Emergent School Leadership: Creating the Space for Emerging Leadership through Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

Much has been written on the importance of increasing leadership capacity in schools and managed systems for leadership development; however, little focus has been given to creating conditions to facilitate the emergence of leadership. This research study examines associations of strength-based reflexive processes to the emergence of educational leadership. Specifically, through qualitative analysis, the author explores the emergence of school leadership during an appreciative inquiry initiative in a large, urban school district and identifies the features of appreciative inquiry that were conducive to such emergence. In addition, the author notes that the initiative also provided participants with many of the elements considered vital to leading a healthy learning community: a greater understanding of the big picture, opportunities for professional reflection and sense making, a safe and affirming learning community, time to dialogue with others in the system regarding their core values and commitments, a collaborative work culture, space for networking, and the freedom to take action.

Keywords: Emergent Leadership, Appreciative Inquiry, School Improvement

1.   Introduction

The importance of increasing leadership capacity for schools is nothing new. Over a decade ago, Michael Fullan (2001) contended that the emphasis in education during the opening years of the 21st century will shift from standardized student achievement to leadership. He argued that in order to navigate the complexity of a constantly changing educational environment, school leaders must instill energy, enthusiasm and hope, understand

the dynamics of changes processes, help build relationships, exhibit moral purpose, develop schools into learning organizations, and help others make sense of it all.

School leaders are regarded as key to both school improvement (Fullan, 2002; Mulford, 2006) as well as the creation of a positive school culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998). And we are not just talking about leadership at the level of the principal or superintendent. Leadership is required at all levels, future administrators, teacher-leaders (Chrispeels, 2004; Frost & Durrant, 2004; Fullan, 2002) and other professionals. These leaders must be system leaders with the skills and experience to lead well at their level as well as a clear understanding of how their school fits in the larger system and how to interact effectively at the district and regional levels (Chrispeels, 2004; Fullan, 2003).

1.1 Developing Educational Leadership

A number of studies have reported on the features of successful educational leadership programs. In her book entitled *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*, Linda Lambert (1998) identified several key steps that districts can take to build their leadership capacity: selecting individuals with the fundamental attitudes and skills to do leadership work, providing opportunities for building authentic relationships, and organizing for reflection, inquiry, dialogue and action. However, in addition to formal programs for leadership, schools are living systems that can foster emergent leadership if the proper environment is created and nurtured. In a recent article, Mitchell and Sackney (2011) discuss the implications of schools as "learning ecologies" and note that structures and relationships may be either formally designed or informally emerge through communication and interaction. They argue that "in a learning ecology, leadership should not be hierarchical or positional; it should be natural, self-regenerating, purposeful, often spontaneous, and always directed toward issues of teaching and learning" (p. 986). Provided that supportive conditions are in place, teachers, staff and students are able to assume the role of leadership naturally when the needs of the system and the passions and gifts of the individual intersect.

Similarly, Frost and Durrant (2004) observed that in order to develop as leaders, teachers need freedom to experiment and opportunities to follow their passions; structures to support and facilitate collaboration and interaction, both within the school and with colleagues at other schools, space to dialogue about education; time to listen to students; as well as recognition of the development work and the emerging leadership capacity (see also Cole & Southworth, 2005, pp. 165-166).

1.2 The Vancouver School District Experience

Recent experience in a district-wide Appreciative Inquiry initiative in the Vancouver School District suggests that Appreciative Inquiry is one process that satisfies the conditions articulated by Frost and Durrant (2004) and provides participants with a perspective on the whole system. While AI has not been used widely in public schools, it attracted the attention of the Vancouver School Board who launched its own AI initiative in January 2006 (Note 1). The goal of the District was to provide a forum for dialogue among all of the stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, administrators, support staff, and community members—to discuss their common vision for engaging student learners rather than continue

to debate provincial policies for standardized testing. Nevertheless, for the 50 or so teachers, counselors, and other staff members who volunteered to serve along with administrators on the site teams coordinating the process, the experience also proved to be a valuable training ground, allowing them to flex their leadership skills, interact with district and school administrators as well as other stakeholders, and learn a positive school change methodology. A quote from one of the site team members illustrates the power of the experience:

> In terms of my role here and my work here, basically it has almost been like a spring board. It has basically landed me in place where I am actively making things happen, big things, things that are bigger than me and planning various activities and reports and all these sorts of things that are telling people what are going on and just kind of linking all these sorts of things together that I otherwise would not have been involved in at all (Phyllis (Note 2), a teacher at North High School, commenting on her involvement in the VSB Appreciative Inquiry Initiative).

1.3 Appreciative Inquiry

In the context of school improvement, some educational scholars have suggested that school leaders consider the use of strengths-based reflexive processes that can generate the optimism, sense of self and collective efficacy and relational trust necessary to take constructive action (Daly & Chrispeels, 2005). One such strengths-based process is Appreciative Inquiry ("AI"), a form of action research with a social constructionist foundation which emphasizes the co-creation of the future by leveraging the strengths of the organization rather than focusing on the correction of its deficits.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a strength-based method used in organizational development, seeks to engage all levels of an organization to renew, change and improve performance (Kinni, 2003). Holman, Devane, and Cady (2008) define Appreciate Inquiry as the "cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them" (p. 104). Cooperrider and Whitney (1998) further define Appreciative Inquiry as the systematic discovery of what gives a system 'life' when it is most effective and capable. While there are many additional ways to define Appreciative Inquiry it is commonly described as a model based on the assumption that the type of questions asked will tend to focus attention towards a particular direction. It is unique from other problem-solving methods of assessing and evaluating a situation and then proposing solutions since "Appreciative Inquiry deliberately works from accounts of the positive core" (p.105). Unlike deficiency models which ask questions such as "What are the problems?", "What's wrong?" or "What needs to be fixed?" the Appreciative Inquiry model begins with appreciating and valuing the best of what is and building upon it.

Although Appreciative Inquiry does not dismiss conflict, problems, or deficiencies, it does not utilize them as the basis of analysis or action (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2008). Appreciative Inquiry involves the art and practice of asking questions that identify and strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1998).

While AI is a flexible process, it generally occurs in four steps: a **discovery** phase, a **dream** phase, a **design** phase, and a **destiny** phase (see Table 1) (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom,

2003). The process typically involves as many of the organizations' stakeholders as possible, begins with interviews of stakeholders designed to discover the pos[i]itive core of the organization, and then follows the next three phases as stakeholders utilize the discoveries from that exercise to co-construct their preferred future and work collaboratively to make their dreams a reality.

2. The VSB Appreciative Inquiry Initiative

The Vancouver School Board governs a large multicultural urban school district with over 100 schools and 57,000 students. Like many North American school districts, much of the policy focus in Vancouver has been on compliance with the provincial student achievement testing standards. In order to shift the focus of dialogue in the district, in January 2006 the Superintendent and school board launched an action research project around the topic of engaging student learners and selected Appreciative Inquiry ("AI") as the methodology for the process. Schools were invited to participate and twenty-two of the district's primary, secondary and adult education schools volunteered. The schools self-organized into groups, with some schools creating a standalone site for conducting an AI inquiry and others joining with other nearby schools to develop multi-school sites. At each site the initiative was led by a site coordinating team consisting of teachers, administrators, support staff, students, and parents who volunteered to serve. The site teams were trained in the Appreciative Inquiry process by district staff and a university professor with expertise in the process. The site teams were responsible for adapting AI to their sites, engaging stakeholders in each step of the process, communicating with stakeholders regarding the purposes and outcomes of the initiative and monitoring the action projects selected by participants. The district's learning services staff provided guidance to the teams and facilitated the AI summits.

2.1 Discovery Phase

During the discovery phase of the process, site teams engaged stakeholders in a search for what gives life to their schools by interviewing each other with inquiries such as "Tell me a story about your most powerful learning experience." The discovery phase continued for a period of several weeks and involved students, parents, community members, teachers, administrators and school support staff. Each site team then analyzed the collected data for the themes and generative metaphors that emerged and shared their findings with their school community. The remaining three phases were then covered in a two-day summit for each site in late spring. These summits involved up to 100 parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff, district personnel and representatives of local community organizations. The district superintendent and at least one associate superintendent participated in every summit.

2.2 Dream, Design, and Destiny

Through the summits, participants developed a vision of their schools' preferred futures grounded in the findings of the discovery process and self-organized into groups committed to make their vision a reality. Dozens of diverse projects were adopted such as adding new technology to the classrooms, beautifying school environs, developing partnerships among participating organizations, putting course lectures and assignments

online, and creating professional learning communities where teachers share their expertise, discuss their common challenges, and observe each others' classrooms.

One of the benefits of AI for site team members was that it gave them the opportunity to work closely with district and school administrators in planning and implementing the process and to interact with dozens of other teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders during the summits and discovery interviews. As one school counselor reported:

> It opened up dialogue between teachers, support staff, custodians, secretary pool, community center, elementary schools, parents in the community, community organizations. It just opened up dialogue that was not there before and people found out that they really all basically wanted the same thing.

Through their interaction, individuals developed stronger connections with their colleagues, a deeper insight into the school culture and history, and a sense of empowerment to make a positive difference for the students.

Site team members also found that their interaction enabled them to better appreciate the big picture, understand the priorities of administrators and other stakeholders and identify with the goals of the system. This perspective of the larger system is invaluable to leaders since like all systems, schools have emergent properties that cannot be fully appreciated without seeing the larger context (Fullan, 2003a).

Interaction with diverse stakeholders also opened site team members' minds to new information and ways of thinking. For example, a number of site team members were grateful for the way in which the involvement of students led to a deeper understanding of student concerns and priorities. These student voices led several of the summits in unexpected directions and added to the richness of the dialogue. Their presence also allowed educators to understand the students at a deeper level. One site team member recalled interviewing a student who always projected a happy demeanor and discovering that she and her family left for Canada after her father's abduction in Africa.

Bridges were built at other levels as well. Many of the participants were able to interact for the first time with others at their own school and appreciate the unique challenges involved in each role. In addition, participants were able to reduce the barriers between nearby elementary schools, secondary schools and adult education schools. Most site team members acknowledged that there are significant cultural divides between schools in these categories and that they did not know anyone at nearby schools until they were able to work and dialogue with them during the AI initiative. One exciting outcome of this interaction is a collaborative effort between teachers at North High School and its feeder schools to develop a stronger transition for student moving from elementary to secondary school. They are jointly reviewing curriculum and selecting textbooks in order to provide an integrated and well-sequenced learning process. In addition, elementary and secondary teachers have paired up to improve communication, share teaching techniques and understand each others' perspectives. At the same time, teachers and counselors at North High are developing new approaches to helping in the transition to secondary school by making incoming students feel welcome and supported.

3. Summary of Findings

As illustrated by the quotation at the beginning of this article, one of the significant benefits of the AI process for leadership development is the opportunity that it provided for participants to become engaged with their schools at a deeper level. The site teams operated on a model of shared leadership and each member had an opportunity to provide their input or lead an activity, depending upon their level of expertise, resources and available time. One site team member observed: "Everybody was working on the same level and that was good because everybody had something to bring in and everybody had their own expertise." Among the opportunities for growth noted by site coordinating team members were explaining the process to their peers, managing group dynamics, overcoming resistance, adapting the process to the needs of their school, developing writing skills, and developing a better understanding of school change. One teacher so impressed others with her ability to bring out the passion and power in stories from interviews that she is now asked to assist in writing grant applications and other key communications for the district.

Others appreciated the chance to stretch their leadership muscles and obtain recognition from their peers as well as school and district administrators. Several of the site team members reported greater confidence in their leadership skills. One secondary teacher commented that she had always wondered whether she would be able to lead effectively until she stepped up to the role of a site team coordinator for her site. She was not only stretched in her capacity to handle the pressure of a heavy workload, but also in her ability to manage a large site team that included 7 school administrators, 9 teachers and a parent, while working to overcome significant resistance from the staff in her own school. Also, one of the elementary teachers was pleased with the opportunity to co-lead a professional development day on the AI initiative with her principal, and a site team coordinator for an adult education school commented that AI gave her opportunities to lead that she would have never enjoyed otherwise.

Finally, by allowing participants to engage in open dialogue about core values, the AI initiative provided them with the opportunity to reflect on the big picture, to consider the meaning of their work, to examine their praxis, to interact empathetically with colleagues, students and other stakeholders, to listen to others, and to contemplate what they were learning, each of the types of reflection Christopher Day found when he studied effective leaders in public schools (Day, 2000). Several of the teachers reported that they were able to reaffirm their values and rediscover the meaning that teaching has for them. As one teacher commented:

> AI gave us an opportunity to have those discussions where we were able to be reflective; I think our being reflective is a big part of this process. The meta-cognitive aspect of education, it allowed us to explore what we are doing, how we are doing it and why we are doing it. In the end, that is what AI meant for a lot of us and especially for me.

4. Discussion

Analysis of an Appreciative Inquiry initiative conducted in 22 schools of the Vancouver School District suggests that the initiative created space for informal leaders to emerge outside of the managed system of leadership development and promotion developed by

the District. While it is true that providing opportunities to teachers and other non-administrators to lead an AI learning initiative in a public school district is only one possible component of a comprehensive leadership development program, there is no question that the initiative added a valuable experiential element. Although some of the projects led by "emergent leaders" in this initiative represented incremental improvements, others constituted fundamental cultural shifts, overcoming barriers between elementary, secondary and adult education schools and divides between different ethnic communities.

As an added benefit, participants in the AI initiative were able to experience a process that modeled many of the elements considered important in leading a learning ecology. Mitchell and Sackney (2011) contend that to be effective from a systems perspective, school leaders must provide the cognitive conditions, affective conditions, cultural conditions, and structural conditions that enable administrators, teachers, staff and students to imagine and create new realities for themselves and their learning community. As noted in earlier research (Dickerson, 2008), the Vancouver District Appreciative Inquiry initiative provided opportunities for professional reflection and sensemaking, a safe and affirming learning community, time to dialogue with others in the system regarding their core values and commitments, a collaborative work culture, space for networking, and the freedom to take action.

Site coordinating team members leading the Vancouver School Board's Appreciative Inquiry initiative were able to compare visions for their schools, dialogue about fundamental questions of teaching and learning, interact with a diverse group of stakeholders, try out their leadership skills, and collaborate with others to develop innovative ways to improve their schools. Perhaps just as important, site team members were able to learn the importance of an appreciative approach which avoids the defensive routines of typical problem solving and planning approaches by inquiring about the "best of what is" and co-constructing a new reality.

Further, the findings revealed interactions allowed site team members to better appreciate the big picture, understand the priorities of administrators and other stakeholders and identify with the goals of the system. This perspective of the larger system is invaluable to leaders since like all systems, schools have emergent properties that cannot be fully appreciated without seeing the larger context.

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