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Abstract

Leadership! Books have been written about it, yet we still seem to want more accounts of it. In large part, the desire for ever more examples and models of leadership derives, I think, from the fact that leadership occurs in context, and particular contexts seem to call for particular kinds of leadership qualities. In this brief paper, I will discuss leadership for school improvement and two core principles that can help explicate it: power and insight.

Keywords

leadership, power, school reform, qualitative research, change

Leadership, A Question of Power and Vision

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Leadership! Books have been written about it, yet we still seem to want more accounts of it. In large part, the desire for ever more examples and models of leadership derives, I think, from the fact that leadership occurs in context, and particular contexts seem to call for particular kinds of leadership qualities. In this brief paper, I will discuss leadership for school improvement and two core principles that can help explicate it: power and insight.

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Introduction

By all accounts, urban school reform is a knotty, oftentimes seemingly intractable problem in the U.S. (Tough, 2008). In the book *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, University of Chicago professor Charles Payne (2008) describes school reform efforts in individual schools, in school districts, and across multiple districts through national programs (e.g., New American Schools [Glennan, 1998]). Payne's (2008) is a painful, sobering book to read, for in the pursuit of findings that would explain how episodic and difficult reform has been, he catalogues rafts of explanations for failure. Yet, he also delineates useful principles for reform. Through many examples of both failures and successes, his book reveals how school reform can be a location for illustrating principles of leadership. It may be precisely because urban school reform has proved to be so terribly difficult that it is the perfect site in which to study leadership.

So, what is it that we learn about leadership from the example of urban school reform, from its failures as well as its few successes? Consider some of Payne's (2008) findings. He says, first of all, that no "single solution" plan will work or has worked. A frequent mantra these days is that schools will work if only the teachers are excellent. So let there be excellent teachers, the chant goes; nothing matters so much as the superb teacher. After all, we each have fond memories of our own best teachers. But Payne points out just how overly simplistic such a notion is; it is, he says with more than a hint of sarcasm, "exactly as useful as the idea that parents are apathetic" (Payne, 2008, p. 91).

When schools become successful, it is because many things are happening simultaneously. For example, schools that succeed are ones in which teachers believe

in their own "sense of efficacy"; where teachers and school leaders, indeed a whole school, interact with consultants; where principals are fully engaged in making change happen, and where they are able to draw on finances, public policy, and political support for their agenda; where teachers and principals have time to talk to each other about their practice; where teachers and principals know their students on a personal level; where parents and others in the community are welcomed participants in change; where there is stability in the workforce; and where those involved in the change process engage for a number of years – he says change is not often apparent until after 3-7 years. Payne's (2008) analysis that complexity must be respected is an echo of what Sarason (1971) described in his 1970s articles and books about the culture of schools and the problem of change.

So where does leadership come in? What are the key principles behind leadership? And how does it address an issue of immense complexity? It may seem easier to uncover the conditions of failure, or even specific factors that can foster success, than to know how the latter can be nurtured in organizations as complex as schools and school districts. But, at least two foundational approaches are essential to leadership for successful school reform (and any other form of institutional or societal change): an understanding of how power works and a keen ability to collect and analyze data in complex settings. Both are central to leadership.

Power to Lead

Gandhi's notion of power was that its source resides with ordinary people and that it exists wherever people cooperate and obey. So power derives from

participation; if people withdraw their cooperation, power dissipates. For example, schools that fail to educate children or that have high dropout or failure rates continue to stay in business as long as there are individuals who support them, for example, with votes, with enrollment, with acceptance of certain narratives that blame others (e.g., the problem is that parents don't care, or the problem is that students are not bright, or the problem is that teachers are ineffective) and an absence of competing narratives.

According to this definition of power, we can identify several key understandings about it:

- Power is not power over;
- Power is distinct from authority and force – authority is an official announcement of power but cannot deliver cooperation and obedience simply by declaring itself;
- Power exists wherever people cooperate or obey;
- Power can be lost; it can be removed by those who have cooperated with it;
- Power must constantly be renewed and replenished; and
- Power does not inherently belong to anyone, even people in positions of authority.

Now, consider again Payne's (2008) book *So Much Reform, So Little Change*. Drawing from his detailed accounts of school reform — and there are some examples of transformation amidst the many accounts of disillusionment — what are the forms of cooperation and obedience that can create power for positive schooling results? The following list of impediments to successful school reform that Charles Payne cites are evidence of how prevailing patterns of cooperation and obedience with ineffective schools persist; at the same time, this list suggests the issues that successful school reform must address in order to create new patterns of power, progressive in their support of effective schooling:

- Failure to account for “the social, political environment” in which the reform is occurring
- “Lack of time ... (for) training, ... planning, ... reflection ... competing time demands” of other activities
- Tendency to not afford enough time for the change for the scale involved
- Too much reliance on a principal and a few participants rather than building broad support
- “Lack of ownership” and “tendency of teachers to comply in a minimal way”
- “Ambiguity of roles introduced by new programs”
- Leaders' lack of understanding of the full program
- Turnover of personnel

- Lack of support from above
- “Absence of follow-through” (Payne, 2008, p. 172)

Some of the ways that a leader can create the conditions where people do in fact collaborate for effective schooling might include:

- Provide a vision for the change. What is it that will happen, with what expected results? No action is more important than articulating a clear, easily understood vision, and then working to discuss it in a way that others share in its value.
- Explain how proposed changes address political and social concerns. For example, how will a more challenging curriculum or an inclusive school model serve all students better? The principal or other change leaders need to be visionaries who are in touch with ground level concerns.
- Create an organizational structure, defined roles, predictable meeting times, and a communication plan to ensure that people get information, engage in dialogue, and have a chance to contribute ideas.
- Develop ways that all or most potential participants can be a part of the change.
- Reward participation in order to ensure a stable workforce.
- Develop a data gathering system so that performance can be measured, seen, discussed, and believed.
- Track the performance of leadership by making regular reports on objectives, and goals met and missed. A group that is particularly good at this task is the Rapid Results Institute (<http://www.rapidresults.org/> viewed October 3, 2011). This organization specifies goals, identifies measures for objectives, and motivates participation by setting 90 and 100-day goals.
- Establish a reporting system that circles back on tasks, guaranteeing follow-through. Share reporting data with relevant constituencies.

To summarize, leadership for any goal, as in this case of school reform, requires constant attention to factors that foster collaboration or, conversely, that undermine it. Given this framework, it is easy to see that no single strategy will likely be enough alone to create change, whether it is hiring award winning teachers, extending the school day, introducing tutoring, or expanding on early college opportunities. These may be excellent elements for school reform, but to implement them, leaders will need to win the cooperation and obedience of diverse constituencies including politicians, parents and guardians, advocacy groups, citizens, students,

teachers, unions, other leaders, and so on. And such a broad array of constituencies will have multiple issues they want to see addressed. Teachers will be concerned about working conditions and curricula; parents will want to be sure there is fairness in students' access to rigorous curricula; politicians will be intent upon monitoring and reducing costs, will want to be certain that local citizens feel included in the plan, and will want to know that there is research to support the strategies; and students will appreciate schools where they feel respected.

There are many examples of school reform where we can see leadership at work. Consider one called *Schools of Promise* that has been created by Julie Causton-Theoharis and George Theoharis (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2011). This model of school reform builds a commitment to completely reorganize a school's structure so that all students, including those with disabilities and those who are learning English as a second language, attend classes together. A core concept in the model is that all personnel are distributed into classes rather than having specialists work outside the academic classrooms. When Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis introduce the model, they meet with all of the teachers and ask the school to vote on whether to become a *School of Promise*. They also present the vision to parents, begin to identify data on the school's performance prior to implementation, and track data as the model progresses. They teach a course in the school building so that teachers can attend, focused on strategies of effective inclusive education. They are present in the building throughout the process. As with any leadership agenda, it begins with a vision that can be expressed simply and clearly. The core concept behind *Schools of Promise* is the notion that any decision in a school should enhance or, at least not impair, a student's sense of *belonging* in the school. Beyond that, the model addresses all aspects of classroom and school life including: scheduling; staff roles; home/school relations; addressing students who have diverse identities (ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, English language learning); classroom community; anti-bullying; curricula; behavior supports; school climate; professional development; and monitoring progress.

Insight: Seeing, Analyzing, and Understanding to Lead

Learning to see what different constituencies see, identifying varying perspectives, seeing the routines of organizations and how these may shift over time,

understanding what people in a setting care about, and figuring out what conditions lead to people being most productive are factors that all require insight into the culture and processes of a setting or situation. A perfect tool for gathering information necessary to lead is the research methodology made popular by anthropologists and sociologists: ethnography. This form of inquiry has been called by different names, for example, participant observation, qualitative research, and grounded theory, as well as ethnography.

The basic elements of the method include:

- Studying natural, everyday settings, including the workplace and all the constituencies that relate to it.
- Sticking to descriptive data. Describe who is involved, what people say and do, and how people interpret their worlds.
- Focusing on process; what are the activities of the setting, the workplace?
- Developing hypotheses and testing them out.
- Attempting to make a difference based on the knowledge – this is the test of validity.

Consider several examples from qualitative research and the insights that grow out of this work that then can inform leadership. Each of these examples concerns my own area of research, namely, how to open up educational opportunity to students with disabilities. First, in the book *Schooling Children with Down Syndrome*, Kliever (1998) uses ethnography to uncover literacy abilities of children with Down syndrome that have been generally missed. But, more importantly, he discovers and describes the practices of teachers and classrooms that elicit literacy skills, contrasting these with instances where competence is silenced, albeit unconsciously, by other practices. Kliever describes his forays into one classroom and school after another where he learned that Down syndrome is equated with mental retardation. He notes that, to suggest otherwise, in other words that some children with Down syndrome might have intellectual abilities that could enable them to succeed with literacy and numeracy skills equated with normalcy, is to invite controversy. What he learned, however, from hundreds of hours of meticulous observations in classrooms and schools, was that the experience of students with Down syndrome in schools fell into three forms, one of which could foster rich development of literacy and numeracy skills and, thus, challenge the myth that Down syndrome automatically equates with mental retardation.

These three forms were what Kliever (1998) called *alien*, *squatter*, and *citizen*. Alien status refers to the

situation in which students with Down syndrome are viewed as complete outsiders in the general public school setting, not included with non-disabled peers in any activities of the school. Squatter status refers to the situation in which students with Down syndrome might have a foothold in a classroom, participate in some activities along with the majority school population, for example, lunch in the cafeteria, participation in art, music, and gym, but not in the main elements of academic instruction. The third type of role he calls “citizen,” referring to those schools in which students with Down syndrome are fully included with non-disabled students, from homeroom to academic subject area instruction. Kliewer describes an example of the “citizenship” situation where two students, one with Down syndrome and one non-disabled, develop a friendship that evolved from their mutual love of books and literacy (Kliewer, p. 125). The student with Down syndrome has difficulty with spoken communication, yet the teacher observes the two boys reading their books and then stopping to talk about them. Observers, she notes, may only be able to understand the non-disabled student’s speech, but the non-disabled student seems to understand and respond to his friend’s communication. In another instance, a student with Down syndrome becomes agitated as the students are taking a test. But instead of this being an instance where the student is interpreted as not being up to the level of other students, the teacher realizes that the test is taking place too slowly for the student with Down syndrome, who is chomping at the bit to provide answers, almost faster than the teacher can speak the questions (Kliewer, p. 123).

It almost seems needless to say, but leadership for school transformation, in this case development of fully inclusive schools, requires that the leader have a feel for and really understand the on-the-ground knowledge of what forms inclusion can take in a classroom and the meaning it may have not only for teachers, but for students, including students with no disabilities. It would seem essential for a school transformation leader to know about the kinds of scenes that Kliewer (1998) describes in order to be able to put forward a vision of an inclusive school, and to do so with confidence.

Another example of how qualitative inquiry has fueled leadership for educational reform can be found in my book, *Schooling Without Labels* (Biklen, 1992). In that book, a qualitative research project that took me two years to complete, I asked the question: “Is there anyplace in society where school inclusion already exists full blown?” It was a rhetorical question, for I

had a ready answer: yes, in some families. Indeed, in many families that include a child with a significant disability, the child is fully included in all aspects of family life. So, the nature of my study was to observe and interview a number of families and, from their experiences, to gain insight about the basic principles of full inclusion, believing that we could extrapolate principles from the families’ experiences to apply to schooling. In retrospect, the findings were predictable: parents referred to their children by names, not labels; the children were known for their personalities and their interests; children asserted themselves in the life of the family; children were part of all family outings; and inclusion was not an experiment to be tried but such an integral, normal part of everyday life that it didn’t need to be singled out as a conscious practice or to be referred to as inclusion. A very important discovery was that many of the families had developed a notion of their children’s competence that challenged more pessimistic views they were given by schools and agencies vested with diagnostic responsibility. In one case, for example, the mother of a child who had multiple disabilities, limited speech and the autism label, kept telling me that her son was smart. She offered numerous examples of how she could verify this — he could show her how to get from one end of the community to another; he cried when he looked at pictures of children in institutions and blurted out the words “no kids there”; and he learned dozens of signs (sign language) with which to communicate, along with other gestures. This work, encapsulated in the book *Schooling Without Labels* (Biklen, 1992), gave me a way to talk about school reform that was both simple and optimistic. The vision was, thus, to create schools that draw upon the principles of the families, and thereby to build inclusive communities. And it was having the particular examples, often ones that conflicted with reports the parents had received from school, that empowered our work on inclusive education school reform.

Conclusion

To summarize, since power exists only through the participation of many, a leader must know enough about a setting or context to appeal to a range of constituencies and their perspectives. Leaders must know the details, know the people, and know the processes of the setting or context if they are to elicit support for a particular direction. Qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) often refer to good data as *thick description*, and that is what great leaders embrace and exude. They are

able to share stories that suggest a new vision. And the fact that these narrative accounts are grounded in real observations and the actual vocabularies of participants gives them validity. There is no such thing as leadership for its own sake; such leadership can never be sustained, for at some point its hollowness becomes evident. Real leadership requires a deep, grounded understanding of the everyday lives and perspectives of the many who participate in sustaining it.

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