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Leader Succession and Collective Efficacy: Conditions that Create Continuity in Transition

Tena M. Versland Elizabeth Quintana Jenny Malloy

Montana State University

Abstract: *Leader succession and its influence on a school's collective efficacy and school improvement processes is an under researched phenomenon. This embedded case study examined whether collective efficacy beliefs of staff changed with new principals and how school conditions and leader behaviors affected the schools' collective efficacy.*
Keywords: *Leader Succession, Collective Efficacy, School Culture*

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to understand whether or not changes in the collective efficacy of a school occurred with transition to new principal leadership. Teachers' perceptions about collective efficacy changes as well as the reasons for change were examined in terms of how new leaders' behaviors shaped school culture and collective efficacy. The significance of the study will help inform principal preparation programs about how to ready new leaders to successfully assume leadership roles in schools in order to promote collective efficacy and student achievement. The study may also inform central office personnel and school superintendents of the necessity for mentoring of new leaders as well as understanding the school level structures, policies and processes that will help ensure smooth, effective transitions during leader succession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective efficacy has been defined by Hoy and Miskel (2008) as, "the shared perception of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students" (p. 189). These researchers suggest that a culture of efficacy is a set of beliefs that give the school a distinctive identity. Hoy and Miskel (2008) tie the sources of collective teacher efficacy back to Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective state. However, they further postulate that the analysis and interpretation of the four sources of information is actually the key to developing collective efficacy. They suggest that teachers in a highly efficacious school will analyze how they can make the school successful, what challenges they must overcome and what resources they will need. When teachers accept the challenges and create goals to address the challenges, have strong organizational effort and persistence to the accomplishment of the goals, student achievement increases. Bandura's 1993 seminal research on collective efficacy and its relationship to math and reading achievement revealed two important findings: that student achievement is significantly and positively influenced by a school's collective efficacy, and that collective efficacy has a greater effect on student achievement than low socio-economic status

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tena M. Versland at tena.versland@montana.edu

aggregated at the school level. In a similar study of math and reading achievement and collective efficacy, Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk-Hoy (2000) found that collective efficacy again was a significant predictor of achievement and had an even greater effect on student achievement than other variables such as race, gender or socio-economic background. Finally, Ross, Hogaboam-Gray and Gray (2006) suggest that highly efficacious schools also create social climates that are more hospitable to parents, welcoming them to partner with school personnel for greater student success.

Although recent research has suggested ways that school leaders can influence a school's collective efficacy (Brinson & Steiner, 2007), neither the actions nor behaviors of leaders new to a school, nor the impacts of leader succession on highly efficacious schools have been clearly explained or thoroughly researched. We do know from Bandura (2000) that when teachers have the opportunity to influence instructionally relevant school decisions, collective efficacy is enhanced. Goddard and Skrla (2006) also found that the differences between school factors such as the experience of the faculty, the socioeconomic status of the school and prior student achievement accounted for less than 46% of differences in collective efficacy levels in schools. These findings suggest that further research into other factors that contribute to collective efficacy development, namely the behaviors and actions of school leaders, should be pursued.

In 2000, the National Association of Secondary School Principals surveyed district level superintendents about the availability of candidates for principal positions and found that indeed, a shortage of principal candidates existed across the K-12 spectrum. "This shortage occurred among rural schools (52%), suburban schools (45%), and urban schools (47%). These shortages of qualified principal candidates also occurred at all levels: elementary (47%), junior high/middle (55%), and senior high (55%)" (Quinn, 2002, p.1). NASSP attributes this failure to attract quality leaders to increased job stress, inadequate school funding, balancing school management with instructional leadership, new curriculum mandates, educating an increasingly diverse student population and being held accountable for constantly changing standards.

Not only are qualified candidates difficult to find, there is also concern about their mobility and the effect that leader transition has on school improvement processes and student achievement. A 2010 Wallace Foundation report found that typically, principal turnover occurs rapidly: once every 3 to 4 years (Seashore-Louis, Walhstrom, Leithwood & Anderson, 2010). This rapid principal turnover in schools has a modest, but significant effect on student achievement. Leader succession for whatever reason is a reality that requires more understanding in light of the complex and changing nature of schools and the pursuit of school improvement processes.

METHODOLOGY

This research study employed an embedded case design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures to understand the phenomenon of leader succession on school collective efficacy. Scholz and Tietje (2002) describe embedded case designs as "appropriate to organize different types of knowledge, such as different stakeholder or disciplinary perspectives" (p.4. 2002). Embedded case studies are also useful when the researcher wants to examine more than one unit of analysis in the case (Yin, 2009). This embedded case study sought to understand school collective efficacy through the lens of leader succession by examining new leader behaviors, teacher perceptions of cultural change and school enabling structures such as policies and practices. Two criteria became the basis for selection of the case site. The

researchers first identified schools that had previously measured collective efficacy using Goddard's Collective Efficacy Scale Short Form (2002). The Collective Efficacy Scale Short Form contains 12 items measured on a six point Likert scale and assesses the extent to which a school faculty believes in its conjoint capability to have a positive effect on student learning. The scale's alpha coefficient of reliability is reported at .96. In addition to conducting previous measures of collective efficacy, schools had to meet the second criterion of this study which was having had recent turnover in principal leadership, or leader succession. Once identified as possible case study sites, schools were asked to conduct a second measure of the collective efficacy of the school under new leadership using the Goddard's Collective Efficacy Scale Short Form (2002).

The researchers identified a school district in a Western state that had experienced principal leadership changes in a high percentage of its schools during a period of 18 months. Since collective efficacy measures were previously tested in most schools in that district as part of another study, those particular schools became the case study site for this research. In the initial collective efficacy measurements from 2011, School A had a collective efficacy score that was higher than 97% of other schools measuring collective efficacy on the same scale. School B, in the same school district, reported a collective efficacy score higher than 58% of schools using the same measure. In pursuing this research, four research questions guided this case study:

1. Has the collective efficacy of the school changed during leader succession?
2. How do behaviors of new leaders influence the school's collective efficacy?
3. Do teachers perceive changes associated with leader succession as influencing school culture?
4. What, if any, school enabling structures contribute to changes in a school's collective efficacy during leader succession?

The two sets of scores from the schools' collective efficacy surveys were used to determine whether or not collective efficacy had changed during leader succession and to what degree it had changed. Participation rates in the collective efficacy measures performed in 2011, saw 24 people complete the scales at School A and 32 people complete them in School B. The 2013 surveys were completed by 21 people at School A and 37 people at School B. In addition to Goddard's Collective Efficacy Scale Short Scale (2002), teachers were asked three open-ended questions about perceptions of cultural change, leader behaviors and enabling structures that might also have contributed to school collective efficacy. Using teacher responses from the three open ended questions, teachers were identified to interview about their perceptions of how the overall nature of leader succession (including changes in culture, new leader behaviors and enabling structures) had influenced the school collective efficacy. Nine teachers from both School A and School B were chosen for semi-structured interviews. The individual survey items from the Collective Efficacy Scale Short Form (2002) as well responses from the three open-ended questions became the basis for the design of a qualitative interview protocol which was used to further understand the conditions that underpinned the schools' collective efficacy under new leaders.

FINDINGS

Results from the collective efficacy scales given to teachers indicate that there were noticeable changes in collective efficacy in both School A and School B during the 18 month period associated with leader succession. School A, which had only two years earlier reported a collective efficacy score higher than 97% of other schools using the same measure reported a drastic drop (97% to 57%) in its collective efficacy. Conversely, School B, which had earlier

reported collective efficacy higher than 58% of other schools, enjoyed a gain in collective efficacy from 58% to 65%.

COMPETENCE AND COMMUNICATION BUILD TRUST AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

The qualitative data analysis determined that teachers identified that the new leaders' abilities to develop trusting relationships with staff were crucial in preserving high levels of collective efficacy in schools. School A experienced a significant decline in collective efficacy due to reported loss of trust in the leader's management skills and that leader's ability to enter into relationship building activities with staff. Teachers perceived that leader competence in handling managerial tasks such as student discipline, budgeting and planning, and creating an effective master schedule were elements that contributed to the development of trust. When the master schedule resulted in overcrowding of students in classes with no apparent contingencies for relief, teachers in the previously high efficacious school (School A) lost faith in the new principal's ability to organize and carry out one of the most important functions of instructional leadership for placing students in classes and supporting instruction. School B, identified as possessing average or moderate levels of collective efficacy on the 2011 measure, reported in the 2013 survey that the school's collective efficacy was higher than it was previously, as faculty willingness to engage in school improvement activities and collaborative programmatic and instructional opportunities had increased with teachers' perceptions about the new principal's management skills and relationship building capacity and focus.

Communication skills in asking for and utilizing staff input, as well as seeking to develop teacher expertise across the school, were viewed as leader behaviors that either inhibited or promoted the establishment of trusting relationships. At School A, the principal held short staff meetings where information was disseminated, but no time was devoted to seeking teacher input about issues. Although meetings were short, teachers felt that two-way communication was not encouraged and therefore their ideas and opinions were not valued. They believed that their perspective about what had worked in the school previously could have helped them with some of the challenges they were experiencing, but there was no time set aside to engage them in problem solving activities. Rather than increasing levels of collaboration and sharing among staff, teachers reported that they felt more isolated from their colleagues than they had previously been under different leadership. Conversely in School B, teachers described how time was regularly scheduled and devoted to all staff discussions about instructional issues such as standardized testing, program and policy changes and resource allocation. In addition to these kinds of staff meetings, committees were developed and chaired by teachers so that the recommendations that came forth about changes in school policy and practice were driven by teachers and fully utilized their perspectives and instructional expertise.

Teachers in both schools also identified enabling structures such as budgets and funding, master schedule and school calendar development, time for professional, collaborative learning and study, and thorough and relevant communication and support from central office as enabling structures that could influence collective efficacy during leader transition. In School B, teachers felt that their new leader advocated for School B's staff and programs with central office personnel even when doing so may have created tension between School B's new leader and central office administrators. Teachers described their leader as "championing our causes" and "advocating for what's best for kids, regardless of money issues." The new leader at School A was viewed in the opposite light. Teachers there felt that School A leader "gave up easily" and "used the idea of 'budget' as an excuse" not to pursue ideas and programs faculty felt were necessary to continued growth. Additionally, while teachers in School B reported feeling that

their leader strived for greater transparency in communication between central office administrators and teachers, School A teachers lamented that they were often "left out of the loop" and felt isolated from what was occurring in the district as a whole.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications for this study are threefold. First, relationships and relationship building must be the priority for the new leaders in highly efficacious schools. Understanding first what works and what needs work through conversations and teacher input helps to build relationships. Second, new leaders must recognize where to devote energy and time. Managing all aspects of school processes effectively and efficiently signals a level of competence that teachers count on for stability and consistency. Finally, leader succession and collective efficacy can be affected by the enabling structures present in schools such as schedules, budgets and communication. Central and district level administrators should understand that the structures and processes that are common to leader succession and should strive to improve communication transparency and advocacy for schools during leader transition. For educational leadership faculty, continued attention to encouraging aspiring principals to master relationship building and behaviors that promote trust, as well as understanding task prioritization are important takeaways to stress within preparation programs.

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