Steering the Ship: Principles of Student Success for Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT: Researchers often use focus groups to collect data for qualitative research, but focus groups can also be used by organizational leaders to articulate participants' values or principles - principles that can be used to guide organizational change. This paper examines one staff's mobilization of a focus group to collect data for a research study they were conducting together to articulate programmatic principles. The collaborative nature of the group-work engaged and guided the participants in the generation of principles that were then used to guide program-wide development. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the group encouraged engagement in the research from a partial participant and generated data that was used for triangulation in the grounded theory research being conducted. The principles indeed guided the educators in their research and in changing their school and impacted both their self and collective efficacy.

Keywords: focus groups, organizational change, teacher efficacy, education

Distributed leadership styles are both necessary and inevitable in the complex and constantly changing educational landscape (Harris, 2002). One way educational practitioners can begin to embody distributed leadership within schools is to generate a mission and vision by articulating principles together. Michael Quinn Patton (2011) suggests a helpful metaphor, comparing organizational principles to components of a recipe. Recipes, Patton asserts, are like rules, telling the cook exactly what amount of each ingredient to include. He suggests, however, that when a cook decides to "season to taste" (Patton, 2011, p. 167), the list of ingredients, and amounts of each, become a set of guidelines instead of rules. In a similar way, principles might be used to guiding organizational change, dependent on context and situation. They should be used to "season to taste." Patton suggests that principles serve other purposes, as well. When organiza-

tions articulate their guiding principles, staff can, in turn, utilize them as they engage in a sort of home-grown type of monitoring and evaluation (Quinn Patton, 2015, 2011).

Working together to articulate a set of guiding principles is a strategy that four teachers, one administrative assistant, one administrator, and I found to be successful in an alternative school in which we worked. We decided to articulate our central principles regarding our work with students – not rules but, rather, guidelines for our work with students. By creating principles together, we engaged in deep conversations about definitions of student success, instructional strategies, and pedagogical philosophies. We believe that the process of collaboratively creating principles and, furthermore, using the principles themselves to guide our continuous improvement, increased our efficacy (Mitchler, 2015), investment and, using the phrase of one leader in our district, helped us "steer the ship" together.

Theoretical Perspective

As individuals, we teachers and staff are unique in our histories and experiences; thus, we used a constructivist lens to frame our research, our focus group work and our work with our students. All of the educators at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program (pseudonym)—myself included—proudly saw ourselves as learners. The work that we did together to uncover our conception of student success was indeed a joint effort, as we were all invested in the success of our students and our role in that success.

Social Constructivism

Because the impacts of language within educational settings are immense, evolutionary, and consequential, the theoretical perspective of social constructivism helped guide us in this work. Social constructivism has roots within the discipline of sociology and is rooted in the understanding that all knowledge is so-

cially constructed. Social constructivism points to questions like "How have people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, 'truths,' explanations, beliefs and worldviews? What are the consequences of their construction of the world on their behaviors and for those with whom they interact?" (Patton, 2005). Social constructivism suggests that humans establish "truths" based on their experiences and perceptions. A constructivist researcher studies the realities, knowledge, and culture constructed by individuals and the consequences of those constructions on their lived experience. The principles of social constructivism were present in this study as we examined how we constructed our perceptions of our students, our work and ourselves.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

We also considered our efficacy as we engaged in this study. Researchers describe teacher self-efficacy as the extent to which a teacher believes they are capable of success; it is a teacher's conviction that they can influence student learning, even when working with difficult or seemingly unmotivated students (Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The terms "capability" and "conviction" are used in this definition, as self-efficacy refers to self-perception of competency, not to actual levels of competence. The research of Ashton, Olejnik, Crocker, & McAuliffe (1982) showed that teacher efficacy has implications for pedagogical practices, student learning, classroom management, and teacher motivation.

Julian Rotter's work was fundamental to the development of early theories regarding self-efficacy and teacher efficacy. The RAND Organization's research on internal and external controls of reinforcement utilized Rotter's social learning theory as the basis for differentiating between *general teaching efficacy* and *personal teaching efficacy*. The former concept describes a teacher's beliefs about the power of external factors in a child's life, like violence at home, socio-economic status, race, and gender, in comparison to their capabilities as educators. Personal teaching efficacy, on the other hand, refers to the teacher's personal confidence—or lack thereof—in their training and experiences leading to success (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Teacher Collective Efficacy

Certainly, individual teachers might feel that they are capable of impacting students in all types of educational contexts on their own. However, teachers may see greater student engagement and achievement in certain educational settings when there is a sense of collective efficacy among the group. High collective efficacy is especially important within urban alternative schools, where—based on my experience—students value a sense of community and family among the staff. From my observations and own work experiences at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program (ALP), when a group of teachers feels they are capable of accomplishing something important, like helping students find academic success, then they are more able to overcome adversity and achieve their goals.

According to Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), collective teacher efficacy is the perception that a faculty, as a whole, impacts students and student achievement. It is also rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theories. Collective efficacy stems from the interactions of all members of the group and is related to personal and general teacher efficacy. As such, collective efficacy is a measure of teachers' beliefs as a group in their capabilities as a team. Just as self-efficacy and teacher efficacy influence a person's choice of tasks, the amount of effort exerted on those tasks, persistence, and stress levels, so too does collective efficacy influence these factors. In general, the two most important factors in determining collective teacher efficacy are the perception of the difficulty of the task facing the group and the assessment of teaching competence across the group (Goddard et al., 2000).

Goddard et al. (2000) conceptualized collective efficacy similarly to Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) by theorizing that high collective teacher efficacy leads to the acceptance of more demanding tasks and more challenging goals. They also suggested that high collective efficacy may lead to better performance on accepted tasks. As we engaged in our focus group work, we remained cognizant of the positive impacts of collective efficacy on our continuous improvement as a team within our school.

By engaging in our focus group work, we hoped that creating the principles within our focus group sessions would aid us in data collection for our grounded theory research. At the time, we did not foresee that it might also help us create a list of values, which we, could use to guide changes within the organization. Our method for creating guiding principles, what data we collected and analyzed to determine if, and to what extent, the principles were being used by staff, is described below.

Method

Our decision to generate principles for our work within Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program was one that arose from a collaborative research pro-

ject we undertook together. As a group, we knew that *success* was a term that frequently appeared in educational contexts, but the term, itself, was often elusive and difficult to define. We felt that articulating what student success was from our perspective, and who had agency over it, might influence our efficacy, particularly seeing as we were the social actors charged with impacting it. During data collection for that research project, we created a focus group. During our focus group sessions, we articulated principles of our work with students, and, to our surprise, these principles became extremely valuable, even after our grounded theory research had concluded. Although this text does not detail the larger grounded theory study, here, I detail one, initially tangential, outcome of our collaborative research that has helped shape the alternative program.

Participants

In order to maintain privacy, I have assigned each participant a pseudonym. All of these participants verbally committed to participating in this study. One female, Heather, taught mathematics and was seeking her master's degree at the time of our research. She was in her third year of full-time teaching; she spent all three of those years in this urban alternative school, Ray of Light ALP. A male science teacher, Chris, was mid-career and also seeking a master's degree. He had worked in alternative education in several different states and was in his second year of work within Ray of Light. Rex, the other male teacher, taught social studies, had a bachelor's degree, and had been working within the alternative school for over 20 years. Additionally, Gertrude, a novice teacher, began teaching one English class period per day at Ray of Light during the second and third trimesters. Gertrude was excited to take part in our work; she and I meet regularly throughout the duration of our research to discuss the data and analysis.

The author was also a participant in this study. At the time of the study, she was in her ninth year of teaching English, and was pursuing a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. She spent her initial year within the district working at the traditional high school within the building and the following three years teaching English within this urban alternative school.

The author suspected from the onset that one participant in particular, Rex, would not be interested in contributing as much to this study as the others. Rex worked a second job outside of this school, so he was quite guarded with his time. He initially opted to be only a partial participant, but to my surprise, he was a full participant by the end of the study. He contribut-

ed to theories and elected to start his master's degree work over the following summer.

The two administrators who oversaw the Ray of Light program also served as participants. Sally, the program coordinator, worked as a technologies educator for several years before obtaining a master's degree in social work as well as a counseling license. At the time of our study, she had just completed her administrator's license. Peg, the program secretary, was the woman who students, parents, and community members first met when they entered the Ray of Light ALP. She had worked as an administrative assistant for the traditional secondary school and for the ALP for over 20 years.

When I began my research, Heather, Chris, Rex, and I had been collaborating with each other at Ray of Light for two years, and we had become quite close. As a group, we explicitly prided ourselves on our "family-like" community within the school.

In engaging in our qualitative study, we attempted to generate a grounded theory about our conceptions of success within the alternative learning context. In our research, we pursued the research question: How do we, the staff at our urban, alternative secondary school, conceptualize success? The results of that research have been published as a part of my doctoral dissertation (Mitcher, 2015). The method described below is the method we used to gather data for that research, and it is also the method we later learned helped us articulate our guiding principles for organizational change, the focus of this article.

Procedure

We conducted our qualitative research over six months, working to develop a grounded theory about what led to student success in our ALP. During our data collection for that research, we met as pairs to interview each other, we observed each other in our work with students, and formed a focus group to discuss the data we collected. It was our intent, at the onset of the focus group work, to generate a set of principles from our data to guide our work with students. In total, we recorded six hours of focus group work and discussion, and I coded the transcribed conversations as part of our data analysis for our grounded theory research.

We did not create principles in a focus group for the purpose of organizational guidance and change. We knew that focus groups were powerful ways for teams to collect qualitative data, particularly in grounded theory research (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002), so, as we were seeking to generate a grounded

theory around our perception of student success, we initially gathered as a focus group in the hopes of using the group conversations for data collection. Therefore, we started our work knowing that one way to elicit evocative information during focus group work as participant-researchers was by working collectively to articulate our guiding principles. We worked together to articulate our philosophies and vision, instead of a list of best practices or answering a series of interview questions, as is more traditionally done in focus group sessions (Kitzinger, 1995), and, broadly, qualitative research.

We arranged to hold two 90 minute focus group sessions during which we discussed our research question and some of the data and analysis as a group. We organized for our first meeting at a local restaurant after school. I prepared a framework to guide our conversation (see Appendix A). In this document, I proposed several elements or categories of student success that we had identified through initial coding of our interview and observation data, and I explained Patton's (2011) concept of a guiding principle. I've included some dialogue from our conversations below so that my role as the facilitator and my contributions to the conversations are both explicit.

In what follows, I speak of the interconnectedness of the categories the participants had been mentioning, noticing that one category stands out more than the others. I mention that observation to the group:

> Jenna: I'll tell you that what I was thinking is how these categories overlap or are in tension with each other, but there's a big spider web, right? It's all interconnected, but we seem to keep saying that relationships have to come first.
>
> Peg: Yeah, that's hard, you know, last year I tried to build a relationship with Deidra, but I just couldn't. I think everything I said went in one ear and out the other. I mean, it's a start [to building a relationship], but…
>
> Sally: We don't know their barriers to doing that. We have no clue what's going on at home. We don't know if they are taking care of kids or what's going on in their lives.
>
> Peg: And I tried to get that out of her but…
>
> Chris: I don't know. I still think the relationships are the most important.
>
> Sally: Absolutely.
>
> Peg: Yes.

Before this first focus group session, I used the data we had previously collected to generate three different diagrams of student success as our major codes (relationships, student attendance, credit completion, and happiness). The group liked the diagrams, which provoked further dialogue:

> Chris: Show us another picture.
>
> Sally: Yeah, show us another picture. We like the pictures.
>
> Jenna: Ok, well this one gets a little confusing. Ok… here's another one. So, I have success in the middle. These lines are suggesting that these are the categories that we think are contributing to success. What are your thoughts?

Each time the group saw a diagram I had created in preparation for our focus group session, I asked them for feedback.

During our second focus group session, I provided the group with a list of the principles of student success that we discussed before the close of our first focus group session. For the first 17 minutes of this second session, we discussed student attendance and whether we should or should not include a reference to it in one of our principles of student success. In this select transcription of dialog, we determined that relationships are ultimately linked to attendance and, thus, relationships, more than academic success, are directly linked to attendance first. I guided our conversation by asking questions that required more than a single word answer, using words like "why" and "what":

> Jenna: Why is attendance so important to us if the students can take the final summative assessments and pass them without being here?
>
> Heather: But can they?
>
> Chris: Well, it's standards-based. If the students haven't met all of the standards, they won't get a good score on the summative.
>
> Jenna: What is it about attendance and being present?

Following these two separate focus group sessions, we met regularly, at least three times per week, for 30 minutes each. During these meetings, held either before school or during our lunch break, we revised our principles of student success. The goal of each revision was to articulate principles that were concise, principles that were representative of the data we'd collected throughout the grounded theory research and principles that were in the format suggested by

Patton (2011). After our research concluded, I took note of when staff mentioned the principles in conversations or to me directly. Upon finding that the principles we generated were used to guide decisions within the organization, I interviewed the coordinator of the alternative learning program, who affirmed this finding.

Results and Discussion

As a group of educational practitioners, we found that conducting focus group sessions rooted in a principles-focused approach (Patton, 2011) allowed us to both gather data for our grounded theory and create principles that would guide our work.

The outcome of our grounded theory research, my dissertation work, was a theory regarding how staff within our alternative learning program conceptualized student success. That theory included three elements of student success including authentic relationships with staff, student engagement in academics, and staff emphasis on students' desired futures (Mitchler, 2015).

As I collected observational data and transcribed auto recordings of our staff meetings after the focus group sessions had concluded, I noticed that we referred to the principles we had generated often. We often used them to consider how we might develop programs to strengthen relationships between students and staff and help our students increase attendance and academic achievement. Following our focus group sessions, I received a total of seven text messages, spread over two months, from two participants suggesting that they had used our principles to guide their work with students. One participant stated, "… It really is all about the relationships." Additionally, the program coordinator created a poster with the principles listed and posted it at the entrance of Ray of Light. At professional learning community (PLC) meetings and often during social time with staff, we all found ourselves referencing the principles we created together proving to us that, indeed, the process of generating principles led to our increased awareness of programmatic goals and helped us "steer the ship" that was our organization.

There was evidence that the process of generating principles of student success also increased our efficacy. The teachers and I were more confident that our interactions with students led to student success. During our last focus group session, for example, Chris noted that it takes "a special kind of person" to work with students within an alternative learning program:

Chris: It's important that the students are in class because then there are more opportunities. You know, it's not just academic opportunities, but opportunities to build relationships. We can have conversations and say things like, "You haven't been here much lately, and I see you're not feeling well…" or, um "what are you going to do next after this school year?" It's an opportunity to talk about the life stuff.

Sally: Yeah.

Heather: Yup.

Chris: You know, it takes a special kind of person to be in an ALP environment. It can't just be anybody. So many people come and go from this system. You have to be able to get kids to trust you.

Sally: Yeah. That goes back to relationships, then. They are so important.

We also noticed that one partial participant who was previously reluctant to engage in our grounded theory research was increasingly motivated to take part in focus group sessions when he learned that the conversations were related to our alternative learning program's philosophies and ideologies. The hesitant participant asked about our principles during one follow-up session, asking if he could provide some feedback; he wanted to be a part of articulating principles that ultimately described and guided our organization and increased their involvement.

Furthermore, we found that the conversations we had during focus group work and later transcribed for use in our grounded theory research paralleled the data we had collected through our interviews and observations.

Through taking part in this focus group, we were specifically able to conclude the following:

1. A focus group allowed us to articulate our program's principles, which we then used to guide our actions, even after the conclusion of our grounded theory research.

2. Focus group discussions, aimed at articulating principles, recruited participation in our research from a previously reluctant participant.

3. Our focus group's conversations, and the principles we generated, provided data that we were able to use for data triangulation as we generated our grounded theory regarding

student success.

Although I did not use an efficacy measurement tool to measure teacher efficacy before and after our work together, I predict that teachers' efficacy increased, in part, through participation in our focus groups. Teachers took the opportunity in the sessions to persuade each other that they were making an impact on students. They also suggested that we continue using the principles we'd created to set goals for ourselves and our professional learning community (PLC) during the following school year.

As I am writing this article, the teachers involved in this study continue to contribute their ideas and thoughts, particularly about the guiding principles we generated, through text messages, emails, and informal conversations. Furthermore, the coordinator of the program has posted the principles near the front entrance of the school, and the staff continues to use them to guide their decision-making. Their ongoing commitment to this work leads me to believe that they continue to find ways to meaningfully shape the alternative learning program as they continue doing meaningful work with vulnerable and promising students.

Discussion

Before our first focus group session, the group had intentions only to gather data for the grounded theory study we were conducting. However, after we had articulated what we believed to be principles of student success, we began using them to guide our work – we referenced them in PLC conversations, text messaged each other when we noticed we had been using them, and the coordinator posted them outside the entrance to the ALP. Furthermore, there was evidence that participants felt more confident in their work as educators.

Implications

Our group realized that focus group work done in the spirit of articulating our principles of student success had many benefits. We were able to collect qualitative data for our collaborative research and generate a set of principles around which we could anchor our work as educational practitioners. Outside of the benefits the principles-focused group had for our continuous improvement, we believe that this process might be meaningful for leadership within organizations seeking to collectively articulate their philosophies and ultimately achieve programmatic or organizational change.

We also believe that our findings may be useful for other alternative learning programs and schools. Through articulating guiding principles, other schools

might also find they can play a role in both describing what they do that leads to student success and in gaining a heightened sense of collective efficacy. We were proud of our articulation of our work with students and evidence of that can still be seen at Ray of Light ALP. Upon entering Ray of Light ALP, one can still see the principles of student success our group articulated. The program coordinator has published and posted them in a glass-enclosed case outside the main office.

We also believe that gaps within the functioning of an organization might become apparent through this work. For example, after we concluded our research, the staff and I noticed that academic rigor was not specifically called out in our guiding principles or in our grounded theory. In noticing the lack of reference to academic rigor, we began deeply reflecting on our program's course offerings. We began questioning how our curriculum and instruction varied from the curriculum and instruction in traditional educational settings elsewhere in our school district and why.

Limitations

One thing that became apparent to us was that our guiding principles represented the perspective of the adults at Ray of Light ALP. Missing was the voice of the students. In future work, we'd like to include student perspectives in focus group work to more holistically capture the values and philosophies of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

One of the key purposes of the Principal Research Center and the Journal of School Administration Research and Development is to contribute to high-quality education for students through the development of school leaders in the nation's schools. This principles-focused approach to organizational change shows that administrators, seen traditionally as the leaders within schools, can work collaboratively with teachers, administrative assistants and, potentially, students to envision and guide change. Collaborative leadership rooted in shared principles can be the basis for that visioning and change.

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