Mobilising the Middle – the key to cultivating collective teacher efficacy

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How can teachers make a difference?

A number of years ago at a school camp students were challenged to set up the campsite and cook each other a meal all without the guidance of the facilitating teachers. After a day of hiking, it was, needless to say, that the group was fairly tired. As I stood back and watched the scene unfold I was impressed by the ability of these teenagers to collaborate and harness their collective strengths to rise to the challenge set before them. Although it is obvious that the work of teachers is vastly different to the experience described above, it should be acknowledged that when teachers collaborate and utilise their strengths, amazing things happen to student learning and school culture.

Recently Hattie (2016) released an update of the factors that make a difference to student achievement. The mutual belief of teachers that they can make a difference to student learning is known as collective teacher efficacy (CTE). With an effect size of 1.57, CTE out ranks other factors such as socioeconomic status, prior achievement, home environment and parental involvement. The power of the collective must be harnessed to make lasting and authentic improvements for our students.

Jerald (2007) defines CTE as the belief teachers have that together they can organise and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on their students. What is most promising from research into CTE

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is that perceptions of efficacy are not fixed and through specific actions by school leaders these perceptions can change.

Collective efficacy is high when teachers believe that they are capable of helping students engage in deep learning and master complex content regardless of the context of the school. With this in mind, school leaders would be remiss to ignore opportunities to implement interventions which improve collective efficacy across the school. After all the principal alone cannot enact authentic change across the whole school for lasting improvement in student outcomes.

What are the benefits of fostering CTE?

The dynamic nature of schools means that school leaders are always negotiating the next challenge. The school environment is not static and change is a prevalent consequence of the tensions and expectations that are pushed into the education sector. The strength of collective efficacy in an

organisation affects how teachers approach the challenges that come with change. Importantly, schools with strong CTE consistently keep student learning at the forefront and, as a whole, teachers are able to maintain learning environments which continually promote student learning and support the work of teachers.

The benefits of CTE are far reaching and drive to the core of teachers' work – that is student learning. An organisation with high CTE is characterised by teachers who demonstrate the following actions:

Greater effort and persistence
A collective sense of efficacy leads teachers to persist in undertaking challenges which includes meeting the needs of all students. Highly efficacious teachers view student failure as an incentive for greater teacher effort (Donohoo, 2017). It follows then, that schools with high CTE are characterised by teachers who are able to collaborate to assist each other in meeting the needs of students regardless of how they are progressing. Teachers are able to utilise the data available to them to generate strategies for student learning and also use data as an indicator of their impact. Lower levels of CTE results in an inclination to stop trying and less effort leading to lower levels of teacher performance.

Willingness to try new approaches
A greater sense of CTE leads teacher to try new teaching approaches and are more accepting of change. By cultivating positive CTE teachers are willing to set challenging goals for their students and introduce instructional practices which focus on mastery experiences for students.

Conveying high expectations
When teachers convey high expectations of their students, the students themselves tend to form higher expectations of their own abilities. Hattie (2016) states that the effect size of teacher's expectations of their students is 0.44, however, when students have high expectations of themselves the effect size is 1.44. Schools which are characterised by strong CTE have high expectations of their students which is linked to students having high expectations of themselves. This is known as the Pygmalion Effect, first proposed by Rosenthal and Babad (1985) and the link between teacher and student expectations is illustrated in Figure 1 above.

However, there is also an opposing self-filling prophecy – the Golem Effect. This is where teachers with low expectations of their students and little belief about the impact they can have on student achievement has a negative influence on the teaching and learning strategies they employ. Consequently, this leads to students underperforming and can result in increased behavioural problems (Donohoo, 2017). It follows then, that fostering CTE should be a key driver in any school improvement strategy.
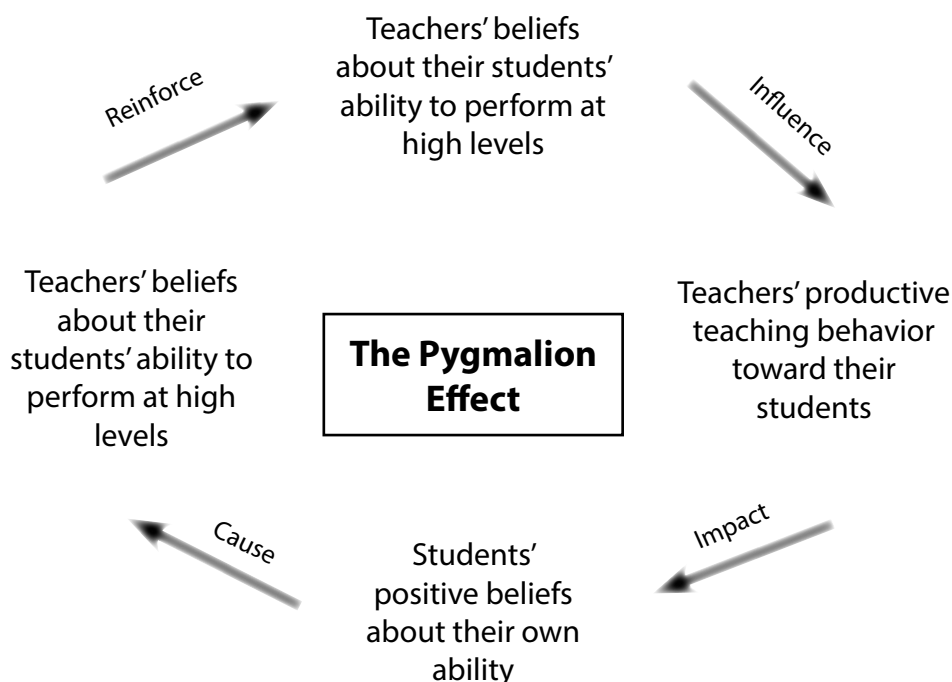

Figure 1: The link between teacher and student expectations

Learner autonomy
Teachers with high sense of collective efficacy promote student autonomy where the focus is shifted from teaching to learning. Students are provided with choice and their motivation to engage in learning improves. This is not to say that the curriculum is ignored, but rather, students are provided with opportunities to choose how they engage with the content. A greater sense of motivation is also linked to the beliefs students have about what they can learn. Classrooms which promote student autonomy are not only characterised by student choice but also by the use of appropriate scaffolds to support learning, peer interactions and cooperation is encouraged, authentic feedback is provided to students from peers and the teacher and students are empowered in their learning by knowing what the next steps to mastery are needed.

Increased commitment
The effectiveness of any school is strongly linked to the degree of commitment of the teachers to the school and its students. Committed teachers are more willingly to show behaviours linked to CTE previously described. Highly efficacious teachers will show increased commitment to the organisation and are likely to collaborate with their peers to ensure their actions lead to improved outcomes for students. School environments need to be carefully crafted so that teacher commitment is enhanced, thereby improving CTE.

Middle leaders as the drivers of CTE
The analysis of the benefits of fostering CTE is impressive and is not exhaustive, however, the question that needs to be addressed is: what actions can principals take to authentically promote CTE?

When looking to foster a strong sense of efficacy among teachers, Donohoo (2017) describes six enabling conditions needed:
1 Advanced teacher influence: providing opportunities for teacher leadership.
2 Goal consensus: seeking teacher involvement in decision making.
3 Teacher's knowledge about one another's work: providing opportunities for teachers to learn about each other's work.
4 Cohesive staff: encouraging a sense of team within and between faculties and stages.
5 Responsiveness of leadership: leadership which protects the work of teachers and is aware of the challenges which teachers face in their day to day work.
6 Effective systems of intervention: teachers working together to recognise and close gaps in student achievement.

When reflecting on the conditions listed, I firmly believe it is the ability of principals to mobilise their middle leadership teams in order to improve and enhance teacher's sense of CTE.

The work of Dinham (2007) and more recently Harris and Jones (2017) and Leithwood (2016) among others, highlight the significant impact the middle leadership team have on developing a culture of a powerful collective. The influence of the principal lies within their capacity to uplift this layer of leadership to generate positive change and improvement. The role of the middle leader is particularly challenging as they are required to lead vertically and horizontally and, hence, the sphere of influence of the middle leader

extends beyond boundaries defined by mere administration tasks. Middle leaders in school can positively influence teaching and learning by building a culture of learning and efficacy and must be recognised as the key drivers in developing CTE.

Harris and Jones (2017) state that current research into middle leadership demonstrates that principals who empower develop the middle leadership team secure improved outcomes for students. This is because middle leaders have a direct influence the work of teachers and therefore can take steps to cultivate CTE.

The greatest within school variation occurs at the subject or stage which means a significant part of this variation is found at the middle tier of leadership. Enabling middle leaders to work outside their traditionally defined roles, commonly characterised by administration, is key to developing CTE. Of course, middle leaders will always need to address some administrative tasks, but principals should be encouraged to seek ways in which they can invest in this vitally important layer of leadership so that these teachers can work to empower the collective.

Leading from the middle doesn't just mean teachers in this leadership tier only work with their team. Rather, leading from the middle can be defined as a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and coherence of teachers by connecting all layers within the system in the pursuit of greater system performance (Fullan, 2015). Increasing capacity and coherence has a direct influence on developing a positive culture of CTE. Middle leaders need to be able to work together so as to mobilise their teams to achieve unity and they cannot view their work in isolation.

An analysis of the characteristics of effective middle leadership teams show a strong alignment to an authentic sense of CTE among teachers. Effective middle leaders are passionate and dedicated educators knowing that student learning is the centre of their actions. They are flexible and open to new ideas and consider the opinions and suggestions of others when planning new approaches. They are able to advance teacher influence and seek goal consensus with their teams. Successful middle leaders are protective of their staff but at the same time communicate a high expectation for staff performance and consequently student progress.

Middle leaders expertly use data to find the gaps in student learning and use this data to measure the impact of their teams. Middle leaders are experts in their subject area and seek to identify best practice in pedagogy and model this to staff. They are, in essence, the true instructional leaders of a school. It is concerning to observe the appointment of the 'teaching and learning' expert evident in some schools. These positions with titles that indicate one teacher is an expert separate to the master teacher, who often holds a middle leadership position, can erode the capacity of these leaders to collaborate within and across teams.

An important characteristic of effective middle leaders in cultivating CTE is they are able to develop professional networks throughout the school and beyond through collaboration, sharing of resources and participation in both in-school and external professional learning. High performing middle leaders are also able to cast vision and work with staff to enact on that vision. They are able to apply a strengths-based approach to leadership and seek ways to extend and develop staff. A consequence of middle leaders taking these actions to develop a greater sense of CTE is that individual teachers are encouraged to be innovative and to use the skills they already have to find new ways of doing things, tackle new challenges and to share what they know with others.

Leithwood (2016) describes the middle leadership team as an untapped resource for school improvement and the impact that these leaders can have is largely overlooked. When considering Hattie's claim of an effect size of 1.57 for CTE, school leadership teams must seek ways to promote and cultivate this among their teachers. The challenge for the hierarchy of school leadership is to acknowledge and utilise the strengths of their middle leadership team and to empower them to create a strong sense of CTE. Middle leaders are the hinge between the top and the teachers; they are learned and passionate educators who are often thrust unprepared into their roles but rise to the challenge. Enabling the middle leaders and recognising their importance in school effectiveness leads a school to success.

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