Leadership and Literacy Processes in School Improvement Creating and Supporting a Community of Success: A Case Study Examining the Principal's Role in the Reconstitution of a Campus to Transform Literacy and Learning

W. Todd Duncan, Ed.D.
Texas A&M University, Central Texas
1001 Leadership Place, Killeen, Texas 76540

Lisa E. Colvin, Ed.D.
Tarleton State University
1333 W. Washington, Stephenville, Texas 76402

Abstract

Any number of school districts in the U.S. are having to improve schools that have been underperforming by state and federal measures. Research has indicated that one of the ways to effectively improve school performance is by reconstituting the school (i.e. change the principal and the teachers in the particular school organization). This case study investigates the improvement effort of an urban elementary school in the greater Houston, Texas area. A principal with a track record of improving student achievement was brought in to change the performance of an elementary school that had spent several years on the federal improvement needed list and the state list of schools that had not met standard. The study investigates the actions of leadership taken by the new principal, the organizational vision cast by the principal, and the instructional support provided to the teachers toward improved student achievement. The study also investigates the perceptions of the teachers regarding the leadership and support provided by the principal, and the instructional expectations that school leadership and the teaching faculty have for literacy development.

The study notes the improvements made by the school in the two years after the school was reconstituted, especially the growth for the Hispanic and English Language Learner subgroups. Also noted is the additional work that still needs to be done for other subgroups particularly the African American subgroup. The results of the efforts of the school in this case study support over 30 years of research that demonstrates the importance of school leadership in improving teacher efficacy and leading the instructional direction of the school.

Key Words: Leadership, Literacy, School Reconstitution, School Improvement, Teacher-empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Every child, regardless of race or socioeconomic environment, should have the opportunity to receive a high quality education. Unfortunately, many failing schools are located in high-poverty contexts (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). Reasons these schools fail include a myriad of factors such as poor teaching, weak leadership, and low expectations along with the undeniable effects of poverty on student learning (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). Indeed, schools in low-SES environments are often staffed with the least experienced and ill-equipped teachers (Douglas-Horsford, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Yet, it is the presence of highly effective teachers in the classroom that ensures academic success.

Marzano (2006) points out that "virtually every study that has examined the role of the classroom teacher in the process of educating students has come to the same conclusion: an effective teacher enhances student learning more than any other aspect of schooling that can be controlled (p. 1)."

Given the importance of the classroom teacher to student learning, it seems incumbent upon the school leader, especially in low-SES urban schools, to ensure that the school is staffed with the most effective and highly prepared teachers. Yet schools in low-SES environments often struggle to effectively recruit highly effective teachers (Douglas-Horsford, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Nevertheless, if students in low-SES urban schools are to have an equitable opportunity at receiving a high quality education, then it would seem that urban school leaders must employ strategies to recruit highly effective teachers to their schools or develop the capacity in their current teaching faculty to become highly effective teachers. Marzano (2005) points out, "Whether a school operates effectively or not increases or decreases a student's chances of academic success." Therefore, strong leadership in schools is critical to ensuring that students have access to pedagogically sound teachers and that the school environment is conducive to successful academic achievement. Marzano (2005) points to extensive research that tells us that "35 years of meta-analysis research indicates that school leadership has a substantial effect on student achievement." Additional research substantiates the fact that school leadership is considered crucial to the success of individual schools and educational change (Hauge et. al, 2014; Bryk et. al, 2010; Elmore, 2004; Fullan et al, 2006; Harris, 2008; Hubbard et. al, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Moreover, Leithwood (2010) states that "one of the strongest explanations for sustained success in high poverty schools is strong and effective leadership (p. 38)."

Given the research that demonstrates the importance of school leadership and effective instruction, it would seem that for children in low-SES environments to attend high achieving schools, the school districts must ensure that current administration and faculty are provided with professional development that will build capacity for effective instruction. Indeed, Leithwood, et.al (2010) say that "an important key to turning around low performing schools is capacity building." Haughton and Balli's (2014) investigation into successful school turnaround efforts demonstrated that at the forefront of these efforts is the principal, who has the responsibility of overseeing the school culture and supporting the quality of curricular and instructional practices. Overseeing school culture and ensuring high quality instructional practice are critical components to capacity building. The development of high quality instructional practice may best be served by bringing in experts from outside

of the school to help guide teachers in effective instructional techniques and model the pedagogy (Leithwood, et.al 2010).

The principal must then ensure that all of the teachers in the school are strong pedagogically and insist on strong research-based instructional practices. They must provide leadership in change efforts that will ensure improved achievement outcomes and make certain all members of the teaching staff are on board with the required change. Haughton & Balli (2014) found that effective principals in successful school turnaround efforts found it essential to address the actions of those staff members who were unwilling to put forth the effort required to support needed change. Haughton & Balli (2014) further noted that the principal's response to addressing school culture had to be direct, corrective, and immediate when confronted with those who did not support learning for all students. Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) tell us that "compelling evidence shows that leaders in successful schools actively set directions, develop people, and engage in organizational redesign"(p. 38).
For schools that have demonstrated particular difficulty in improving student achievement, school redesign may prove to be the most effective turnaround effort (Hill, et.al 2014). In a redesign effort, the principal would be given authority to choose which teachers on the current faculty roster would be invited to return to the school to teach in the subsequent term, recruit new teachers from inside and outside of the district who are aligned with the principal's vision, and implement research-based instructional strategies that all staff would be expected to adhere to with fidelity (Rice, 2010; Beteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb, 2009). In order for such a redesign effort to be successful, the school leadership must be strong. Good leadership may be most important in recruiting and retaining effective teachers in disadvantaged schools (Rice, 2010). Moreover, "effective instructional leadership combines an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide teachers with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly (Rice, 2010; Grissom and Loeb, 2009)". Once given the authority to design the school for optimal academic outcomes, these effective leaders are more likely to stay in the low-SES school, providing stability and strong leadership to the new organization (Rice, 2010).

Purpose*:* The purpose of the study is to examine the principal's role in creating a culture of success for literacy instruction.

Research Questions: How does the principal establish effective processes that lead to improvement of instructional practices resulting in increased K-4 student literacy achievement? Does effective school turn around require specific administrative structures be in place before effective turn around can be possible? Are there specific non-negotiables that the principal must insist upon to ensure a successful turnaround effort?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As researchers, we were interested in doing our study in the context of the school 'where the participants live and work' 'to get as close as possible to the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21).' Observing participants in their roles as principal and classroom literacy teachers with their students was key to understanding their culture, perspectives, and educational and leadership beliefs and practices. Guided by the epistemological philosophical assumption that we would learn more by being physically present lessening the distance between researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018), we visited this school several times over the course of two years in order to learn and understand how these aspects were impacting student

literacy achievement. We believed that answers to our research questions could be addressed through observation and interaction and that critical knowledge gained was 'limited only by the quality of the interactions of those involved in the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 35).'

The conceptual framework guiding this study was the efficacy of leadership in the restructuring of the organization and guiding pedagogical activities toward improved student performance. The study integrated the literature on turnaround efforts in school reorganization toward the infusion of stronger teachers in failing schools (Bryk, et.al 2010; Burnette, 2013; Elmore, 2004; Hauge, Norenes, et.al 2014; Hill, Mellon, Goddard, & Laker, 2016; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010) and leadership in pedagogy and teacher planning (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Kensler, et.al, 2012; Marzano, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Stoll & Louis, 2007) toward ensuring effective instruction. Social constructivism played a part in the conceptual framework as well as we sought to understand the historical and culture world in which the participants lived and worked and how their backgrounds shaped their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The literature indicates that with schools that are perpetually poor-performing, sometimes it is necessary to reconstitute the school with new teachers as chosen by new leadership (Hill, Mellon, Goddard, & Laker, 2016; Hubbard Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Haughton & Balli, 2014). Teacher efficacy is extremely important as this is the number one variable that positively impacts student performance (Marzano, 2006), while resources and ongoing support ensure that teachers have the instructional material and ongoing professional development necessary to ensure their efficacy (Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Elmore, 2004). Finally, strong instructional leadership ties all of these important pieces together and is critical to ensuring the change effort (Bryk, et.al, 2010; Hill Mellon, Goddard, & Laker, 2016; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a phenomenological qualitative method to conduct the case study. Given that the research literature has strongly indicated that a) strong leadership is important to school improvement, b) teacher efficacy has the greatest impact on student achievement, and c) school reconstitution is sometimes necessary to ensure that a and b are achieved (Hauge et. al, 2014; Leithwood et. al, 2010; Marzano, 2006), we interviewed the principal in this case study regarding the restructuring process, teacher selection, and instructional support of the teaching faculty. We also interviewed selected members of the teaching staff to discover whether teachers were provided supportive leadership and sufficient resources and professional development that would allow them to be continuously successful.

Based on the research questions that guided the development of the study, interview questions were developed for the school principal. The interview questions to the principal were designed to answer the broader research questions. Questions to the teaching staff were designed to inquire whether there was buy-in by the faculty to the changes made by the leadership and to what extent the leader solicited their input.

The purpose of the study was to see if there was a corollary between the reconstitution efforts and student achievement. We looked at summative achievement data in reading and writing for the third and fourth grade from the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests for the two years prior to the reconstitution efforts and for the two years after the reconstitution efforts. The focus of the study was

on the impact of school leadership on literacy achievement; therefore, the summative data that was examined was limited to the subject area of English Language Arts.

The school is an elementary school that is part of a large public school district in the southeastern portion of the state of Texas. The elementary school is a K-4 campus with 632 students. The ethnic subgroups of the school are African American (32.6%), Hispanic (64.1%), Caucasian (1.7%), and other (1.6%). Forty-six percent of the students are English Language Learners, and ninety-three percent of the students are Economically Disadvantaged as measured by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced price meals. The academic achievement of the school for three years prior to the reconstitution was **standard not met** for the state and **Program Improvement status** for federal accountability.

PARTICIPANTS

Large urban Texas public school district K-4 campus, 632 students, At-risk population 60%
Ethnicity
- 32.6% African American
- 64.1% Hispanic
- 1.7% Caucasian
- 1.6% Other

English Language Learners 46.7%
Economically Disadvantaged 93%
One campus principal interview – identified from study phase I. Focus group interview with seven campus literacy teachers - identified as fitting into these categories:
- Had taught at the school prior to reconstitution – 3
- Moved to the campus with the principal during reconstitution – 2
- New hires for reconstituted school- 2
- Grade K (2)
- Grade 1 (2)
- Grade 3 (1)
- Grade 4 (2)

History of State Literacy Assessment for Case Study School:
2016-2017
3rd Reading: AA=43% H=80% ED= 72% ELL=82%
4th Reading: AA=44% H=85% ED=77% ELL=87%
4th Writing: AA=32% H=56% ED= 51% ELL=40%
Standard Met
2015-2016
3rd Reading: AA=53% H=75% ED=69% ELL=79%
4th Reading: AA=74% H=66% ED=70% ELL=58%
4th Writing: AA=48% H=56% ED=56% ELL=47%
Standard Met
2014-2015
3rd Reading: AA=55% H=48% ED=52% ELL=48%
4th Reading: AA=38% H=34% ED=34% ELL=14%
4th Writing: AA=46% H=28% ED=37% ELL=12%
Standard Not Met
2013-2014
3rd Reading: AA=58% H=61% ED=59% ELL=53%
4th Reading: AA=31% H=56% ED=59% ELL=53%
4th Writing: AA=44% H=56% ED=48% ELL=31%
Standard Not Met

Legend: AA=African American, ED=Educationally Disadvantaged, ELL=English Language Learners, H=Hispanic

According to the Texas School Performance Report for the past four school years, the school did not meet standard for the two years prior to the school change effort. For the two years after the change effort began, the school met state standard requirements. Strong gains were realized for the majority of the student population. The strongest gains were with the Hispanic and ELL subgroups. The African American subgroup experienced little gain since the change effort began. The lack of improvement in this subgroup is an indicator that there will need to be a more focused effort of instruction and intervention for this population.

Overall, the improvement in student achievement indicates that the change efforts had a positive effect on student learning. The data also indicates that there is still work to be done to ensure that all population subgroups experience positive growth in academic achievement.

FINDINGS

Themes emerged for the principal interview and the focus group of teachers, and then both sets of data were analyzed for connections between the two. Prominent themes for the principal and teacher interviews and connections are discussed further with supporting data from the interviews.

Principal Interview Themes

Culture of Learning and Leadership
The principal viewed himself and all faculty as learners and leaders of literacy. The expectation for learning and leadership extended beyond administration and instructional coaches into the teaching staff. Learning and leadership was at the core of the school culture and was the driving force for all decision-making. When asked about the delivery of targeted professional development, the principal said, "Last year the coaches did deliver the trainings in order to build capacity and to build expertise with the teachers, moreover our teachers are actually starting to present to one another this year."

Intentionality
Intentionality and purposefulness were words that permeated the principal interview and was the foundation of the school's culture. In response to the question about how funds were initially budgeted during school reconstitution, the principal replied, "We were fortunate as a federal priority school that we had monies, and we wanted to be very targeted and intentional about where we used those monies." He commented further about being intentional with collaborative planning efforts amongst teachers:

> First of all, it has to be intentional, and it has to be effective. So, you have to craft time into your schedule for teachers to meet together. You also have to have in place multiple layers to meet the differing needs of teams, individual teachers, and content areas.

Research
The principal in this study used research in two primary ways: to frame his own decisions and administrative practices and to frame his support of teachers and their practice as instructors. Research guided decisions he made from the initial steps when

becoming principal of the school. These initial decisions included how to staff the school and in choosing instructional materials and curricula.

> I had done some research around characteristics and qualities of not just working in a turnaround school but also working in schools in traditionally underserved communities, culturally responsive teaching. So, I was looking for teachers who had a very clear idea of what they wanted to achieve in the classroom with students…an openness to learn, and openness and willingness to participate in true collaborative learning. Our teacher teams I knew would be a key to turning this school around.

As the campus instructional leader, the principal continually supported the teachers to foster learning and understanding along with implementation of best practices for teaching and learning by being the model of best practice. Helping teachers understand the value of research in their decision-making and practice was evidenced in this quote from the principal:

> Michael Fullan talks in his book *Coherence* that we need to "talk the walk", as he sort of flips that phrase. So, I kind of have that in the back of my head what I want for our teachers is for them to be able to articulate the what, how, and the why. Not only the what and the how, which are important, but the why behind it. How, for example, different components of balanced literacy support one another. How everything they do, there's research and rationale behind it to support our students to become better readers and writers.

Support

As the campus administrator, the principal supported the teachers by planning for them to have all materials necessary in order to provide the best literacy instruction possible for students. Increasing student achievement data was his top goal, but to do that he knew he needed to train and equip his teachers with the right tools. This commitment to ensuring sufficient quality resources was evidenced in his responses pertaining to budgeting decisions.

> I knew I needed teacher capacity, providing staff development for our teachers, making sure that every classroom had enough books so that we could implement literacy and reading workshop. Bookshelves, carpets, easels, making sure that the teachers had access to the curriculum that they needed. So, all of those things were part of the budgeting process because I do think it is important that the teachers have the necessary resources so they can implement what we are asking them to do.

Teacher Focus Group Interview Themes

Feedback

Teachers in this study commented about the helpful feedback provided by the principal and how that feedback positively shaped their instructional literacy practices. They described various methods of constructive feedback that was viewed as valuable and could be used to hone their teaching skills. One teacher explained:

> As far as coming into our classrooms, he is very timely. He gives us feedback. Regarding emails, he is always very direct and to the point. And it is not one of those things where you are only going to see him once. He

will come back into your room and regularly give feedback and let you know how you are doing.

In addition to regular classroom observations, the teachers expressed appreciation that the principal attended team planning meetings and empowered them to disaggregate literacy achievement data and design data-driven instructional decisions for their own classrooms. A teacher described how his attendance at meetings and feedback contributed to teacher and student success: "He gives instructional feedback but he also comes to our planning. So that way, we have a goal and a plan of how we are going to get there as a team and as a grade level."

Consistency

Consistency with curriculum, expectations, alignment, feedback, collaboration, and structure permeated this campus. Teachers believed that consistency with their principal and with every aspect of their school is what has contributed to their success with student literacy achievement and in other aspects as well. One teacher explained how consistency with collaboration has led to student success:

> Actually, he just mentioned in the last meeting that "collaboration is key to success on campus." You have to have collaboration. You can't just have one person or any individuals. You have to have the team working as a whole in order for the students to be able to achieve, especially in literacy. Everyone has to understand the structure and the material.

Modeling

It was clear that the teachers believed the principal viewed himself as a learner, leader of literacy, and team member with the instructional faculty. Modeling what he expected from them was key to his success and the success of the students. The teachers referred to the principal as "a good model" for them and "a learner himself as far as attending trainings and doing research himself." One teacher illustrated this idea of modeling related to developing a culture of literacy school-wide when she explained an element of their staff meetings:

> One thing that encourages me is that during faculty meetings we always have a 'books we love' time. So, we as teachers are able to share with our coworkers books that we love, which has been like a breath of fresh air to me in many ways because I do love reading, but I don't always have time to read. So, that allows me to listen to other teachers and go get a good book that they recommended and read it.

Support

The teachers felt supported by the principal in more ways than being provided with instructional and human resources. They also felt supported by knowing that their principal's goal was to provide them with research-based curricula and the training necessary to implement it effectively. A teacher explained:

> He really does a lot of research before he ever commits us to any sort of staff development. He wants to know it is something that is good and will work. He always does the research and then brings us in. He always makes sure whatever training course he is implementing has an excellent background and has a track record for success.

Following training, the support continued with follow-up and reflection, as another teacher described:

> He actually brings staff developers here on campus to help develop us. We have had people come and train us here on campus. He gives us a notice so we can plan to attend, and he gives us plenty of background on it so we can understand and prepare. We also continue to discuss it after the training. We implement it and then continue to talk about it.

One teacher explained how her practice as an instructional leader has grown under the effective leadership of the principal in the study compared to the previous administrators. This teacher described how the support systems that were currently in place at the school under the leadership of this principal was beneficial:

> We had high expectations before as well, but there wasn't near the support with all of the skills teams we have now that are here to help us reach those expectations. There's so many people in place that weren't here before that help us achieve goals.

Connections across Interviews

As researchers, we wanted to look at both sets of data more closely to determine ideas emerging as connections between them. We were interested in knowing which words, phrases, and concepts recurred in the participants' responses. We determined that the connections included: consistency, high expectations, positivity, belief, targeted professional development, support, research, leadership development, and intentionality.

Leadership development on this campus was expected, ongoing, and a part of the culture. Each person had the opportunity and potential capacity to grow and develop into a highly effective classroom instructional leader of literacy, and with the targeted trainings, into instructional literacy coaches at this campus and other campuses in the district. The principal shared a bittersweet comment with us concerning how his well-trained teaching staff often must be replaced because they move to literacy coach positions at other district schools:

> Since I started as principal, our campus has produced more of the literacy coaches who are now out in other schools providing support for campuses that are new to this work as well. For example, when the district literacy coaches get together now, there are about 15 or 20 of them I think. More than half of them have all worked with me, and they became experts, and now they're literacy coaches at other campuses.

A teacher echoed this idea of leadership development, which was encouraged by the principal, as she spoke about collaboration on the campus:

> If you could see one of our team meetings, you could see it in action. The collaboration is there. We have incredible literacy coaches that are always in there. We read chapters in books, we discuss it, we plan, and the collaboration is unbelievable. Some people came from another school just to watch our team collaborate. It is really cool!

Another teacher explained how the principal encouraged the faculty to develop themselves by introducing them to research-based literature and supporting them in their quest to stay current with effective literacy practices:

> He also mentions a lot of times when we are having meetings, when he has certain professional development books in his own repertoire, he will mention them to us so we can read it, and it often will tie in to whatever we are doing on campus. He will always offer us the ability to read any of his books as well. He is constantly encouraging us to be leaders of literacy.

DISCUSSION

This case study is consistent with other case studies that demonstrate that traditionally underserved schools in low-SES environments can experience high achievement given effective leadership and effective teachers who implement effective research-based instructional practices. Students at this school had experienced a pattern of low literacy achievement prior to the principal in this study taking over as campus administrator. Under his leadership, the literacy instructional staff was selected, trained, and supported with the goal of increasing student literacy achievement. The themes that emerged from the principal and teacher interviews revealed that an effective campus leader can create a culture in a school where students can perform successfully in literacy skills despite the contextual factors of the students.

This principal can serve as a model for other principals who are faced with poor state literacy test scores. The effective practices he modeled and implemented on his campus were proven to make a difference with the teachers and their students (as evidenced by the rise in achievement scores in the years after the reconstitution began). He hired the best people, equipped them with the best resources, trained them with research-based professional development, and then let them teach and lead supporting them with continuous modeling and feedback. All of these actions are hallmarks of the transformational leader. These actions took countless hours of planning, research, and budgeting to reach his goal of raising student achievement.

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