

The Influence of Elementary School Leadership in Promoting a Learner-Centered Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study which investigated how teachers demonstrate “learner-centered” classroom instruction and how they are influenced by the school principal as a transformational leader in promoting a learner-centered classroom. The respondents were eight participants who were chosen based on their purposive experiences and had been teaching at the Elementary School of Silliman University. Face to face interviews provided the primary method of data collection with the selected teachers comprising the primary source of data. This study shows that teachers’ opinions concerning their principal’s transformational leadership behaviors are positive in general. The results revealed that the teachers perceive their principal as transformational leadership influential in creating or maintaining a classroom with a “learner-centered” instruction. The findings signify that there is a shift among the teachers from positional leadership to fluid, teamwork, collaborative, and emergent leadership that is spread across teachers. This was evident from the teachers’ perspective, which described the leadership as cooperative, supportive, trusting, participatory, democratic decision-making, empowering, shared management, and professional learning communities. In school, therefore, teachers and principal work together to develop effective learner-centered classroom practices, and they study together what things work useful in the classroom.

Keywords: Elementary School, Transformational Leadership, Learner-Centered, Phenomenology, Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines

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1.0. Introduction

In the 21st century, students require skills, competencies, and flexibilities for learning and working. According to demands, students around the world need effective education. To maintain the quality and standards of effective education, the schools depend mainly on the leadership responsibilities which affect job satisfaction and self-efficacy of teachers and which in turn affect pupils' performance in the classroom. Gorton, Alston, and Snowden (2007) pointed out that the school leader's capacity to lead is the most critical factor that could affect teachers, students' performance, and school accomplishments.

Despite the changes in school leadership and policies, few teachers could perform their actual role in the management of a classroom where they are the facilitators who will only guide the learners in the learning process. Many teachers still use teacher-centered approaches in classrooms where the focus is on the teachers and not on the students. The teacher-centered approach is apparent where the teacher talks and the students exclusively listen. During activities, students work alone, and collaboration is discouraged. When students work individually, they will be weak in cooperation with other students and communicative skills.

Furthermore, having high students' performance needs learner-centered classrooms which make a better and more efficient learning environment for students. Doyle (2008) stated that a learner-centered class is one where there is active learning, student engagement, and other strategies that involve students. It engages students in the work of knowledge. Here, the teachers act as a facilitator who teaches students how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyze arguments, generate hypotheses, and all these learning skills are essential to mastering material in the discipline.

Transformational leadership emphasizes the actions and process of behaviors that promote the motivation of followers to perform beyond what is usually expected of them (Leithwood, 1994). Furthermore, this kind of leader gives attention to the needs of followers and helps them reach their highest potentiality (Northouse, 2010). This kind of leadership practices is required in preparing qualified teachers and students because it can maximize the quality of teaching, active learning, and the achievement of the school. The school leadership, therefore, could influence the promotion of learner-centered classroom.

At present, schools around the world are facing many issues and specific adversities with which educational leaders must contend. How a leader responds to these difficulties affect not only the leader's performance but also the capability of those they lead. Since principals have a myriad of roles included in their job; one of the most important and influential is the effect they have on the teachers of the school, particularly in the classroom setting (Leithwood, 1994). Therefore, a principal pays attention to transform others by helping one another, to encourage, to look after one another, and to pay attention to the development organization as a whole. As Lievens, Geit and Coetsier (1997) articulate, a leader makes the progress of these changes smooth by focusing on the enlargement of vision and encourages the subordinates to pursue that concept. The most crucial role of a school leader is to provide an environment that motivates teachers to improve how they deliver instruction, which can empower students and help them to improve their academic performance (Leithwood, 1994).

This paper focused on teachers and how they demonstrate “learner-centered” classroom instruction and how the school principal has influenced them.

2.0. Literature Review

Transformational leadership. Bass (1985) described transformational leadership to consist of the practices that improve the level of awareness about the significance and value of particular results. Transformational leadership theory mainly focuses on actions and process of behaviors that encourage the motivation of followers to achieve beyond what is usually expected of them. Moreover, Northouse (2010) states that transformational leaders promote the performance of followers and develop them to their entire potential. They encourage their followers to observe old problems from a new perspective, and they always inspire their followers to achieve higher than before. Besides, they motivate their followers more than their interests and aims through focusing on the more significant team, organizational, national, and global objectives (Jandaghi, Matin, & Farjami, 2009).

Thomson (2007) stated factors based on Bass (1985) to describe the characteristics of the transformational leader such as idealized influence or attributed charisma, idealized influence or behavioral charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. According to Greiman, Larson and Olander (2007), idealized influence or charisma is that followers are dominated positively by the leader who has high ethical behavior and moral standards. The leaders with an idealized influence provide followers with a sense of mission. Besides, two leadership factors are necessary: idealized influence (attributed) and idealized influence (behavior). School leaders demonstrate the most important values, a strong commitment to goals, and decisions based on spiritual and moral standards, according to Jandaghi et al. (2009). These leaders encourage trust in their followers. They do not use their leadership power and capacity to achieve personal goals, but they try to obtain organizational objectives by providing direction and guidance for their followers.

Inspirational motivation is utilized by a leader who communicates with high expectations to followers through supporting them with motivation to give to a shared vision of the organization. The leaders practice symbols and heartfelt request to concentrate followers’ attempts to get more than they would in their self-interest (Northouse, 2010). Besides, followers learn from this vision not by the leaders’ instruction but due to their town interest. It shows that the followers’ insight is higher than hierarchy levels, and it is inspired among followers by sharing organizational visions. Intellectual stimulation is used by a transformational leader who provides the followers to be innovative and creative in problem-solving skills (Northouse, 2010). These kinds of leadership give confidence to the followers and encourage them to challenge their values and beliefs (Greiman et al., 2007).

Furthermore, leaders enhance followers’ capabilities to understand the organization’s natural behaviors and challenges. The point is to be a learning organization by paying attention to creating and developing ideas. Moreover, individualized consideration is that leaders give a supportive situation for their followers and demonstrate individualized consideration when they present as mentors and

coaches and inspire followers to attain their potential and goals (Greiman et al., 2007). Transformational leadership refers to a series of behaviors designed to affect classroom instruction. Such practices include principals informing teachers about new educational strategies and tools for practical education and assisting them and critiquing them to determine their applicability in the classroom (Leithwood, 1994).

The principal as a transformational leader. In recent years, professional learning communities and the role of the principal has changed, putting a greater emphasis on shared decision making. Furthermore, the organizational structure has shifted to a more open and democratic model. School principals are in a unique position as managers or administrators who control schools' resources to attain the missions and goals of the organization. They can affect various aspects of education. They have so many functions and responsibilities included in their job, and one of the vital elements is their effect on the teachers in the school.

In any school setting, transformational leadership fits into the higher level of needs because it requires a higher level of self-esteem, authenticity, morality, and pride to perform this kind of leadership. It is where people are encouraged more on the results of the organization. It involves value that encourages the followers to collaborate, rather than working as individuals (Burns, 1978). It is of considerable significance for transformational principals to provide support to their subordinates particularly the teachers to keep excellence in their learner-centered classrooms and at the same time retain their level of satisfaction amidst the demanding field of education (Leithwood, 1994).

Stronge (1998) asserted that if school heads follow the call of policymakers to become transformational leaders, then, it is evident that they must take a more complicated role. Moreover, Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2010) stated that in high-functioning schools, transformational principals established a collegial culture that fostered teacher empowerment and created the school vision—shifting the emphasis from the supervisor as the sole decision-maker to an increase in teacher involvement and participation that promotes reflection and positive change. Teachers' job commitments are directly related to the leadership style employed by their principal (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Developing a faculty in which teachers are wholeheartedly committed to their work and the school vision has a positive impact on school effectiveness.

Moreover, Ahuja (2007) supported the impact of active transformational leadership by using a descriptive case study designed to investigate teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of the factors influencing commitment to school success. Her results indicated that successful student achievement was due to great transformational leadership and collective responsibility with the teachers. Six themes evolved such as mission which includes the goals and shared vision; empowerment; teamwork and capability development; flexibility and learner-centered differentiated teaching; organizational learning like mentoring; and fostering competency and relatedness.

Furthermore, Cotton (2003) found that the majority of the principal's efforts to impact student achievement were indirect and took place through the teachers. He also stated that principals indirectly influence student achievement through the skills, abilities, and effectiveness of the teacher. If the principal shares the responsibility to coordinate and collaborate on practices with teachers, the teachers can build in a classroom a sense of community and provide opportunities for students to develop the skills and attitudes needed to work collaboratively in diversely populated classes.

Learner-centered classroom. A learner-centered classroom requires teachers who are aware that students construct their meaning. Learning in these classes is viewed as the construction of a bridge between the learner and the subject matter, and the teacher in a student-centered classroom watches both ends of that bridge. Doyle (2008) stated that "learner-centered classroom allows that students are taking some real control over their educational experience, and it encourages them to make important choices about what and how they will learn". Also, McCombs and Whisler (1997 cited in Murphy & María, 2008) recommended that teaching paradigms be flexible. Students are partners in the student-centered experience, and as such, they provide reliable information.

In a learner-centered classroom, teacher's questions should inquire about knowledge, advance understanding, and invite reflection about how each student learned (Harris, 2000). Also, teachers create the setting for students who, in turn, take the initiative for their learning, are fully engaged, help other students have a voice, participate in the broader community, among others. These teachers create in a classroom a sense of community and provide opportunities for students to develop the skills and attitudes needed to work collaboratively in diversely populated classes.

McCombs and Whisler (1997) stated that in creating a learner-centered classroom, teachers can use specific strategies. In general, there are four learner-centered practices. They are a focus on conceptual understanding, problem-solving, and reasoning; a movement toward a constructivist and authentic approach to teaching, collaborative learning, and decision making process; a classroom environment that honors and respects students' voices; and an emphasis on student improvement and learning for its sake. Guided by McCombs and Whisler (1997, p. 113-114), in learner-centered classrooms, a teacher

"organizes learning activities around themes that are meaningful to students; provides complex and challenging learning activities that promote conceptual and analytic thinking; helps students develop and refine their understanding through critical and higher order thinking skills; provides opportunities for students to choose their projects and work at their own pace; uses a variety of instructional strategies and methods to match student needs; encourages shared decision making and student autonomy and gives students increasing responsibility for their learning; monitors student progress continually and provides feedback on individual growth and progress; uses standardized and alternative forms of assessment; and allows competencies and achievement of educational standards be demonstrated in a variety of ways."

3.0. Methodology

Based on the previous studies, to examine the particular unique experiences of individual teachers and explore not what is a reality but what is preconceived to be, the phenomenological approach was notably used. According to Holloway (2005), phenomenology is an inductive descriptive method which aims to describe participants' lived experiences (phenomena) in an attempt to enrich the lived experience by drawing out its meaning. As the study was further concerned with meaning and how the meaning arises from the experiences of the elementary school teachers of Silliman University with their school principal that can be considered as transformational and their classroom instruction as a learner-centered, this approach under a qualitative method was applied in this paper.

There were eight participants in the study who were chosen based on their purposive experiences. These participants had been teaching at the Elementary School of Silliman University for two years or more and had employed the learner-centered instruction in the subject areas they taught. The researcher obtained consent from the school principal before the conduct of the study. Any information obtained from the participants would remain confidential between the two parties. The purpose of this was to ascertain that anonymity and confidentiality were followed during data collection.

The primary instrument in gathering the necessary data for this study was the face to face interview. Face to face interviews provided the primary method of data collection with the selected teachers comprising the primary source of data. Several interviews were conducted until saturation of information was reached. The participants of this study were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before their participation in each interview. A semi-structured interview protocol was a researcher-made questionnaire which was validated by experts in the field. All the suggestions and revision were integrated into the final guide questions. All the interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour or until saturation of information was reached. The responses from the participants of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and categorized based on the objectives of the study. All the interviews were done privately and recorded. During the interview, participants were encouraged to state their responses in a language they were comfortable with to express their thoughts. The interview ended with a debriefing, which reiterated the purpose of the study and the observance of confidentiality with regards to the interviewee's identity and the data collected. After the data were processed and interpreted, the survey instrument was shredded or burnt.

The framework data analysis process used in examining the researcher's findings employed a pre-defined structure which reflects the aims, objectives, and interests by focusing on particular answers and abandons the rest (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Moreover, guided by Lichtman (2012), the three C's - coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing - were used in conducting in-depth interviews which revealed the practices of the transformational principal which help the teachers develop certain behaviors/values that promote learner-centered classrooms of the Elementary school of Silliman University. The analysis was safeguarded as data were locked on the

researcher's computer by using data protection passwords. The purpose of this was to make sure that nobody had access to it.

4.0. Results and Discussion

Understanding learner-centered classroom. The teachers recognized that diversity makes each classroom unique. Four of the participants mentioned the importance of “addressing *individual differences of the pupils which need to be addressed*,” so the teacher needs to be flexible to meet the needs of all learners. In this context, a teacher claimed, “*A classroom can be learner-centered if the classroom equipment is supporting student learning, and the place is conducive for learning.*” Another teacher revealed that “*The best way to handle the classroom, you have to adjust all the times, and you have to make an effective seating arrangement... support and facilitate the learners.*” According to two participants, they “*usually group pupils into small groups not only to promote a deeper level of learning but likewise to learn how to talk with or listen to others.*”

All of them emphasized that the teacher's best strategy was to be flexible and adaptable all the time. Classroom management is also crucial in the implementation of the learner-centered classroom such as seating arrangement, classroom policies which must all be geared towards the pupils' comfort and preferences, and not the teachers. Moreover, appropriate classroom facilities and equipment must also be present and utilized during the teaching and learning process. The learner-centered learning is defined as an approach to learning where pupils choose not only how to study, but also what to study, and why that topic might be of interest. The learning environment has the responsibility and activity of the pupils at its heart, according to Rogers (1983).

Teachers' understanding of learner-centered classroom is related to McCombs and Whisler (1997) Which recommended that teaching paradigms be flexible. Moreover, it is also affirmed that teachers must be facilitators of students' learning opportunities through questioning, meaningful discussions, and higher-level thinking events that lead to increased learning. In this form of instruction, learning facilitators are viewed to be instructionally effective when teachers can offer constructive and prescriptive feedback on student's work, which in turn informs them of their advancement into learning (Tournaki, Lyublinskaya, & Carolan, 2009).

The teachers understood “learner-centered” classroom instruction and were able to demonstrate it. The participants emphasized respect for diversity, individual differences, the importance of classroom management and policies, utilization of appropriate classroom facilities and equipment. However, many instruction strategies can be used in the classroom, the selection of instruction is considered as an essential issue for improving the quality of teaching and learning because the students' achievement mainly depends on the instructional strategies teachers use in the classroom and besides, the students' attitude toward learning also relies on teacher instruction (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1998).

Demonstrating learner-centered classroom. *“Storytelling is one of the best strategies”* according to the teacher participants as storytelling involves collaboration and cooperation during the session and at the same time develops higher-order thinking skills and vocabulary enhancement while inculcating strong Christian values. One teacher said that *“I always teach students not too talk, show them and think of them... that is value.”* The other teacher claimed that *“I give time my students before the study or before classroom discussion, and I also provide opportunities for students to choose their projects and work at their own pace. I make them group for the peer’s discussion and collaborate with them.”* The experience of the lessons learned excited the teachers and made them more interested in teaching. The teachers also realized that discoveries of new knowledge also makes students want to be part of the activity and apply this knowledge in real life situation later on. The learning process must be more meaningful when topics are relevant to the students’ needs, lives, and fascinations, and when they are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge as espoused by McCombs and Whistler (1997).

All of the participants agreed that performance is also a much-sought activity by the pupils, and they love performing in front of the class. In the lower grades such as Grades 1 and 2, the attention span of the pupils is quite short, so according to the teacher they always need to be prepared and ready to introduce topics and activities to catch their pupil’s interest. It is also the phase where classroom management is essential since the pupils would like to play all the time. One participant said, *“Since we, the teachers are the source of knowledge in the classroom, improvement should start with us”*. Pupils had prior knowledge, particularly those in the higher-grade levels, but the teacher needed to ask the appropriate questions to ignite their interest and encourage them to be part of the classroom discussion.

The participants also reveal that for a classroom to be learner-centered, it has to be conducive where classroom facilities/equipment are present and support student learning. The learning skills, attitudes, critical thinking strategies, and behaviors which the pupils learn in the classrooms are now a part of the learner-centered classroom, and these skills are in preparation for their future careers. The learner-centered instruction is the most appropriate method to provide students with the 21st-century knowledge and skills. Therefore, some examples of learner-centered instruction, such as conceptual understanding, collaborative learning and decision-making process and a classroom environment that honors and respects students’ voices, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, inquiry learning and cognitive apprenticeships that are the most appropriate learning approaches in providing students with the 21st century skills and knowledge (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Principal as a transformational leader. The principal, as a transformational leader, is also called quiet bosses. They guide by example, and their style tends to utilize inspiration, affinity, or understanding to followers (Ahuja, 2007). They are known to have courage, confidence, and the willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good. The principal always goes back to the vision, mission, goals, and situation of the school and is being guided by the school policies. She is a reliable model for teachers, pupils,

and parents alike. She looks at the competition as a healthy way of improving oneself, thus encourages pupils and teachers to build character and spirituality to achieve not only their personal goals but also the goals of the university. Teachers emphasized the importance of communication, and they said: *"It always starts with the school principal". "Listening to what the teachers are feeling and thinking is also part of communication,"* according to one teacher. Communication is essential to transformational leaders since this is the mode of transferring not only messages but knowledge as well.

One of the teachers remarked that *"the principal acts as a strong role model for teachers, students, and parents (for example, early going to school, the teacher will look up to her). The principal is not only staying inside the office but also is going out to check that the teachers are already in the classroom. Aside from that, she also ensures that the place is clean and that the students are not outside the classroom during classes. She respects her teachers, students, and her work. She trusts us, and we trust her".* Another teacher asserted, *"Our principal supports new ideas and different solutions to problems, but she wants us to convince her at first."*

The principal always emphasized that the lesson plan has to be aligned with the mission, vision of our school which is the 5Cs (classroom, church, culture center, court, and community) of Silliman University. A good leader has open communication to all stakeholders of the school. A transformational leader is also a good listener. She listens to the suggestions and feedbacks of the faculty for the improvement of classroom and unit outcomes and is very approachable. Support for the pupils and teachers from a good principal will show good governance of the unit.

The experiences of the teachers with their principal as a transformational leader included the emergence of collaboration and cooperation, a discovery of new ideas and concepts, and the utilization of various strategies in the classroom. The principal searches the ideas, suggestions, insights, and expertise of teachers, and works with teachers for the school improvement. Transformational leadership develops the vision of instruction, builds a relationship with teachers, students, and parents, enriches teachers with new theories of education, empowers teachers for innovative teachings, encourages them to provide feedback and share practices. Furthermore, she promotes the performance of followers and develops them to their entire potential. She also encourages her followers to observe old problems from a new perspective and always inspires their followers to achieve higher than before.

According to Northouse (2010), transformational leadership behaviors are often exhibited as an idealized influence, followed by intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and lastly individualized consideration. Moreover, it is understood that principal welcomes new ideas easily about creativity, lets them express their opinions freely, demonstrates high-performance expectations, models best practices and essential organizational values, develops structures to foster participation in school decisions, and creates a productive school culture and supports them as well (Leithwood, 1994).

As it can be seen here, the teachers trust their principal, and they have great belief in her efforts to move their schools forward. It is evident from the teachers'

statements that she respects the teachers and also does not want to use the formal power to them. The teachers also state that the principal is a good role model, and although she is busy with office and paperwork all day long, she always deals with the teachers' problems.

Influence of the principal in learner-centered instruction. By focusing on learning, today's school leaders shift both their focus and that of the school community to outcomes and results. The principal evaluates through observation for identification of the teacher's weaknesses and strengths. One of the participants claimed that *"there is a year of our evaluation. We evaluated our performances, classroom management, how we deal with our students in the classroom, then our passing of grades, our meeting of deadlines."* The other participant asserted, *"My principal affects me in my classroom instructions, especially in checking in the lesson plan and making sure that classroom management, speaking ability of the teachers, suggesting to do student performance activities. She encourages me to be a better teacher. She knows and listens to the problems of the pupils and teachers and supports the decisions and undertakings. These leadership practices of my principal directly or indirectly influence the promotion of my learner-centered instruction"*. Furthermore, the teachers revealed that their principal is very approachable, and she does not want anyone behind left. She keeps and maintains high expectations for teachers and students, supervises classroom instruction, coordinates the school's curriculum, and monitors student progress and achievement.

One participant stated that *"my principal is not only focused on working with the school community to establish a common mission, instructional values, and goals but also focused on creating a school culture grounded in collaboration and high expectations. She also facilitates and influences teachers' continuous instructional improvement in the classroom and guides them on what to do, particularly on how to teach inside the classroom"*. Transformation leaders let their subordinates grow in their chosen field and only guide them for better classroom outcomes. When teachers feel the school leadership supports them, they take risks that are more creative in their teaching and learning. They can provide complex and challenging learning activities that promote conceptual and analytic thinking in the classroom. Thompson (1996) added, *"Supportive principals are in tune to the needs of teachers and are there to offer the support necessary for teachers to meet their challenges"* (p. 150).

Ashton (1985) stated that one likely challenge facing principals is providing the needed support for teachers as they struggle with their capacity to affect the student learning process. Leithwood (1994) highlighted that transformational principal could proceed with the commitment of teachers by supporting their sense of self-worth, confidence, value, and effectiveness. In their research findings, Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) affirmed that transformational leadership had a moderate and significant influence on teachers' classroom instructions. This influence was not as strong as either teacher motivation or teacher capacity, but it was substantially stronger than teachers' work settings (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In the results of his study, Coladarci

(1992) affirmed that when teachers felt supportive, trust and encouraged by their principal, they tended to grasp confidence in their capabilities to attain excellence in the classroom and were able to increase the levels of student achievement. It shows the transformational leadership of the principal and this process actively facilitated by the schools' culture can lead students' learning, influence, and work collaboratively for school development.

Findings revealed that the principal has the responsibility for supporting the best transformational practices. Teachers are researchers always taking risks to try new ideas, mentors, and reflective practitioners. They believe that their principal creates an autonomous working environment and promote positive team-working in school. The activity of school leader includes developing warmth, autonomy, and independence, and thus, teachers' sense of empowerment is the central role in establishing teachers' profession and their performance in the learner-centered classroom, but the context seems to be the best to predict overall satisfaction.

Moreover, it was evident from the teachers' perspectives, which described the leadership as cooperative, supportive, trusting, participatory, democratic decision-making, empowering, shared management, and professional learning communities. The teachers claimed to be sharing ideas and good practical experience, which is more of professional development and communities of learners. It suggests that principals are more of transformational leaders who empower and recognize that many others have the potential to lead while teachers are engaged in decision making, collaborating, and taking the active role in the classroom. The current study supports the research findings of Clawson (2006) that leadership has the capacity and capability to "redesign organizational systems to support and encourage followers and make it easier to release their potential contribution and how the work system can be reorganized to realize worker's potential" (Clawson, 2006, p. 129).

5.0. Conclusion

Results of this study revealed that the teachers perceived their principal's transformational leadership behaviors as positive in general. The principal has influenced teachers in creating or maintaining a classroom with a "learner-centered" instruction. As one who possesses the openness to new ideas and concepts and who works in collaboration with the teachers and other stakeholders, the principal directly or indirectly supports the development of the teaching and learning environment.

In this qualitative case study, the principal's role in learner-centered instruction, according to the teachers, is based on their knowledge, perceptions, and experiences. In school, therefore, teachers and principal work together to develop effective learner-centered classroom practices, and they study together what things work and are useful in the classroom and pay high attention to improve not only for one's practice but also for others. When a principal is concerned explicitly with the individual's needs, shares in decision-making, and models professional behavior, teachers will respond positively. A particular area for action would be to increase learner-centered classroom, where the influence of a principal's transformational practices in creating a school culture

grounded in collaboration and high expectations, facilitating continuous instructional improvement, sharing a vision, building consensus, offering individualized support can produce excellent academic results for all students.

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