

Building Cultures of Excellence: Individual and Organizational Factors that Promote Great Teaching

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the individual and organizational factors that are necessary to build cultures of excellence in school environments. The challenge of creating educational cultures of excellence in schools is complex and interweaves many critical factors. In spheres beyond the school improvement literature, the notion of excellence includes consideration not only of the individual behaviours that represent excellence in action, but also the conditions or environments that foster or provide opportunities for growth in this direction. Unless the conditions for excellence to occur are present, this quality may remain inert. This paper discusses three areas that are essential to building strong school cultures: (i) the psychology of individual teacher excellence and theoretical concepts of expertise and excellence, (ii) the organizational factors that can promote excellence and (iii) the role of healthy school environments in nurturing excellence. The author examines how each of these principles is interconnected and interdependent in the creation of high performing school cultures.

1. Introduction

There is a rich and deep body of knowledge related to excellence in teaching. The breadth of the literature that examines the concepts of “excellence” and “expertise” crosses many fields of knowledge. These areas of study include the psychology of personal excellence, the organizational factors contributing to excellence and the effects of health promoting schools on teacher excellence. These three primary factors form the foundation of this research and create a heuristic framework through which excellence is viewed. The purpose of this paper is to examine the current literature in these areas, and to weave together the key concepts of excellence to create a background for conceptualizing teacher excellence in further research. The conceptual framework portrays a complex matrix of factors in both the individual and the organization in which individuals work that determines how these factors work interdependently to produce teacher excellence.

Three theoretical constructs are reviewed in the literature, and several strands emerge in the research regarding each construct. First, the two critical concepts of “expertise” and “excellence” are discussed. As part of this dialogue, a general view of excellence across professions is reviewed. Talent development in education and other areas is analyzed as a supplement to this discussion. Excellence in general educational settings is examined, and this is followed by studies of both teacher efficacy and excellent teacher performances. The role of “flow” in teachers who are performing at a high level is examined, and the critical importance of Schon’s “reflection-in-action” [20] is viewed as an essential component of teacher excellence and professional mastery.

Second, research on organizational factors that contribute to high-performing schools is reviewed. Many of the factors that are common among high-performing learning communities are also present in what many authors refer to as the healthy school environment (Anderson [1]; Burgeson, Weschler, Brener, Young & Spain, [6]; Cai, [7]). Cibulka and Nakayama’s [9] framework for high-performing schools serves as a major framework for this study. The six main components they identify in a high-performing educational institution include “a collaborative culture, transformational leadership, accountability, reflective practice, a culture of achievement and an ethic of interpersonal caring”.

Third, the concept of health schools is examined. The important role of healthy institutions in individual and collective achievement is acknowledged in a diverse body of literature. The effect of a healthy school climate, the promotion of teacher excellence and high level mastery in teachers are discussed by several authors (Anderson, [1]; Brener, Kann & Allensworth, [5]; Burgeson, Wechsler, Brener, Young & Spain, [6]; Cai, [7]; Ferguson, [14]). According to Anderson and Piran [2], fundamental guiding principles for a health promoting school include “democracy, equity, empowerment, school environment, curriculum, teacher preparation, measuring success, collaboration, communities and sustainability”. These parameters interact in a dynamic and changing way which has a direct effect on the performance of teachers. In addition, the school leader in a health promoting

school has a critical role in the overall level of teaching excellence. Hornett [15] states that “the transformational leadership style seems to be highly predictive of a healthy school culture”.

2. Conceptual Framework for Teacher Excellence

In order to begin the dialogue on excellence in teaching, the necessity for a solid conceptual framework is evident. To facilitate both research and discussion, this study is based on a conceptual framework which encompasses three primary areas of interest.

First, the notions of expertise and excellence in individual performers are examined. Perceptions of experts and individual high performers are studied using Bereiter and Scardamalia’s [4] research on expertise. Orlick’s [17] Wheel of Excellence involves several key traits in the individual high performer which are indicators of excellence in fields outside of the educational world. These characteristics include “commitment, belief in oneself, full focus, distraction control, constructive evaluation, positive images and mental readiness”. Orlick’s examination of high performers in many professional fields is comparable to the professional experiences of teachers.

The second key element in this conceptual framework is an investigation of the organizational parameters which affect teacher excellence. Many authors have studied the primary factors which are considered to be indicators of a high-performing educational organization (Carter, [8]; Meehan, Wiersma, Cowley, Craig, Orletsky & Childers, [16]; Trimble, 2002; Cibulka & Nakayama, [9]). In addition, organizational factors in the business world that are clear indicators of high-performing companies are examined (Peters & Waterman, [18]). For the purposes of this research, Cibulka and Nakayama’s [9] work that identifies some characteristics of high-performing schools will be applied to the study of teachers in school settings. These features include a “collaborative culture, transformational leadership, reflective practice, an ethic of interpersonal caring, increasing standards of professional development, and accountability for high standards”.

A third critical element in this investigative framework is the research on the impact of health promoting schools on teacher excellence and teacher performance. A great deal of research supports the idea that the characteristics of a healthy school are also key features of an institution which nurtures teacher excellence (Anderson, [1]; Anderson & Piran, [2]). This focus also includes a discussion of the

wellbeing of teachers and the importance of mental and emotional health as a factor which promotes high-performance teaching. Teacher stress and burnout are increasing as the demands on teachers continue to rise. Several authors reiterate the critical importance of addressing this issue by paying attention to the parameters of a healthy school environment (Cohen, [10]).

3. Concepts of Expertise

Expertise is arguably one of the resources that is critically needed by our society, both now and in the future. It is paradoxical, however, that defining expertise remains an academic and intellectual challenge. Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] raise some critical questions as to the nature of expertise. In fact, they argue that attempts to define it precisely, often quash creative attempts to describe, observe, or experience it. They argue that “expertise defies precise definition, and to impose a definition on it at the outset would be a sophomoric exercise almost guaranteed to stifle productive thought”. In addition to this, Peters and Waterman’s [18] study of excellence in American businesses does not rigidly define the term “excellence”, even though that is precisely what the researchers were observing. They state that the researchers did not “try to be too precise at the beginning about what we meant by excellence or innovation. We were afraid at that point that had we tried to be too precise we would lose the essence of what we thought we were after”. Much like rigid attempts to cage in a precise definition of “excellence” or “quality”, the exact meaning of “expertise” eludes us. Yet, people have a human sense of what expertise entails, and an intuitive feeling about the quality that exists in personal experience. Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] argue that the capacity to acquire expertise is, we shall argue, one of the great and peculiar strengths of the human species. We need to understand better what it means to acquire expertise, what fosters and what stunts its development, and how it functions in people’s lives and work.

Still, it is essential to attempt to refine the use of the terms “expertise” and “excellence” in order to understand better how they emerge and how they relate to teacher development. Expertise is not to be confused with specialization. Experts do not merely do things better than novices; they exist at the edge of their knowledge level and continuously work harder and more creatively to solve new problems. They do

not act in repeated patterns; rather, they create new and divergent paths to solve professional issues, since, as Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] reiterate, the difference between experts and nonexperts is not that one does things well and the other does things badly. Rather, the expert addresses problems whereas the experienced nonexpert carries out practiced routines. It is only when the routines fail that the difference between experts and nonexperts becomes manifest.

This raises an important question for teacher educators, and that is how to address the problems of professional practice, and how to make the beginning teacher's development meaningful, transferable and useful for real world teaching situations. Experts in any profession operate in constructivist ways. Schon [20] refers to this as a constructivist approach to professional mastery. It is a challenge for many involved in teacher development to view the process of becoming an expert teacher as similar in design to artistry. He concludes that

it is a much larger step, indeed a leap, to see practitioners of professions outside the fine arts as designers. In order to see lawyering, managing, teaching or clinical medicine as frame experimentation we must adopt a constructivist point of view.

In contrast to this, some argue that teachers should not be considered experts. Rather, Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] argue that teachers need to be broadly competent experts and not specialists in one or another field of interest. They note that

teaching is not the sort of occupation in which you want people to be experts. Teachers must be caring, sensitive people and teaching is a complex human enterprise that cannot be reduced to technique. Teachers ought not to seal themselves off as an elite community of experts, but ought to be involved with and responsive to the communities in which they serve.

Teachers, then, must go beyond technical competence to a level of human interaction that involves an intuitive, artistic component. When teachers exhibit what one might call "artistry" in their craft, they are considered to be excellent teachers. They cross the boundary of the personal, and this

allows them to touch students' lives in meaningful and lasting ways. As Schon [20] concludes, inherent in the practice of professionals we recognize as unusually competent is a core of artistry. The artistry of painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers and designers bears a strong family resemblance to the artistry of extraordinary lawyers, physicians, managers and teachers. It is no accident that professionals often refer to an "art" of teaching or management and use the term "artist" to refer to practitioners unusually adept at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness or conflict.

4. Concepts of Excellence

It is worthwhile to note that much of the literature on excellence in other professions also refers to the elements of flow, expertise, and intuitive sense. Sport psychologist Orlick [17] defines what he calls the balanced pursuit of excellence, and he "advocates the importance of maintaining a sense of balance and perspective in sport and life when pursuing ongoing excellence". Orlick [17] has defined balance as "finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life every day. Balance is respecting your needs for achievement and relaxation, work and play, giving and receiving, intimacy and personal space". Pirsig [19] in his culturally profound work *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* refers to the Greek warrior's definition of "arete" or "excellence".

Arete implies a respect for the wholeness or oneness of life, and a consequent dislike of specialization. It implies a contempt for efficiency, or rather a much higher idea of efficiency, an efficiency which exists not in one department of life but in life itself.

It is evident that individual definitions of success and excellence are critical to personal goal setting, and there is also a need to recognize that these parameters are dynamic entities, the boundaries of which will change depending on one's age and stage of career. Clearly, it is the teacher's ability to rise above his/her own professional skills and to create a healthy environment, that is one factor that identifies an individual as a high-performing educator.

Certainly, the pursuit of high goals requires several techniques and strategies. According to

Orlick and colleagues [17] reveal there are several common methods used by performers in the fields of music, athletics, medicine, astrophysics, and coaching. Initially, Orlick proposed a model of excellence that was based primarily on a study of high-performance athletes. He identified seven common mental skills in the Wheel of Excellence used by human beings in the pursuit of excellence: “commitment, belief, full focus, positive images, mental readiness, distraction control and constructive evaluation”.

These constructs may form a strong theoretical basis for a review of teacher excellence. Orlick’s further studies of musicians elaborated on this model to include an abiding love for and enjoyment of the profession, specific performance goals, and a strong sense of self. In addition, Talbot and Orlick’s [22] later study examined internationally renowned musical soloists. Participants were identified by specific performance criteria, were interviewed and the transcripts of these discussions were analyzed qualitatively. This work found that the mental skills of top classical musicians are common in comparison to each other, and it also revealed that high-level performers refer to “creativity, flexibility, and spontaneity as critical components of excellent performance”. The field of medicine also provides examples of how professionals are trained with a view of excellent performance in mind. Tribble and Newburg [23] discuss a system of education for young physicians wherein candidates are indoctrinated as virtual beginners but achieve a level of mastery in a relatively short period of time. They discuss a cross-training approach that includes “preparation, leadership, awareness, decision-making, reflection, vision and flow”. Barbour and Orlick [3] studied elite-level National Hockey League players and have identified four major factors contributing to their success. These included “desire or determination, self-sacrifice or being a team player, the ability to cope well with pressure or maturity, and coachability or dependability”. Finally, Orlick’s [17] in depth interviews with Canadian astronauts Chris Hadfield and Marc Garneau have produced similar comments on the qualities required to generate excellent performance. In addition to the characteristics noted by other high performers, Orlick also included “the ability to prioritize, think and act clearly under stress, to maintain a big picture focus and to quickly rebound from failure and move on the next task”.

The author argues that true excellence becomes evident when the teachers are at their best, and that intuition and “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, [12]) are critical aspects of this process. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi [12]

examined the motives of creative people across several disciplines. The creative people all reported the same quality of experience. Flow denotes a state of immersed concentration which is centered, distractions are minimized and the person attains an enjoyable give-and-take with the activity. This sense of fluid intelligence is demonstrated in expert performances, and for teachers, it is a key component of ensuring that students are fully engaged in the lesson at hand. Given the inherent distractions of a school environment, the challenge of engaging adolescents in all aspects of learning can be enhanced by the sense of “flow” that exists in a state of “critical play”. Going beyond critical thinking, “critical play” implies that the individual is fully participating physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. The individual is deeply connected to a sense of self, the lesson content and the interactions with others in the activity. The sense of “flow” which exists in an excellent lesson is enhanced by the fluid intelligence of the teacher. Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] describe a “fluid expertise, consisting of abilities that are brought into play on novel or challenging tasks, or tasks that the expert has elected to treat in a challenging way”.

Talent development is nurtured in environments that encourage the “Flow” experience. Talent is an important element in school improvement, and that it is a critical component of achieving excellence in schools. Our productivity in schools is determined by many influences. Feldhusen [13] agrees that

human abilities may be partially determined by genetic influences, but environmental events in the home, school, and community in interaction with people and things are major determinants of the nature and extent to which talents develop into adult expertise, creativity and productivity in careers.

It is possible to suggest that the roots of talented teaching are generated by the teacher’s own experiences in school as a youth. This implies that excellent teaching has a much broader and far-reaching effect than was once imagined, influencing career choices, values and attitudes about excellence throughout students’ lives.

Ultimately, developing talent in teachers has a direct relation to the urgent need for a healthy school environment, that is, one that encourages creative problem solving and appropriate levels of challenge. There are direct connections between school improvement, talent development, and creativity.

5. Organizational Factors in Healthy High-Performing Schools

A further strand that emerges from the research on successful healthy schools is the nature of a high-performance learning community. One major theoretical framework for measuring the characteristics of high-performing learning organizations in this study is that of Cibulka and Nakayama [9]. They state that all high-performing schools possess six main criteria; “(i) a collaborative culture, (ii) transformational leadership, (iii) reflective practice (iv) accountability and commitment to professional development, (v) a culture of achievement directly related to discipline, and (vi) an ethic of interpersonal caring”. Many other authors discuss the common elements of schools that are considered to be high-performing learning organizations (Meehan, Wiersma, Cowley, Craig, Orletsky & Childers,[16]). There is a wide body of literature that identifies several common features of high-performing schools. Institutions which achieve levels of excellence demonstrate key components which contribute to student and teacher performance. Trimble [24] states that she found five common traits of a high-performing school.

Principals are free to act, used measurable goals and elicited parental support. Master teachers use their expertise to set the tone for improved teacher quality, achievement acted as the framework for self-control, self-reliance and self-esteem, and time on task resulted in students’ own demonstration of mastery.

These traits appear across several research findings. Carter [8] names seven similar traits that excellent schools have in common:

Principals are free to act, and use measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement. Master teachers bring out the best in a faculty. Rigorous and regular testing leads to continuous student achievement, and achievement is the key to discipline. Principals work actively with parents to make the home a centre of learning, and effort creates ability.

Similarly, Meehan, Wiersma, Cowley, Craig, Orletsky and Childers [16] identified six major dimensions of high-performing learning communities. These parallel the findings above and include: “learning culture, connections among school,

family and community, shared leadership, shared goals for learning, purposeful student assessment and effective teaching”. In addition, other findings by Meehan et al [16] show that “high-performing learning communities are organizations that have shared vision, challenging curriculum aligned to assessment measures, a culture of continuous learning and improvement, parents and community as partners in the learning process and a supportive school structure”. Top notch schools are those that have evidence of strong leadership and effective working relationships among the school staff, parents, and others in the community. Further, such a school has a strong commitment to the professionalism of its teachers, and to educational excellence as a goal of students. It also demonstrates an outstanding record of progress.

6. Making Connections and Partnerships

Coppedge [11] refers to the “school, home, community partnership” as a predictor of excellence, and it is also a factor in our examination of the healthy school model. Basic elements to produce educational excellence that appear across the literature include the fact that high expectations are critical. Coppedge [11] reiterates that “high expectations must be established which are clearly communicated to students and parents. The standard of high performance for teachers should be established at a level that demands excellence. Principals must be effective instructional leaders”. In addition, Cibulka and Nakayama [9] state that high performance organizations are “open systems with new ways of responding to challenges, they reduce or prevent failure and have ever-increasing standards of performance”. Again, elements of the comprehensive approach to healthy schools are congruent with the notions of school-community partnerships and high-performing organizations (Anderson & Piran, [2]).

There is evidence to demonstrate that the fundamental principles of health promoting schools are critical factors which influence school effectiveness. Anderson and Piran [2] state that “to be effective, schools should reflect, in both word and deed, the principles and values of the health promoting school”. A high-performing school must integrate the principles of the healthy school to function as an effective organization. Anderson and Piran [2] consistently refer to guiding principles which are key to the development of a healthy and high-performing school. These include “democracy, equity, empowerment and action competence, school environment, curriculum, teacher preparation, measuring success, collaboration, communities and

sustainability”. Both individual factors and organizational factors combine to influence the health of the organization. A complex interplay of elements determines the level of excellence which is nurtured in students and teachers in a health promoting, high-performing school.

Historically, the model of health promoting schools has expanded and it has been acknowledged and promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) [21] as having a significant positive effect on the achievements of students and teachers (Anderson, [1]). Three main areas of influence which form the foundation of a healthy school are essential to creating an environment for promoting excellence in teachers and students. First, the context of the school in terms of its management, policies and relationships to the community is a factor. Second, the nature of health promotion and the process by which it is delivered are key influences on a high-performing school. The third feature of a health promoting school includes the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, competencies and values of students and teachers.

7. Conclusions

A healthy school environment based on equity, empowerment and participation is a critical factor in creating a highly effective school. It is also essential for developing excellence in teachers and their students. High-performing teachers inspire students to strive for excellence. It is clear that cognition, concentration, and cooperation are all enhanced when students and teachers are healthier. There is a direct connection between healthy teachers and the levels of excellence they achieve. Health promoting schools provide these critical conditions which foster the growth of excellence for all stakeholders. For teachers to perform at high levels, several structural features of the learning organization must be realized. A learning organization is an institution that is committed to the growth of all stakeholders and that sees teachers as learners. Peters and Waterman’s [18] study on the best-run American companies, *In Search of Excellence*, demonstrates that the pursuit of excellence in any company requires that individuals perform at their best; individual excellence contributes to organizational achievement, and individual efforts and talents are revered and nurtured. Peters and Waterman [18] state that “treating people, not money, machines or minds, as the natural resource may be the key to it all”. Teacher training, effective class management, the school environment and the resources available to teachers all have an impact on the overall achievement of teachers. Measures of organizational excellence in the business world also operate on a broad range of

levels, and have often been referred to as measures of quality improvement. Core values, in either a school or a business, are essential to focus and move individuals towards a culture of excellence. It is apparent to Peters and Waterman [18] that “these excellent companies require and demand extraordinary performance from the average man”. Coordinated efforts to produce excellent performances, such as the initiatives of top performing corporations are essential; in comprehensive school health programs they are also critical. According to Skevington [21], the World Health Organization (WHO) supports the development of health-promoting schools and defines some of the factors in the school environment that contribute to high performance. According to the WHO, a healthy school “can be characterized as a school that is constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working”.

It is clear that each of the factors elucidated in this paper contribute to the development of excellence in teaching and learning. It is only with concerted efforts on the part of all stakeholders that we may see this complex web of factors move in concert to create conditions and environments within which excellent teaching can exist, and have a meaningful impact on school success and student achievement.

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