Principals Who Think Like Teachers

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To lead teachers toward greater success, principals need to place both student and adult learning at the center. School leadership is a complex cognitive task. Principals are required to think like coaches, budget builders, strategic planners, visionaries, and community organizers. To complicate matters, many of these complex ways of thinking have to be learned on the job, as needed and without much support.

Over the past few years, my colleagues and I have been interviewing and creating case studies of principals and their leadership practice (Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, & Hensley, 2012). Before they became principals, these principals already knew a lot about being school leaders. That's because they thought like teachers—and they still do.

Principals who think like teachers—that is, who think of themselves as teachers and think the way teachers do—understand that if their schools are to improve, then the adults in the school have things to learn. Research suggests that when adults in schools intentionally learn about their practice, teaching and learning improve (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

Specific learning needs among the adults in a school vary. Some educators need to learn about numeracy; others, about building inclusive classrooms. Some teachers need to learn to teach vocabulary, whereas others need to learn to be more reflective. An individual teacher might need to learn more about the new math program, the 2nd grade team might need to learn more about phonemic awareness, a middle school team might need to learn more about supporting writing, and the entire school might need to learn more about giving feedback. Principals who think the way teachers do attend to all these learning needs. They also understand how adults learn.

The Developmental Nature of Learning

Teachers know that children learn in a variety of ways. And as children learn, how they learn also changes. Student learning is developmental, and educators know that effectively supporting students' learning should take into account the ways students grow in their learning.

The complex, developmental nature of learning is easy to accept when thinking about students but is often overlooked when considering the learning educators need to engage in to improve their own practice. A teacher who is worried about his kids lining up without being disruptive will understand his practice differently from the established teacher who has a broad repertoire of behavior management strategies but questions how her vocabulary instruction might better meet the needs of English language learners. Some teachers are desperate for a right answer, whereas others resist prescriptive answers and prefer an inquiry-based stance.

Constructive-developmental theory of adult development offers one way for educators to better understand how adults
make meaning (Kegan, 1998). This theory acknowledges that (1) adults continually work to make sense of their experiences (constructive) and (2) the ways that adults make sense of their world can change and grow more complex over time (developmental).

Although there is no strict timetable for adult development, Kegan suggests that there are identifiable stages for leaders interested in supporting teacher learning to take into account.

**Stages of Learning**

Skilled teachers would never go into a 1st grade classroom and hand out copies of a Harry Potter book for the whole class to read. Nor would they go into a 6th grade math class and begin a lesson on differential equations. Good teachers understand that who learners are, and how they learn, makes a difference.

Similarly, principals who see themselves as teachers understand that teachers, departments, grade-level teams, and schools can be in very different developmental places. According to constructive-developmental theory, adults go through instrumental and socializing stages as they learn (Kegan, 1998). Understanding the distinction between these stages can help principals create effective, sustainable cultures of adult learning.

**Instrumental Learning**

Instrumental knowers seek exact answers and specific processes. They "orient toward following rules and feel supported when others provide specific advice and explicit procedures so that they can accomplish their goals" (Drago-Severson, 2008, p. 61). A teacher who is having difficulty structuring guided reading lessons probably wants a clear procedure, not an inquiry question or a chance for reflection. Such a teacher wants concrete steps and specific advice about how to get kids into groups and reading.

Instrumental learning is particularly useful for teams, departments, schools, and districts where clear answers, expert knowledge, or technical support are needed. Although their learning needs can change over time, these schools might need clear procedures for making students better writers, specific strategies for teaching in longer blocks of time, or steps for implementing an inquiry-based science program.

Principals who support instrumental learning know about best practices or about how to help teachers find the necessary information. Principals Sue Snyder and Sue Charochak from Beverly, Massachusetts, for example, figured out that their schools needed to learn more about building classroom communities. So they turned every faculty meeting for a year into a class, complete with essential questions, goals, presentations, group activities, and homework. They had considerable expertise in this area and were skilled teachers, so they did what they knew best: They taught. Sue Snyder put it clearly: "We just figured out that our faculty meetings needed to be classes and we need[ed] to be teachers" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 15).

When educators attempt to put new learning into practice, the limits of instrumental learning become apparent. Instrumental learning helps teachers learn about a new practice or strategy but not necessarily how to integrate that new practice into their teaching. Learning a new practice requires discussion, feedback from colleagues, classroom learning experiments, and collaborative work (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Instrumental learning can be a good place to begin, but it tells teachers little about how a specific practice should look in their own classrooms.

**Socializing Learning**

Socializing knowers are not desperate for an answer but are interested in the perspectives of others and able to take them into account. Teachers who are socializing knowers are reflective about their practice, flourish when working in teams, and can even sacrifice their own interest to benefit the group.

Leading socializing learning requires a different approach to leadership. Some schools use socializing learning to spread the practice-related knowledge that already exists within their hallways. Doug Lyons, principal of the Parker School in Reading, Massachusetts, took such an approach to building adult learning, noting that "to learn more and improve our practice, we have to dig deeper into what we do, what our kids need, and what we already know. We need to learn from each other" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 29). Doug, like Sue Snyder and Sue Charochak, was thinking the way a teacher would, but with the goal of teaching teachers to learn with one another, to share what they knew, and to make transparent what they needed to learn.

Doug began his principalship asking a few simple questions: What do we want to learn about to do a better job for our kids? What do we already know? Who knows it? Doug and the other members of the school's instructional leadership team quickly discovered that teachers were interested in pursuing a wide range of questions. The team began using faculty meetings to talk together about teaching and learning. They created structures for collaboration in which teachers who had a shared interest in a topic or practice learned about it together. Eventually, every professional development day was devoted to schoolwide inquiry into such themes as integrating technology into teaching practice.

As the school became more comfortable with collaborative learning, the faculty took on more challenging topics and incorporated more demanding processes that required them to give one another feedback and build consensus about good teaching. In other words, they shifted the focus from isolated, individual practice toward a collective emphasis on improving teaching and learning.
Four Shared Qualities

So what does it take to be a principal who thinks like a teacher? The answer seems complicated—but it's not. These principals share four qualities: purpose, eagerness for learning, clarity about who they are as learners, and courage.

Principals who think like teachers are purposeful about supporting the learning needs of their teams, departments, and schools. Some schools need instrumental learning; others, socializing learning. Effective principals, like all good teachers, are clear about the learning that is needed and how to lead it. Sue Charochak noted, "It's interesting that in order to have my greatest success as a leader, I became a teacher" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 15).

Principals also need to be eager to learn. Educators will not learn in a socializing, collaborative way if the principal does not do the same. Principals who think of themselves as teachers must be not only willing to learn, but also ready to learn in a public, transparent, and risky way that can be at odds with the expectation that the principal will always have the right answer.

The principals we talked to were aware of the connections between how they learn and how they lead the learning of their schools. Although Kathy Bieser from San Antonio, Texas, was comfortable with socializing learning, she knew that not all the teachers in her school were, and she kept their needs in mind when planning learning experiences for her faculty (Breidenstein et al., 2012). Like all good teachers, Kathy shaped her practice around how her students learn, not how she learns.

Finally, being a principal who thinks the way a teacher does takes courage, especially when principals are expected to solve problems and provide answers. These principals have the courage to raise unsettling questions, expose what they do not know, accept ambiguity, and embrace discomfort. Their leadership succeeds only when the leader is also a learner.

Already Prepared

Leadership is a daunting, complex, almost undoable job. Not one of the principals we spoke to told us otherwise. Yet they all told us that although they had to learn quickly, they already had lots of training in the very essence of the principalship: They knew how to teach. These principals worked hard to hold on to what they already knew and made it the heart of their leadership practice.

References


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