Raising Student Achievement: Building A Model for Teacher Leadership

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Abstract

Research abounds in what makes an effective school but there is limited research on how principals use such research to drive school improvement. This paper draws on the guidance of the school improvement literature and claims that the most pivotal element in raising student outcomes is the classroom teacher (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Hattie, 2008). It explores one school's pathway to improving student learning via focusing on building teacher leadership. In doing so, it offers a guide to Principals and Heads of schools wishing to raise student attainment and improve the learning outcomes of their school community.

Introduction

Changes in education are inevitable as schools strive for excellence and move to implement improvement strategies. Reforms in education have come and gone (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Elmore, 2004; Andy Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006) for decades with minimal improvement in educational outcomes. The argument lies not in the resistance to change but rather in the model or methodology leaders use to implement change.

Often educational change in schools fail because of:

- A lack of ownership by staff and a deficiency of understanding why improvement is needed,
- Not understanding how the change is expected to be implemented,
- The pace of change is poorly managed,
- The change is mandated from the hierarchy, and
- The key leaders in the school lack commitment to the change.

The focus on building an improvement model in a school hinges on the raising of the capacity of staff to undertake change. Building teacher capacity is about addressing points 2 and 3 above. In doing so it enables the teacher to gain new knowledge and skills, which lead to changes in teacher practice, attitudes and behaviour.

The catalyst for change in schools is heavily influenced by comparative data. Whether schools use international data that highlights how countries perform or the implementation of the norm referenced standardized tests that allow schools to compare individual student data, the need for accurate base line data to inform school planning is undisputable. Furthermore, the use of comparative data helps teachers "learn new pedagogical strategies, implement them in their classrooms, collect evidence of student learning, reflect on practice with others, and then refine their practice" (Ross et al., 2011).

What Does the Theory of School Improvement Tell Us?

Understanding school improvement practices from the effective schools research (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Béteille, 2012), studies on teachers' work (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), turnaround schools (Fullan, 2006) and restructuring schools (Hallinger, Murphy, & Hausman, 2013) have led to theorists and practitioners alike building and creating lists identifying the critical elements for creating effective schools. Common to most lists are:

- A unified vision and mission dedicated on teaching and learning;
- A strong professional community based on collaborative work and collective responsibility for student learning;
- Instructional leadership led by the Principal
- Sufficient resources particularly human, material, instructional, fiscal;
- Timely, accessible and accurate data about students and learning;
- Well qualified instructional staff;
- Significant professional learning opportunities;
- Community support

However, knowing the traits of effective schools is not sufficient. The key task for school leaders is to turn the knowledge of such lists into creating effective strategies within the school that produce the traits listed above.

If a school is to improve learning for *all* students, then school leaders must develop and implement meaningful curriculum and effective instructional programs to meet the diverse needs of students within their school. Schools need teachers to have not only the content knowledge but also be able to diagnose the aliments of student learning so as to prescribe effective remediation and intervention. They need the requisite skills and the tools to apply them.

Ultimately school improvement research has demonstrated the adage that if you want to improve student learning you must improve the schools where the learning takes place.

A Practical Implementation of the Theory
The pressure on schools to improve student learning and classroom teaching has seen a refocus on the role of the teacher. The Information Age of technology (Treadwell, 2008) has moved us into an era of instant information necessitating changes pedagogy to facilitating learning in this 21st century (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013).

The notion of the importance of teacher quality and its influence of student learning has gained much publicity in recent years (S Dinham, Ingvarson, & Kleinhenz, 2008; Hattie, 2008; Leithwood & Duke, 2000). Unequivocal empirical evidence indicate that:

> *Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequenc*e (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 2)

Consequently, the need to build a model of school improvement that centres on the classroom teacher is a logical pathway for schools wishing to raise academic standards.

Taking the above section as a guide, the key strategies for school improvement used at Dar Al Marefa Private School include:

1. Building A Desire for Change
2. Building Teacher Capacity
3. Job Embedded Professional Learning
4. Teacher Leadership

Let me provide a brief rationale of each strategy.

Building a Desire to Change
Research on teachers' job satisfaction, motivation and morale conclude that the main contributors to high levels of teacher job satisfaction are working with children, the intellectual challenge of teaching and employee autonomy/independence (S Dinham & Scott, 1998). However, dissatisfaction with teaching was often linked to high workload, low levels of pay and poor job status (Metlife Inc, 2010).

School leaders cannot mandate a staff member's desire to change their practice. It is the choice of the teacher to either undertake any change strategies or disengage from the process and attempt to continue with current teaching practices. However, leaders are able to help foster conditions that help influence a teacher's choice.

Improving teacher commitment to change practice at Dar Al Marefa begins with the following strategies:
- focusing on building strong relationships across the school
- aligning professional development to the immediate context of the classroom
- increasing staff efficacy
- fostering acknowledgement and rewarding classroom excellence
- Increasing teacher voice

Whatever strategies are used the success of any change will be dependent on the strength of teacher's commitment to the change. Engaging teachers in professional dialogue is a sure path to promoting acceptance to school-based decision-making.

Building Teacher Capacity
A key aspect of building teacher capacity is moving the teacher from "doing" (the teacher) to "enabling" (the learner). This strategy is about focusing on results using the professional learning community framework to galvanise teacher practice and to raise expectations. Building teacher knowledge and improving their TEACHing competencies is the ultimate aim.

A pathway forward is through the use of external accountability measures (ie national teaching standards), not by way of a "stick" approach, but rather through professional dialogue and critiquing teaching excellence.

Raising knowledge about effective teaching practices and immersing staff with examples of best practice and providing time for teachers to collaborate, discuss and critique the practice leads to an increase in motivation to change practice.

Job Embedded Professional Learning
Pedagogical improvement for teachers is the key target for increasing student attainment and must underpin the discussion at the classroom level. Improving teacher learning should be the focus on the life inside the classroom. Such learning in context is both continuous and sustained. Having a framework for teacher observation leading to coaching, mentoring and feedback [read *Harnessing Professional Dialogue, Collaboration and Content in Context: An exploration of a new model for Teacher Professional Learning* for further insight (Lynch, Madden, & Knight, 2014)]

Consequently moving to a Professional Learning Community approach, where there is connectedness between the various learning communities within the school improves alignment and understanding. The focus on professional dialogue and collaboration guides the teacher to not only understand effective teaching strategies but also be able to apply evidenced based teaching practices on a daily basis.

A number of key international research program reports and institutions (eg TALIS, PISA, TIMSS, ACER,) offers schools comparative data around important domains including effective teaching, successful leadership and professional development. These are key catalysts for re-focusing teachers on best practice and their own teaching performance and guide the decision making around professional development needs.

We know that teachers are the most important within-school influence on student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Hattie, 2008). Thus improving teaching is crucial to improving school performance.

Teacher Leadership
While the definition of effective leadership maybe illusive (Crowther, 2012) it is evident that good leadership is essential to implementing and sustaining school improvement practices in schools. Leadership is an important factor for making successful schools. Furthermore, effective leadership, in focusing the school goals helps staff to connect with their immense potentials and enable them to accomplish purposeful things collectively that gives the individual staff member's sense of personal accomplishment and fulfillment.

At the heart of every successful school are dynamic teacher leaders who inspire, direct, enable, and empower individuals to do more with less and achieve the school's vision. By investing in developing the leadership capacity of each teacher as espoused by the teacher leadership movement (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001)

Literature has provided clear evidence that teachers' self-efficacy increases with the advent of a school's focus on building teacher leadership (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2008; Harris & Spillane, 2008). With the recent increase in collaboration and collegiality fostered through teacher leadership practices, it is within the implementation of professional learning communities that an enhanced capacity for change and improvement in schools can be realised (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; A Hargreaves, 2003).

Leaders also impact on teacher professional learning by building learning conditions through providing spaces for teachers to effectively collaborate and learn from one another. Providing opportunities for teachers to share good practice, collaborate on effective strategies for improving student learning and offers teachers the space to learn together leads to better quality teaching (Madden, 2013).

Having provided an overview of each of the four key strategies I now provide an explanation of the current school's implementation of the strategies in the form of a model for implementing a school improvement scaffold.

Towards a Model of Building Teacher Leadership
Using the elements of the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (Lynch et al., 2014) and Teachers As Researchers Initiative (Madden & Lynch, 2014) an initial action plan was established to guide the school towards improved outcomes. While it is essential to involve teachers in decisions concerning the school's mission, vision, and goals in order to create a collaborative school culture, the ultimate task is the building of each teacher's capacity to take control and positively influence student achievement.

This section provides insight into the six facets used by the author to galvanize his school towards a school improvement program.

1. *Begin with the school's context and then build a vision for learning*

Literature on effective schools continually highlights the importance of establishing a school vision that is deeply rooted in the context of the school (Cavanagh & MacNeill, 2002; DeMeulle, 1999). In developing a vision for learning the leader is articulating what the school is striving to become. Given the nature of the school, its demographics and culture, the vision statement proclaims what it wants to achieve. Uniquely tied up in the vision creation process is also the communication of how it will be held to account for progressing toward fulfilling its vision.

In undertaking a full review of the school's areas of strength and weaknesses a number of methods were used including focus groups drawn from staff, student and parent communities, questionnaires, exit interviews, analysis of examination results and meetings with staff either in a team or individually, a more informed understanding of the status of the school laid the platform for discussing the preferred future for the school.

2. *Focus on building teacher capacity*

It is self evident that school improvement mechanisms that seek to improve the abilities, skills, and expertise of teachers will realize greater gains in student outcomes.

A key mechanism for changing teacher practice to focus on improving the TEACHing is through deprivatizing instruction. Increasing opportunities for teachers to open up their classrooms to visiting teachers and placing trust in each of them as observers to be able to provide valuable feedback (Madden, Wilks, Maoine, Loader, & Robinson, 2012). This mechanism helps teachers reflect on their teaching practices. By giving teachers regular feedback teachers can continually work on improving their teaching. Such capacity building should be the cornerstone of any school leader's leadership repertoire.

The consequence of deprivatising the teaching and learning within a school is the promotion of a collective understanding of the instructional practices. The flow on effect is the building of shared responsibility for the teaching and learning.

3. Provide collaborative time to focus the teaching/learning

In breaking down the barriers of isolation between teachers, leaders need to create structures to promote a collaborative culture. Part of this process is the provision of time for teachers to analyze and discuss student data. Beginning with the notion of contrived collegiality where "specific bureaucratic procedures" are arranged to "get teachers working together" (Andy Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), the nurturing of trust and relationships will lead to positive outcomes for both the teacher and the student.

As a key feature of professional learning communities, collaboration is sometimes difficult to achieve as meeting times can be derailed. Key norms to guide the school's various team meetings include:
- Establishing standard operating procedures
- Efforts focused on school goals

- Focus on student learning
- Discuss and use data to inform teaching
- Sharing teacher learning across the school

4. *Establish a data mindset to monitor effective practices*

Data on student achievement offers invaluable support for teachers in making good decisions about instruction. To gain a deeper understanding of students' learning needs, teachers need to collect data from multiple sources, and then they need a system to help identify patterns in performance. It is through the interpreting of the data that teachers can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each child. As they examine the data teachers begin to create intervention plans to address areas of weakness.

An important part of analyzing the data is that it can lead teachers to develop propositions about the factors that affect students' learning. This is the prelude to defining ways of improving their own instructional practices and a vehicle to matching right teaching strategies to the needs of the learner.

While teacher observation processes (including "walkthroughs", observation checklists, self recording lessons and teacher summative reflections) are in place the introduction of using student performance data to guide teacher practice is gaining momentum in the school. The introduction of the Hattie formula as a catalyst for discussing effective practice has engaged staff in the debate on the impact of the teacher in raising student attainment.

5. *Create a coaching, mentoring and feedback regime*

Literature concludes that those principals, who get   the most out of their teams, spend a high proportion of their time and energy coaching   or mentoring others (Knight, 2013). While the role of mentoring is to manage career transition, coaching is used to evaluate a teacher's professional capabilities, allowing for genuine continuous professional development.

The key function of coaching and mentoring is to be results oriented. As a beginning point and built into the collaborative time is the intervention of a collegial peer coaching process. Teams of teachers, at a pre-conference, meet and discuss the elements that the teacher being observed wants to focus on. This is followed by the observation of the teacher. The important step is the post-conference session to discuss what worked well, what didn't work at all, and what could be changed or improved to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning.

Practicing and building the coaching/mentoring mechanics across the staff is the key focus for the school in the short term. Provision of professional development sessions and workshops and building a regular schedule for teacher coaching/mentoring framework to develop is a central part of the school development plan.

6. *Build a teacher as researcher culture*

Another mechanism to increase teacher leadership is to ensure that teachers reflect on their practice to learn from and improve it through continuing reflections and interactions. Having teachers inquire into why some teaching strategies impact on student learning within their classroom and others do not, engages teachers to be more discerning when planning their teaching and learning (Lynch et al., 2014).

Teachers with the research skills to share and critique their practice become key collaborative professionals in the change processes within school communities (S. Dinham & Crowther, 2011). It is evident that collaboration is a key catalyst in engaging teacher participation in researching their own practice in order to inform school improvement.

Conclusion

In this paper I have offered a practical overview of how literature has informed the development of a school improvement strategy that focuses on the role of the teacher in raising student achievement. Although in its infancy having a strategic approach to building teacher capacity has yielded promising outcomes.

Building a formalized teacher leadership model offers teachers a more concentrated approach to improving their own teaching and learning. It provides a transparent and focused approach to the role of the class teacher and offers a pathway for self-improvement.

Having teachers more closely connected to the planning and discussion on school improvement measures leads to improved outcomes for not only the students but also for the teachers themselves. Building such a pathway to an outstanding school is centred on creating a collaborative learning culture in your school. The consequence of such a strategy is the creation of teacher leaders within the school.

There is evidence in the literature to support notion that as teachers take on leadership functions, they not only improve their leadership skills and organizational practices but also change and improve their instructional practices (Barth, 2001). In providing more occasions for teachers to be exposed to observation and interaction with other teachers around instructional practice the greater opportunity schools have to improve student learning. Consequently, a key ingredient for school improvement is the promotion of teacher leadership and encouraging meaningful collaboration that is centred on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Schools should play a major factor in teachers' learning. They need to create continuous opportunities for reflection of teaching practice, foster dialogue, encourage inquiry, nurture collaboration and establish systems to share teaching experiences. In doing so they will not only support teacher growth but also strengthen the learning environment across all facets of school life.

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