

Sustainable School Improvement: Suburban Elementary Principals' Capacity Building

By Alison J. Clark, Ph.D.

Introduction

Current federal and state reform agendas, with their focus on funding, accountability systems, and mandates, are not sufficient to produce sustainable, meaningful change. Reforms however must focus on sustainability so that the overall system can continuously self-improve. Any reform work meant to sustain itself must be embedded directly into the school, changing teaching and learning practices as well as school culture (Copland, 2003; Levin & Fullan, 2008). Policies must go beyond competition and intense performance requirements.

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) concluded that leaders have the responsibility for revealing the abilities of teachers that potentially exist within the school setting. While there is no single model of successful school leadership, there is a common repertoire of actions and values used by effective leaders. Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) classified effective leadership practices into four broad categories:

- Setting directions - focuses on developing vision, goals, communication of the direction;
- Developing people - relates to increasing the knowledge and skills of faculty;
- Redesigning the organization - focuses on establishing positive relationships and supporting collaboration;
- Managing the instructional program - relates to teaching and learning, such as staffing, providing instructional support, and aligning resources.

Principals draw upon these basic leadership values and practices as they attend to school improvement and student achievement (Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

One way to support change is through capacity building. Critical to the change process, capacity building brings a group of people together to work toward a common goal, therefore strengthening their efficacy (Fullan, 2007). The effective leader directs and nurtures the ability

of others through building capacity to support long-term school improvements. This type of reform begins at the building level, strengthening individual abilities while increasing the collective efficacy of the entire school. Raising capacity is a key task of principal change leadership efforts. Capacity building is a process to increase the individual and collective abilities of professional staff to continuously improve student learning.

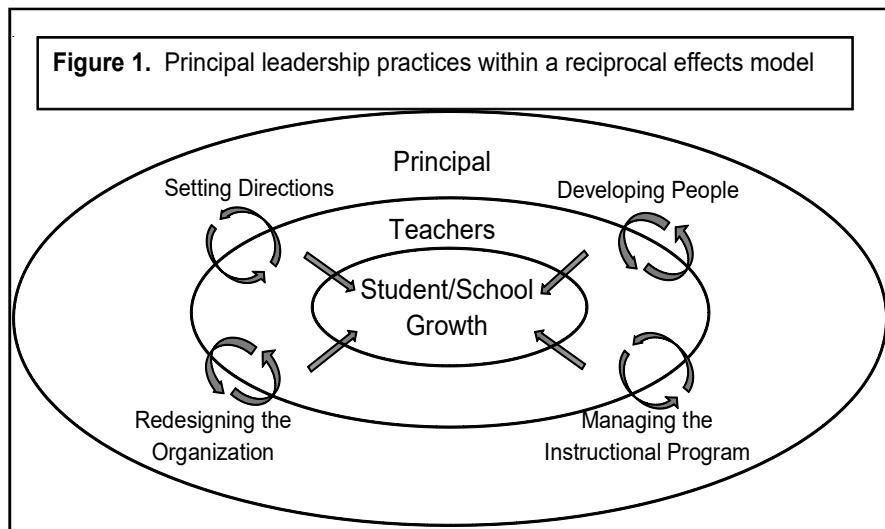
Theoretical Framework

For nearly 30 years, researchers studied schools and leadership, developing models to determine the linkage between leaders and school improvement. Most models frame leadership as a one-way flow of influence and change whereby leaders influence school improvement indirectly through other variables between them. Another perspective of leadership is through the reciprocal effects model. Heck and Hallinger (2010) found that the reciprocal effects model, when compared to unidirectional models, demonstrated the most statistically significant findings. This perspective considers the interactive nature of people in schools emphasizing a mutually reinforcing relationship rather than a one-way flow of influence. It conceptualizes principals as changing in response to what is happening within the school. It is a dynamic, adaptive process that offers a contrasting, more comprehensive way to view leadership. Few studies have investigated leadership through a reciprocal effects model.

Figure 1 illustrates the reciprocal effects model as principals build capacity through the four leadership practices as described by Wahlstrom et al. (2010). The figure represents the indirect effects that leadership has on student and school growth. As a principal focuses on setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program, a change in thinking and behavior among teachers occurs. Subsequently, as capacity among teachers increases, the change cycles back to the principal resulting in new responses, interactions, and influence demonstrating a dynamic, mutual process of change.

Research Purpose and Questions

The increase of intense pressures to ensure long-term education reforms have created a challenge for school leaders as they direct and nurture the abilities of others. Researchers present the challenge of initiating school improvement efforts that support sustainable change (Century, 1999; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Heck & Hallinger, 2010). With the role of change leadership as a necessary component for school improvement endeavors, it is more important than ever to understand how principals build capacity.



The purpose of this research was to understand and describe suburban elementary principals' practices and perceptions as change leaders related to capacity building through the leadership categories of setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program and subsequently how the principals reacted to the changing environment within the reciprocal effects model. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do elementary school principals who have led sustainable school improvement initiatives build capacity in their schools?

RQ2: What experiences have shaped these elementary school principals' leadership related to building capacity?

RQ3: How do these elementary school principals' capacity building practices align with the reciprocal effects model?

Methodology

The concept of building capacity is based on social interactions and processes. Using a descriptive case study approach provided a way to look in depth at the complex phenomenon of principals' capacity building processes by capturing details in context. This study took place within suburban elementary schools in New York State. Principals of schools having received New York State Reward School designation in the 2013-2014 school year were identified and needed to be tenured at their schools from 2010-2011 until the Reward School designation. Three principals, along with their superintendents and one teacher from each school, provided data for the three cases.

Data were collected through interviews and documents. Each principal was interviewed three times, while each superintendent and teacher had one interview. Interviews were independently reviewed and coded for concepts related to the research questions. Additionally, each case was explored for alignment to the reciprocal effects model.

Once each within-case analysis was completed, a cross-case analysis was used to build general explanations about how principals build capacity in elementary schools.

Findings

Research Question 1: How do elementary school principals who have led sustainable school improvement initiatives build capacity in their schools?

The findings suggest that building capacity is all encompassing. In other words, as principals seek to increase the individual and collective abilities of professional staff to continuously improve student learning, there are many interconnected actions. While each leadership category was unique and could be viewed individually, capacity building happened as the result of varied actions; change in one area connected to change in another. Each principal: established direction with input from teachers; nurtured a learner-centered community; provided professional development relative to teacher needs; fostered teacher reflection; and cultivated collaboration and shared responsibility.

Established direction with input from teachers.

Each principal established a direction for their school based on district mission and state demands. The vision was communicated, discussed, and input was gathered from teachers, thereby establishing buy-in, a sense of commitment, and even inspiration. In some instances teachers helped to craft the schools' goals, while in other instances teachers identified individualized goals for their own growth that typically connected to the greater school or district objectives. In either case, everyone was working towards the same goals. In each case, the principal identified and communicated the overall direction for the school and kept it at the forefront of their work with teachers and communication with parents.

Nurtured a learner-centered community. The principals established themselves and the teachers as part of a learning community. They were responsive to what teachers needed and wanted to learn consistent with the overall

direction of the school. There was a clear value placed on continuous growth for the principals and teachers; principals shared their learning with teachers and supported teachers who wanted to learn more. Although the principals recognized that not all of their teachers sought out continued professional development, they made it clear that adult learning was valued.

Provided professional development relative to teacher needs. The structure and content of professional development was determined and delivered in various ways. Professional development was provided by the principal, other administrators, or outside consultants. Opportunities for learning also came from within and could be the most meaningful as teachers shared their knowledge with each other. Professional development also happened as principals provided clear and consistent feedback during the supervisory process of observation and evaluation. Not only was specific feedback provided, but principals ensured that resources were available for improvement as they held teachers accountable for follow-through. In schools with a capacity-building mindset, teachers appreciated the feedback and strived to implement recommendations. This process could only happen with a principal seen as supportive and one who encouraged growth.

Fostered teacher reflection. Each principal encouraged teachers to continually reflect on curriculum, data, and instructional strategies, indicating that opportunities were put in place to ensure conversations about their work with students. Furthermore, teachers were asked to reflect on their own learning. Reflection was encouraged throughout the formal supervisory process and during informal meetings and conversations with the principals. There was a constant focus on aspects of curriculum, instruction, and student learning as reflection was nurtured.

Cultivated collaboration and shared responsibility. Each principal cultivated a spirit of collaboration as structures were put in place to ensure that teachers were working together. Although the structures may have looked different in each context, teacher leadership was encouraged. Capacity was developed as teachers, along with their principals, planned, learned, and shared aspects of leadership together. Principals embraced the understanding that success depended on the collaborative efforts of the entire team, including the superintendent, teachers, and parents.

Research Question 2: What experiences have shaped these elementary school principals' leadership related to building capacity?

The second question sought information about experiences that shaped the elementary school principals' leadership related to building capacity. Results demonstrate varied practices, skills, and responsibilities used among principals and cited by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) as essentials to promote school improvement. Each principal: situated self as a learner; maintained focus on goals; established trust and honored relationships; reflected on input.

Situated self as a learner. Each principal situated her or himself as a learner and collaborator in achieving district, school, teacher, and student goals. Striving to be a model for learning, principals sought out information and brought it back to teachers. Each principal engaged with teachers as new curriculum and instructional strategies were learned.

Maintained focus on goals. Each principal kept a regular focus on district, building, and individual teacher goals. Maintaining consistent and specific communication happened as each principal remained on a steady course. Each principal demonstrated this as a critical aspect of supporting change as they kept goals at the forefront of the daily work through verbal and written communication.

Established trust and honored relationships. Each principal appeared to have engendered trust and confidence through consistently clear, honest, and candid communication that formed not only professional, but personal, relationships. The importance of relationships built around trust were evident as the principals, superintendents, and teachers spoke about their experiences. This research demonstrated how the principals were caring and committed individuals who placed the development of relationships as a priority.

Reflected on input. Each principal's experience demonstrated his/her willingness to gather, consider, and genuinely reflect upon input from teachers. Principals' ability to reflect was not only a model for teachers, but showed through in the decision-making process. As each principal was willing to make difficult decisions, it appeared to be done in the best interest of the school, teachers, students, families, and the district. Decisions ensured that teachers' use of time was purposeful, whether it was in the classroom with students or during professional time with colleagues. The principal's actions of gathering feedback and accounting for others' opinions furthered the teachers' belief and trust in the principal.

Research Question 3: How do these elementary school principals' capacity building practices align with the reciprocal effects model?

In the reciprocal effects model, leadership is viewed as an adaptive and developmental process as thinking and behavior change and develop based on the environment (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Pitner, 1988). As each principal initiated a change, he or she was reflective and responded based on how the teachers responded. Each principal built teacher capacity, recognized change, and responded by: motivating teachers and self; supporting continued collaboration; recognizing and encouraging teacher leadership; and adapting to new circumstances.

Motivating teachers and self. Each principal had the ability to motivate others to achieve the district and school vision through communication, collaboration, and dedication in establishing school identity. As the principal inspired change in teachers, that in turn cycled back to motivate the principal creating a deeper understanding

and appreciation for the work taking place. As new demands were placed within the school, the principal responded and set a course of action with a greater awareness of the direct work of teachers.

Supporting continued collaboration. The development of meaningful collaboration has been identified by Fullan (2011) as a way to foster capacity building. Each principal embraced the understanding that success depended on the collaborative efforts of the entire team, including the superintendent, teachers, and parents. As the principals realized changes based on the collaborative work, they responded with new types of support and recrafted the goals based on new knowledge.

Recognizing and encouraging teacher leadership. As each principal initiated a change, whether it was curricular, instructional, or for the school culture, he or she observed development among teachers. Once new abilities developed, the principal often encouraged teacher leadership. In all three schools, the principals wanted to increase teacher participation. Teachers became more invested, motivated, and learned more when leading.

Adapting to new circumstances. Each principal was adaptable and responded to the school context since there is no true set of rules to follow when building capacity. Each principal worked towards curricular and instructional goals and approached his or her teachers as a whole group and as individuals.

The four themes that surfaced suggest reciprocal effects is a leadership model that recognizes the dynamic relationships among variables. This can only be seen through exploring the interactive encounters among people within their settings.

Conclusions

A comprehensive repertoire of actions and values were used by effective leaders. These findings confirm that capacity building is a key to sustainable school improvement. It is important for principals to be inclusive and collaborative. Although at times the principal as school leader may be the final decision-maker, capacity building happens when teachers are involved in the process of setting the direction, establishing individual and department goals consistent with the direction, and having choice. Furthermore, nurturing teacher leadership plays a critical role for the principal. When teachers are in leadership roles it is evident that capacity building is valued.

The findings confirm that principals' capacity building practices align with the reciprocal effects model as change flows back and forth evidencing a fluid model. For capacity building to be successful, individuals within the organization must believe that collectively they can bring about change. This type of reform begins at the building level, strengthening individual abilities while increasing the collective efficacy of the entire school. There

is much potential for the idea that reciprocal effects is a more comprehensive theoretical model of school leadership, because it provides a broad and dynamic understanding of school improvement.

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Alison J. Clark, Ph.D., is a Principal at Plainview-Old Bethpage CSD.