The Role of School Administration in Promoting a Strength-Based School Culture

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Current research on the adoption and implementation of strength-based approaches details the positive impact such practices can have on both student and educator engagement, success, and well-being. These strength-based approaches consist of practices which identify, highlight, and amplify individual's existing areas of strength, interest, and ability to promote their continued development in other areas which may present a degree of challenge.

Schools are on the ground level where the impacts of this shift in paradigm and practice will be the most noticeable. For such a change to be effective and sustainable, it needs to be fully embraced by the educators within the schools. Administration plays a key role in the promotion and operationalization of a shift towards a strength-based approach to inclusive practice within their school's culture through their own professional practice, their understanding of the specific considerations relating to the second language programs in their school, as well as in providing support and encouragement to the learners and educators of their schools. Throughout my doctoral research, investigating the current use of strength-based practices within inclusionary models of education (Garrett, 2022), participants of my study identified several ways in which school administrators can apply these strength-based concepts and practices, promoting well-being among the students and staff of their school community (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This article serves to share these findings, providing very practical examples of how administrators can promote the concepts and practices of a strength-based approach within their school to encourage the flourishing of their staff and students.

Leadership Priorities

The beliefs, practices, and examples being modelled by the school administration have an impact on the school culture as a whole. Change can arise from educators following the direction and example provided by principals and vice-principals, particularly in relation to the implementation of practices, programs, and models to enhance student learning. The intentional application of such practices will undoubtedly cause a discernable shift in the way in which they would approach their roles within the schools. Adopting a mindset that values individuals' strengths will naturally impact administrators practices of recognizing and leveraging educators' strengths, allowing for their own personal and professional development. The following recommendations come from the findings of my doctoral research, directed specifically to the important role a school's administrative team can have on the collaborative, innovative, and strength-based culture of Canadian schools.

Strength-Based Well-Being Needs

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory describes the relationship of three essential well-being needs that are foundational to people's well-being, providing the conditions for flourishing in their respective settings. Self-determination theory defines these needs as universal and essential for optimal human development and flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Morrison & Peterson, 2015). These needs are:

Relatedness - an individual's sense of belonging and feeling of connection to others through the creation and maintaining of supportive relationships.

Competence - feelings of accomplishment and self-worth that exist when people feel recognized for their gifts, abilities, strengths, and achievements.

Autonomy/Support - having a sense of control and support over decision-making processes through the provision of voice, choice, and collaborative opportunities.

Relatedness: Walking the Journey Together

Leadership which prioritizes student learning, personal development, and the well-being of all those in the building provides fertile ground for this strength-based approach to take root. For such a shift to occur become embedded in daily practice, within the very fibers of a school's culture, the leadership in the building needs to prioritize this vision. Developing and articulating the initial premises of a shared school vision involves the absolute belief that *"all individuals have strengths and there is a place for everyone. Everyone can become stronger with their skills."*

Students and educators need to have a sense of belonging within all contexts of their daily lives.

Educators need to also feel valued and appreciated. Recognition of the skills and talents they possess is a way to acknowledge the value that they have within their classroom or their school community. Clearly acknowledging and stating that not only does each person hold their own individual strengths, but that there is value and space for those strengths to be applied within the school further serves to satisfy an individual's need for relatedness (New Brunswick Health Council, 2015; Alberta Mentoring Partnership, 2013; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005).

Specifically, as it relates to administrators, providing teachers with the opportunity to discuss, collaborate, and create alongside their fellow colleagues is another way of promoting relatedness.

Leadership Modeling Autonomy/Support

Administrators need to be aware of the strengths existing within the walls of their school.

Once identified, individual educator's strengths can be leveraged, allowing educators to feel a sense of empowerment as they begin adopting the proposed concepts and practices of the strength-based dimension, allowing them a sense of professional autonomy while also feeling wholly supported by their school's leadership (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

School leaders need to model autonomy/support practices among their staff. Likewise, leaders need to model the expected language, behaviours, and practices that they wanted to see among educators working and teaching students. Consistency in the pursuit of the vision of the school's culture is essential for whole staff buy-in and support.

"We believe that our kids are strong and we're going to work from their strengths. That means as a principal you do that with your teachers as well. You have to model it. You can't want that for the kids and when a teacher tries something new and wants to talk to you about it have another behavior" (Sonya[1], 2020).

Any new practice or program being implemented takes time to become successfully and impactfully embedded. Educators are often heard encouraging their students to *take risks* when learning a new skill or concept. Educators need to feel free to implement new practices, knowing that they are fully supported by the leadership of their school, regardless of the initial outcomes. As with any situation when something new is being learned or piloted, there will undoubtedly be hurdles and errors. When properly supported, however, educators will learn from the difficulties encountered throughout the process but will be accompanied and encouraged by their fellow colleagues and the school's leadership. This in turn will promote a strength-based culture within the school in which educators are then able to accompany their students on their own journeys of learning, drawing out and amplifying their strengths along the way.

[1] *Referring quotes are taken from data collection as part of the author's doctoral/master's research and names are pseudonyms.*

Leveraging Educator Strengths (Competency)

"If you find great teachers, great schools, it's up to the leadership to elevate them" (Chris, 2020).

A school's leadership team must prioritize the promotion of strengths among not only their students but also their staff.

There is often a competitive element within the field of education. Educators compare themselves to others and can sometimes *feel threatened* by those doing different and wonderful things in their classrooms. It can be an isolating career with this type of mindset shared among staff.

"We have to learn to scale up good teaching. Let's leverage the strong teachers because really, they're not having the impact that they should" (Chris, 2020).

Principals, vice-principals, and other educators holding leadership roles within inclusionary school contexts have the opportunity to first identify, and then leverage, the diverse strengths of the educators who make up their educational staff, allowing them to grow and flourish. This type of strength-based environment will only enhance the learning that occurs within the school's walls.

This particular study emphasized the important role played by coaching and modeling when promoting change within a school or system setting. School administration who creates a culture that identifies, values, and mobilizes the various talents of its staff creates a collection of professional educators who are willing to share their practices with others. This can have a ripple effect, potentially shifting an entire system towards one which is more focused on individual's strengths and abilities.

Conclusion

There is no *how-to* manual for beginning this journey of deepening a paradigm. What is clear, though, is that it must be undertaken with flexibility and openness. Time must be used effectively, providing numerous opportunities for educators to reflect, communicate and co-construct processes necessary to build a collective vision. At the very center of this is the recognition, valuing and amplification of individuals' strengths.

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