Impact of School Based Leadership Teams for Implementing a Successful Professional Development Initiative*

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Abstract

This study focuses on the depth of implementation of a professional development initiative. In one group, the school based leadership team was provided specialized coaching to support and monitor the implementation of the initiative. In the other group, no assistance was provided. Results indicate that the coaching of a school-based leadership team to support and monitor a professional development initiative has significant impact on the depth and rate of implementation. Such mentoring also influences the alignment of the perceptions of the depth of implementation between teachers and the leadership team.

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1 Sumario en espanol

Este estudio se centra en la profundidad de implementación de una iniciativa profesional del desarrollo. En un grupo, la escuela se basó el equipo de liderazgo fue proporcionado entrenar especializado para apoyar y vigilar la implementación de la iniciativa. En el otro grupo, ninguna ayuda fue proporcionada. Los resultados indican que el entrenar de un equipo escuela-basado de liderazgo para apoyar y vigilar una iniciativa profesional del desarrollo tiene impacto significativo en la profundidad y la tasa de implementación. Tal mentorizar también influye la alineación de las percepciones de la profundidad de implementación entre maestros y el equipo de liderazgo.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suminista como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

Educators, principals, and teachers alike, are becoming challenged with higher demands and requirements in preparing our future generations for the 21st century. Ongoing professional development for teachers is a key focus for school transformation efforts. School transformation in today's educational system is dependent, in part, on how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Recent research has focused on the role of the school principal and other site-based leaders in the implementation of professional development initiatives (Pedersen, Yager, & Yager, 2010). Studies have suggested that when principals work with a team of teacher leaders, forming a School Based Leadership Team (SBLT), the speed at which transformational efforts occur is increased (Yager, Pedersen, & Yager, 2010). Principals play a key role in supporting and encouraging teachers to grow professionally. Successful principals establish the work conditions that enable teachers to be better teachers. Schools rely on teachers to assume a variety of leadership roles, both formal and informal, including department chair, peer mentor, and faculty representative on site leadership teams (Gabriel, 2005). When work conditions are established to promote professional development, alignment connecting the perceived depth of implementation between teachers and school leaders should improve. If alignment is improved, accurate feedback and evaluation of the initiative is increased. The ability to share with others and collaborate for the purpose of providing instruction that is conducive to enhancing student development is critical given the many demands that are being placed upon the educational system. Increasing teacher involvement in making good decisions about school-wide initiatives to improve instructional practices must be the primary responsibility of school leadership (Louis, et al., 2010).

Collaboration between classroom teachers, building-level administrators, and teacher leaders can be extremely difficult without intentional planning. A SBLT can impact transformational efforts through outlining clear expectations for the teams and defining explicit practices. Facilitation is dependent upon the principal and other school leaders being flexible and accommodating by providing collaborative work time. Providing time for collaborative work can enhance faculty awareness and build overall positive reaction to the professional development experience, this is crucial to successful professional development initiatives (Guskey, 2006). School leaders must be open to the diffusion of leadership roles. Intentional leadership development is needed for an SBLT to function at its highest potential.

Distributed leadership practices and collaborative learning with professional development initiatives are attributes that serve school systems well in creating a positive school-wide climate and culture built upon common languages, beliefs, and values which establish a level of excellence in student preparation. Increased depth of implementation of professional development focused on pedagogy and improvements in student learning, a distributed leadership framework involving multiple learning-centered leaders has been reported to produce positive effects (Sherer, 2004). There are only a few studies that provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the impact of distributed leadership practices on the implementation of professional developments designed to improve school effectiveness and increase student achievement (Copeland, 2003; Harris, 2004; Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi, 2002). Additionally, there has been a

call to explore the actual behaviors and influences associated with core leadership practices that occur with distributed leadership frameworks (Louis et al., 2010). This study focuses on providing research results for this call by examining the relationship between schools which have experiences with an SBLT and schools that do not. The study is an investigation about the impact this has on the depth of implementation of any professional development initiative and the perception regarding the depth of implementation between teachers and team leaders.

The two research questions examined in this study are:

1. How will the depth of implementation of a professional development initiative be impacted by a school based leadership team prepared to support and monitor the initiative?
2. What differences can be found in the perceptions of the depth of implementation of a professional development initiative between teachers and school based leadership team members who have been given preparation to support and monitor the initiative compared to teams that have not been provided such preparation?

3 Methods and Procedures

This quantitative study focuses on the actual and perceived depth of implementation of a school-wide professional development initiative carried out for six years in four elementary schools. The school-wide initiative that was used in each of the schools was a comprehensive school reform model called Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (CLASS). The CLASS Model is a framework and philosophy aligned with academic mastery, character building, and positive social interactions for preparation of students in the workforce.

A group of independent evaluators selected four elementary schools from a pool of 75 schools based upon their ongoing work with the CLASS Model. The evaluators were expert trainers in the CLASS Model and identified the four schools based on results from informal principal interviews and informal classroom observations from within the pool of schools. Also, the selection was based on the school's own declaration that an SBLT would be in place to share in the governance of the school and to assist in the implementation of the CLASS Model.

All four schools in this study were similar in size and socio-economic level and had undergone identical summer preparation and coaching regarding the CLASS professional development initiative. The teaching staff at each school participated in an annual summer institute which consisted of a week-long workshop about the CLASS Model and a quarterly coaching session held in each school in the fall. Each school committed to maintaining quarterly coaching sessions and participation in annual summer workshops.

After the four schools were selected, the expert trainers identified the fourth and fifth grade sections in each of the four schools as being at the same level of implementation and selected them for this study. Using the interview and classroom observation form, the expert trainers interviewed and observed each teacher in each fourth and fifth grade class in each of the four schools. The initial scores on the interviews and classroom observations were used as a pretest. The fourth and fifth grade teachers in all four schools scored at equivalent levels of implementation after the same summer training and two months of implementing the model into the first school year. Each school had three sections of fourth and three sections of fifth grade.

Prior to the start of this study, the teachers in each school identified a group of five teachers to work with their respective principal to share leadership responsibilities within the school. This team was the SBLT and for a month before the start of this study, met weekly with the principal for 30 minutes to discuss school issues and suggest solutions. Also, each SBLT presented the possible solutions that were discussed with the entire teaching staff. At the start of this study, an additional responsibility of each team was to support the implementation of a professional development initiative. The SBLT efforts in all four schools were directed at meeting with each grade level team once per month each for at least 30 minutes to discuss implementation of the professional development initiative. Minutes of these support sessions were saved as documentation.

In two of the schools, the SBLT was provided information which aimed to prepare the team in how to monitor, evaluate, and support the CLASS initiative as well as involv them in systems thinking and quality

school components (Treatment Group). This effort was provided before and during the summer institutes and quarterly coaching sessions. In the two other schools, no preparation was provided for the SBLT (Control Group).

In the spring of each school year data were collected using three tools and were the same tools used in the pretest. Each assessment tool used a four-point Likert instrument. Teachers were observed teaching and teachers were interviewed to report on their own perception regarding the implementation of the specific professional development initiative. Also, each SBLT member was interviewed individually to assess the perception of the depth of implementation. Teachers were interviewed and each classroom was observed by the same two expert trainers in the CLASS Model. Answers to the interview questions were scored using a rubric provided by the leaders of the professional development initiative. The observation instrument and the two interview instruments are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Observation and Interview Forms

3.1 Observation Form

One hour observation
Score by percent of time:
1=25%; 2=50%; 3=75%; 4=100%

1. Life Long Guidelines evident in teacher action 1 2 3 4
2. Life Goals evident in teacher action 1 2 3 4
3. Life Lines evident in teacher action 1 2 3 4
4. SPRW evident in teacher action 1 2 3 4
5. SPRW evident in student action 1 2 3 4

3.2 Teacher Interview Form

Score by number of examples given:
1=0 to 1 examples
2=2 to 40 examples
3=5 to 6 examples
4=7 or more examples

1. List examples of how you've used the Life Long Guidelines.
2. List examples of how you've used the Life Skills.
3. List examples of how you've used "say it."
4. List examples of how you've used "play it."
5. List examples of how you've used "relay it."
6. List examples of how you've used "weigh it."
7. List important rationales for implementing the initiative.

3.3 Perception of Depth of Implementation Interview Form

Teachers and SBLT
Score by number of examples given:
1=None
2=Some
3=Meets Expectations

4=Exceeds Expectations

1. Based on your knowledge of the model and the implementation expectations, how would you rate the depth of implementation?

The interview questions asked teachers to identify important aspects of the initiative, the rationale for the initiative, and descriptions of teacher and student behaviors when implementing the initiative. The observation form measured the depth of implementation using a four-point rubric provided by the leaders of the professional development initiative. The observation form was used to keep track of the amount of teaching strategies from the initiative that were elicited by the teachers. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient with k = .67, demonstrating strong inter-rater reliability. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for each data set from each instrument. Cronbach's alpha values for each of the three instruments are as follows: observation form = .72, teacher interview form = .75, and perception interview form = .81 showing significant internal consistency between items on all three instruments. Therefore, scores on items were combined to get an aggregate score for each instrument. Answers to the interview questions were scored using a rubric provided by the leaders of the professional development initiative.

As stated above, the data collection instruments were first used as pretests after one summer training and one coaching session in the fall of the first school year. T-tests for the independent samples were applied to pretest scores which showed no significant difference between control group and treatment group. Therefore, the effectiveness of the experiment was assessed by using t-tests on the posttest scores which occurred during the spring of each year following the pretest.

4 Results

Figure 1 illustrates that teacher content knowledge regarding the professional development initiative would be impacted positively with SBLT experiences in supporting and monitoring the outcomes of the initiative. Survey results were significantly different (p< 0.01) from teachers who worked with an experienced SBLT person as compared to teachers who worked with an SBLT who had not been assisted.
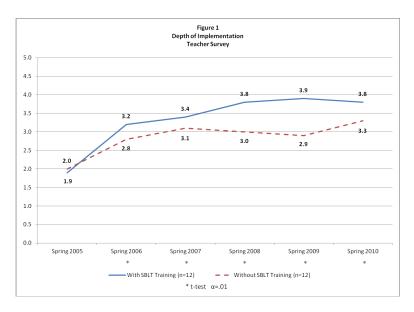

Figure 1: Depth of Implementation Teacher Survey

Figure 2 shows that actual teacher behavior when using specific techniques from a professional development initiative was positively impacted with SBLT preparation in supporting and monitoring the outcomes of the initiative. Observation results were significantly different (p< 0.01) between teachers who worked with an experienced SBLT person compared to teachers who worked with an SBLT who had not been involved.
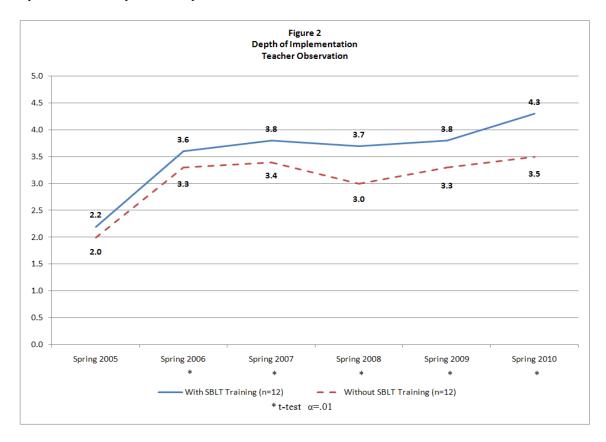

Figure 2: Depth of Implementation Teacher Observation

Figure 3 indicates that the perception of the teachers regarding their own depth of implementation of the professional development initiative who worked with an informed SBLT was aligned with the perception of the SBLT regarding the depth of implementation by the teachers. The difference between the two groups was not significant.
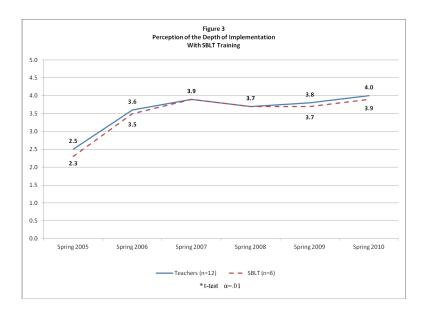
Figure 3: Perception of the Depth of Implementation With SBLT Training

Figure 4 reveals that the perception of the teachers regarding their own depth of implementation of the professional development initiative who worked with an SBLT that had not trained was not aligned with the perception of the SBLT regarding the depth of implementation by the teachers. The difference between these two groups was significant (p< 0.01).
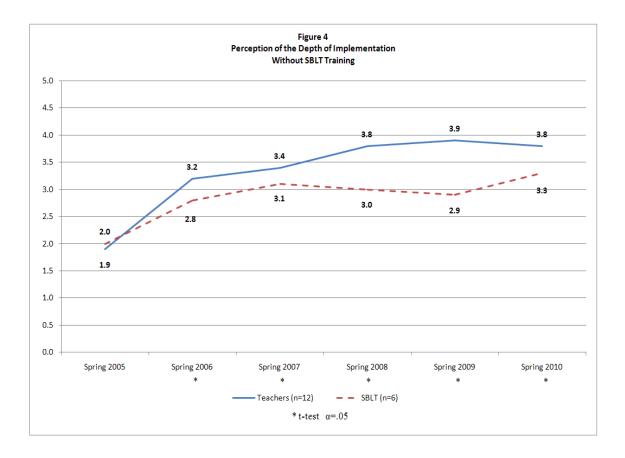
Figure 4: Perception of the Depth of Implementation Without SBLT Training

5 Implications and Recommendations

Researchers have discussed the important role principals play in supporting and encouraging teachers' professional development needs. Additionally, recent studies have suggested that involvement by teachers in making good decisions regarding school leadership and improved practices is essential to transform a school (Louis et al., 2010). Results from this study indicate that preparing leadership teams is not only appreciated but key to the school-wide implementation of professional development initiatives. Indeed, school leaders can have a significant influence on classroom practices of teachers through their efforts to motivate teachers and create workplace settings compatible with instructional practices known to be effective (Louis et al., 2010).

General observations have been made from previous research indicating that the shared leadership among a school staff is likely to have significant impact on positive student achievement (Bell, Bolam, and Cubillom, 2003). It is imperative that schools create opportunities for school leaders and school leadership teams to work together, united in school improvement efforts (Spillane, 2006). Several researchers (Elmore, 2000; Miles, Odden, Fermanich, and Gallagher, 2002; Joyce, 2004; Odden, 2009) have suggested that effective professional development is linked to the structural features of collective participation. Professional development should be organized around teachers needs from a school and have experienced SBLT preparation to support and monitor the initiative. Furthermore, effective sustainability of professional development initiatives have

been linked to distributed leadership frameworks and learning-centered leaders within individual schools (Southworth, 1998). When a school's professional learning-centered community engages in schoolwide professional development and, at the same time, works toward development of a distinctive identity, it maximizes its capacity to enhance outcomes, particularly relative to student achievement (Crowther et al., 2001). The sustainability of professional development initiatives may be directly increased by increasing the amount of efforts SBLT receives in supporting and monitoring the professional development initiative. Increasing teacher involvement in the difficult task of making good decisions and introducing improved practices should indicate a major focus for school leadership (Louis et al., 2010).

Research on shared decision-making in schools has identified barriers preventing decision-making that focuses on pedagogy and quality instruction (Griffin, 1995). This is due mostly to the culture of isolation between teachers found in most schools and the general non-confrontational tone set between teachers who work together in the same school building. Typically, teachers remain unaware of what their colleagues are doing in their individual classrooms. This, combined with strong divisions commonly found between administrators and teachers, creates a culture of individuality and private practice. This study, however, demonstrates when teachers view their principal as a member of a SBLT whose purpose is to support and monitor the initiative, the depth of implementation are dramatically increased.

The two research questions stated for this study were answered. The first and key finding is that the depth of implementation of a professional development initiative is increased when an SBLT is prepared to monitor and support the initiative. Also, this study suggests that when an SBLT is engaged in accurate monitoring and support for the initiative, the perception between the teachers and the team leaders regarding the depth of implementation is aligned. Alignment in the perception can foster authentic and accurate feedback which can increase the speed and depth of implementation. Additionally, this study supports the research that when teachers view both their principal and an SBLT as isolated and not committed passionately to instructional improvement, their own level of engagement and follow-through with the implementation of professional development initiatives is diminished (Pedersen et al., 2010).

The majority of force and motivation for implementation of the professional development initiative in this study came mostly from the core group of teachers with their principal as a school-based leadership team. Additionally, results of this study suggest that support for school-based leadership teams by central office is essential. This finding is supported by previous research that indicates emphasis by the central office on professional development that encourages quality instruction is key to achieving high-level implementation (Louis et al., 2010).

Further research is needed in the area of how leadership is distributed and the impact it has on the implementation of professional development initiatives. A key finding in this study was that in schools which were identified as exemplary schools in implementation of a professional development initiative, leadership was distributed to the teachers and in these schools the principals wanted teachers to be developed as leaders. When the leadership team was seen as knowledgeable and accurately monitoring and supporting the initiative, the speed and depth of implementation was increased. Also, there was alignment between teachers and team leaders in the perception of the depth of implementation. Therefore, accurate and realistic feedback about the initiative was possible during coaching sessions between teachers and team leaders. Additionally, and perhaps mostly importantly, the teachers viewed the principal and team leaders as learners with them. This supports the notion that holistic professional learning, where teachers and principals learn together, will spur changes leading to enhanced student outcomes (Crowther, 2009). Additional research is needed that examines other professional development initiatives to see if similar findings will result regarding the depths of implementation when school-based leadership teams are prepared to support and monitor the implementation.

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