LEADING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: WHAT TEACHERS TELL US

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Abstract: Educational leadership and schools feel perpetual expectations for improved student learning and ingenuity in satisfying increasingly diverse student needs. This study probed beneath the broad factors of principal leadership, vision, and collaboration to reveal specific tipping points that make school improvement possible. The purpose of this study was to analyse teacher perceptions for what specific factors create successful school improvement projects (SIPs). Twenty-three successful school growth experiences were analysed. Clarity of information, and teacher voice were dominant features, but each successful project had a unique ingredient that required attention.

Keywords: *school improvement, educational leadership, principal leadership, communication, teacher voice, student voice*

Introduction

Schools have always been expected to develop successful students and capable learners, whether for the Industrial Age, or for the complex and fast-paced society of today. School improvement has been extensively researched and better student performance is an ongoing goal for researchers, districts, schools, and parents. Accountability for this expectation is built into the No Child Left Behind order in the USA and Provincial Ministerial Orders in Canada. Thus, jurisdictional obligations, and more importantly, professional motivation and mission propel educators to search for deeper insights, approaches and strategies for educational improvement.

Senior managers develop detailed achievement plans and school leaders cultivate school improvement plans (SIPs) to grow student performance. Teachers are desired for their participation and to be motivated to support and enact these plans. With the overall goal to improve student performance and well-being, what are the specific resources, strategies, actions, and personnel that teachers say are necessary for this to occur?

Assessments get made; plans generated. Goals get set; data analyzed. School improvement plans are multifaceted and dependence on any one aspect or person is not reasonable. One consistency in the research is that teachers listen to teachers. Teacher knowledge, influence, and affirmations change practice and improve schools (Loeb, Elfers & Plecki, 2010; Louis, Dretzke &Wahlstrom, 2010; Marzano, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2009; Williams, 2009). The intent of this study is to listen to teachers, learn from them, and attend to the matters necessary for successful school improvement.

Research demonstrates that successful school improvement requires a collaborative vision, good staff relations and dispersed leadership with teachers engaged (Christophersen, Elstad &Turmo, 2012; Fullan, 2010; Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010; Williams, 2009). Specific and flexible planning and effective principals are also consistently identified (Loeb et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano, 2003; Schmoker, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2009). As an experienced school-based and district leader, the investigator has lived a number of successful school improvement scenarios. Personal experience indicates that the following cornerstones need to be in place to generate positive school growth: (a) a broadly developed, collaborative school vision; (b) utilizing and developing teacher leadership; (c) monitoring of agreed-upon actions; (d) passion and encouragement; and (e) results feedback. This acquired praxis aligns with previous findings.

Are these factors that are found in the research and in lived experience also what teachers feel and believe? Fullan (2010) emphasizes the need to respect teacher voice and Malcolm Gladwell succinctly states that "you realize that an awful lot of seemingly complicated questions about education could be resolved simply by asking teachers . . . they're the ones doing the teaching, dealing with the kids, who live this stuff. Just ask them" (Bethune, 2013, p.15). The purpose of this study was to analyze teacher perceptions for what specific factors generate successful school improvement projects?

Methodology

This investigation took place in fall, 2011, in the cities of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Calgary, Alberta. Twenty-three teachers in a Leadership and Administration program were administered an open-ended written survey to complete independently. Individual teachers, 13 female and 10 male, were asked to reflect upon and analyse a successful SIP that they lived. Twenty-three different SIPs were analysed, from a teacher perspective. These had occurred in 8 elementary schools and 15 secondary schools.

Each school-based SIP was distinct to the individual teacher, and was considered to be successful in his/her opinion. To gather data an open-ended survey requested information in the areas of (a) context and purpose, (b) strategies and resources used, (c) evidence of change, and (d) significant actions and turning points. The purpose of this study was to learn from teachers what conditions were necessary for school improvement. Particular to the needs of this study, the questions regarding specific actions and turning points were (a) What situation or person instigated the change? (b) What were the key moments or actions that precipitated success? (c) What action got people agreeing to the change? and (d) What were the important factors that had to be attended to? When completed, the surveys developed into 2-4 pages of data for each SIP. The data was analysed using concept occurrence, tabulated under the question headings, type of project, and school level.

Findings

The SIPs were categorized into four types, these being (a) curriculum, (b) technology, (c) student climate, and (d) staff relations. Student climate encompassed social and behavioural aspects of student life, such as discipline, attendance, and respect. Staff relations involved issues of communication, collaboration, and morale. The data was assessed for which strategies and actions, and personnel were instrumental in making the school change successful. Eighteen of the SIPs analysed were school-wide projects and five were department-based.

What situation or person instigated the change?

The formal leaders were most instrumental in initiating the school improvement projects, followed by staff discussions, and teacher-leaders. Figure 1 illustrates that from the 26 comments in this area, 12 identified the principal or assistant principal (9 and 3 respectively) as the person instigating the change. Four of the projects were generated from staff discussions and three were initiated from individual teachers. Of the 23 SIPs only two of the successful endeavours were initiated by district office.

Figure: 1
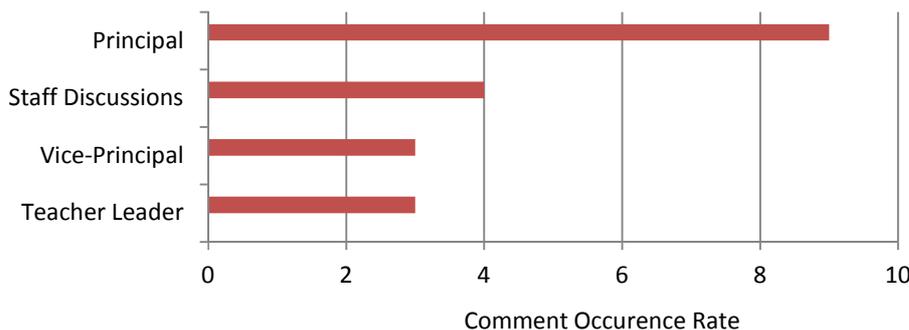
Instigating the improvement plan

**What were the key moments or actions that precipitated success?**

The data concerning key actions was exceptionally diverse. Twenty-seven responses came forth regarding what moment or action was vital for ensuring the success of the SIP. Twenty-six of these statements were different from one another, each project appearing to have a unique circumstance that was pivotal for creating the successful situation. Samplings of the precipitators for success were such areas as (a) student voice, (b) new personnel, (c) organizational changes, (d) vision development, (e) student performance, and (f) agency meetings.

What action got people agreeing to the change?

Four areas emerged that were deemed to get people on side for the successful school changes. The most prominent action for galvanizing people to the cause was teacher voice, receiving 8 of the 36 responses for this area. Teachers being listened to, teacher modelling, and teacher validations of the initiative were examples given of teacher voice. Subsequent to teacher voice, Figure 3 shows that three areas were found to be equally important in fostering the success, each

receiving four responses, these being (a) the project being worthy, (b) student voice, and (c) the principal.

Figure: 2
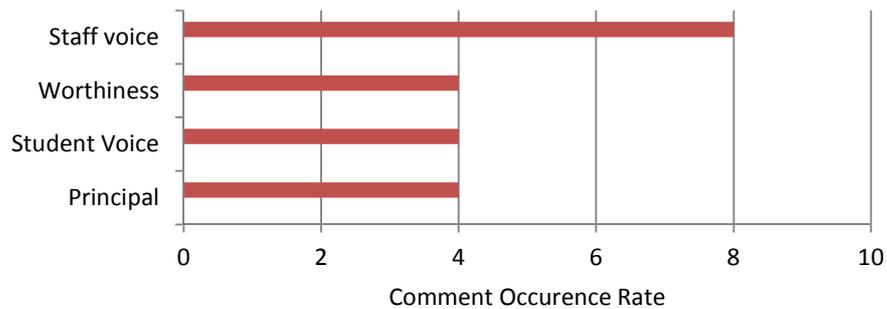
Getting to agreement

What were the important factors that had to be attended to?

The most important factor that needed attention for successful school change was communication. Clarity and accuracy of information, and staff collaboration produced 15 of the 51 responses, as displayed in Figure 3. Subsequent to effective communication, monitoring and follow-up on actions to be taken, and teacher training were prominent receiving 7 and 5 responses respectfully.

Figure: 3
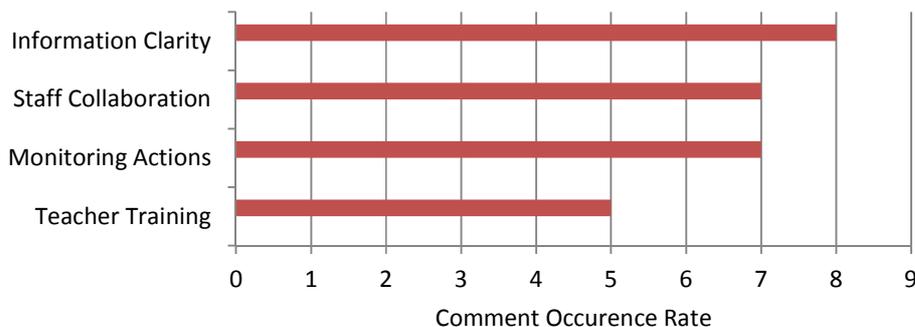
Issues requiring attention for success

Discussion

School improvement can be a complex enterprise in some environments. Effective leadership creates collaborative culture for growth. Research indicates that a shared vision, teacher participation, and effective leadership are influential for successful school change. To further reveal the finer particulars of managing school change successfully a group of candidates in a graduate leadership program were asked for their perceptions as to what made SIPs successful.

The majority of successful SIPs were instigated by an administrator, 12 of the 23 overall. The importance of an effective leader is a replication of much previous research findings. Staff discussions and teacher leaders combined for creating seven of the school change proposals that were investigated. Only 2 of the 23 successful SIPs were mandated by central office.

Leaders may initiate, but the continuation of the project revolved around staff affirmations and the worthiness of the endeavour. Found equally influential to the worthiness of the project was the impact of affirming student voice, by means of student leadership groups or through student discussions. In this study the importance of student voice was present in the social/behavioural SIPs, but not in the curriculum related ones. Student voice was not identified as an initiator for change in the 23 SIPs investigated, but four comments surfaced recognizing its importance for driving the school to agreement on the SIP. Mitra (2008) "identified important benefits of student voice initiatives . . . . including to help improve teaching, curriculum and teacher-student relationships" (p.2). The presence of student voice as an important consideration in school improvement presents an interesting and potentially powerful dimension of school reform for a leader to be cognizant of, and to concentrate on.

What needed to be attended to throughout the process was thought-provoking. The importance of monitoring actions and follow-through of strategies were strongly present, having the second highest incidence of occurrence with seven. These areas have also been advocated and expected based on previous research and the experience of the investigator. Superseding these factors however, was the subject of staff communication, receiving the highest incidence of occurrence with 15.

Teachers stated that communication was the most important factor to attend to when generating a successful SIP. Aligning with past research, having time to discuss and collaborate with fellow staff was dominant in the data (Fullan, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2009). Coupled with this, the data revealed the need for all information, data, and directions provided to be accurate and clearly stated. The need to have specific research information to support the initiative did not arise once.

The importance of principal participation was also not evident in any of the data. Principal participation with teachers on instructional practice has been identified as a powerful effect on student learning (Fullan, 2010; May & Supovitz, 2011) and yet principal influence on instructional practice has also been thought to be minimal (Schmoker, 2006). This is an area requiring further inquiry and refinement.

Money was not found to be a significant factor for school growth initiatives. Only 2 of the 23 projects cited financial resources as something that needed to be attended to. Even with ten of the SIPs distributed over curriculum and technology issues, financial resources were not a prominent element shaping success. The insignificance of money and the importance of follow-through for successful school growth aligned with the experience of the investigator.

The foci that teachers deemed influential, and the diminished importance of financial resources, may be related to that the positive school growth that teachers had experienced did not centre on things or resources, but predominantly on human dimensions of school culture. Of the 23

successful SIPs examined, 13 were either in the student social/behavioural or school culture realms (8 and 5 respectively). The remaining ten SIPs involved curriculum development (8) and technology (2), comparably distributed between both the elementary and secondary levels. The projects focusing on school culture concerned staff morale and relationships. Seven of the eight student climate projects were at the secondary level. The prevalence of successful plans in these affective domains is assuring. Difficult personnel and student environments can be positively addressed when the necessary factors are attended to.

The key moments and actions that precipitated successful reforms was the most diverse response area, with each SIP having its own unique turning point. Further examples to those identified in the Results, were (a) having a successful initiation, (b) student accountability, (c) staff vote and ownership, (d) staff vulnerability, and (e) administrative directive. The existence of a particular and significant turning point, which is exclusive to each SIP, is of interest to leaders. Effective leaders may be attuned to, and have the critical leadership, management, and cultural dimensions in place for school improvement to occur. Nonetheless, each SIP appears to emit a particular elucidation, unique unto itself that is the tipping point for success. Leaders need to have the "educational connoisseurship" (Eisner, 2002) with the capacity to observe, identify, and then manage that key moment.

This study has revealed the dynamics of a successful SIP through the voices of teachers. For further study greater specificity of questioning, broader evidence collection and sample size, principal perceptions, and focus groups would assist in evolving this discourse further. The impact of student voice and principal participation on school growth and student learning are topics compelling further examination.

Conclusions

The intention of this study was to use teacher perceptions to reveal the factors that are pivotal for ensuring school improvement. The data demonstrated that instigation of a school improvement plan predominantly originates from administration, but teachers ensure its success. Few successful SIPs came from central office. Financial resources, research information, and principal participation did not emerge as being significant.

Once proposed, agreement on a school's direction required (a) teacher affirmation, (b) the project being worthy, and (c) student voice. To maintain the initiative the most influential driver was to have clear information regarding purpose, directions, and actions to be taken. Following these, staff collaboration and monitoring were next in importance. Each plan demonstrated an exclusive component, specific to itself, which needed to be attended to for ensuring the SIP's success. Each successful SIP may ultimately rest upon a leader's capacity to be attuned to, and be able to act upon that specific moment or action within the dynamic school change milieu.

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