

1-1-2010

Impact of Variations in Distributed Leadership Frameworks on Implementing a Professional Development Initiative

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Recommended Citation

Pedersen, Jeffrey; Yager, Stuart; and Yager, Robert (2010) "Impact of Variations in Distributed Leadership Frameworks on Implementing a Professional Development Initiative," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 34.

DOI: 10.58809/KXKD4936

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/34>

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Educators, principals, and teachers alike, are being challenged with higher demands and requirements in preparing our future generations for the 21st century. Professional development for teachers is a key focus in school transformation efforts. School transformation in today's educational system is dependent, in part, by how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Recent research has focused on the role of the school principal and other site-based leaders in the implementation of professional development initiatives (Pedersen, Yager, & Yager, 2010). Principals play a key role in supporting and encouraging teachers' professional development needs. Successful principals establish the work conditions that enable teachers to be better teachers. 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 by providing collaborative work time; to be an important part of the learning process; and to be open to the diffusion of leadership roles.

Distributed leadership practice 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 both 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; Leithwood et al., 2002). Additionally, there has been a call to explore the actual behaviors and influences associated with core leadership practices that occur with distributed leadership frameworks (Louis et al., 2010). This study focuses on providing research results for this call by examining the relationship between distributed leadership, collaboration among teachers and administrators, and school improvements through a professional development initiative.

Methods and Procedures

This qualitative study focuses on the understandings of four building principals and eight teachers from four schools concerning how distributed leadership, collaboration, and team learning has affected school improvement through the implementation of a school wide professional development initiative. The school wide initiative used in each of the 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 two of the schools, the level of implementation of this professional development initiative was rated exemplary by the evaluators. In two other schools, the level of implementation of the initiative was rated below satisfactory by the evaluators.

All four schools in this study were similar in size and socio-economic level and had undergone similar training and coaching in the C.L.A.S.S. professional development initiative. Interviews were conducted by the researchers onsite; through the use of e-mail; and by telephone.

Results

All four schools were selected based upon their 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.

Griffin (1995) suggests that the school culture plays a critical role in how effectively and efficiently school improvement can occur. In each of the four schools, 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 present among the exemplary-rated schools that were not found in the below satisfactory-rated schools and how the presence and absence of these themes affected the school climate, as well as staff and student development.

It is within this context that teachers and principals described how their schools had and had not established a school culture of trust and non-threatening environments in a relatively short amount of time.

Marita (all names used in this report are pseudonyms), a teacher from an exemplary-rated school described their environment this way:

“It’s an amazing place to work. The Life Goals and Lifelines have really become our foundation to how we run our school; from staff meetings, to how we as staff talk to each other to how we teach our students. It all connects. The parents see a big difference and the staff members have become closer together than ever before. We are a family.”

Juxtaposed is Jessie’s explanation of their environment, a teacher from a below satisfactory-rated school:

“All I can say is it is a toxic environment right now. We have a lot of mistrust and angry people here. There are a few people who use the Life Goals and Lifelines, but it is not what I would call school wide.

It definitely has not been a focus for us. It is not what I would call a happy place.”

It is within this context that five themes evolved in the exemplary-rate schools as critical components in successfully implementing the C.L.A.S.S. professional development initiative that were not found in the below satisfactory-rated schools.

Principal is a Co-Learner with the Teachers.

All of the teachers interviewed in the exemplary-rated schools stated that the principal’s leadership played a crucial role in the successful implementation of the model. A leading factor contributing to this success was that the principal was a co-learner along with the teachers. Consistent was the teacher’s description of the principal’s roles during this time; that the principal was not only present at the coaching and training sessions, but was actively engaged and participating as a learner 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 in turn enhances classroom instruction. Sig stated that:

“Our principal really cares about us and wants to be a part of the instructional process. We all know the demands that are put upon her, but she is always there with us and is a part of the team in learning. It makes us feel great and really helps our staff discussions about what we believe is right for the students we serve and how we can become better at what we do in the classroom. I really appreciate her for always being there.”

This type of alignment is referred to as team learning (Senge, 1990). When a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges and individuals’ energies harmonize. There becomes less wasted energy and the staff begins to develop a commonality of purpose, shared vision, and an understanding of how to complement one another’s efforts.

Absent was the description of the principal as a co-learner in both of the below satisfactory-rated schools. One teacher described it this way:

“Sometimes he will check in with us to see if we are at the session. I’ve never seen him actually be a part of the learning experience or even interested in doing that. That would be great, but probably unrealistic to expect it.”

Classroom Teacher as an Opinion Leader.

In each of the exemplary-rated schools, there was at least one teacher identified in the building as a person who modeled the initiative in their classrooms; was enthusiastic and passionate about the process and results; and was willing and able to share these strategies informally with other teachers in a non-threatening way. Rodgers (1995) describes this interaction as “opinion leadership” in which an individual is able to influence other individual’s overt behavior or attitudes informally with relative frequency. One teacher described his identified opinion leader this way:

“We could tell she was excited about the things she was changing in her classroom. A few of us noticed the changes in the kids too. It made a lot of us curious. She started to share things that were working for her and that really helped to open up conversations. Now we all are sharing ideas.”

Joey stated: “It was contagious. You couldn’t help but get excited. I wanted to be a part of this immediately.”

Opinion leadership aligns itself with what Fullan (2008) suggests is the ability to create systems change through the use of strategies that foster leadership at all levels of the system. The actions of each of the identified opinion leaders in these schools helped to cultivate other teacher leaders who then began to collaborate together for a common good. This continued growth reached a critical mass of interacting and coalescing leadership for change within the school community (Fullan, 2005). As the change increases, teacher leaders increase in volume by operating as interactive expert learners.

No teachers were identified as “opinion leaders” in either of the two below satisfactory-rated schools.

Teacher Leadership Team is a Critical Support Mechanism.

Within each of the exemplary-rated schools, a formal teacher leadership team existed and was comprised of teachers from each grade level. In both schools, the team functioned as a support mechanism for their colleagues in areas of morale building, best practices, and curriculum development all associated with the C.L.A.S.S. initiative. The functions of the team were described by a teacher this way:

“Our C.L.A.S.S. Support Team is a group of teachers from the building who really help the school to become better at what we do. The principal is a part of the team too. We work on keeping the staff energized and happy. We are always trying to keep the joy in our school. We share out strategies to try in the classroom and always are asking the whole staff for input on what they need so we can address their problems. There is a rotation of who gets to be on the “Support Team”, so it really helps everyone to become leaders.”

The effects of the leadership teams were found to be a positive support system for the teaching staff and consistent across both exemplary-rated schools. A possible explanation for this success is that the leadership team 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).

The under satisfactory-rated schools were found to have no functioning support teams as defined in the exemplary-rated schools. Two teachers described it this way:

“Support Team? I’m not sure if we have one. If we do, I have not seen it.”

“We have a group that does a few things, but it isn’t consistent. I wouldn’t say they are supportive to the staff.”

Reeves (2010) suggests that successful teaching depends upon teacher leaders who provide feedback to help their colleagues and who receive feedback on the impact of their support. When asked of the response from other teachers who were not on the leadership team from the exemplary-rated schools, two teachers responded this way:

“Our support team is a big piece of how we communicate here at school. They are always helping us and giving us ideas and feedback. It’s not a thing where they think they are better than everyone else;

we all have a voice and all work together. It works for us and keeps us moving together.”

“I love our support team. They keep us motivated and give us new strategies to try. They communicate to all of us consistently too; e-mails are always flying with support and ideas.”

Professional Growth is nurtured through Adequate Time.

Adoption rate and adequate time for individuals are two factors that need considerable attention when implementing a new professional development initiative. The teachers involved in the change process 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, 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.

In the two exemplary-rated schools, there was a consistent understanding that the C.L.A.S.S. initiative is a process that will take time to build and develop. All interviewees from these two schools stated there was never a mandate or time set as a deadline for implementing a particular part of the curriculum model. The principal and staff including the support team planned together in establishing expectations, support mechanisms, and flexible timelines. One teacher expressed it this way:

“First of all, this is something that almost all of the teachers wanted to do. It wasn’t some mandate from the office. We all had a voice in this and committed ourselves to it because we believe it is what is right for kids. We also agreed together that there would be some challenging times and that we were a team and will help each other through it. Setting up these goals and working as a team from the start really helped us grow and make us feel like we were working together toward a mission to improve.”

In addition to the teacher’s commitment is the principal’s role in how this initiative is implemented with regards to adequate time given. It is evident that the diffusion of this initiative takes great patience and flexibility from the principal and the team leaders. The principal must be understanding to those who are struggling while maintaining the lead of staff development expectations. A teacher from an exemplary-rated school explains:

“Our principal is really supportive. She is probably our biggest cheerleader and is always willing to take time for us if we have questions or if we are struggling. She is dedicated to making the C.L.A.S.S. strategies work in our building. She believes it and it helps us to believe too. It is great to have that kind of support.”

In the under satisfactory-rated schools, teachers from both schools described their principals as not fully supportive of the initiative and lacking leadership skills on how to support the staff in implementing the new strategies. Two teachers described it like this:

“He acts like it is not really something that is needed or something that we don’t have to do. I really don’t think he believes in it which makes it hard for all of us to make the changes needed to help our students. A lot of us perceive his attitude as a hands-off policy when it comes to supporting us.”

“Our principal is really sweet, but just hasn’t gained any respect from the staff. This has really hurt us all as a staff because we need her to be a strong leader who supports us and gives us time and resources to work with C.L.A.S.S. strategies. It’s just not there right now.”

School Staff is a Team that Trusts Each Other.

The most prominent barrier described by the teachers from the below satisfactory-rated schools was the lack of trust amongst the entire staff and administration. This lack of trust creates suspicion of integrity, agendas, and capabilities and becomes very difficult to communicate effectively. In a low trust environment, you can be very articulate and still be misinterpreted due to suspicion (Covey, 2006). Ken describes his school like this:

“You have to watch what you say around here. The principal has his favorites and you never know who is listening. All it takes is one comment to set off the fireworks. I have learned to just keep to myself and do my own work.”

Teressa stated:

“Our staff is really split. We have small pockets of people that get along and trust each other, but not as a whole staff. It’s pretty sad. It reminds me of being back in high school with all of the clicks. You just stay within your little group.”

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 (Pedersen et al., 2010). 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). In both exemplary-rated schools, trust was the most prominent attribute described by the interviewees. Estella describes it like this:

“It is really remarkable; the relationships we have with each other. We have built a very trusting environment where we all help each other and work with each other whether it is a personal issue or professional. I can’t think of anyone on our staff who wouldn’t voluntarily help one another. On a scale from 1 to 10, I would rate our level of trust an 11.”

Sam stated:

“It is so wonderful to be able to go to the rest of the staff and share my mistakes knowing that they can help me through them rather than be ridiculed because of them. The trust and support is great. Because of these relationships, we can laugh and support each other with confidence that we are a team and are there for each other.”

This type of trust and communication is described by Rodgers (1995) 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.

Discussion/Conclusions

Researchers have discussed the important role principals play in supporting and encouraging teachers’ professional development needs. However, recent studies have suggested that trust by teachers in the school leadership is not essential to transform a school (Louis et al., 2010). Results from this study indicate that trust in leadership is not only appreciated but key to the school-wide

implementation of professional development initiatives. Indeed, school leaders can have a significant influence on teachers' classroom practices through their efforts to motivate teachers and create workplace settings compatible with instructional practices known to be effective (Louis et al., 2010).

General observations have been made that distributed forms of leadership among a school staff are 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, 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 and other students. Furthermore, effective sustainability of professional development initiatives have 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 a distinctive identity, it maximizes its capacity to enhance outcomes, particularly relative to 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. Increasing teachers' involvement in the difficult task of making good decisions and introducing improved practices must be at the heart of school leadership (Louis et al., 2010).

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. Additionally, this study and others report that when teachers view their principal as isolated and not committed passionately to instructional improvement, their own level of engagement and follow-through with the implementation of professional development initiatives will be diminished (Pedersen et al., 2010).

Another interesting finding from the two exemplary 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. However, this study documented that support for teacher empowerment by central office and its expectations for support at the building-level is viewed as essential by teachers in exemplary schools. This finding is supported by previous research that showed emphasis by central office on professional development for quality instruction is key to achieving high-level implementation (Louis et al., 2010).

Further 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 finding was that in the exemplary schools, leadership was distributed to the teachers and in these schools the principals

wanted teachers to be developed as leaders. Additionally, and perhaps mostly importantly, the teachers viewed the principal as a learner with them. This supports the notion that holistic professional learning, where teachers and principals learn together, will spur changes leading to enhanced student outcomes (Crowther, 2009). Similar research should be conducted that examines other professional development initiatives to see if similar exemplary depths of implementation are achieved when leadership is distributed in schools.

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