their respective school as a significant factor in how the C.L.A.S.S. initiative was diffused throughout the building. One of the identified opinion leaders described her role this way:

“When you love something strongly and believe in it, you want to do whatever it takes to share it, defend it, and celebrate it. I take it upon myself to share the things I create amongst the staff and to be proactive about C.L.A.S.S. “

It is this factor that aligns itself with the ability to create systems change through the use of strategies that foster leadership at all levels of the system (Fullan, 2006). The actions of each of the opinion leaders in these schools assisted with the developing other leaders, who then began to work together. This continual growth and collaborative effort reaches what Fullan (2005) describes as a critical mass of interacting and coalescing leadership for change across the school. The more the change becomes established, the more every teacher becomes a leader because teachers will operate as interactive expert learners all the time. To progress, especially in the early stages, the principal is key, along with at least one other internal opinion leader.

Teacher Leadership Team is a Critical Support Mechanism.

Reeves (2010) has suggested that successful teaching depends upon teacher leaders who provide feedback to help their colleagues and who receive feedback on the impact of their support. Within each of the schools, a formal teacher leadership team was created and comprised of teachers from each grade level. Each team acted as a support mechanism for their colleagues in areas of best practices, curriculum development, and moral support all associated with the C.L.A.S.S. initiative. The roles and responsibilities were described by two of the teachers this way:

“The Support Team is a group of teacher leaders who implement the C.L.A.S.S. Model. The team consists of one person from every grade level. One of the most important things we do is to offer the staff encouragement and help them in implementing the new ideas. We tried to assure our fellow teachers that this is not yet another program, but more a way of connecting what we do with one another. Having each grade level represented on the team helps to relay information and answer questions in a timely manner because each grade level meets weekly for collaboration. We also share and collaborate C.L.A.S.S. ideas through email, staff meetings, and in daily conversations.”

The effects of the leadership teams were found to be a positive support system for the teaching staff and consistent across the schools. Teachers not on the teams expressed their appreciation of the team members' work and support in helping their grade level teams implement the new strategies and act as motivators and encouragers during the process. One teacher stated it this way:

“I love our support team. Tony, our grade level representative on the team, is always giving us new ideas and encouragement. He is never pushy. He really tries to make our grade team better and I believe he does. It helps pull all of us up to a higher standard and participate and share more too. It's a great team!”

These leadership teams act as a part of a communication structure that allows for homophilous sets of individuals to be grouped together. We define homophily using Rodgers (1995) definition as the degree to which two or more individuals act as a system talking with each other finding how they are similar to themselves. Such is the case in this study with the leadership teams structured to plan and share the C.L.A.S.S. initiative with their grade level peers. This structure gives regularity and stability to human behavior in a system and provides the opportunity to predict, in part, the behavior of individual members of the school system, including the adoption a new professional development initiative

(Rogers, 1995).

Professional Growth is nurtured through Adequate Time.

Implementing any new initiative in a school system brings issues of adoption rate (how fast the initiative is implemented school wide) and adequate time for individuals to adopt the initiative. The dichotomy is wide in range from innovators who are described as active information seekers about new ideas and who are likely to be the first to adopt a new idea, such as the opinion leaders in this study to what Rodgers (1995) describes as laggards who are generally suspicious of any change and are often people who need additional time for buy-in.

Consistent in all four schools, was the understanding that the C.L.A.S.S. initiative is a change that will take time to build and develop. In each case, there was never a mandate or time set as a deadline for implementing a particular part of the curriculum model. The principal and the support team in each building worked together in establishing expectations and the support systems needed to help those who are struggling with the adoption and implementation. Sally expressed it this way:

“Nothing is hidden or lonely in our building. We all share everything and we know that there is always someone to help us through a new strategy. We see it every day in every classroom so it feels like we are part of a team; speaking and doing the same things.”

It was clear from the discussions with the teachers that this type of diffusion takes great patience from the principal and the team leaders. The principal must be willing to be flexible and understanding to those who are struggling while maintaining the lead on staff development expectations. Just as important was the perseverance of the leadership team members in helping those that were falling behind. Joe described it like this:

“The Principal and Support Team took input from the staff to determine what to work on next. They’ve been very good about slowing down and giving us more time if there is a particular concept of C.L.A.S.S. that we are struggling to implement. The process is gradual, therefore manageable.”

It is important to note that although the teachers describe their school climate as one that is flexible and supportive when it comes to implementing the new initiatives, there are expectations that are agreed upon by the entire staff which holds each other accountable for their actions. Sherry puts it this way:

“Just because there are no hard rules or mandates in place for this implementation doesn’t mean that the staff is off the hook. We are a team and are accountable for each other and as a team, we try hard to work together to help ourselves and the students we serve. Everyone here knows that and believes it.”

School Staff is a Team that Collaborates and Trusts Each Other.

Trust is one thing that is common to every relationship, team, and organization that if developed and leveraged, can have a potential impact to create unparalleled successes and prosperity in every dimension of life (Covey, 2006). Covey (2006) suggests that trust is defined as confidence. When you trust people, you have confidence in them, in their abilities, and in their integrity. The opposite of trust is suspicion, meaning you are suspicious of their integrity, agenda, capabilities, or track record. In a high trust relationship, you can say the wrong thing and people will still get your meaning. In a low-trust

relationship, you can be very articulate and people will still misinterpret you. It is this factor that establishes the way the school system behaves and operates on a daily basis. Trust greatly affects how teachers communicate and share with each other which significantly impacts the effectiveness and efficiency of how professional development initiatives are diffused throughout the school. In this study, every interviewee described his/her school and other staff members as caring and trusting individuals. Harold stated that:

“We have been able to build a great sense of trust throughout the building that helps us let our guards down and be open with each other. I think that this has been a key to our success in communicating with each other. We are able to share information and be more consistent on how and what we teach at our grade level.”

Through the foundation of trust, the teachers reported that the entire school staff functions and collaborates as a team. Many of those interviewed described this growing collaborative effort as having a positive impact on the whole staff and student body. Barbara stated that:

“In first grade we work to plan our daily lessons together. We have now expanded communication between kindergarten and second grade to further help our students. We know what is being taught grades below and above our own. C.L.A.S.S. has helped us see the benefits of open communication.”

Joe describes the collaborative effort this way:

“My colleagues and I consistently share instructional strategies when we plan our lessons each week. We also share teaching ideas and methodologies across grade levels, and gather input from our media specialist, literacy coach, principal, and resource teachers too.”

Rodgers (1995) labels this type of communication as openness where two or more individuals become willing to share their thinking and are susceptible to having their thinking influenced by others. Openness has great benefits where the individuals gain access to deeper understandings that otherwise would not be accessible. Sally states:

“By having open communication with other grade levels, we are able to have engaging discussions concerning good teaching models and best practices.”

Barbara follows:

“Communication and a welcoming environment are keys. I am not teaching on an island – we are all together in educating our students.”

Discussion/Conclusion

Researchers have discussed the difficulties associated with leadership distribution and its potential negative impacts on school effectiveness when leadership is not tied to professional development (Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005). General observations have been made that distributed forms of leadership among a school staff is likely to have significant impact on positive student achievement (Bell et al., 2003). It is imperative that schools create opportunities for school leaders and school leadership teams to work together, united in school improvement efforts (Spillane, 2006). Several researchers (Elmore, 2000; Miles et al., 2002; Joyce and Showers, 2004; Odden et al., 2009) have

suggested that effective professional development is linked to the structural feature of collective participation. The professional development should be organized around groups of teachers from a school that over time would include everyone in the school – that is, the entire faculty. Furthermore, effective sustainability of professional development initiatives has been linked to distributed leadership frameworks and learning-centered leaders within individual schools (Southworth, 1998). When a school's professional learning-centered community engages in school-wide professional development and, at the same time, works toward development of distinctive identity, it maximizes its capacity to enhance outcomes, particularly student achievement (Crowther et al., 2001). The sustainability of professional development initiatives may be directly increased by increasing the density of leadership opportunities across a school building so that everyone has access to facilitative leaders who can help articulate and analyze the level of implementation.

Research on shared decision making in schools has identified barriers preventing decision making that focuses on pedagogy and quality instruction (Griffin, 1995). This is due mostly to the culture of isolation between teachers found in most schools and the general non-confrontive tone set between teachers who work together in the same school building. Typically, teachers remain unaware of what their colleagues are doing in their individual classrooms and this, combined with strong divisions commonly found between administrators and teachers creates a culture of individuality and private practice. This study however, demonstrates that when teachers view their principal as a learner, learning about good teaching alongside them, the depth of implementation will be dramatically increased. This, along with a core group of teachers identified as experts and helpers enables faster and deeper implementation of professional development initiatives. Another interesting finding for all four schools was the absence of top-down mandates to implement the professional development initiative. The force and motivation for implementation came mostly from the core group of teachers. Oftentimes this core group even changed membership from year to year enabling many different teachers the opportunity to lead the implementation efforts. Finally, central to successful implementation was the emphasis on flexible time for teachers to meet together to learn about and plan for the professional development initiative.

Future research is needed in the area of how leadership is distributed and the impact it has on the implementation of professional development initiatives. In this study, a central part of the initiative was the emphasis on community building within classrooms prior to content instruction. It may indeed be that the very content of the initiative impacted the implementation because of the emphasis on team building among students. This could have influenced the relationships between teachers as they learned about team building. More research should be conducted that examines different professional development initiatives to see if the barriers indicated in prior research are evident when leadership is distributed in schools as it was in the four schools studied here.

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