

# Capacity Building and Succession Planning

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## Abstract

School leaders can make a considerable difference to the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, and consequently student achievement, by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers. If school leaders are to be leaders of learning, then they should take responsibility for ensuring the continual learning of both students and teachers, as well as maintaining their individual learning. This paper will analyse the role of succession planning and staff capacity building as essential components of a leadership for learning school.

## Keywords

School Leadership, Succession Planning, Capacity Building, Leadership for Learning, Student Outcomes

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## 1. Context

Schools have experienced numerous education reforms in the past 30 years, many of which were aimed at raising the achievement standards of students. The multifaceted and continuously changing school environments these reforms have created has resulted in school leadership becoming of immense interest education researchers who view it as a key influence in improving student outcomes (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Mulford, 2008). These views are based on the belief that school leaders can make a considerable difference to the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, and consequently student achievement, by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers (e.g., Pont, Nusche, & Hunter, 2008; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). The more leaders focus on the central business of teaching and learning, the larger their likely influence on student outcomes. If school leaders are to be leaders of learning, then they should take responsibility for ensuring the continual learning of both students and teachers, as well as maintaining their individual learning. This paper

will analyse the role of succession planning and staff capacity building as essential components of a leadership for learning school. These aspects are closely interrelated as building staff capacity is an important part of succession planning. These aspects will be analysed in relation to one of the author's previous teaching experiences. The context of these experiences was an Australian primary school with approximately 40 staff and 300 students aged 5 - 12. This primary school was considered the junior campus of a local private high school. The head of the junior school would often attend senior leadership meetings with leaders from the senior campus. These meetings were presided over by the headmaster and made decisions that affected both campuses. The author became interested in the aspects of capacity building and succession planning after a sudden leadership change in the school. He wondered how much support the new principal had been given to develop his leadership capacity prior to taking on the role, and whether the school had done any succession planning prior to this change to ensure a smooth transition.

## 2. Building Teacher Capacities

Transformational leadership has a strong emphasis on capacity building (Day et al., 2016). This leadership style focuses on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning by developing the resources within the school. Principals who adopt these leadership approach lead and inspire others by example, create a culture of intellectual stimulation, and strongly support the professional development of individual staff members (Shatzer et al., 2014). Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins (2006: p. 15) stated that one way in which leadership affects student achievement is that it acts as a "catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization". Other previous research (e.g. Penlington, Kington, & Day, 2008) similarly observed that building the capacities of school staff was a highly effective way of achieving school improvement. This focus on building capacities had three elements: developing the leadership capacities of staff, building self-confidence, and focusing upon improving the teaching capacity of the staff team. The development of the skills and knowledge of emerging leaders were seen as very important, as developing this capacity involved more people in school decision making; which (Leithwood et al, 2006) observed to be a feature of schools that were more effective in raising pupil outcomes. The author's recent primary school had staff meetings fortnightly and year level meetings on alternative weeks. Staff felt that they were involved in general campus decision making and had a voice on bigger issues through their year level coordinator's attendance at leadership meetings. Teachers perceived they had ownership of change within the primary school but were often irritated at the lack of action from senior leadership, who they felt neglected the primary campus in favour of the larger secondary campus.

Successful school leaders view the development of teaching and leadership capacities within their staff team as an essential element of their role (Penlington

et al., 2008). These leaders placed a strong emphasis on building these capacities in order to ensure a sustained improvement in student outcomes, and that these improvements continue as other leaders succeed them. Many schools did this through a focus on matching professional development with a specific school wide focus for developing teaching and learning within the school. This approach can have a more direct effect on pupil outcomes, as it effected improvement in teaching approaches in classrooms and reduced variability in teacher quality across the school (Cruickshank, 2017b). Weaknesses can be identified by student assessment data and then specifically addressed. Indeed Schildkamp & Kuiper (2010) stated that the use of data in education might serve several purposes such as improving student learning, and identifying school, student, and teacher strengths and weaknesses. The author's recent school made a point of saying that they did not teach to tests and did not allow test data to change curriculum at the expense of other areas that contribute towards the social and emotional well-being of students. They did however utilised data from standardised tests conducted throughout the year to identify weaknesses that required more future focus within the existing curriculum, and also design intervention strategies for struggling students. They consciously limited their standardised testing so that they would not be overwhelmed with data, as some schools have become (Shen & Cooley, 2008).

Leaders in effective schools place a higher value on teacher learning and support staff development inside and outside the school (Dinham, 2008). These leaders modelled professional learning and were prepared to learn from teachers, students and others (Cruickshank, 2016). They encouraged staff to engage in professional development activities and also brought experts into the school to run sessions and provide assistance. These principals were prepared to invest school funds to promote teachers' professional learning as a part of a whole-school focus on student learning. The author's recent school did have a professional development (PD) budget and were generally willing to cover expenditure and relief for local events and contribute to interstate events if attendance was adequately justified. There were general full school PD sessions throughout the year on topics such as first aid, and staff were regularly emailed upcoming events. However, the PD budget was not actively advertised and staff seldom attended PD sessions as there was no encouragement or expectation for them to do so. Besides the compulsory full school sessions on student free days throughout the year; the minority of teachers who did undertake PD had to actively seek it out and justify their attendance. The fact that prospective leaders were not encouraged to attend PD that could facilitate them taking over leadership roles when required indicated that the school was focused on the present and did not appear to be thinking about succession planning. In order to keep improving student outcomes, school leadership could consider modelling professional learning and make it an expectation that staff do the same.

Gains in professional knowledge could be generated in a number of different ways (Sugrue, 2002). Firstly, teachers might engage with instruction to inform

their own teaching practice. Secondly, teachers could modify their practice as a result of reflection. Thirdly, teachers might become active in their own learning through collaborative learning in professional communities and networks. Allocating time a staff meetings for teachers to share key messages from the external PD events they attend might also positively contribute to the development of overall staff capacity. What teachers do outside of the classroom can be as important as what they do inside, in terms of their professional development, and student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Some of the most valuable conversations the author had at his recent school were at meetings attended by the health and physical education teachers from the ten schools within their city. Ideas for games, budgets, equipment, carnivals and inter-school sports rosters were freely exchanged in a very constructive environment that resulted in everyone taking a lot of useful information with them.

The shared wisdom and intelligence of the group has been identified as one of the defining features of a leadership for learning school (Dempster & MacBeath, 2009). Taylor (2009) and Voulales & Sharpe (2005) similarly talked about schools as learning communities in which teachers both teach and continue their own learning at the same time. These researchers believed that one of the most important sources of learning is internal; with teachers learning by sharing instructional problems and successes with colleagues in ways that promote organizational learning and bind members of a learning community together. Voulales and Sharpe additionally proposed characteristics that distinguish learning community schools from their traditional counterparts. These characteristics included a commitment to professional development and improved student outcomes, enthusiasm and professionalism, and a sense of inclusion, openness and empowerment. Silins & Mulford (2004) similarly identified professional development as of the four dimensions that identify schools as learning organisations. Some teachers at the author's recent school appeared to ignore their own professional learning needs in their effort to help their students excel. The teaching profession has intensified dramatically in recent decades (Galton & MacBeath, 2010). Teachers are consequently very busy, yet ignoring PD is unlikely to be the best way to improve student outcomes. Conversely, principals focused on developing teacher capacities in order to improve student outcomes need to encourage their teachers to be active learners who believe in self-improvement and are self-critical. Time can be a barrier for schools moving towards becoming learning communities. This time conflict was definitely relevant at the author's recent school. Some staff had very heavy workloads and simply did not have time amongst all their class and administrative duties to do additional PD. Alternatively, other staff seemed to be simply "coasting"; reluctant to volunteer their time and seemingly intent on doing the minimum required. This inequity caused division amongst staff and is something that the principal should address; when he finally has the time. If school are more actively focus on succession planning and teaching prospective leaders the requirements of senior roles,

principals might be able to involve others in finding solutions for issues such as this.

### 3. Succession Planning

The falling number and quality of applicants for leadership posts in schools is of increasing concern, given the importance of effective leadership in schools and likely increases in leadership distribution as a means to building leadership capacity (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2006). A possible solution to this problem is for existing school leaders to actively identify and develop leadership talent amongst existing staff (NCSL, 2004). A good starting point could be teachers who are exhibiting exemplary follower behaviours such as being independent, innovative, willing to question leadership, work well with others and easily adjust to workplace changes (Cruickshank, 2017a). These teachers would have a strong knowledge of the school and could be well placed to move into leadership positions if required.

The concept of succession planning originated in the corporate world as companies began to recognize that the survival of their organization greatly depended on developing the skills of existing workers so that they could successfully fill future management vacancies (Wallin, Cameron, & Sharples, 2005). More recently, succession planning has become a proactive process to fill leadership vacancies. Numerous school districts worldwide have noted that many experienced administrators are leaving the profession, and also that fewer teachers are showing interest in pursuing careers as school administrators (Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007). After noting that the average age of Australian principals was 49.6 years, the Victorian Department of Education launched a study of 2000 teachers to investigate their aspirations and the factors that impacted them (Lacey, 2003). The results supported their hypothesis that work motivation, career and personal life planning, and values alignment are key factors that influence teachers in choosing to apply for leadership positions. Lacey also noted that districts that had deliberate plans to build leadership capacity had an increase in leadership aspirations amongst their teachers. The findings of this study infer that schools should develop and implement a leadership succession plan.

Leadership succession planning is vital in identifying and supporting the development of potential school leaders whose skills align with the critical elements of leadership for learning (Northfield, Macmillan, & Meyer, 2006). In order to build leadership capacity schools need to have the ability to attract and retain quality leaders, as well as the ability to groom their own leaders to fill leadership positions (Wallin et al., 2005). In the author's recent school the concept of succession planning was never mentioned. Whenever a vacancy arose, leaders encouraged applications from those who they thought would suit the role. There were no programs operating to develop leadership skills in preparation for those moments, and no transparency in regards to how they made their choices. There were limited promotion opportunities and the same people constantly had the

same responsibilities year after year, and were not willing, or possibly able, to test their management skills in other areas. Limited staff turnover caused a lack of opportunity and transparency which resulted in many teachers having no leadership aspirations, and consequently no motivation to develop their capacity in this area.

Size can be an important influence on school succession planning. Rhodes & Brundrett (2006) observed smaller schools who considered that their size limited leadership development and succession possibilities; whereas others saw this as beneficial to succession planning because people were required to work in teams and take on more roles than would normally be expected in a larger school. Unfortunately the author's recent school fell into the first group, with many staff seeing additional roles as simply extra work, not as preparation for succession. Although a school of around 200 students would not technically be considered small; the leadership structure of teachers, grade level coordinators, assistant principal and principal did limit leadership opportunities. Specialist departments such as health and physical education were small and techniques such as work shadowing were not practical or economically possible during school hours due to specialists' heavy class and administrative load. As the author was a health and physical education specialist not a classroom teacher, he was not eligible to be a grade level coordinator. This left the only promotion possibilities as ascending directly into the assistant principal or principal roles, with the assistant role being a very impractical fit due to school timetables. Neither of these options were a realistic possibility.

#### 4. Conclusion

If school leaders are to be leaders of learning, then they must take responsibility for ensuring the continual learning of both students and teachers, as well as maintaining their individual learning. An increasing shortage of school leaders worldwide (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2006) has led to the idea that existing school leaders need to actively identify and develop leadership talent amongst their existing staff. This analysis has shown that succession planning and the building of staff capacities are essential elements of this process, and vital components of a leadership for learning school. In the author's recent school he was immediately thrust into a leadership role as head of the physical education and sport department. He was given no mentoring in this role and the possibility of it leading to higher leadership roles was never mentioned. He was never encouraged to undertake PD and those sessions that he did attend were as a result of him actively seeking them out and justifying his attendance. The author learnt a lot through his experiences, but does not believe these were not as a result of school leadership or a school wide leadership for learning philosophy. Schools should consider making succession planning and the building leadership capacity in their staff are more important focus, as this is likely to result in smoother leadership transitions that have less adverse impacts on student learning.

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