Building School Leader Capacity for Impact

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Building Leadership Capacity for Impact

This qualitative case study centers on building principal leadership capacity in northern Michigan schools within Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBAISD). The authors were part of a team from TBAISD who developed a leadership curriculum to use for meetings throughout 2016-2020. The researchers then conducted a study analyzing the results of the professional learning series using semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and a participant needs survey. Our interest was to identify the impact and transfer of learning in these principal meetings.

Identifying the Problem

K-12 achievement gaps either widened or continued to stay the status quo as evidenced by state assessments. We hypothesize this may be because school improvement is often reduced to a checklist of compliance activities, as opposed to identifying real change that could improve student learning. Building the capacity of school leaders requires collaboration with peers, leadership coaching, and learning activities embedded through onsite coaching.

Background and Context

Significant attention, study, and research has focused on leadership development, leadership behavior, and leader skills. A current trend addresses leadership type, as researchers such as Northouse (2016) first identify a type of leadership style, then describe that style's strengths and challenges to pinpoint situations requiring differing styles of leadership or decision-making processes. Regardless of leadership style or type, it is evident that today's leader must focus on improving teacher effectiveness and student learning. Although a teacher has the single greatest impact on student achievement, a principal is primary to the effectiveness of the teacher on having a positive impact (Grissom et al., 2021).

Michael Fullan's (2012) leadership research investigates the kind of capital needed to successfully implement change. Fullan posits that a leader needs to identify and support three capitals: social, human, and professional. Chandler and Frank (2015) take this further in their publication for the Michigan Department of Education, "Blueprint for Turnaround," by listing specific evidence of practice within each capital and providing assessment tools for implementation.

Other researchers, including those supported by the Wallace Foundation (Davis, 2016), believe that building and district leaders need a more rigorous and aligned preparation program. Assessment frameworks also enter the research landscape of effective leadership (Learning Sciences International, 2015; Center for Educational Leadership, 2013). Additionally, the professional learning organization Learning Forward (2016) developed a preparation program entitled "Executive Leadership." We incorporated both the Marzano evaluation tool and Learning Forward's standards of professional learning into our series, described later in this manuscript. The Marzano evaluation tool is consistently used across the TBAISD region and the standards of professional learning helped to guide our intentions of format and design.

Missing in current research is the notion of building leadership capacity in building and district leaders who already work in a school leadership position. How does one help this leader

take the research and theoretical knowledge and apply it in the day-to-day experiences through job-embedded learning?

In response to this increasing need of implementing sustainable change and clearly aligning the path of leadership to student achievement or student learning, the researchers, in collaboration with a team from the TBAISD, developed the Building Leader Capacity Series (BLCS). Five, seasoned, K-12 administrators, along with the authors, coached and mentored 17 entry-level and experienced school leaders in districts within the TBAISD. These districts partnered with TBAISD administrators to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness with varied success. Challenges included leadership capacity, support from district office, and transiency.

Outcomes of this series included the following:

- Identify a school leader's role in maintaining a data-driven focus on student learning and improvement of instruction (Data-Driven Focus on Student Learning).
- Provide continuous support for a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum).
- Establish a collaborative school-planning process that incorporates the use of data to make decisions and monitor progress on indicators of success (Cooperation and Collaboration).
- Identify strategies for analyzing the political environment of a building and build coalitions to support needed reform (School Climate).
- Identify and use effective strategies when maintaining productive relationships with central office administration, labor unions, the media, the school community, and staff (School Climate and Cooperation and Collaboration).
- Maintain a focus on student learning when allocating resources (Resource Allocation).
- Be prepared to lead an effective leadership team (Cooperation and Collaboration).

The professional learning sessions occurred monthly, with prioritized time for peer collaboration and job-embedded coaching. However, this structure changed yearly, as dictated by the senior administrators of TBAISD, as well as by the regional superintendents who wished their principals to be out of the buildings as little as possible. The series emphasized building capacity through job-embedded learning as participants worked through relevant problems of practice via data sets in their own buildings and districts. They also learned how to assess observational and artifact data, as well as quantifiable data such as standardized test scores.

Following the BLCS, the authors used semi-structured interviews, artifact analysis, and surveys to conduct a case study, identifying the degree to which the participants transferred their learning to practice. This study was guided by the following three focus questions (two of which were developed by Michael John Koonce in his dissertation, *Principal Engagement in the Professional Development Process: The Identification of Barriers, Resources, and Supports):*

1. What factors or conditions serve as barriers to principal engagement in the professional development process?
2. What are principals' perceptions of resources or supports that would lead to increased engagement in the professional development process?
3. How does leadership behavior support a culture of learning?

Conceptual Framework

We used Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) because it theorizes that learning occurs in a social context (Bandura, 1991). According to Bandura, "SCT is based on the concept that learning is affected by cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors" (p. 1). The goal of SCT is to explain how people regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be maintained over time (Behavior Change Models, 2019).

The design and evolution of the Building Leadership Capacity Series (BLCS) curriculum illustrated the intent and followed the tenets of SCT theory by including direct experiences like job-embedded professional learning, onsite coaching, and collaboration with peers. Social Learning Theory also posits that learning through experiences is not obtained by observation only (Bandura, 2001). Rather, we used three criteria developed by Bandura to ascertain how people manage their own behaviors and interactions for learning to occur:

1. Human Agency: an individual or group intentionally uses time, energy and thought to change behavior (Bandura, 2001).
2. Self-Regulation: the ability of an individual to "self-generate thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Boekaerts, 2005, p. 14).
3. Self-Efficacy: a person's belief to have the ability to control the events and actions in their life (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy is created in an individual by experiencing "enactive mastery experiences, vicarious (observational) experiences, social persuasions and physiological and psychological states" (Bandura, 1997).

Leader Behavior

School leaders remain one of the most important factors influencing school success and student learning (Grissom et al., 2021.) The Wallace Foundation published a 20-year synthesis study indicating that those school districts able to move principal effectiveness from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile influenced student achievement across the whole school by nearly three months in mathematics and English language arts (Grissom et al., 2021). Most school leaders would embrace the opportunity to have this impact on student achievement. Yet to do so, leaders must engage in certain habits of practice. Researchers Brown and Psencik (2017) refer to principals who cultivate the mindset of "continuous improvement as learning leaders" (p. 2). Learning leaders embrace the theory that adults who engage in learning to improve their practice can positively impact student learning (Brown & Psencik, 2017).

The 2021 synthesis (Grissom et al., 2021) study identified three skill areas principals need in order to be highly successful: people, instruction, and organization. From these three skill areas, four leadership behaviors must be cultivated.

Principals are "multipliers" when they commit to their own and others' professional learning. They model the professional learning expected of themselves and others in the school (Brown & Psencik, 2017). Principals who expect teachers and students to embrace learning hold themselves accountable with their own personal learning plan and engage in learning opportunities with peers (Brown & Psencik, 2017). They also value the importance of collaborating with others in teams and use reflection as a tool to gain clarity about the learning impact and application to daily work.

Job-embedded Professional Learning

Ask building leaders why they became administrators, and the answer will be akin to, "I wanted to make a bigger impact beyond my classroom." Despite this similarity, each administrator has their own strengths and challenges. Some may excel in the skill of instruction but be unable to manage adult learning. Others may be excellent managers but struggle with the skill of teaching and learning. These differences among leaders in skill sets and experiences led us to create a professional learning series that embraced job-embedded learning.

Job-embedded learning occurs in the context of the school day with a direct connection to student learning. It is when professional learning occurs "on the job" with coaching and mentoring as the leader is working on the unique challenges of his or her building. However, job-embedded learning for principals happens very rarely. Principals tend to prioritize professional learning for their teachers, and not themselves. And if principals do attend professional learning with their teachers, their learning must compete with staying fully present to events happening in the building. Or, if a leader attends a workshop or other form of isolated professional learning outside their building or district, learning transfer may not occur, because their own context is unique. Unless the leader has frequent coaching or side-by-side learning, what was learned in the workshop will be forgotten in approximately three days. (Knight, 2021).

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The opportunity to participate in the BLCS was provided to every principal in the TBAISD. All principals who applied to the series were accepted. Therefore, the recruitment process was equitable and open to all regional principals. It was our expectation to recruit a minimum of 13 principals, and, in the end, 17 building leaders participated to varying degrees.

Methods

This study utilized a case study design (Yin, 2009) which included multiple data sources. This design enabled us to examine how principals utilized new knowledge they acquired from BLCS to enact instructional leadership at their school. As part of the data collection process, principals participated in monthly meetings and agreed to be interviewed about their experiences.

The cumulative case study design and structure of the professional learning in the BLCS meetings evolved over the course of four years. Data and artifact collection focused on if the principals took the learning back to their day-to-day leadership practice.

In year one, principals were invited to participate in monthly meetings. Each monthly meeting was a professional learning session that emphasized the importance of transformational, instructional, and servant leadership. The facilitators designed the learning activities using whole and small group strategies.

In year two, meetings took on a slight variation based on end-of-year feedback. Principals still met monthly, but we added additional structures that required principals to participate in triad groups and job-embedded coaching.

In year three, as a result of feedback from participants in years one and two, a "virtual manager meeting" was added to the schedule, along with intentional job-embedded coaching. A virtual manager meeting was a gathering in which managerial topics and/or administrivia filled the agenda, as opposed to intentional professional learning. Intentional job-embedded learning included a TBAISD former administrator coaching three to five school building leaders and shaping the experience based on the need of the field administrator. For example, one principal might have only needed a visit and consultation every other week, but another may need their mentor in the building three times a week.

Year four of the BLCS series changed significantly, as the focus of the BLCS series emphasized the importance of formative assessment in classroom instruction. The professional learning in this final year required participating principals to invite teacher leaders to scheduled sessions and participate as a leadership team. The content and application of the new learning was delivered and facilitated by a consultant. The consultant worked directly with all of the principals and leadership teams at whole group sessions and visited school sites to collect evidence of use and implementation in classrooms.

Primary Data Sources

The use of semistructured interviews was a source of data for this study (Seidman, 2006). The semistructured interviews (lasting approximately 30-60 minutes each) were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview responses were scripted and those who were interviewed were given pseudonyms to protect their identification. Data from the recordings and interview notes were kept on a password-protected computer at a locked university office, and the notes and audio recordings from the interviews conducted were kept in a locked file cabinet that only we had access to.

Themes began to emerge from the scripted interviews that we categorized under each research question. If more than two principals who were interviewed had a similar response to a question, we would consider that to be a pattern worth noting.

We conducted the semistructured, one-on-one interviews with each principal in the BLCS following the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school years. During these interviews, we asked closed- and open-ended questions related to the research questions (Creswell, 2015). The spacing of the interviews were designed to impact the thinking and practice of principals over time, which also allowed us to monitor patterns and dispositions of principals for a specified timeframe. The instrument used to conduct the interviews was the Concerns Based Adoption Model (American Institutes of Research, n.d.). This tool helps to understand the systematic implementation of a concept, initiative or disposition, as well as look at the level of implementation. We wanted to know if BLCS removed barriers for participants' professional learning. The CBAM instrument is a generic construct, so the procedures and findings can be applied across innovations (Hall et al., 2006).

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources included:
- BLCS materials and artifacts to influence disposition and capacity of participants (e.g. syllabi, presentations, printed materials, session lessons, participant artifacts from sessions)

- Participant-generated artifacts
- Field notes and analytic documents captured before, during and after data collection
- An anonymous survey administered at the end of the BLCS series each year. The survey is an instrument that was generated and designed to elicit principal feedback on the perception of the "quality" of the professional learning experience.

Our role was twofold. Both authors assumed the researcher role and facilitated the professional learning. To reduce bias, we used the following questions to evaluate our perceptions:

1. Is the account based on direct perception? If the answer is no, then both co-investigators will treat the data with caution.
2. Is there any reason to be suspicious of the data collected due to values and biases that may be present because of the dual role of the co-investigators and whether it is self-serving and therefore regarded with caution?
3. Are both co-investigators accurate listeners?

Timeline

The BLCS series began in September of 2016 and lasted four years. Our case study of the learning transfer from the series ran for four consecutive school years and completed in 2019-2020.

Findings

The latest Wallace Foundation funded research (Grissom et al., 2021) shares compelling evidence of the effects a building-level leader has on school climate, teacher performance, and student achievement, but it does little to describe the professional learning needs of these building leaders. Our case study explored the manner in which these principals are able to learn and grow into effective leaders. As mentioned, we primarily focused on three questions. Themes we discovered in the data included the importance of job-embedded learning, as well as the desire for increased collaboration routines among building leaders, and the need for superintendents or principal supervisors to shift their practice to better support school principals.

Question 1: What factors or conditions serve as barriers to principal engagement in the professional development process?

Finding 1: Superintendents who did not support principals' time spent in professional learning were a barrier to learning transfer.

When principals felt their time spent out of the building was not supported by their superintendents, they experienced added stress. In an interview in year three, one principal reflected:

What we don't have right now is a way for, as a building, to get my leadership team together to meet with some specialists supporting us. Because I can't pull all the administrators and top people out of my building in a day. So, some way to support a structure of building my leadership as a team...is kind of the next step that I wanna focus

on that we weren't able to do this year and...and I don't foresee us ever being able to take a Tuesday during the week and pull out my counselor, myself, my principal, maybe a top teacher and really build that building-wide leadership.

In addition, when principals returned to their buildings from a professional learning session, multiple phone and email messages awaited them and sometimes, fires that needed to be put out. One participant stated in an interview in 2017, "When I go to those meetings, I usually have a ton of emails waiting...that it was hard to take things back." The stress of having been out of the building put the learning of the day on the back burner, so new concepts had neither the time nor space to grow.

A constraint in this study occurred around the value superintendents appeared to place on BLCS. Many principals felt as if their superintendent did not support them taking time away from their buildings. We also found that, if a superintendent was far-removed from building-level tasks, such as teacher evaluation or school improvement, they would not support the priority. This support could look like providing time and resources for the principal to provide effective feedback to their teachers, or removing some responsibilities from a principal's long to-do list.

Question 2: What are principals' perceptions of resources or supports that would lead to increased engagement in the professional development process?

Finding 2: Time spent with leadership coaches and interacting with peers positively impacted learning transfer.

Leadership coaches were placed in a school in nine cases, and, when this occurred, so did job-embedded learning. Each coach was a former experienced building or district leader who, depending on the willingness of the district and building principal, would spend time in that principal's building. The coach was able to help the principal prioritize "fires," give effective feedback to teachers on their teaching, and support building-level initiatives or challenge areas. The amount of time a coach spent with a principal varied based on the needs of the school and leader. For example, one coach was consistently in a single district three days a week and was responsible for supporting two building leaders. Another coach was in a single district once a week and coached five building leaders. A third coach primarily spent his time with the superintendent helping to craft agendas for meetings he had with building-level leaders to improve instruction within his district.

An additional support for the participants was the time spent with peers at the BLCS training. For example, one elementary school principal reflected:

Well, I guess the impact it has had for me is just time with other professionals to think about the things that really do matter and are important and why we do what we do. So that collegiality time around you know, schooling. How you want school to be in theory and why you're there. So that's been nice to be able to just take a minute and think about those things and reflect on those pieces of your day. I've appreciated that.

Time spent with peers allowed participants to hear how a fellow principal handled a situation. For example, many of the principals indicated that they wanted to see firsthand how a

fellow principal implemented an initiative or piece of legislation. They also mentioned wanting to visit classrooms in other buildings and felt this would help them better understand instruction.

Another elementary school principal had this to say about professional learning communities (PLCs):

> We've talked about how to do learning walks and why it's so important to be in and observing each other and supporting each other. That fed into our PLCs and one of the things that my staff reflected on, that they wanted to do for next year was that they wanted to change how we did PLCs because they wanted it to be more focused. They wanted it to be like a purpose for when they meet and that there was data that they were going to look at. And I'm like, "Oh, those are all great ideas, that's really what PLCs are supposed to have!"

A reflection of the value principals placed on attending the BLCS meetings occurred when more principals showed up to a session than had earlier indicated. They found value in the learning and the collaboration. This was mentioned in all of the interviews each year. There were also increased levels of honest conversations among the participants, which a number of participants mentioned in the interviews.

Question 3: How does leadership behavior support a culture of learning?

Finding 3: Principals valued their time spent learning in the leadership series, but an immediate culture change in their buildings did not occur.

As mentioned before, many principals in our study valued the time for their own professional learning, but they also found the time out of their building to be stressful. An elementary principal suggested:

> Some of the reasons why I don't use the stuff is when I walk back in the building, reality is greeting near a door, and so all those things that you want to get to take a back seat to the people that you're met with you know, it's just reality, I guess, is the way to put it.

We found that principals did speak with others about what they learned in BLCS, but they were unable to transfer what they learned in a way that improved learning. This was either because there were competing priorities, or they were not sure how to implement something learned and wished to see it in action in another building.

We also found that increasing leadership capacity in principals through professional learning meant educating superintendents about its importance. Superintendents in the region need to receive the same message as the building principals to better support their principals.

Implications for Practice

We discovered the importance of professional learning for building leaders to support their growth and effectiveness, and, in particular, emphasized the importance of job-embedded learning. Regardless of leader behavior and skill management, school leaders need the mindset

of the learning leader, as well as support and resources, to include practical application of skills into their own building context.

Our suggestions for building leadership capacity include:

- Job-embedded learning: Leaders need to learn from their own problem(s) of practice in the context of their own building and district.
- Connect teacher improvement and capacity building with principal practice and school improvement. This can be done through an intentional practice of continuous school improvement. A strategy of this is a well-defined observational practice, such as district and/or school-based rounds in which instruction is examined and discussed collaboratively.
- Balance organizational management and instructional leadership. The two are essential to the job of principal. However, focusing on one over the other will not yield good results.
- Establish learning-focused partnerships in which principals have coaches to help support them wherever they may be in leader development.

Conclusion

A principal is the second leading indicator of student performance behind the classroom teacher (Grissom et al., 2021). Similarly, when there is high principal turnover, or a less-effective principal leading a building, student achievement is negatively impacted (Grissom et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to support building-level leaders with professional learning that is meaningful and will bring results of increased leader performance.

In designing the curriculum of the BLCS, we took prior research into account. The Series was written and delivered with Learning Forward's Professional Learning Standards as a guide (Learning Forward, 2011). For example, we increased the participation in job-embedded learning, as well as included coaching for newer leaders.

Grissom et al. (2021) found that school leaders should be skilled in instruction, management, and development of people, as well organization management. When school leaders support instruction, they focus on teaching and learning throughout the school day, know how to provide effective and structured feedback on the instruction, and recognize the need for quality and impactful professional learning.

Effective school leaders build positive school climates through collaborative routines (including professional learning communities), manage a school building to ensure a safe and orderly school environment, and intentionally manage resources. This is accomplished through data-driven decision-making and prioritizing resources with teaching and learning at the forefront. These same skills and behaviors were the driving forces of the content we delivered in the BLCS, as well as the goal areas we encouraged the participants to focus on in their growth plans.

With the passage of multiple pieces of legislation and higher teacher and leader accountability, the past decade has brought an increased focus on a school principal serving as an instructional leader (Grissom et al., 2021). Although leader preparation programs tend to this calling, it is important to increase the effectiveness of those principals already in the field.

Leaders matter. However, we cannot assume that once a person becomes a leader, the learning stops. It does not. Leaders need just as much support, care, and professional learning as teachers.

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