

Honing Leadership Skills among In-Service Teacher Educators through Problem Solving

Charmaine Bissessar

University of Guyana / Georgetown, Guyana

Abstract

This study examines the responses of 17 secondary teacher educators in Guyana towards improving the staff morale within their institutions. This was a purposive sample population with a qualitative methodology. The in-service students/teachers conducted initial interviews to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the organizations' current staff morale. Based on the information garnered, they implemented a workshop geared towards improving staff morale and provided reflections of what worked and did not work. The findings indicate that there was a general improvement in the morale of the staff who participated in the workshop and there was the suggestion that this will be continued into the next academic year. There was also an obvious issue of differences in gender with two males indicating that they felt that the entire exercise was disingenuous as opposed to the females who said that they were quite pleased to be involved in such an initiative. Overall, as neophyte in-service teachers/students, their teacher leadership was honed in the entire process from determining the staff morale needs of the organization to implementing strategies to fill such lacunae.

Introduction

Teacher leadership is a polemical construct with researchers debating its conceptual and operational definitions. Harris and Muijs (2002) highlighted the importance of what they termed distributed or teacher leadership in developing their leadership roles and providing support for their peers via professional development. Nevertheless, they viewed teacher leadership as shared and collaborative with Harris (2002) proposing four dimensions of teacher leadership: (1) brokering; (2) participative; (3) mediating; and (4) building relationships. Harris and Muijs cited Rosenholtz (1989) who indicated that change occurs in schools through collegiality and collaboration. Two years later, York-Barr and Duke's (2004) seminal work on teacher leadership appeared paving the way for extensive research on the effects of teacher leadership. In their study of teacher leadership within the last two decades, they found that teachers function as instructional and organizational leaders. York-Barr and Duke also concluded that teacher leadership does contain the elements suggested by Harris and Muijs and expanded this view by underscoring the need for teacher leadership to assist in the management of school and the evaluation of educational policies and initiatives. Later, Cherkowski (2018) segued that teacher leadership can foster reflective praxis which allows the teacher and others to grow and develop. Thus, the concept of teacher leadership continues to evolve and be linked to more aspects than York-Barr and Duke's earlier findings where emphasis is on teacher leadership roles and tasks. Such tasks include visionary leadership and partnering with key stakeholders as an example of the role.

Discussions

Seventeen Guyanese students pursuing their post-graduate diploma in education were asked to conduct a needs assessment on the staff morale at their organizations and implement a workshop involving 3 to 5 strategies that can be used to promote a culture of improved staff morale. The result was more than expected and raised the morale of not only the organization but the in-service students/teachers. In fact, the students/teachers were able to hone their teacher leadership skills since all students were relatively new to the profession (3 to 5 years) and had never been in charge of any such initiative. This activity allowed students to report and reflect on the process. Analysis of their reflective papers suggests that they were able to practice and hone their teacher leadership skills. All students except two male students indicated that they had grown and were able to capitalize on their

latent leadership skills in order to carry out this study and train their peers. Some participants indicated that when they started conducting the study they were not aware that they also had low morale and it was through planning and implementing their professional development that they realized that they had low morale. However, 15 of the participants indicated that there was improvement in the overall morale of the department with which the study was conducted. In-service students/teachers found that one of the main issues of the staff was that of recognition and praise. They also highlighted that the Guyanese culture was not one in which praise and recognition are easily given. This would also point to differences in culture, however, a search to determine Hofstede's cultural dimensions for Guyana did not yield any results which point to a need for future studies in this area.

Another issue that was quite prominent in the reflections was that of communication. In-service student/teachers found that there was a lack of communication which resulted in lower levels of staff morale. In implementing their professional development, however, they orchestrated strategies that they felt would help intrinsically motivate staff members. What occurred as a result of this initiative was that about 70% of the student/teachers ended up implementing staff morale strategies at least a month after the action research was completed. They said that their peers wanted them to continue with findings ways to make them feel appreciated and valued. In fact, some students/teachers even beautified their environment as part of boosting staff morale in their organizations. Teacher leaders expressed surprise that their peers were so receptive to the initiative and were in need of appreciation and recognition. Some students/teachers did indicate that the older staff members stated that they did not need to be recognized and appreciated by anybody because it comes from within. However, the younger staff members appreciated the value of boosting staff morale and creating a more motivated staff. Feedback from those involved in the implementation found it quite motivating. However, the two males felt that the whole process was disingenuous and contrived because they had to continuously promote staff morale during the workshop and within the allotted two-week period.

This small sample and implementation indicated the need for more emphasis to be placed on the softer skills with socialization as a critical aspect of building staff morale within the Guyanese context. Nevertheless, from the data, it can be seen that all students/teachers were able to hone their teacher leadership skills by providing professional development workshops for their peers. They showed teacher leadership agency. They worked collaboratively with their peers to create an environment of congeniality. However short this action research was, in-service teachers/students were able to hone their leadership skills, plan, organize and implement a professional development workshop as well as promote staff building activities for two weeks. This allowed students to improve their professional and personal development through identification of a problem, trying to solve the problem, and reflecting on the entire process. In some instances, students/teachers indicated that they would have to find ways to motivate staff members since they were not motivated and did not see the value of implementing strategies to boost staff morale. However, eventually, the reluctant staff member was able to buy into the initiative and appreciate the need for more activities that promote positive organizational behaviour in the workplace.

In one example, the head of department of a particular secondary school was asked to implement staff morale boosting activities with her staff for two weeks and give feedback. She indicated that her peers were so pleased with the recognition and praise that they worked better and more efficiently submitting their exams scripts ahead of the deadline. Another teacher at that same school was reluctant to implement staff building strategies, however, after she saw her head of department implementing the strategies, she decided to implement them and was pleasantly surprised that the work environment changed as staff members became more aware of each other's feelings. This initiative had a ripple effect and staff members not involved in the professional development session wanted to be a part of the process of staff building. The feedback from this particular student/teacher was that the participants in the professional development workshop would make the staff building and morale boosting strategies a permanent part of their workplace behaviour. However, a year later, one of the student/teachers involved in this initiative indicated that she has not been able

to continue the practice with her staff but she has been promoting positive organizational behaviours in her classroom and these are well-received by her students who have indicated that many times they are not given positive reinforcements at home. This also points to the aspect of culture in the Guyanese context which is compelling fodder for future research.

Therefore, in-service students/teachers were able to hone their leadership practices, problem solve, think critically and improve themselves personally and professionally. They grew geometrically and this growth was mirrored in their reflection at the end of the entire implementation. It is hoped that more initiatives like this one will be implemented in order to ensure that students/teachers are agents of social change which can have a ripple effect on the microcosm and macrocosm in the long-run.

Conclusions

Many researchers contend that teacher leadership and continuing professional development have much in common. This research clearly shows that there is a link between teacher leadership and staff morale. There is the need for more extensive research on how positive staff morale is boosted by enhanced teacher professional development. More studies indicating the importance of staff morale within this particular setting are needed in order to ensure that the workplace culture changes from that of lack of care to a more caring and appreciative environment.

References

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