Psychological Capital and the Positive School Environment

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Abstract

Increasingly there is an awareness of the links between the quality of the environment in schools, the effectiveness of the school and the wellbeing of students and staff. The quality of the school environment is largely determined by the degree of positivity exhibited by those who work there. This article focuses on the manifestations and relevance of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in the school context. PsyCap in schools is reflective of the positive disposition of staff members and is manifested in their levels of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy. Each of these components is examined in the school context.

Creating a climate of hope in schools is associated with teachers facilitating students in realising their abilities and also with acknowledging and celebrating the individual achievements of students. It is suggested that school leaders build hope in schools by clearly communicating the standards that are expected from staff members.

The manifestations of optimism in teachers and the benefits accruing to high levels of optimism are explored. Optimistic teachers are considered to be positive in their attitudes and outlook. They interpret difficulties as surmountable, behave rationally in conflict situations and use humour and laughter frequently, yet judiciously.

Resilience is viewed by the author as essential for teachers, to enable them to cope well with the challenges and pressures associated with their job. The research of Seligman, informs the focus on how interpretations of events influence individual's convictions and conclusions. It is suggested that in order to build the resilience of students, protective processes need to be put in place as resilience does not happen in a vacuum.

The work of Bandura (1997) linking self-efficacy to self-belief and confidence is highlighted and the implications of the self-efficacy and confidence of teachers, for innovative teaching and learning, are explored.

Introduction

An awareness of the environment in schools first struck me when I was working for one of the teacher training colleges more than twenty years ago. I was supervising student teachers engaged in teaching practice in various schools. Through visiting a large number of schools over a short period of time, I became aware that each and every school – irrespective of location, student numbers, socio-economic background of the students, or physical condition of the building – had a particular and unique atmosphere, something that I sensed or felt as soon as I entered the school. Although there were, of course, nuances of similarities and differences between the quality of the atmosphere in the various schools, the general sense was that a visit to a particular school proved to be either a positive experience on the one hand, or a negative one on the other.

While initial impressions of the school can be powerful indicators of the positivity or negativity of the school environment, they are but the tip of the iceberg in terms of understanding the myriad elements and dimensions of school life that contribute to what constitutes an overall positive school environment. However, the sense that one initially gets is invariably to do with the people in the school, including adults and children, and how they treat each other, get on with each other, and how well they work with each other.

The quality of the behaviours and relationships impacts not merely on the atmosphere, but also on the quality of the teaching and learning, and the wellbeing of both staff and students. Appropriate behaviours and high-quality relationships are characterised primarily by their levels of positivity. School leaders and teachers set an example through how they behave and relate to others. They also set the tone of the behaviours and relationships which, whether positive or negative, the students will emulate.

This paper will focus on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in schools, through examining the components of PsyCap and how they impact on the quality of environment in schools.

Psychological Capital in Schools

A huge body of research has been conducted on positivity in the workplace both in the positive psychology, and the positive organisational behaviour fields of study. The objective of the pioneering work undertaken by both Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi on positive psychology was to change the focus of psychology from one of healing and repairing people, to one of building and reinforcing positive qualities and helping people to flourish in all areas of their lives including their work.

With particular reference to the value of staff who are positive in their attitudes and behaviours, Luthans *et al* (2004) built on the ideas of positive psychology and organisational behaviour, to develop the concept of positive psychological capital (PsyCap) as a resource for workplaces. Capital generally refers to the range of resources that an individual has, and can draw from as required in the workplace. There are a number of different forms of capital, which include the more familiar Human Capital and Social Capital. Human Capital is made up of an individual's knowledge, skills, and qualifications. A person's CV would usually indicate his/her level of human capital. A person high in social capital
ould have the ability to work cooperatively with others to contribute to collective effectiveness. Successful school leaders, in particular, are aware of the benefits of Human and Social Capital, and look to the components of both as criteria to guide their decisions in the appointment or promotions of staff.

Psychological Capital, or PsyCap, is less well understood, and refers to an individual's positive state of mind (Luthans *et al* 2007). Someone high in PsyCap has a predominantly positive disposition. Some school leaders concentrate merely on the qualifications/experience of candidates and on their accounts of how well they work with others, when making decisions at interviews. They have often been subsequently disappointed to discover that the person they have appointed has turned out to be a negative force on the staff. When they do get it right and appoint someone who is a positive influence, they have a responsibility to ensure that he/she is facilitated and empowered to stay positive. Pryce-Jones (2010) stated that PsyCap really matters in a job that requires motivation, creative thinking, and perseverance. These are surely among the essential hall marks of good teaching. PsyCap becomes even more relevant to schools and teaching when we consider it in terms of its components, which are:

- Hope
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Self-efficacy (confidence) (Luthans *et al* 2004)

These four components, are not firmly fixed personality traits, but are relatively stable states of mind, that benefit from being appreciated and managed. All three forms of Capital, Human, Social and Psychological are important and contribute positively to the effectiveness of the workplace. The latter, PsyCap, as the positive state of mind of individuals, is perhaps the most important resource in itself, and in its ability to contribute to the effectiveness of a school and the wellbeing of those in it. The positive disposition of staff also contributes to their own commitment and wellbeing through reduced anxiety and stress (Newman *et al* 2014).

Hope as a positive mind-set

In order to appreciate the importance and positive impact of PsyCap in schools, each of its components will be examined to ascertain how it relates to and manifests in everyday school life. Hope, as one of the constituent elements of PsyCap, is probably the most easily identified as absolutely essential in the teaching profession. Teaching has been variously described as the discipline of hope (Kohl 1998), the profession of hope (Perrone 1991) and as a vocation of hopefulness (Shade 2011). Some tired, cynical or generally disillusioned teachers may have abandoned hope. As a result, they may have succumbed to fatalism in their attitude and passivity in their practice. Fatalism is expressed in an unwillingness to change or improve practice and an adherence and contentment with the *status quo*. "I have been doing it this way for the past thirty years and it has served me very well, thank you very much" or "Leave well enough alone" are examples of the fatalism heard not too infrequently in staff rooms or at staff meetings. Fatalism can stifle the hopes of others as they make suggestions

for change and improvements. It is important not to allow the fatalism and negativity of others to silence the more positive members of staff, as they present suggestions for consideration.

Notwithstanding the damage that a fatalistic and dismissive attitude of teachers can cause in schools, in terms of the demoralisation of both staff and students, it has to be said that the vast majority of teachers and school leaders retain high levels of hope.

Hope constitutes not merely the ability to identify and pursue goals but also the willpower to persevere in realising them. Bashant (2016) asserted that hope is a driving force for emotions and wellbeing, both of which he describes as essential components on one's happiness and success in life. Therefore, instilling hope in students, in other words, instilling in them a belief that something is possible, should be part of every teacher's strategy in the classroom. Teachers who are high in hope, are usually able to articulate a variety of means for achieving this goal. They have what Shade (2001) described as practical and pragmatic hope, enabling them to facilitate students in realising their abilities. Snyder's theory of hope consists of a number of components which include, the setting of realistic goals, having the motivation and perseverance necessary to pursue these goals, and finally the attainment of the goals (Snyder 2002). The sense of mastery that is achieved by students, through goal attainment, motivates them to repeat the cycle, leading to further successes (Bashant 2016). The classroom environment is key to providing the conditions most conducive to driving hope. In a climate of hope, teachers do not treat all students as if they were on a level playing field, through pitching them against each other for praise and recognition. The competitive practice of selecting student of the week, month, or year often assumes that all students are operating from a similar set of abilities and motivational circumstances. Even when they are doing so, the practice creates winners (temporarily) and losers and has far more disadvantages than advantages. However, when some students are at a distinct disadvantage to begin with, this competitive practice is rendered even more damaging to student motivation and hope. Covington (1992) suggested, that, with the possible exception of the student who wins the award, ranking students is more likely to diminish a student's sense of self-worth, confidence as a learner and motivation for learning. Competitive practices are "based on a false assumption that achievement is maximised when students compete for a limited number of rewards" (Covington 2000, p.23). A sense of achievement and success is a great motivator. However, "real success comes from learning what you need to learn, not from beating other students" (Bluestein 2001, p. 230). She further asserted that it is preferable to continually challenge students by encouraging them to reach farther than they have previously done. This positive approach is reflective of an abundance mentality where there is, as Covey (1992) suggested, "plenty out there for everybody" (p.219). It is in sharp contrast to the scarcity climate that is created through the competitive practice of selecting one winner, and making losers of everyone else, and where success is defined in terms of outperforming others (Covington 2000).

Celebrating the individual achievements of students as they occur, is much more conducive to building hope. Placing the reality of their achievements in the context of future possibilities will help the latter to sustain and increase the former (Shade 2011). The type of hope that is required in teaching does not provide instant gratification. Shade (2001) put it well when he suggested that "hope functions to energise and sustain the self, as it reconstructs itself in the teeth of trying circumstances" (p.11).

School leaders have an advantage in relation to building hope, when they practice what they preach. From two particular perspectives, the levels of hope of the school leader are pivotal to creating a community of hope in the school. The hope that they articulate and demonstrate sets a tone and expectation that is contagious, and reinforced in both staff and students. School leaders who are high in hope, are in a more credible position to clearly communicate the performance and relationship standards that they expect from their staff. They are also much more likely to provide the encouragement and empowerment that enhances hope in others. Without this context, neither staff nor students will sustain the levels of courage and commitment required to remain hopeful for the long haul.

Optimism as a positive mind-set

Hope and optimism, despite their difference in meaning are inextricably linked, and both contribute to the levels of positivity in a school. If hope is a sense that an outcome is possible, optimism is a sense that it is probable. Averill *et al* (1990) suggested that people will hope for things that are important to them, despite a low likelihood of realising that outcome, whereas optimism is more closely attuned to the probability of an outcome occurring. Optimism is typically defined as the degree to which an individual generally expects positive experiences in the future (Scheier and Carver 1985).

Those with an optimistic attitude have a positive outlook and positive expectations. While retaining a realistic and flexible level of optimism, they generally expect good things to happen to them, and generally make the most of what does happen to them. They are also good at overcoming problems and obstacles that arise, by regarding them as manageable and/or transient (Seligman 1991). Above all else, those with a mindset of optimism have the ability to positively affect the moods and mindset of those around them.

Although optimism may not be specifically cited as a criterion in the appointment of a teacher to a school, I have no doubt that every positive school leader would be delighted to be surrounded by staff with high levels of optimism.

Practical optimism, manifests in practical, realistic and positive actions that help to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Wilson and Conyers 2011). Practical optimism manifests in teachers through, for example:

- seeing the best in their colleagues and students
- giving decisions and ideas the benefit of the doubt
- facing change with energy and enthusiasm

An optimistic state of mind as an element of PsyCap is a resource that needs to be valued and supported by school leaders. It is also worth their while to work on their own levels of optimism both in terms of how it impacts on others, and how, more generally, they are perceived by others.

The mindset of optimism is a relatively stable one, as, unfortunately, is the mindset of pessimism (Seligman 1991). Optimism is regarded as an element of successful adaptation. Having optimism is not to be confused with having unrealistic expectations. Optimism entails weighing up the pros and cons of difficulties and problems, in order to seek out and find optimal solutions (Deutsch *et al* 2006). Optimists adopt a 'can do' attitude to problems, and persist when the going gets tough. They retain a sense of positivity and enthusiasm, when faced with challenges, and they are less likely to be fazed by the 'bolt from the blue' comment or intervention. Pessimists, on the other hand, are oblivious to these and other positive insights. By bemoaning and lamenting, they indulge in increasing the burden of problems rather than lessening it (Deutsch *et al* 2006). As Oscar Wilde so irreverently and accurately put it, "between optimist and pessimist the difference is droll, the optimist sees the doughnut and the pessimist sees the hole".

A further insight into the differences between optimists and pessimists is provided by Seligman (1991). He suggested that optimists generally view difficulties as temporary, specific, and external to themselves. Seeing them as such, encourages and facilitates a positive attitude of resolvability in relation to tackling them. Whereas optimists, need fellow optimists to sustain them, pessimists need to be dissuaded from their pessimism. It is important for school leaders to be aware of the range of negative consequences associated with the pessimism of colleagues, in order to help, support, and /or challenge them as appropriate. Pessimistic teachers who consistently demonstrate a lack of confidence and belief in positive outcomes risk being adversely affected both personally and professionally. For example, there are many negative motivational implications associated with pessimism (Carver and Scheier 2014). And when pessimism becomes entrenched it can have disastrous consequences in terms of resignation, underachievement, and depression (Seligman 1995).
Encouraging those who are prone to pessimism to shift towards a more optimistic mind-set can help them to reflect and change.

Unresolved conflict is one of the biggest problems in schools. Those involved in conflicts, frequently put the behaviours of others, through the narrow filter of how those behaviours affect themselves, their feelings and their positions. Whereas those who work on seeing problems as external, rather than personal, are better able to focus outside themselves in addressing and managing conflict (Seligman 1991). Not taking things personally is important, but can be exceedingly difficult, particularly in the context of negative personal comments and criticisms. Optimists do have a better disposition for behaving rationally and, if things go awry, they are more likely to have the resilience and perseverance to get them back on track. Further good news in relation to optimism emanates from the work of Carver *et al* (2010). They stated that not only are optimists optimistic themselves, but that they reinforce optimism in others. Most of us can display optimism and pessimism as events

dictate. What we need to do is to increase our optimism, so that it becomes our prevalent way of looking at events and people, particularly in problem situations and adversity.

Being able to laugh, despite being in the throes of problems, can help to put things in perspective and enable better coping and recovering. In everyday life laughter can cut through and diminish disappointments, and even failures.

Mc Donald (2010) wrote that laughter is quite unique in that it has the ability to find common ground even among disparate people. He further asserted that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems, laughter can become the only "transcendent positive signifier" (Mc Donald 2010, p.62). Being able to laugh at yourself however, is a real test of optimism. To see the funny side of something embarrassing that you have said or done, instead of imagining that everyone will be thinking the worst of you, and that you will never get over it, is extremely liberating. Teachers who take themselves too seriously can be sceptical and dismissive of laughter in the classroom. However, teachers who are familiar with the research and strategies associated with humour-in-the classroom can make a valid argument for its inclusion (Lovorn 2008). Humour helps to make connections between teachers and students and can bring lesson content to life. It can also help teachers to cope with the stressors and demands of their jobs (Berk, 2007). A teacher's sense of humour is appreciated by students and is essential in interpersonal relationships. It helps to create a warm atmosphere and has the power to transmit energy to the learner (Jeder 2014). In the context of the demands and intensity of a teacher's job, Deiter (2000) rightly observed that humour is also one of the best survival skills that they can have. One note of caution is added in relation to the use of sarcasm in classrooms. Sarcasm can be used by teachers to focus on a student's faults or weaknesses and can trigger shame, hurt and embarrassment. It can cause other students to laugh at the targeted student and can be extremely hurtful Lovorn 2008). Whereas laughter and humour should be part of every teacher's repertoire, there is no place for sarcasm in a caring and optimistic classroom.

Applying Wilde's description of retaining optimism in difficult situations, allows one to see the hole, but think, 'so what, it's a small hole in a much bigger doughnut'. True optimists do not ignore problems and challenges. They keep them in perspective, and look for ways to work through them. Why would teachers and school leaders not put learning/improving optimism on their 'must do' list when, in intrapersonal terms, optimists are generally healthier, happier and more successful and, in interpersonal terms, they engage better with others, maintain better relationships, and use more creative strategies for resolution of difficult situations.

Resilience as a positive mind-set

Resilience, the ability to sustain through the ups and downs of life, is a key attribute of positive Psychological Capital. It is essential for those who work in schools in order for them to make a positive contribution to the school environment, especially in tough times. It is generally associated with bouncing back from adversity. Resilience is also necessary for maintaining good physical and mental health and wellbeing.

While no-one sails through life without experiencing hard knocks, and associated consequences, those who have a mindset of resilience do not get completely bogged down in, or totally overwhelmed by them. Rather, they recover more quickly and have the ability to move on and let go. Resilience is further associated with being able to cope well, and thrive in the context of everyday and unavoidable disruptions and pressures. It is absolutely necessary for building and sustaining a high quality workplace in testing and challenging times (Day and Gu 2009).

Over the past number of years, there appears to be an ongoing attrition of teachers' autonomy, through increased levels of administration, a prevalence of a competitive focus, (e.g. league tabling), decreasing support and resources. In this context, resilience is called for in spades. It is "a quality that enables teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching and teaching practices despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks" (Brunetti 2006, p.193).

Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory examines the links between emotions and resilience (Fredrickson 1998, 2001). The theory outlines how positive emotions, broaden one's thought-action to enable more positive responses in difficult situations, whereas negative emotions narrow one's though-action options and provoke more negative reactions (Tugade and Fredrickson 2004). Salovey *et al* (1999) described psychologically resilient people as emotionally intelligent. This is hardly surprising in the context of those with emotional intelligence being equipped to control and manage emotions and to maximise positive emotions and minimise negative ones.

Block and Block (1980) alluded specifically to those with ego resilience as having high levels of adaptability in the context of stress and change and as being resourceful, flexible and having a range of problem-solving strategies to draw on. Those who have such positive attributes make good colleagues and good leaders. Whereas they acknowledge the clouds, they generally manage to see a silver lining. They are more positive than negative in their attitude and behaviour, and they do not create an atmosphere where one has to tip-toe around them for fear of being misinterpreted or reacted to negatively.

On the contrary, those with what Block and Block (1980) labelled as "ego brittleness" lack flexibility, and have a difficulty recouping after a challenging experience. It is very frustrating working with a leader or a colleague who determinately holds on to the residue of a difficult or disappointing issue, allowing it to adversely affect their behaviours and their relationships with others. Ego resilience and ego brittleness are considered to be personality characteristics, and therefore less likely to alter or change significantly. However, the manifestations of ego resilience, as outlined above, can be developed, particularly in those actively seeking to become more resilient.

Arguably, the first and most important step in building resilience is a realisation that it involves a set of skills that can be acquired and developed. Individuals also need to have a strong belief in their ability to influence the outcome and effects of challenging situations. Seligman, has carried out extensive research, and written widely on the development of resilience. He has focused particularly on the explanatory style, which refers to the learned and habitual way that people interpret the difficult and challenging things that happen to them. Resilience is helped or hindered depending on whether interpretations are positive or negative. Lifelong habits of negatively interpreting events and situations renders it difficult, but not impossible, to alter and change our automatic convictions and conclusions.

Stressful and difficult situations are frequently interpreted from the perspectives of personalisation, permanence and pervasiveness (Seligman 2004). When we personalise or internalise a challenge or a problem, we see ourselves as being the cause of it, and we apportion blame to ourselves. When we attach permanence to our interpretation of a problem, we see it, or its effects, as lasting indefinitely. When we interpret a problem in terms of its pervasiveness, we see the worse possible consequences of it, and of its effects. Bonanno (2004) proposed that we make ourselves more or less vulnerable or susceptible to stress, depending on how we think about the things that happen to us.

That is not to suggest that we can always prevent ourselves for being negatively affected by upsetting or challenging encounters. What it does suggest is that those with resilience have the ability to regain their equilibrium, and return to healthy functioning after such encounters (Bonanno 2004). Examining our own explanatory style is an important first step in maximising the positive interpretations and minimising the negative ones, and, in the process, increasing personal resilience.

Unfortunately, there are those who perpetually interpret events negatively. They develop what Seligman (1975) called learned helplessness. Consequently, they feel that they have no control over what happens to them, have no confidence in their ability to undertake certain tasks, and are very intimidated and powerless in terms of undertaking new challenges. Learned helplessness is self-perpetuating and seriously impacts on a person's resilience in overcoming obstacles.

In school terms, the imposition of challenging changes can lead to learned helplessness where staff feel overwhelmed and disempowered in terms of complying with the expected changes. The effective management of change by school leaders, which includes adequate and open communication, meaningful consultation, and ongoing support, can empower and facilitate the change process and prevent staff members from developing a sense of helplessness and powerlessness.

School leaders, can also develop a degree of learned helplessness when the demands on them, from both internal and external sources, exceed their perceived ability to comply and cope. Many school principals accept as inevitable the levels of isolation and aloofness that are attached to their role. In that context, they may be denied the support that they need to withstand problems and challenges. The importance of having a support network inside and outside the school cannot be overstated, particularly when school leaders feel stressed and overstretched. Their resilience in the face of adversity, however, is contingent on support, which, when school

based, is facilitated by a leader building positive relationship with their staff. Relationships are alluded to, not merely as being an important and necessary prerequisite for resilience, but as being at the very core of it. Jordan (2006) alluded to the engagement in mutually empathic and responsive relationships as a source of resilience.

Despite some opinions to the contrary, teaching is widely considered to be one of the most challenging and stressful jobs. Resilience, in that context, is essential for staff, to enable them to maintain high standards of commitment and enthusiasm. The consistency of the support provided to them, and the quality of their relationships with others helps to keep them going, especially when the going gets tough.

According to the work of Benard (1995), high quality relationships, among and between teachers and students, serve to create a caring ethos in the school that helps to build the resilience of all who work and study there. Benard (1995) further opined, that we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience. However, Bluestein (2001) rightly asserted that resiliency does not happen in a vacuum and that children in particular, need protective factors or processes to help them to build their resilience. A considerable body of research in a number of disciplines would suggest, that these protective influences emanate primarily from caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Benard 1995). In the school context, children who have the support of a caring teacher, who focuses on their strengths and assets rather than on their shortcomings, have a distinct advantage in terms of improving their resilience. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all children get the care and support needed to build and sustain their resilience. The importance of talking to, and not at, children cannot be overstated in this regard (Noddings 1993). It is naive and perhaps irresponsible for schools to presume that children will automatically bounce back from setbacks. Bluestein (2001) acknowledged that of course some will, but the ability to do so is contingent on the volume and levels of challenges that they face, and on the mitigating protective processes available to them.

When school leaders understand the importance of a positive school environment, and do everything possible to create and maintain such an environment, they provide the context that is most conducive to building and sustaining the resilience of the staff and the students.

Self-efficacy (Confidence) as a positive mind-set

Self-efficacy and confidence are strong indicators of the positive disposition of school staff, and are particularly relevant to educational workplaces. Much is written about the self-efficacy of teachers and its impact on student achievement, classroom management, and relationships in the school. The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Bandura and it refers to the self-belief and self confidence that a person possesses in relation to their ability and capacity to perform effectively, and achieve desired and expected goals (Bandura 1997). Teacher self-efficacy is the belief and confidence that teachers have in relation to their effectiveness as educators. They are confident that they can influence the achievements of all students even those who are considered difficult and unmotivated (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

Self-efficacy is important because, as Bandura (1986) stated, “people regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have” (p.129). In teaching terms, when teachers feel that students will engage in class and be motivated to persevere with difficult tasks as a result of their efforts, then their commitment will be consistent and high.

Confident and efficacious teachers are known to positively impact on the learning experiences of students. They are innovative and use a variety of teaching methods and approaches in order to cater for the various learning styles of their students. Despite the high volume of educational research that extols the merits and necessity of teachers employing a number of teaching methods, there are some, who remain wedded to the ‘talk and chalk’ method. This traditional method, which is formal and teacher-centered, involves students sitting quietly, paying attention and listening. Minimal opportunities are afforded to students to interact with the teacher. This teaching style suits only a small number of learners and the remainder, to varying degrees, are disengaged, bored and frustrated. The attitude, that the ‘talk and chalk’ approach reflects, is one of ‘take it or leave it’.

The introduction of new pedagogies has contributed to making teaching and learning experiences more interesting and fulfilling. For example, Ross (1994) made the link between increased teacher efficacy and the introduction of cooperative learning. The widespread recognition of co-operative learning as a ‘best practice’ approach has encouraged teachers to use it. “Co-operative learning is the instructional use of small groups, so that students work together to maximise their own and each other’s’ learning” (Johnson and Johnson 1999, p.

5). Co-operative learning is more complex than merely assigning students to group work. It involves five essential components, which include positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. “Students work together to accomplish shared learning goals” (Johnson and Johnson 1999, p.1).

A teacher’s decision to embrace a new teaching strategy is usually based on how effective they believe the strategy will be, and how successful they believe they will be, in implementing it (Kirik and Markic 2012). The academic and social advancements associated with co-operative learning are well documented, and can be realised relatively quickly among students engaged in the practice. Consequently, teachers’ expectations in relation to their own continuing success in implementing co-operative learning, are likely to be positive, contributing to their overall sense of efficacy.

Some teachers need persuading to change their teaching methods. However, since the introduction of appropriate professional development opportunities, most of them have come around. Using innovative teaching methods and observing the benefits of them, result in a rise in teachers’ confidence and self-belief and a significant increase in student participation and learning.

Efficacious teachers persist with students who are struggling, and criticise them less when they provide incorrect answers (Gibson and Dembo 1984). They set attainable goals, and willingly provide special assistance to students who require it. In general, they feel confident not only about their instruction but also about their relationships with the students. Consequently, their students have higher levels of achievement and teachers have fewer behavioural problems with them. Tschannen-Moran and Woolford Hoy (2001) alluded to the enthusiasm and commitment of teachers with high self-efficacy and also suggested that they are more likely to remain in the teaching profession.

Self-efficacy presumes a certain level of self-belief that comes from childhood. It also presumes a certain level of knowledge and skills which, when built on, impacts positively on a person’s confidence at work. Bandura (1997) cited four sources of self-efficacy as mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological cues. Mastery experience is gained through a person’s accomplishments and successes, which in the aggregate boost self-belief and confidence. The more successes a person has the more confident he/she becomes. Bandura (1997), suggested that “success builds a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy” (p.80). Vicarious experience is gained through watching others perform well and achieve goals. Observing the effectiveness and success of others can increase a person’s belief that she/he can be successful also. Verbal persuasion is the encouragement and support that is needed to affirm a person’s confidence and belief in their ability. Physiological cues are the physical signals that one experiences prior to undertaking a task. These signals can enhance or diminish self-belief. Feeling energetic, for example, can instil in a person a belief that success is likely. Whereas, feelings of nervousness or anxiety, can contribute to a belief that success is unlikely. Paying attention to the signs of anxiety, for example, can help to alleviate it and improve self-belief.

In relation to the four stated sources of efficacy, school leaders can reinforce the self-efficacy and confidence of their staff by consistently:

- acknowledging their achievements
- encouraging collegiality among staff and providing mentoring to new staff
- providing constructive feedback to staff
- offering assistance and support to those who are stressed or anxious.

Leaders will be unlikely to consistently engage in these types of behaviours unless they have a high degree of self-belief and self-confidence themselves. Self-confidence is an essential element of leader effectiveness. Confident leaders generally encourage their staff to take initiatives by facilitating their autonomy. If, as Bennis and Nanus (1997) stated, “autonomy is the sine qua non of creativity” (p.214), then micro management is the antithesis of it. “Leaders of great groups, trade the illusions of control, that micromanagement gives, for the higher satisfaction of orchestrating extraordinary achievement” (Bennis and Nanus 1997, p.214). A lofty aspiration one might think, but possible to realise, under the stewardship of leaders who are confident enough to surround themselves with excellent people and facilitate them in reaching their potential. Extending autonomy to teachers is conditional on school leaders’ confidence and trust in the professional judgement of teachers (Blasé and Blasé 1998). Mc Gregor’s famous theory Y (Mc Gregor 1960), is one on which many other theories

and philosophies of successful and effective leadership are based. It has as its central plank the necessity for leaders to:

- outline expectations for those who work with them
- provide clarity and support in relation to what needs to be done and
- have the self-restraint and confidence to let people get on with it.

Genuine confidence helps the leader to realise that the effectiveness of their leadership is only realised when those around them are free to do exceptional work (Bennis and Nanus1997).

Confidence is a realistic view of one's abilities that is backed up by skills and competence. Those who have genuine confidence are secure in their self-belief and are not threatened by the confidence or competence of others. They do not feel the need to let everyone know about their abilities and achievements and readily admit to mistakes and to not understanding something.

In general, self-efficacy and confidence at work are positively related to engagement and persistence with the task, positive relationships with others and high levels of energy and enthusiasm. According to Watson (1991), there is a popular misconception that equates enthusiasm with "peppy exuberance "(p.203). He suggested that there is more to it than "superficial effusiveness" (p.203) which might appear glib and shallow, and that enthusiasm comes, with sustained actions and hard work. Teachers with self-confidence are enthusiastic and persistent because they believe that they are competent and can do the job well. They are also generous, and more than willing to share their knowledge and experience with others. Supporting and helping others can be a great source of pleasure and is also a natural motivator (Deal and Key 1998).

In positive schools with positive leadership, confidence grows and staff are eager to learn new and innovative ways of doing things. They are rooting in the bags of enthusiastic, newly qualified teachers for novel and creative ideas and methodologies. A public endorsement, by a school leader, of the enthusiasm expressed by the new teacher, will help to harness and sustain it. It can also minimise the adverse effects of the occasional dismissive and negative comment, and hopefully help enthusiasm to become contagious. Self-efficacy and self-confidence are genuine reflections of abilities and competencies which, when appreciated and valued, grow and improve. However, when they are disregarded and dismissed, they can be eroded and diminished.

The efficacy and confidence of a school's staff provide a positive psychological resource to a school. When combined with hope, optimism and resilience, the resource is enhanced and multiplied. School leaders who maximise this resource, unleash high levels of positivity. Their own role becomes more manageable and enjoyable and this impacts positively on their stress levels and general wellbeing. Appreciating the power of positivity and the value of having people on the staff who are positive in their attitude and approaches, is a necessary prerequisite for school leaders in maximising the psychological capital in their schools.

Note:

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