Relationships as a Lever for Improved Student Outcomes: Reflections from a Leadership Preparation Partnership

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Abstract: Effective leadership preparation includes meaningful, experiential opportunities. This article details an effort to provide these opportunities through a school-university partnership. Through involvement in a semester-long action research project, a cohort of teacher leaders increased academic growth for selected students at their middle school while developing their own leadership skills. The focus of this partnership work was an action research project aimed at strengthening student-teacher relationships as a lever for improving student academic outcomes. The partnership provided a vehicle to build the capacity of aspiring leaders in the district and to improve the university's educational leadership preparation program.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed:

Essential 3: Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need

Essential 4: A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants

At universities across the United States, many leadership preparation programs are undergoing revisions aimed at better preparing leaders to do the complex work of school improvement. These revisions are rooted in the alignment of program content, pedagogy, and field-based experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017; Murphy, 2002). Often, program content and field experiences are integrated around a problem-based curriculum drawn from actual school and district challenges. This problem-based approach incorporates inquiry methods, engagement in a learning community, and reflection (Mintrop & Zumpa, 2019; Orr, 2006). District and university partnerships are a necessary component of quality leadership preparation programs, as a means for offering rich, experiential opportunities. These partnerships also serve as a critical component of program design (Young et al., 2002). Through collaboration, inquiry, and innovation, leadership preparation programs are preparing leaders to meet the challenges of leading high performing schools.

The project described in this article addresses NAPDS Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading. The project focused on a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry. Within the school-university partnership, specific needs of the school were identified, potential strategies were explored, and a plan for improvement was created. NAPDS Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation was also a focus. Project participants (teacher leaders and university faculty) made a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge. Throughout this collaborative action research project, all participants maintained reflective journals and openly shared experiences and insights to add to the collective knowledge of the group.

Setting the Scene

In an effort to develop reform-minded leaders, capable of and committed to improving the quality of schools, our institution focused on strengthening the partnership with our local district. Working with one Central Florida district, we secured school improvement grant funding through the state department of education to offer leadership preparation programs on site at schools identified as underperforming. Our partner district identified a small cohort of teacher leaders at each school who would progress through coursework and field experiences together. These teachers earned credit for courses and eventually earned a Masters of Education in Educational Leadership as well as Florida Educational Leadership Certification.

The cohort model was one of the powerful practices we incorporated as we sought to ground the program in adult learning theory. We also incorporated experiential learning, structured dialogue, and purposeful reflection (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Wenger, 1998). As the coordinator of the program, my role was to guide the inquiry process, facilitate discussion, and provide resources and support.

The School Improvement Cycle

This article details my work with a cohort of six teacher leaders at a rural middle school in Central Florida serving students in grades six through eight. Our project spanned the course of one semester. During this semester, the participating teacher leaders earned four credit hours for the course. The school had been designated as a turnaround school and was in danger of being closed by the state. District leaders in our partner district were seeking a way to utilize these teacher leaders in the current,

pressing improvement work at this school while also preparing them for future administrative roles.

The Continuous School Improvement Framework developed by Bernhardt (2016) served as the basis of our collaborative work. This framework required the collection and analysis of multiple data sources, including data related to demographics, data related to perceptions, data related to student learning, and data related to school processes. Using this data, a picture of the current state of the school was created. School needs were also identified and prioritized. With these needs as the focus, a vision and goals were created to move the school from its current state to the realized vision.

We began with an examination of multiple measures of data. We started by asking, *Who are the students we serve?* We included demographic data related to race, ethnicity, gender, English proficiency, enrollment, and attendance. We then examined student perceptions, asking, *What is the experience of our students at this school?* We used surveys, interviews, and observations as we sought to understand students' perceptions. We took a deep dive into student learning data, asking, *How are our students performing?* This data included both formative and summative assessments. We then examined school processes, asking, *How are our actions, processes, and programs contributing to student success?* Finally, we looked at the intersections of these categories. For example, we questioned how the perceptions and experiences of specific subgroups of students might be related to their achievement. We also questioned how our own practices and processes may help or hinder their achievement. These powerful conversations led to a clearer picture of the current state of the school.

Our next task was to identify a problem of practice we could address. Using the guidelines for an appropriate problem of practice, we chose a problem that was based on the evidence we examined, related to teaching and learning, within our control, and realistic (Boudet et al., 2015; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). All of the problems of practice we considered were small in scale and specific, but we aimed to choose a problem that, if improved, could lead to progress on broader goals for the school and district.

Through our data conversations, the cohort of teacher leaders had identified a group of students receiving intensive, academic interventions for two years but showing no learning gains. Looking at perception data for this group as well as school processes, cohort members questioned the academic engagement of this group of students. After considering and revising several options, we stated our problem of practice as, *Teachers are not focused enough on student engagement when working with struggling students*. Our next step was to review literature and external resources that could inform our action plan.

Student-Teacher Relationships as a Lever

Students' feelings about school are one predictor of academic engagement. According to Valeski and Stipek (2001), the three variables which influence feelings about school are classroom structure, academic performance, and relationships with teachers. Teacher-student interactions are at the center of all three variables. In classrooms characterized by supportive student-teacher interactions, students experience higher levels of autonomy, supportive peer relationships, and positive emotions (Martin & Collie, 2019). The quality of student-teacher relationships is crucial in the transitional, middle school years, when a normative decline in the quality of relationships with adults as well as a decline in academic engagement are common (Duong et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). A close relationship with a teacher can be a protective factor during early adolescence.

Our review of the literature confirmed that improving student-teacher relationships could be a lever for increasing academic engagement, and therefore, improving students' academic outcomes. We believed the nature and quality of student-teacher relationships could be assessed and improved with increased teacher knowledge and skills related to classroom interactions (Duong et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2012). The cohort of teacher leaders decided to intentionally focus on improving relationships as an intervention for the targeted students.

The Plan

The six participating teacher leaders each chose two students in their current classes who had been on the school's targeted intervention list for two or more years. See Table 1 for the self-reported demographic data of participants. The teacher leaders began by examining current and cumulative data on each student, recording data related to discipline, attendance, achievement scores, and grades. They also completed a Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) for each student. The STRS was developed by Pianta (2001) as a tool for measuring a teacher's perception of his or her relationship with a student. The STRS is a 28-item self-report that uses a 5-point Likert Scale to gauge a teacher's perception of the closeness or conflict in the relationship, the teacher's perceptions of a student's interactions with the teacher, and the teacher's perceptions of the student's feelings toward him or her.

Armed with the cumulative data and the STRS assessment results for each student, we planned the structure of our weekly seminars. We envisioned the seminars as cycles comprised of digging into the literature on a topic central to strengthening relationships, discussing the topic, planning action steps, and then debriefing in the following seminar (See Figure 1). This dig, discuss, do, and debrief is similar to the recurring steps of a traditional action research cycle: identify a general idea; do fact finding concerning the idea; design a tentative overall plan and first action step; take first action step; evaluate; revise plan; take second action step (Solis & Gordon, 2020). As an additional source for reflection, the teacher leaders kept a journal related to their interactions with each student. Our initial topics would focus on interpersonal interactions, including connection and trust.

Table 1. Self-Reported Demographic Data of Participants

Teacher Leader Demographics	*Students Selected by Each Teacher Leader*
Teacher 1- Female, White, 10 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, Black, age 14 Student 2- Female, Black, age 14
Teacher 2- Male, Black, 5 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, Hispanic, age 14 Student 2- Female, Black, age 14
Teacher 3- Female, Hispanic, 9 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, Hispanic, age 14 Student 2- Male, Black, age 14
Teacher 4- Male, White, 8 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, White, age 13 Student 2- Male, White, age 14
Teacher 5- Male, White, 3 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, Black, age 15 Student 2- Female, Black, age 14
Teacher 6- Male, White, 6 years teaching experience	Student 1- Male, White, age 13 Student 2- Female, Black, age 13

Connection

We began by digging into the literature on connection and found John Gottman's research on responding to bids as a pathway to stronger relationships. Bids for connection and responses to those bids are the building blocks of relationships. A bid is any signal that a student wants to connect. A bid could be a comment, question or gesture.

According to Gottman (2001), teachers respond to bids in three ways. First, they can respond by turning toward, which involves responding in an affirming, positive way. Teachers turn toward a bid by listening, asking questions, and giving words of encouragement.

Second, they can respond by turning against, which is characterized by responding in a degrading or argumentative way. Teachers turn against a bid when they use words or gestures that make a student feel devalued or rejected. The third way to respond is turning away, which entails ignoring the bid. Teachers may ignore a bid intentionally, but often turning away happens because of distractions. Turning against obviously damages relationships, but consistently turning away can be just as harmful. Turning toward bids builds trust and strengthens connection. It is impossible to turn toward the bids of every student all of the time, but turning toward as much as possible creates better relationships (Gottman, 2001).

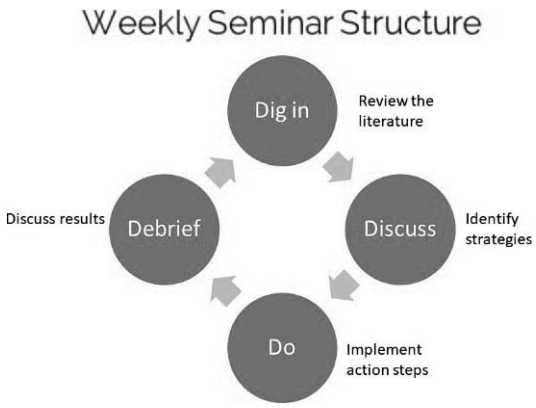

Figure 1. Weekly Seminar Structure

We then agreed on our action steps for the next week. The teacher leaders would simply notice and respond to their targeted students' bids for connection as often as possible. They would also record notes in their journals. As we debriefed the following week, the teacher leaders expressed surprise at the effectiveness of this seemingly small action. They noted in their journals an increase in most students' willingness to comply with their directives and an increase in students' willingness to ask for assistance with tasks. One teacher commented on the ease of implementing the action, "I thought it was going to be impossible and take so much time, but it was quick and easy." Although the focus on bids appeared to be having an influence on trust, we decided to focus explicitly on trust as the next topic.

Trust

Digging into the literature revealed the necessity of trust for student learning and growth. When there is trust in a classroom, students are willing to share ideas, risk making mistakes and ask for help. When trust is lacking, students spend their energy being hypervigilant and protecting themselves from potential embarrassment or rejection (Tschannen-Moran, 2020). Researchers, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) identified five components which impact students' trust in teachers:

- Benevolence – Students believe their well-being is the teacher's priority
- Honesty – Students believe teachers tell them the truth and operate with integrity
- Transparency – Students believe teachers share relevant information and provide a rationale for decisions
- Reliability – Students believe teachers are dependable, follow through on promises, and also respond in a calm and consistent way
- Competency – Students believe teachers are capable of managing the class and meeting their learning needs

We decided our action step would include being mindful of these five components of trust, and emphasizing them in both actions and interactions. The teacher leaders agreed to

intentionally respond to students in ways that build trust and record notes in their journals. During our debrief, they cited specific examples of their efforts. One teacher described an interaction in which she reassured a student of her benevolence, "I kept reminding my student that I am on his side – I've got his back." Another teacher emphasized his competence with a student, "I told her I've been teaching math for a long time, and I can definitely teach a smart kid like her." We agreed to continue our focus on connection and trust for a few weeks before turning our attention to pedagogical interactions. We would begin that shift with a focus on goal setting.

Goal Setting

Students who lack confidence or competence in a subject may avoid engagement in academic tasks. This avoidance comes with an opportunity cost to the student because engagement is a critical component of improved academic outcomes (Stevenson & Mussalow, 2019). Goal setting is one strategy teachers can use to initiate and sustain engagement.

Goal setting can lead to increased student motivation and academic achievement if goals are specific, accompanied by a plan of action, and monitored frequently (Dotson, 2016). Once a specific, short-term goal is determined, students benefit from identifying action steps related to the goal. For example, a goal of mastering new vocabulary words for a reading unit could be accompanied by the creation and daily use of flashcards.

We decided our actions related to goal setting would include talking with the students to determine the goal, identifying actions needed to achieve the goal, and making a plan for monitoring progress toward the goal. During our debrief, the teacher leaders expressed concerns about the students' limiting beliefs interfering with their progress. This concern was illustrated by one student's reason for not consistently following the action steps related to her goal, "I'm just not good at math." Before moving to our focus on feedback, we agreed to take a detour to efficacy.

Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief that one can achieve a desired result through his or her actions. It is the belief that one can improve with time and effort. When students have high levels of self-efficacy, when they believe in their own ability to perform a task, they are prompted to act and are more likely to persist (Bondie & Dockterman, 2018).

Self-efficacy can be increased through recalling mastery experiences, studying models, and receiving positive messages (Noonan & Erickson, 2017). Almost any success contains strategies which can be applied to other contexts. Teachers can assist students in recalling past successes and identifying strategies they can use to make progress toward their goal. Teachers can also help students find models to emulate who demonstrate successful strategies. This is even more powerful when the model and the student share some common characteristics. Helping students attend to self-talk and replace limiting statements with empowering words is another path to increasing self-efficacy.

We decided our first action would be to assist students in the self-assessment of their levels of efficacy in goal related tasks. Teacher leaders would ask students to rate their ability to improve in each task on a continuum. They would then use the building blocks of mastery experiences, models, and messages to facilitate increased levels of efficacy as needed. They would also continue to record notes in their journals. During our debrief, teachers shared their interactions. One teacher tapped the power of models, "I recommended some biographies to him, and we talked about the early lives of the people he admires." Another teacher was intentional about self-talk, "I reminded her to be mindful of the things she says to herself. I told her to talk to herself like she would talk to a friend." We spent a few weeks focused on increasing self-efficacy in an effort to reduce that barrier. The teacher leaders then returned to their focus on goal setting. Once progress toward goals was becoming evident for many students, we proceeded to the literature on feedback.

Feedback

Specific feedback enables students to understand their current performance relative to their goals. It also helps students develop the ability to assess their own performance and reflect on their learning. Task specific feedback includes next steps for improving performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007). The more students receive quality feedback, the more likely they are to engage in discussions about their learning with teachers (Stevenson & Mussalow, 2019).

In our examination of feedback as a motivator for engagement and a tool for improved performance, we postulated that it may also result in even stronger student-teacher relationships. It seemed to constitute noticing and responding to a bid, but in an academic context. We agreed on weekly feedback conferences with students as our action for the next few weeks.

When we debriefed the experiences with feedback conferences, teacher leaders confirmed their hunches. Feedback conferences seemed to be a synthesis of all previous efforts. These conversations with students provided a way to connect, build trust, discuss goals, and increase students' confidence as well as competence.

Conclusion

Before we met for our final debrief, the teacher leaders collected updated data (attendance, grades, achievement scores, and discipline data) for each of their students. They also used the STRS to reassess perceived levels of comfort and conflict in their relationships with each student. As an additional source of data, they reviewed the notes in their journals.

Our final debrief revealed many positive outcomes. Ten out of the 12 students experienced a decrease in discipline referrals

and consequences. One student saw a decrease from 16 discipline referrals and nine days of suspension to one discipline referral with no exclusionary consequences. Grades improved for 11 out of 12 students, but there was limited achievement test data available at the time of our meeting. The impact on attendance was not as strong, with seven out of 12 students showing improvement. Teachers alluded to the role of parent support related to this factor.

The STRS suggested gains in comfort (with scores closer to 5) for all 12 students and decreases in conflict (with scores closer to 1) for all students. Qualitative data in journal notes affirmed the positive influence of teachers' actions. Below are some of the comments.

- "The student does not get defensive when I correct him. He calms down more quickly and is much more likely to comply than he was before."
- "He now desires to do well in class. He wants to meet his goals and puts in the effort. He decided it was cool to be smart."
- "She has opened up about her challenges. She now seeks me out to talk or ask for help."
- "It was a rollercoaster at first, and I wanted to give up. I am so glad I kept working on building a relationship with this student. He seems like a different kid in class now."

Strengthening relationships with students is complex and challenging work. This project required commitment and flexibility from the teacher leaders involved. Although our work on this project officially spanned one semester, the teacher leaders expressed a desire to continue working with their assigned students and to use the strategies they implemented with additional students. One unexpected outcome was the increased satisfaction and the reduced stress teachers experienced from building stronger relationships with challenging students. We collectively agreed that the effort to build stronger relationships yields a win for both students and teachers.

The project also strengthened our partnership with the district. Serving a cohort of teacher leaders focused on a problem of practice at their school site provided a meaningful, experiential opportunity. The project required the application of concepts from course content to an authentic context. In addition, feedback received from the teacher leaders, their school administrators, and district leaders prompted us to make improvements to our leadership preparation program. We celebrated these wins as we planned for continued improvement and growth. The grant funding has ended, but we have continued to focus on problems of practice within the district we serve as a foundation for the field experiences and action research integrated into our coursework.

Recommendations

Reflecting on this project led to the following recommendations for schools and universities partnering in leadership preparation. First, collaborate on the analysis of multiple forms of data to identify school needs which can be the focus of field experiences and action research. Next, endeavor to align field-based work and course content to the needs of the school and district. Assist in the identification of resources and strategies that could positively impact school or district goals. Facilitate the creation of action plans, which will direct the field experiences and development of leadership skills for aspiring leaders. Finally, guide the implementation of action plans, and integrate opportunities for sharing experiences and reflection.

Through this collaborative process, university faculty can partner with schools and districts to better prepare leaders to do the essential and complex work of school improvement. Working together enables the sharing of information and the building of trust. Aligning university leader preparation programs to school and district needs is a path to stronger partnerships and better outcomes for students. SUP

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