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Understanding the Human Side of School Leadership: Principals' Impact on Teachers' Morale, Self-Efficacy, Stress, and Commitment

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study from Ontario, Canada, reveals that principal behaviors shape teacher emotions in important ways, influencing teacher morale, burnout, stress, commitment, and self- and collective efficacy. The findings suggest that principals can influence teacher emotions through several key behaviors: professional respect shown for teacher capability; providing appropriate acknowledgement for teacher commitment, competence, and sacrifice; protecting teachers from damaging experiences like harassment; maintaining a visible presence in the school; allowing teachers' voices to be heard; and communicating a satisfying vision for their school. Implications include greater awareness at the school and system level, as well as appropriate principal training.

Background and context

Finding a clear connection between principal behaviors and student achievement has proved remarkably difficult for educational researchers. The review of educational leadership studies by Hallinger and Heck (1996)—possibly the most commonly cited article on the topic—showed, in the words of Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006), that “little or no direct relationship exists between principal leadership and student achievement” (p. 426). Yet, the K–12 schooling systems of Canada and the U.S. assume that school principals are important in achieving improved student outcomes. Principals are largely responsible for teacher selection, retention, and dismissal; they drive the instructional agenda, selecting school priorities for faculties to pursue; they allocate resources within the school in order to achieve the kinds of change initiatives important in the district and system. In short, while teachers do most of the “heavy lifting” in schools, much hope and responsibility has been invested in principals to lead the kinds of improvements policymakers and parents alike want to see (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Yet, even if research eliminates the possibility of principals having any direct effects on student

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outcomes, principals might still be able to improve the performance of the students in their schools by working through their teachers (Hallinger, 2011). As Hallinger and Heck (1996) put it, "...Achieving results through others is the essence of leadership...Understanding the routes by which principals can improve school outcomes through working with others is itself a worthy goal for research" (p. 39). Other researchers echo this conception of school leadership. Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger (2003), for example, argue that the conception of leadership as "mediated by teacher practices and attitudes" (p. 418) has the most empirical support. The view that has come to encapsulate the field is "principals helping teachers helping students" (Mascall, 2003).

This qualitative study explored what school leaders can do, in practical terms, to lead more effectively through others by considering how principals can act in emotionally supportive ways. As such, it aims to more clearly understand the kinds of specific leadership practices hinted at in recent empirical work on "the Emotions Path" by Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010). In what is sometimes called transformational leadership by researchers like Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), principals operate "by creating a shared sense of direction, clear goals and support and encouragement for peoples' work" (p. 185). This form of leadership is supportive in its emphasis on understanding the emotional and affective needs of teachers and students. It sustains and encourages, providing the necessary motivation to meet the many, sometimes exhausting, challenges of teaching (Addison & Brundrett, 2008). And even detractors of the softer side of school leadership, like Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), who argue that empirical support for transformational, supportive leadership is lacking, concede that "the types of motivational, collaborative, and interpersonal skills that are emphasized in transformational leadership research are essential to leaders' ability to improve teaching and learning" (p. 666). Leithwood (2007) is clearest in his endorsement of leading in emotionally supportive ways when he argues, "this may be the most powerful, 'natural' path through which principals contribute to student learning" (p. 628). Yet, as Leithwood et al. (2010) note, the field is gripped by "a relatively confusing body of empirical evidence" (p. 695).

Research objectives

The purpose of the study was to understand the effects principals have on teacher emotions, specifically teacher morale, self- and collective efficacy, stress, and commitment. To the extent that these questions retrace some of the emerging work of the field, they are confirmatory; to the extent that they might elicit new responses, they are exploratory. (For an example of a similar study rationale, see Leithwood, Steinbach, & Jantzi, 2002; and Leithwood, Strauss, & Anderson, 2007.) This study builds on some important work already done to understand the effect principals have on teachers in their schools. It seeks to extend and deepen an emerging understanding about

emotionally responsive and responsible school leadership through the consideration of what Leithwood (2007) and Leithwood and Beatty (2008) call “leading with teacher emotions in mind.” As well, the study is guided by Leithwood’s (2006) survey of teacher working conditions for the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario.

The theoretical lens used here draws both on sociological work like Hochschild (1983) and Hargreaves (2001), in addition to the more cognitive work found in reviews like Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999), and even some writing in organizational psychology that has motivated much of the work in the literature review below. In selecting these perspectives, the study aims to understand emotions as an aspect of teachers’ inner lives, as well as the very real managerial nature of leading schools.

The specific research question and sub-questions addressed by this study are:

What impact do the actions (or inactions) of leaders have on the emotional lives of teachers?

- (1) What principal actions influence teacher emotions?
- (2) How do these actions shape morale, self-efficacy, stress, and commitment?
- (3) How do these actions and subsequent emotions affect how teachers approach their work?
- (4) What principal actions do teachers believe will emotionally support their work?

Significance of the study

Given the resources invested in the principalship, and the role it plays in our current conception of the mechanisms of school improvement, both practitioners and researchers have an interest in the findings from a research project such as this. District and system leaders would benefit from a clearer, more precise, and more empirically valid understanding of the ways principals are likely to improve schools. As well, principals themselves would be well-served by knowing precisely where their energies are best spent. As Earl, Freeman, Lasky, Sutherland, and Torrance (2002) argue, “Learning for capacity in schools depends on believing in success, making connections, attending to motivation, experiencing emotion, being a community, engaging in inquiry, fostering creativity, encouraging practice, and finding time” (p. 75). Yet, what needs further exploration is the set of specific practices associated with these capacities. While there have been several meta-analyses of leadership effects (Hattie, 2012), Leithwood and Sun (2012) argue for studies that understand in deep ways the most fruitful leadership practices:

All but the largest and most ambitious of future studies, in other words, should use “deeper” measures of fewer variables so as to produce more robust evidence about a smaller number of associations than is possible with the more complex designs required for indirect effects leadership studies...Future research inquiring about how leadership influences student learning should also be “practice specific” (p. 412).

This study contributes to the growing recognition of the importance of teacher emotions in teacher performance (for example, Hargreaves, 2001; Leithwood, 2007, 2010; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008) to describe better the kinds of practices leaders could consider adopting to improve the functioning of their schools. In that it describes the practices of leading through others, the study sheds light on an important mechanism of principal leadership. In the short run, this study offers insights about the nature of leadership and concrete suggestions for leaders to improve their practice. As such, it fulfills the wishes of researchers like Leithwood (2010) who has worried about the gaps in the reform efforts underway in places like Ontario:

We have to nurture the way our staff is feeling about their work if we expect them to be resilient and sustain their efforts. The work has to be something that’s meaningful. It needs to feel like we’re making progress, and it needs to be something teachers are confident about being able to do (p. 2).

This study keeps the agenda focused on this central question. Furthermore, this study, to the extent that qualitative research can, confirms the findings of previous studies (Beatty, 2000a, 2000b; Finnigan, 2010; Hargreaves, 2001; and especially Leithwood & Beatty, 2008).

Literature review

The review below brings together a few decades’ worth of research on aspects of the working emotions of teachers. Leithwood (2007) and Leithwood and Beatty (2008), in particular, synthesized key elements into a compelling model of leadership effects through teacher emotions, including in particular: job satisfaction and morale; stress, anxiety, and burnout; a sense of individual and collective self-efficacy; and organizational commitment and engagement. These are a promising position from which to start any inquiry on the topic.

Job satisfaction and morale

If we include studies from the larger body of research on job satisfaction and morale, there is a very mature set of findings. Though not always consistent, they do often point to a satisfaction-performance relationship, the tendency of dissatisfied teachers to leave schools (or the profession), and the importance of the principal in creating the best work environment to ensure performance and retention (Angle & Perry, 1981; Buckley, Schneider, &

Shang, 2005; McKenzie, 2005; Rhodes, Nevill, & Allan, 2004). It stands to reason that teachers who dislike their work will not perform it well, or perhaps leave altogether. Baylor and Ritchie (2002) were bold enough to say, “Teacher morale influences all aspects of the teaching and learning environment within the school setting” (p. 410). Rhodes et al. (2004), in their study of English teachers’ satisfactions and dissatisfaction, found that several factors that school leaders have some control over were centrally important. Many studies point to the part for the school leader to play in improving the lives of teachers in order to improve the learning of students (for example, Black, 2001; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mascal, 2003; Ozcan, 1996; Schmidt, 2010).

Stress, anxiety, burnout

The term burnout was coined by Freudenberger (1974), in an article about clinic work describing the emotional exhaustion that comes with healthcare. Closer to the world of the classroom, Cunningham (1983) wrote that teacher burnout results from “stress related to inordinate time demands, inadequate relationships, large class sizes, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, role ambiguity, limited promotional opportunities, lack of support, etc.” (p. 37). The results of burnout, which can grow when unmoderated by school leadership, can be profound, suggest Blase and Greenfield (1985). According to Leithwood and Beatty (2008), through the “provision of support and the creation of an ethic of openness to being influenced about decisions” (p. 41), school leaders can impact the very internal states that can either sustain the emotional labor of teaching, or undermine it through burnout.

Self- and collective efficacy

There are few matters so studied as teacher self-efficacy—hundreds of studies from many nations, across many areas of teaching, establish its importance. Beginning with the work of Bandura (1977) to establish the field, the work has since been carried on by many others (for example, see early studies like Armor et al., 1976; Ashton, Buhr, & Crocker, 1984; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; or through surveys of the field like Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) to establish the centrality of this concept in explaining teacher effectiveness. There has been much more work in the intervening years to add to the discussion, like the addition of internal and external elements (Guskey & Passaro, 1994), distinctions between personal and general teaching efficacy (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and many others. But perhaps the most salient to the ideas of this article is the addition of the notion of collective teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). The role of principals in supporting this dimension of teacher emotion is best supplied by Armor et al.

(1976), who argued in language that is reminiscent of more recent studies that, “It is possible that an improvement in teachers’ morale and commitment could be produced by school policies that support teachers and help them solve their classroom problems, and that their sense of efficacy might improve as a result” (p. 24).

Organizational commitment and engagement

In what is one of the most thorough surveys of teacher commitment, Dannetta (2002) argues that the literature:

...Reveals that the principal can be directly responsible for as many as eleven of the twenty-three factors that influence teacher commitment to student learning. Principal preparation initiatives should assist principals in appreciating the significance of a teacher’s commitment to student learning and fostering the development of such commitment by identifying those factors that influence a teacher’s commitment to student learning that they have control over. Of particular note was the skill of “buffering” their staff from tedious paperwork, and the management of new initiatives; these proved to influence negatively a teacher’s commitment to student learning (p. 166).

Leithwood and Beatty (2008) point to Datnow and Castellano (2000) who, when studying the implementation of whole-school reform, found teachers were willing to persevere with a difficult teaching job if it meant better student achievement. While not all relevant factors are under the control of the principal, many of them are. The conclusion Leithwood and Beatty (2008) draw from this and other research (like Blase & Blase, 2001, whom they paraphrase here) is this: “Leaders build commitment and engagement when they share governance and foster collaborative, learning-focused cultures that are resilient and adept at solving problems” (p. 74)—what Austin and Harkins (2008) call “post-bureaucratic practices” (p. 105). Leaders need to be aware of the threats to commitment and reduce them wherever possible.

Methods

This study investigated teacher perceptions of leadership in an effort to understand better the kinds of leadership practices that contribute to, or detract from, leadership that works for teachers. Data were gathered during semi-structured interviews designed to understand the kinds of emotional and relational effects leader actions and behaviors have had on teachers, finding an answer to the question: What kinds of leadership practices have been important in helping to produce the best performances of the teachers, as understood by teachers themselves? Finnigan (2012) employed a similar design to understand school leadership through the eyes of teachers, for good

reason; if leadership practices are to be effective, teacher perceptions are critical.

Population and sample

Twenty secondary teachers (13 females, seven males), teaching in a total of 16 different schools in Ontario, Canada, were interviewed. Participants in the study represented a range of experience, from relatively new teachers (two years in the profession), to those with much experience (28 years). They represented urban, suburban, and rural schools, and a range of subject disciplines across grades 9–12. But most important, they taught in schools with a range of socioeconomic status (SES) conditions, serving families with the widest range of incomes and opportunities possible (for the importance of SES in like studies, see Hoy et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010). Teachers were recruited by publicizing the study through the networks of a large university in Ontario. Subsequent interview participants were recruited through a “snowball sampling” technique, whereby interview participants suggested peers or colleagues as potential interview subjects (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, interview participants were asked to forward the details of the study on to their peers. The peers, if interested, contacted the principal investigator directly. Based on the considerations above, the “seed” participants came from secondary school teachers in the southern Ontario area across schools representing a range of SES (see Merriam, 2009).

This research involved human subjects, and so ethics approval from the participating university was required. No special risks were foreseen in the carrying out of this research, and the respondents were not drawn from a vulnerable population. All data remained confidential, and pseudonyms were assigned to all respondents. The researcher was not in a position of authority toward the participants, and the data was not shared with anyone in a position of evaluation or authority over the participants.

All respondents were informed of the study’s aims and objectives, as well as the requirements of their involvement. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were at no time judged or evaluated and at no time were they at risk of harm.

Data collection and analysis

The data were gathered in approximately 45–60 minute semi-structured interviews—a timeframe within the range of similar studies (see Beatty, 2000a; Hargreaves, 2000; and Leithwood et al., 2007). In order to ensure consistency across respondents, the same basic set of questions was used in each interview (Patton, 1980; see Leithwood et al., 2007 for a similar study and methodology). However, in keeping with the semi-structured interview style, appropriate questioning sequences were allowed to enter new areas of discussion. The

investigator asked questions about teachers' experience with principals, and the impact the principals have had on their emotional state—especially with reference to their organizational commitment, burnout, self- and collective efficacy, and morale and job satisfaction. Teachers were asked to describe instances where principal actions had an influence—specifically, negative and positive—on these domains in order to gain an understanding of how principals affect teacher emotions. For example, when questioning about a principal's positive impacts on morale and job satisfaction, the investigator asked: "Can you think of something a principal has done to make you love your job more? What made it memorable, and why? Please describe it." On the topic of negative impacts on self-efficacy: "Can you think of an instance where a principal made you feel *less* capable than you thought you were? Why was it damaging?" A similar positive and negative sequence was used for each domain. In addition, the investigator asked questions about background and context factors to further try to isolate the role of the principal. As well, the investigator probed beyond the domains considered in the literature by offering unstructured and open-ended opportunities for participants to express their views.

The interviews were transcribed and the respondents' identities were anonymized. The transcripts were then coded, and broad categories or themes were identified using an inductive method. In order to understand the initial research questions, transcripts were coded using the language of the literature review. In order to highlight new and emerging themes, however, codes reflecting the unique qualities of the data were applied to the participants' comments. For example, data in which a teacher recalled an emotionally difficult experience with a principal involving student discipline might be coded as "stress, anxiety, and burnout," as well as "student behavior." In this way, the coding process allowed the researcher to organize teacher experiences in ways that reflected the previous work on this topic highlighted in the literature review, while still being open to concepts that might emerge from the experiences of the participants. The development of categories was "in response to the purpose of the research, ...mutually exclusive,... [and] conceptually congruent" and as sensitive to the data as possible (Merriam, 2009, pp. 185–186). Once it was clear during the interviews that the data had become saturated, when new information had become scarce, the interviews were concluded.

Findings and analysis

Morale and job satisfaction

Job satisfaction and morale—understood by researchers as a positive attitude and enthusiasm toward a person's work (Evans, 1997; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991)—has been connected to improved school performance in a variety of ways (for example, Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Ingersoll, 2001; and Stockard & Lehman,

2004). The findings of this study suggest that principals have an influence over this domain of teacher emotion. One participant summed up the connection in a comment representative of the participants generally: “A motivated staff is an effective staff. A beleaguered, bored, and bludgeoned staff is a less effective staff. They check if they punch the clock...”

Acknowledgment by principals

At least half of teachers in this study indicated that they felt unacknowledged, even unknown, by their principals. When discussing her last principal, one teacher remarked, “There was very little positive reinforcement. Individual, genuine, positive reinforcement.” For participants who perceived their principals as adept at acknowledgement, the gesture appeared genuine, and more importantly, specific not generic: “They told us why they appreciated what we were doing, not thank you for the ‘magical things you do with our students,’ which we hear all the time to the point where it’s a joke.”

Teachers being heard

Study participants often expressed a desire to be heard by their principals. One participant put it like this: “I’m constantly being asked for my opinion as a sort of ceremonious gesture. ‘We are a democratic institution and I care what you have to say.’” When teachers in the study perceived a lack of “being heard,” morale suffered, in this case in response to changes in the school:

That sense of feeling unheard, the sense of feeling...Last year was particularly low in terms of morale because the leadership change had been handled really poorly. I think that when a change happens...again, I use the word honor...there has to be some honoring of why people are holding onto what they’re holding onto.

Several participants expressed frustration at what were perceived to be needless meetings, covering material already understood; the sense among participants was that they were being disrespected in this way. One participant explained the effect of not being heard: “You have the staff of 80 spending two hours in a meeting that accomplishes nothing for the purposes of staff or for the kids.”

Teachers in this study expressed unequivocally a desire for principals to listen to their needs, talents, and concerns—in a way that honored the capabilities of the staff. The morale of the faculty surveyed was closely tied to this principal behavior (as might be expected given the synthesis provided by Leithwood, 2006).

Principal presence

Forty percent of teachers in this study explained that their morale was affected by the ways principals carried themselves and maintained a presence

in the school. Teachers spoke about ways principals have been able to improve morale by what is sometimes jokingly called MBA—“management by being around.” One participant described the actions of her current principal like this:

For both students and teachers alike, she comes out in the morning and greets us...This principal, she is only in the hall...She comes out...Our class would start at 8:30, she comes out at 8:15...She makes that engagement with every single student, not just the troubled students, not just the high-achieving students, every student.

Teachers in this study appreciated seeing their principal in action, walking the school halls, engaging with students and teachers alike. Among participants, morale—positive attitude and enthusiasm—was tied to the behavior of the principal in this way: visible principals were able to improve the morale of many of the study participants through increased engagement and presence by providing opportunities for acknowledgement and support, as well as discipline.

Principal keeping order

One quarter of teachers in this study looked to the principal to establish student discipline and keep order in the school. They regarded this task as critical to the smooth functioning of the school—and if the task was unfulfilled, the morale of these teachers suffered. One participant described what she perceived to be the abdication of the principal keeping order:

The students were running the school, especially there was a group of about seven of them. The principal would just allow the behavior thinking that he...I don't know...He was their buddy...Very, very unprofessional, very, very discouraging to teachers.

Another participant echoed this view:

I've seen positive morale when principals have enforced the code of conduct, enforced school rules, and proactively created an environment where kids understand that this is an institution of learning. It's not the street and you can't act like it's the street.

A sizeable group of teachers in this study looked toward principals to act as the keeper of discipline—this was especially true in schools with low SES. When principals acted in ways that supported student discipline, for many teachers in this study, morale tended to improve.

Principal empathy for teachers

Half of the study participants reported that empathetic principal behaviors had a positive impact on their job satisfaction and morale.

One participant put it like this:

She (the principal) also knows whether you're just venting and not looking for a solution, but she's also not afraid to share her personal experiences, "You know what? I had this happen and here's how I felt," and so you're reminded that she's been in the trenches like you have and there is that camaraderie.

For the half of participants reporting similar comments, teachers felt buoyed by a personal, authentic, and genuine attempt by the principal to understand them as individuals, with all that entails—emotions, hopes, disappointments, and fears. Principals who were able to take an empathetic stance were able to positively impact the morale of the participants, even in the face of external pressures like demanding parents.

On the other hand, the lack of principal empathy was reported to have a negative impact on teacher morale and job satisfaction. Approximately a third of teachers in this study reported that their principals, past and present, have often failed to recognize them for the individuals they are:

We're not numbers. It requires feelings, and that interpersonal piece is really important when you're in a leadership role,...when the leadership role requires that you have sensitivity and compassion and emotional intelligence.

Principal support

Participants frequently recalled instances where principals either behaved in open and interested ways toward their new initiatives or direction their practice was taking, as well as instances where they perceived the principal to be scolding or otherwise unsupportive.

Several teachers spoke about the importance of principals supporting teacher initiative on special events like student performances or athletics. One participant described the effect on morale when she perceived her principal as being unsupportive of her efforts on a school performance:

I thought it was a place that, you know, you were supposed to be able to, doing things with kids. And here we were, you know working after school, getting the school show ready with probably a hundred kids total involved and I thought that's a weird thing to say: "This is a place of business, be quiet."

Many teachers recalled similar instances where principal behavior that was perceived as unsupportive, or even hostile, to teacher initiative or teaching practice had a negative impact on faculty morale. Teachers in this study reported relying on their principals to approach situations with a supportive disposition. In the absence of principal encouragement, one teacher reported that she felt:

Like a cog in the machine. It's just like you're just another...You're just churning almost all the time with very little to make you want to keep going...It's a lot of negativities all the time. Everybody needs affirmation or encouragement.

Role of professional respect from principals

Teachers in this study frequently spoke about specific instances where principals either supported morale by behaving in ways that were perceived as respectful of the teacher's professional capabilities, or in ways that demeaned that sense of professional respect. One participant described the interactions with her principal:

The way that she would carry out a Friday morning meeting:...I'm going to talk at you rather than have a conversation with you. The way she would interact in the hallway, if you're walking down the hallway. If I was carrying a coffee mug, she didn't like that. She would say, "Could you please put the coffee mug away." So, it was a lot of wrist slapping rather than, "Oh, I saw these students doing this and that looked really interesting. Good for you."

This kind of observation was common to many participants; 18 of 20 reported that professional respect from their principal was important to them. One teacher perceived his principal to be excessively picky about how he spent his preparation periods; in "micromanaging" his time, he felt a sense of professional disrespect that negatively impacted his sense of morale: "I'm up on email with colleagues and administrators until midnight or 1:00 in the morning to be lectured about 20 minutes of professional time...It's a dehumanizing experience and it makes me want to scale back."

Stress, anxiety, and burnout

Teachers in this study reported that burnout, stress, and anxiety were major features of their working lives. They talked in very striking terms about the effects principals have had on their emotional well-being:

There are always people at various stages of burnout in the building...I've seen people when they had to leave. People in emotional breakdown, physical burnout; you can tell they're not sleeping. They've been doing it for so long without support...When you don't have support and guidance you're just constantly digging, and digging, and digging, and trying to get out of the mess, and you're not even sure you're going in the right direction.

Blame

One quarter of participants reported being concerned that principals would blame them for the performance of their students. While teachers in this study spoke passionately about their desire to have students succeed, several respondents talked about the stress associated with having responsibility for achieving targets on standardized tests. A respondent explained this feeling: "Teachers have said to me, 'The principal's going to blame me for that, right? I will be blamed for poor scores.'"

Three teachers in this study reported feeling that their principals were often eager to take the side of others when disputes emerged. One participant used especially strong language in order to describe the stress she had felt in defending herself against accusations of unfair marking: “It starts with having to defend: how was my teaching?...You’re then defending your classroom teaching....It’s almost like being in a courtroom without a lawyer...”

Principal buffer

Several teachers in this study looked to their principals to protect them from what they perceived to be the increasing stress of the school site—and the form that has been taking of late is that of the bully parent. Five teachers in this study reported this phenomenon as a major source of teacher stress and anxiety: “The harassing parent is becoming extremely common. Having parents just walk into the class and scream at you, without going to the office, in the middle of your class and, ‘Who are you to give my kid that mark?’” At least one participant reported that her principal took an interest to protect her from an overbearing parent, and in so doing, reduced the stress and anxiety of the situation. When principals acted to protect teachers against what they perceived as threatening behavior from parents, teachers felt relieved, supported, and much less stressed.

Teacher workload

Three-quarters of teachers in this study responded that when they were overworked, their emotional state suffered and exhaustion set in. Several teachers commented that they looked toward their principals to protect them from being depleted: “I think also recognizing when your faculty is over-programmed and holding back rather than pushing forward... Canceling a meeting when it’s clear that the faculty is burnt out, giving some sort of value to their time and the way it is being used.”

Eight respondents described in positive terms their principals’ efforts to protect teachers from being overburdened. Principals who ensured the faculty in their schools had appropriate time to perform their work were able to effectively reduce the degree of stress felt by teachers in this study:

One positive thing that happened last year was when the counselors went to the leadership and said, ‘We’re having as many teachers in our offices crying as children, so we need to take this PD [professional development] off the table because it’s driving people crazy.’ And they listened and they did take it off the table.

Another teacher put it like this: “I think it’s a quality of a good leader to recognize everyone has limits to their abilities and contributions, and to encourage people to constantly seek to establish their limits.”

Self- and collective efficacy

Teachers in this study identified a few areas where principals had an influence on their sense of efficacy: in the provision of professional development and alterations to their teaching schedules; through unhelpful teacher comparisons; and in providing support.

Professional development

One of the ways in which participants recalled principals having an effect on their sense of self-efficacy was in school administrators ensuring that appropriate professional development was available. In this way, principals were able to ensure that teachers felt like they were able to reach students, and confident that they were equipped for the challenge of improving student performance. At least a quarter of participants described professional development as important to their self-efficacy. One participant described the positive effect of his principal ensuring professional development:

I’ve been actually again, at both schools I’ve been on, I’ve been offered the opportunity a couple of times to do watch and learns and sort of little mini PD sessions for either grade team or for the entire staff. I appreciate those opportunities because it’s practice for me. It’s also, to me, it would suggest pretty clearly that there’s a confidence and what I’m doing they see as being effective and good practice and worth sharing with the rest of the staff.

Schedule changes

Five interview participants reported that changes to their working schedules had impacts on their emotional states, particularly their sense of self-efficacy—in this case, specifically, their ability to meet the needs of the students. The teachers with negative views were very sensitive to what they perceived as vengeful or manipulative changes to their schedule. These teachers believed it to be a common practice for principals looking to constructively dismiss teachers to arrange a schedule that, while in accordance with the collective agreement, would undermine the teacher’s sense of competence in the classroom. One participant described seeing this in practice, and the effect on teacher self-efficacy:

A school leader will often change timetables of the teacher because, as you know, we have different qualifications. If I’m qualified in English and history, but I’ve been teaching English for 25 years, and if he said, “I want you to teach history now,”...I may say, “retirement papers please.” That’s one way that school leaders do it. People move on.

Role of principal support

In addition to teachers reporting that the perception of principal support affected their sense of morale, it also impacted their sense of self-efficacy; this was true for 13 of 20 participants. This study finds that when teachers felt undermined by their principals, they suffered a loss of self-efficacy. Some teachers explained that they perceived being undermined when principals arbitrarily questioned their teaching practice or skill at maintaining class discipline in front of the students. One participant described the relationship between principal support and self-efficacy like this:

We talk about children being risk-takers. Teachers have to be risk-takers, too, and they can't do that if they're being undermined with that relationship, with the relationship with their principal; or if their relationship with the principal is such that the teacher is now questioning and second-guessing what they're doing.

As in other areas, teachers in this study wished for the kinds of support that they, as practicing teachers, are expected and encouraged to give students in their classes.

Teacher comparisons

Several participants in the study complained that their sense of efficacy was negatively impacted through unhelpful and demeaning comparisons with other faculty. Some respondents reported that in an effort to demonstrate “best practices,” their principals would imply that some of their colleagues were delivering superior instruction. The tone with which this was done decreased the sense of self-efficacy for some participants: “I could see like a little civil war starting, it just was just like a really, really bad decision; a lot of people felt that it was like a public shaming...It really caused a real stir. People left feeling really [bad]....”

Organizational commitment and engagement

Teachers in this study reported that their sense of organizational commitment and engagement fluctuates depending on the behavior of the principal. The findings below suggest that teachers are willing to engage deeply—in putting time and effort into extracurricular initiatives, Professional Learning Communities work, literacy committees, and the like—but are more likely to do so if principals acknowledge their efforts, the principal avoids creating the appearance of favoring some teachers over others, and if the principal is able to read the staff's interests accurately and appeal to them. One participant explained: “Well you know if it [the principal] was someone that I felt a little bit differently about, I might get involved in maybe more literacy-based activities or literacy committees and things like that...”

Acknowledgement-commitment connection

Sixty-five percent of teachers in this study reported that being acknowledged for their efforts by their principals—which were often above the contract requirements, required much of their own personal time, and benefitted students outside the classroom—was a major influence on their desire to commit in future instances. When describing what this acknowledgement looked like, one participant said:

He [her principal] would do, like the thank you cards. Honestly, he hooked me. My second week there, I had a thank you card....And, I just never had a thank you card. As simple as that, and I was hooked.

One participant recalled a principal from earlier in her career who was able to increase the commitment of the faculty through a sense of being honored. Years later, she was still impressed by the effectiveness of his behavior: “There’s stuff that he can get out of his staff...By really making you feel like he honors and values what you do, like truly, truly making you feel like that, there’s stuff that he gets out of you.”

Principal favorites

While teachers in this study underscored the importance of acknowledgement and encouragement, 40 percent also commented on the possible negativity associated with the appearance of principal favorites, specifically on their desire to commit extra time and energy to school causes. By favorites, participants meant that they perceived principals had selected a privileged group of teachers who received special treatment or advanced invitations to participate in school initiatives. Some participants in this study felt their sense of commitment decline when it appeared to them that their principals assessed staff not by their potential and capabilities, but by inclusion in an arbitrary group. One participant complained that it felt to her like her principal had selected favorites in her school for promotion over more—or at least equally—qualified teachers in her school; what she called “the tap.” Perhaps this is the clearest way to understand the offensiveness of the principal favorite concept; it appeared to teachers in this study that the favoritism enjoyed by some teachers was baseless, unwarranted, and perhaps more damaging, preventing their own engagement in the school.

Bureaucracy

Fully half of teachers in this study commented on the negative effect of bureaucracy on their practice. In general terms, teachers in this study reported feeling that when they perceived an inordinate amount of bureaucracy—“paperwork”—insisted on by the principal, they decreased their commitment and engagement—especially to events and activities that required paperwork. When teachers saw their principals as partners in their commitment, willing to find ways to “make it work” by facilitating the paperwork or

helping to break down “roadblocks,” in the words of one participant, they were more willing to commit. On the other hand, when study participants reported they felt like their principal’s desire to satisfy board-level minutiae exceeded their interest in supporting student and teacher initiative, their commitment waned. As the participant explained, “It gets to be overwhelming, so you say, ‘I’m not going to do it.’”

Discussion

Critical principal behaviors: Key findings

This study supports the core body of research in this field, suggesting that principals play a central role in shaping the emotions of teachers (Nir & Kranot, 2006; Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2010). This study serves as further validation of the idea that school leadership needs to be understood as at least partly, if not mainly, a social endeavor, infused with emotion on the parts both of the leaders and the led (Beatty, 2007; Hargreaves, 2001; Leithwood, 2007). Several specific and key areas emerge: showing professional respect; encouraging and acknowledging teacher effort and results; providing appropriate protection; being seen; allowing teacher voice; and communicating principal vision.

Showing professional respect

Teachers in this study reported they thrived when they felt a sense of professional respect from their principal. This respect came in a variety of ways: in being consulted on the topic of school programming, curriculum directions, and the implementation of change; in principals assuming a positive intention on the part of teachers; and allowing teachers autonomy in building their programs and delivering their lessons and evaluating student work (see Crawford, 2009). Teachers described feeling exhilarated and engaged when principals found ways to express their confidence in teacher ability. This feeling of being respected, demonstrated through principal behavior, led to increased teacher commitment and morale; teachers who felt their principals valued their capability, knowledge, and even ambition, gave more.

When teachers felt their professional judgment, or integrity, was called into question, their morale suffered profoundly. Perhaps because the profession is structured in the way it is, thirty students in a class, one teacher; perhaps because teachers often enter the profession out of a sense of vocation; whatever the reason, the desire among teachers in this study to have their professional judgment respected was remarkably strong (see West, Ainscow, & Stanford, 2005). When they felt undercut by their principals—for instance, when their marks were unilaterally changed by

the principal—they felt despair and a sense that their practice lacked meaning. When they felt blame from their principals, and when that blame felt unearned or merely at the whim of a powerful parent or due to an unrealistic expectation, they experienced a deep sense of stress and anxiety. When issues occurred, teachers were fully prepared to be disciplined, but asked that they be disciplined for only their own errors; group admonishments eroded morale and commitment. While teachers in this study reported feeling buoyed by encouragement and support, they were prepared to take suggestions to improve their practice, provided it came from a position of respect and of encouraging a growth mindset. Most teachers were able to speak candidly about incidents where they received some kind of correction from the principal, one going so far as describing her initial teacher performance as “terrible”; but principals who approached teacher improvement and critique by assuming a positive intent and encouraging growth were able to do so with respect, and earned in many cases the admiration of the teachers in this study. On the other hand, in the absence of professional respect, their desire to teach fell away in many cases. Under these negative emotions, teachers dreaded coming to work, began to resent their students, and withdrew their commitment to school initiatives. They retreated from school programs, committees, and commitments. This can be true on a larger scale, as well, as Beatty (2010), argues: “When teachers’ emotional understandings of leaders and entire systems create expectations of respect, care, and professional support, their professional practices differ markedly in creativity, professional performance, and optimism” (p. 188).

Encouragement and acknowledgement

Teachers in this study reported that they desired encouragement from their principals. While they enjoyed working with students, and while they were sometimes a source of rejuvenation, the emotional effect of teaching was largely that of feeling drained. The students took and took, and the teachers gave and gave. And the teachers then looked to their principals for encouragement and acknowledgment. This echoes what other writers on school culture have noted (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Bolman and Deal (2002) write about what they call the Human Resource frame, a way of thinking that “highlights the importance of individual needs and motives. It assumes that schools and classrooms, as other social systems, work best when needs are satisfied in a caring, trusting work environment” (p. 4). These findings support an emerging body of literature (Andrews & Crowther, 2002; Beatty, 2007).

Teachers consistently reported that feeling acknowledged by their principals was a critical contributor to their emotional satisfaction with their work, and in securing future commitment. The form this acknowledgement took was not of much importance; a kind word, a small note, or a brief thank you

in the hallway was often sufficient to remind the teacher that his or her efforts were noticed and appreciated. In fact, the grander the gesture from the principal, the less profound the response in the teacher, suggesting that a small but genuine demonstration of thanks was more valuable than the faculty-wide thank you. The reasons for this likely relate to the inauthenticity of “announced acknowledgement.” If the acknowledgement given was in some generic or rote form, the eventual effect was often the opposite of the intended one (for a similar discussion, see Beatty, 2011).

When teachers felt their principal knew what contributions they had made, and appreciated them, noting the positive effect those efforts had on students or the school generally, they felt energized. Commitment can require many hours and much dedication from teachers, and is a critical part of student engagement and overall school success. When teachers felt that principals were unaware of the depth of their commitment, contributions, and effort, when they went unacknowledged, they suffered a blow to their morale, and often disengaged. Teachers in this study would only toil for so long un-thanked and unnoticed; at some point, they would withdraw, taking with them opportunities for student success. Gratitude begat a sustained commitment; its absence, withdrawal and disengagement. This study echoes the findings of Weiss (1999), who found that “teachers’ perception of school leadership and culture and teacher autonomy and discretion shape the extent of their willingness to do their best work, to commit to teaching as a career choice again, and to plan to stay in teaching” (p. 869).

Of particular note, this study supports the work of Bandura (1993) in understanding notions of efficacy: “Teachers’ beliefs in their personal efficacy to motivate and promote learning affect the types of learning environments they create and the level of academic progress their students achieve” (p. 117). Performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states are suggested as central sources of efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The teachers in this study provided evidence to support this theory. They often reported that verbal persuasion in the form of principal encouragement was important. (Conversely, the negative effect of teacher comparisons to their sense of efficacy can be seen as a reflection of Bandura’s (1977) suggestion of vicarious experience as a source of efficacy; in this case, the vicarious experience took on a negative and condescending tone, and so had the opposite of the intended effect.)

Yet when principals appeared to have a small group of favored teachers, the effect on the morale and commitment levels of other faculty suffered. The appearance of principal favorites took the following forms: some teachers seemed to be selected for leadership without competition or credential over those more qualified; given preferential treatment for course scheduling; or perhaps approached for participation in professional development. The results

of this perception were predictable: teachers not in the favored group tended to withdraw their effort and retrench in their classrooms, believing they had been pigeonholed by their principals, and that increased effort mattered not so long as the favored teachers would dominate the spotlight.

Appropriate protection

Teachers in this study wanted protection, and they looked to their principals for it. Their unprompted analogies drawing parallels between the principal-teacher relationship and the teacher-student relationship suggest that this is a widespread phenomenon. These findings differ slightly from the more reciprocal mutual influence conclusions of Hallinger (2005), but are more in line with Rosenholtz (1989), who argued in her study of Tennessee schools that principals play a key role in establishing appropriate cultural and relational norms. Perhaps owing to the often-combative nature of school sites—parents and students clamoring for grades, denigrating the role of the teacher—teachers felt they needed defending. When they felt defended, their loyalty to the principal, and their desire to experiment with the principal's initiatives, increased. Teachers reported, in simple terms, “doing more” for those principals. Yet when teachers felt undefended by principals, their stress and anxiety issues became severe. Teachers reported many medical leaves after feeling unprotected in the face of emotionally violent and negative interactions with bullying parents or students. Their emotions became toxic.

Part of protection includes school orderliness. Teachers in this study, even those who identified as very progressive educators, reported that the ability of a principal to keep order affected their emotional states. This principal responsibility was understood as critically important to both the functioning of the school, but more simply to the stress and anxiety levels of teachers.

One area of protection was that of guarding against unrealistic work expectations for teachers. Schools can be places of near unending work; a teacher who wanted to dedicate her entire waking life to professional duties could easily find a way to do so, and likely still feel there was much more work to be done. Principals who understood this reality, who were able to monitor the workload of teachers in their schools and provide a reasonable respite from exhaustion, were able to insulate teachers against burnout (in concert with Blase & Greenfield, 1985). Principals who ignored the distribution of work, who perhaps looked to only a small group of high-achieving faculty or who drove agendas beyond reasonable expectation, exhausted their staff; the result, according to this study, was a risk of teacher disengagement as a protective measure.

Being seen

One of the more subtle but important respects in which principals supported teacher emotion, at least according to teachers in this study, was in their

visibility in the school. Teachers reported that a visible principal was more able to gain authority with students, and therefore act as an agent of order and safety. Visible principals were more likely to find the impromptu social interactions with teachers that afforded small moments of gratitude. Visible principals were able to set a positive tone with staff and students alike.

When principals were not able to find the time to be in the halls, it meant a greater emotional distance between teachers and their principal; that emotional distance led to decreased morale, lowered commitment, and an atmosphere of hostility rather than cooperation.

Allowing teacher voice

Teachers in this study reported that their sense of engagement and commitment, as well as their morale, improved when principals allowed teachers to have a voice. Examples of this voice might include hearing teacher input on new directions for the school, or in addressing issues like student absenteeism. In this way, this study endorses the view taken by Beatty (2011), in the importance of authentic conversations between leaders and teachers. While participants understood that school challenges are not easily solved, and even though teacher input in and of itself might not help to alleviate the problems under consideration, they nonetheless felt empowered and buoyed by the mere act of being listened to. Blase and Anderson's study (1995) found that teachers who expressed dissent found themselves marginalized, leaving them "resentful, hostile, frustrated, outraged, bitter, violent, used, exploited" (p. 40). Participants in this study generally supported that view, as well as the work of Leithwood and Beatty (2008), who argued that "stasis and demoralization are typical outcomes of leadership that does not allow people to voice their criticisms" (p. 29). In fact, it was just this sort of behavior that tended to prompt teachers to view school improvement initiatives as mere principal careerism. Participants often mirrored the language of Ball (2000), in characterizing these unidirectional meetings as pointless distractions from what they regard as the real work of schools. When principals solicited teacher voice, they achieved greater commitment (see Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010).

Communicating vision

What teachers reported is that vision matters; when they were able to see the vision of the principal—when they were able to understand the drives behind it, the rationale, and the hope of sustained success—they embraced initiatives in higher numbers. When the change or improvement to school programming or classroom instruction seemed like yet another board initiative, change for change's sake, or worse, merely another step in the career of the principal, they became demotivated. Finnigan (2010) reported that "teacher expectancy is higher when principals... communicate a vision, clarify

expectations, and set high standards for teaching and learning...” (p. 175). Similarly, teachers in this study recalled fondly principals who were able to articulate a vision for the school. While this study acknowledges the importance of a shared vision (Hallinger & Heck, 2002), one interesting finding of this study is that the particular vision mattered less than the existence of a vision at all; when teachers in this study understood their efforts as part of a larger effort, part of a longer-term vision, they were more likely to deepen their commitment.

These principal behaviors—showing professional respect, encouraging and acknowledging teacher effort and results, providing appropriate protection, allowing teacher voice, and communicating principal vision—are practical and concrete means by which principals of teachers in this study shaped the emotional landscape of the school faculty. The positive principal behaviors noted in this study, those that teachers said had a positive effect on their emotional states, are within the grasp of the average among us.

Unique contributions of this study

As mentioned above, the motivation for this study had two aims: first to confirm a young set of findings that teachers’ emotions were important to their practice, and that school leaders had important influences on these emotions; and second, to explore, from the perspective of teachers, what specific leadership practices support positive teacher emotions, and have the possibility of influencing their teaching practice. The findings of this study, as stated earlier, certainly support the work of Leithwood (2007), Hargreaves (1998, 2000, 2001), Mascal (2003), and Beatty (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008), to name a few, that suggest teacher emotions are important to teacher performance, and that principals who lead through emotionally responsive and responsible leadership behaviors are likely to improve teacher performance.

Yet the study goes further than confirmation in at least two important and unique outcomes. The first concerns the centrality of emotions to the working lives of teachers. In making the case that these principal effects were central to the lives of the teachers in the study, not ancillary, this study places on the school improvement agenda affective concerns that are often overlooked in leadership studies. This is not simply a problem of the academy, either; the complex and ambitious plans for system and school improvement very often ignore the emotional side of leading teachers. This study argues that, unless teacher emotion has a central place in understanding school operation, improvement, and change, any proposed initiative might suffer. This study places teacher emotions at the heart of school leadership.

The second novel contribution of this study is the specific set of practices identified as being important for teacher emotions. While there has been some work that argues teacher emotions matter, few have attempted to

identify promising principal behaviors that are likely to lead to teachers feeling more supported, more encouraged, and more committed. This study suggests a practical and achievable set of practices for principals to support teacher emotion; this rich description of exactly what constitutes “leading with teacher emotions in mind” (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008) allows for greater clarity than existed before. The behaviors identified in this study could influence principal preparation and mentorship. And while the understanding of these leadership behaviors would benefit from further study, they offer a promising, if provisional, place to start.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study explored the impacts principals have on the emotional states of teachers. Participants reported principal behavior was a key factor in improving their working emotions—or deteriorating them. Furthermore, teachers in this study supported the claim that principals can affect teacher performance by affecting teachers’ emotional states across the domains found in the literature: job satisfaction and morale; burnout, stress and anxiety; self- and collective efficacy; and organizational commitment and engagement. This study therefore supports the recent literature on the importance of school principals understanding the influence of the emotional dimension of their leadership behaviors (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010).

The discussion of the findings stressed the importance of the following key principal behaviors in influencing the emotions of the teachers working in their schools: professional respect shown for teacher capability; providing appropriate acknowledgement for teacher commitment, competence, and sacrifice; protecting teachers from damaging experiences like harassment; maintaining a visible presence in the school; allowing teachers’ voices to be heard; and communicating a satisfying vision for their school. In this way, this study adds a unique contribution to the existing work on leadership practices. Through these behaviors, principals can contribute to the optimal emotional well-being of the faculty. (While these findings suggest schools would be improved with the adoption of these recommendations, further research is needed to determine the magnitude of these impacts to understand how they compare to other possible principal behaviors or mechanisms of school improvement.)

Recommendations emerging from this study include better preparation of principal candidates for this aspect of the job, providing appropriate training for principals currently in the role, and placing emotionally savvy school leadership practices on the agenda of district and system leaders. Those interested in school improvement, at all levels, should consider the central role emotions play in achieving not just more humane school environments,

but (because of the emotion-performance connection) improved school outcomes. In this way, this study supports the recommendations of others, including Schmidt (2010), who argued “leadership preparation programmes in the new millennium should be required to train school leaders emotionally as well as cognitively” (p. 627). As well, this study highlights some specific key behaviors for principals, and those that guide and mentor them, to keep in mind. Those considering the design of programs preparing principals should carve out a place in the curriculum for the emotional dimension of school leadership. As well, district and system leaders should put on their agendas this important area of educational leadership and administration. Doing so might ensure that in the desire for technical changes, the human side of school leadership is not lost.

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