

Managing Bad Teachers: The Hows and the Whys

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Abstract

C.B. Peterson Elementary School is identified as an at-risk school, as per the North West District School Board's (NWDSB) criteria. In light of rising diversity issues, the school board has released an Equity and Inclusion Policy, which is a top priority to C.B. Peterson's administration team. This new policy adds to the work intensification faced by these administrators. This case describes the candid discussions between the administration team during their first private meeting to make staffing decisions that reflect the Equity and Inclusion Policy for the upcoming school year. However, staffing a more socially just school, that is in compliance with the NWDSB's new priorities, will add hours to administrators' workload. Tensions arise when conversations about *how* to staff for a socially just school lead to disagreements. Discussions include where to strategically place effective, ineffective, and altogether bad teaching staff in order to have the greatest and least impact on students, respectively. Teaching activities in this case study focus on strategies for dealing with teachers who refuse to adapt their practice to current policies/initiatives as well as strategies for conflict management.

Keywords: challenging teachers, union, leadership, educational administration

C.B. Peterson Elementary School

C. B. Peterson is a medium sized-elementary school in Ontario, hosting 600 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. The school is located in an urban center and is extremely diverse along the lines of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion. There is a teaching staff of 30 who, unfortunately, do not reflect the diversity of students. In terms of age and experience, teachers vary from young and inexperienced teachers to older, veteran teachers who are still teaching despite their eligibility regarding retirement. Janet Smith, a first-year principal, and Becca Elliott, the vice principal, who has been at C.B. Peterson for the past two years, agree that age and experience of teaching staff does not always align with one's competence as a classroom teacher, nor their propensity for social justice. Though Janet and Becca agree that many of the equity-minded teachers are quite new, the administration team does not agree on all fronts regarding how to best utilize socially just, equity-minded teachers. Efforts to run a socially just, equity-minded school *and* get along with one another and teaching staff, *while* attempting to meet additional competing demands of administrators, all add to the workplace intensification already experienced by both Janet and Becca.

Case Narrative

This school year, Janet and Becca have put several social justice initiatives in place and have struggled to understand the reaction of one of the most senior teachers at C. B. Peterson, Mrs. Lazyrithe. The administration team began by putting forth one initiative whereby *at-risk* students have the opportunity to become leaders in the school. The purpose of this initiative is to provide *at-risk* students with a sense of purpose

and belonging. When the two proposed this idea at the September staff meeting, Mrs. Lazyrithe outwardly disagreed, claiming that this initiative would be rewarding negative behaviour and not preparing students for reality. Despite the persistent protests of Mrs. Lazyrithe, most teachers saw this initiative as an opportunity to engage a hard-to-reach population in the school and expressed their support. With the majority of staff on board, Janet and Becca implemented the initiative.

Teachers tapped several *at-risk* students on the shoulder and asked them to take on various responsibilities within the school. The tasks included reading announcements, being hall monitors, and helping to plan and lead assemblies. One of these candidates was a Grade 5 student in Mrs. Lazyrithe's class. This student expressed interest in reading announcements twice a week. Janet was pleasantly surprised when this student's parent called Janet to thank her and express their excitement to be potentially turning a new leaf with their son. The first day this student was to read the announcements he did not show up. This absence caused a minor disruption in the day, as the busy secretary, Ms. Joy, was pulled from her duties to read the announcements. Becca approached the boy during recess to find out what happened, and the boy indicated that his teacher, Mrs. Lazyrithe, would not let him leave class, because he had not done his homework the night before. Becca thanked the boy and sent him on his way before growing hot in the face with frustration.

"But it's the very fact that this young man had not done his homework that shows how disengaged and disconnected from the school he is—which is exactly why we need to try other ways of reaching him," Becca later explained behind closed doors to Janet. Janet was in full agreement. Becca noted that the former principal had had difficulties in getting Elizabeth Lazyrithe to incorporate Differentiated Learning in her classroom the previous year as well.

"She doesn't like change," Becca explained. After venting to one another for quite some time about their frustrations with teachers who will not change, the two decided it was best that Becca speak to Elizabeth about this issue, as Becca had a longer relationship with her. When Becca did so, Elizabeth brushed her off and told Becca she would reconsider letting the boy read the announcements next time if he "pulled his socks up." Not wanting to get into a conflict, Becca headed straight to Janet's office to describe the conversation.

"What should we do?" Becca asked.

"What *can* we do?" Janet replied, referring to the strong union which protected teachers. "She doesn't actually have to go along with this initiative. We cannot demand this of her. I think the best we can do is to ask her to please allow him to leave next time and hope for the best." After this request, they sat back and hoped for the best. By the end of October, it had become clear that Mrs. Lazyrithe had no intention of ever letting this boy become a leader in their school. In fact, although she sent him to the principal's office at least twice daily to be dealt with, for one reason or another, Mrs. Lazyrithe only sporadically let the young man make the announcements. This behaviour was frustrating, but what was more frustrating was when the administration team would do *drop-ins* in Mrs. Lazyrithe's classroom. Often, Mrs. Lazyrithe would be knitting or reading her novel at her desk while students silently worked on handouts that were, apparently, still in use from the early years of Mrs. Lazyrithe's career. Sometimes Mrs. Lazyrithe would be yelling at or berating students to be quiet and do their work. Mrs. Lazyrithe was unfazed by the drop in visits. Her lack of engagement in her job was evident, and she seemed unashamed. One day, Becca walked in on the young man attempting to read aloud to the class. The boy was an extremely weak reader and was having an incredibly difficult time with the task given to him. Mrs. Lazyrithe let him struggle awkwardly. Becca was simultaneously enraged and heartbroken for the boy. She knew the boy had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for some of his learning concerns, and Becca felt having him read aloud was exposing his vulnerabilities to the entire class. Mrs. Lazyrithe later informed Becca the young man had been talking while someone else in the class read aloud, and, therefore, she gave him the task to read aloud to keep him from constantly talking in class. Experiences such as this one occurred all year.

Becca and Janet had many discussions over the course of the school year regarding how to best manage Mrs. Lazyrithe's negative attitude towards their social justice efforts, though the two could not agree on a plan of action. Becca's stress, regarding this conflict of opinions, and their inability to get this teacher to change, was beginning to negatively affect her formerly positive attitude at school. Through their brainstorming discussions over the year, in regards to how to deal with Mrs. Lazyrithe, the administration team had discovered that Mrs. Lazyrithe's Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) was upcoming the following year. By June, when Becca and Janet sat down privately to address staffing concerns for the school, they

knew they would need to be cautious regarding where they placed Mrs. Lazyrithe.

“Let’s begin with our areas of greatest need and place our strongest teachers there,” Janet began.

“*I disagree*. I think pairing strong teachers with weaker teachers in grade teams might help the weaker teachers improve their pedagogy,” Becca offered.

“Interesting idea. Unfortunately, we have EQAO scores to consider as well. We *have* to staff those grades with the best teachers,” Janet countered.

“*But* it’s equally important that we staff the grades leading up to Grades 3 and 6 with good teachers, and since we only have so many good teachers, I think we will need to split them up and place at least one strong teacher per grade. I think that’s only fair to the students. I’d hate for all Grade 1s to end up with weaker teachers. We’d see the effect of that on EQAO scores in two years anyway,” Becca observed.

“We also have to consider teacher personalities. You know Alice won’t work with Lindsey. And Brett and Sandra would be too distracted working together to do a good job,” Janet stated, referring to a past romantic history within the staff.

“That’s true. This is going to be tough. We also need to make sure we satisfy 80% of teacher’s requests, as per their contract. Let’s make a list,” Becca suggested and opened up her notebook. The administration team only managed to get two of their teachers assigned to grades before they came across Elizabeth Lazyrithe’s name.

“Where do we put her?” Becca asked, perplexed.

“Let’s take the bullet. Let’s put her in Grade 3 and take her to task. The school community’s eyes will be on her and what she’s doing to prepare kids. She’ll *have* to... *pull up her socks*,” Janet said with a giggle. Becca smiled.

“But has she ever taught Grade 3? She’s been in Grade 5 for most of her career. Think about the kids. It’s unlikely she’ll change her practice and then those kids will flounder. That isn’t fair,” Becca replied.

“If we don’t deal with her weak teaching now, more kids will suffer in the future. That, to me, is more unfair than one Grade 3 class taking the hit one time. Hey, maybe she’ll be so thrown by the change that she’ll retire early?” Janet suggested.

“How many more years does she have?” Becca asked, hopefully.

“Three,” Janet replied.

“I doubt it then. She has a daughter in university. But that would be ideal,” Becca added.

The two agreed that the best case scenario would be to not have to deal with Elizabeth Lazyrithe at all. However, they clearly disagreed on how to staff the school to ensure the most equitable environment for the most kids. Ultimately, as principal, Janet got to make the decision. Becca knew this, however, felt it crucial that her perspective be considered.

There was a knock at the door. “We have a parent here to see you,” Ms. Joy announced as the door opened.

“Let’s return to this tomorrow,” Janet told Becca.

“Sure,” Becca responded, defeated.

Teaching Notes

Professors in educational administration, educational leadership, social justice and policy, as well as instructors of Principal Qualification Program courses and Professional Development training can use this case study to discuss how to work within teacher contracts to hold teachers accountable. In addition, students can use this case study to discuss and deconstruct the challenges and complexities at play when professional conflicts arise. Two challenges arise from this case study that are particularly current and relevant to educational administrators: (1) challenges dealing with ineffective, and/or bad teachers (given teachers’ strong contract and union standings), and (2) challenges of managing professional conflict in the workplace and the personal toll this may take on administrators. The relevance of focusing on each of these challenges is provided below, as well as an explanation behind why activities have been designed the way they have been. Notes to guide instructors through the activities are provided, and additional readings are suggested. By having strategies ready when these issues arise, administrators are saving themselves stress and time amidst their ever-increasing job responsibilities.

Activity 1: Challenges of dealing with ineffective and/or bad teachers

Relevance of this challenge. Along with many other competing demands of the profession, principals are responsible for ensuring teachers adapt their practice to adhere to numerous policies and initiatives (Leithwood, Azah, Harris, Slater, & Jantzi, 2014; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014; Pollock and Hauseman, 2015). Yet, teachers, particularly many veteran teachers, are often resistant to change (Snyder, 2017). To further complicate matters, permanent teachers enjoy tremendous job security as they are protected by very strong unions. Teachers' jobs do not rely on their ability to adapt their practice, minimizing some teachers' motivation to do so. Trying to get teachers to adapt their practice while working within the confines of very strict teacher contracts, further adds complexity to principals' jobs today.

Purpose of activity. Research shows that principal leadership has the second greatest impact on student learning—second only to teaching (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Since “empirical evidence . . . suggests that raising teacher quality may be a key instrument in improving student outcomes” (Rockoff, 2010, p. 251), and improving student achievement is at the forefront of a principal's responsibilities (Leithwood et al., 2004), it is crucial that principals are prepared to handle teachers who, for various reasons, are not adapting their practice.

Instructor guidelines. Have students read the case study at home and ask them to independently develop an action plan for dealing with Mrs. Lazyrithe. Instructors may provide the following questions to get discussions started:

- What are the main issues to be addressed with Mrs. Lazyrithe?
- What consequences must be considered in predicting potential outcomes of various action plans?
- *How* do we decide what is best for student learning?

Then, encourage students to share this case study with a principal in their local school board(s). Ask participants to interview those principals with regards to how a principal would handle the situation—given ministry and board policy and procedures principals must follow, especially those pertaining to teacher contracts. Students can share their findings in group discussion in the following class. How similar were their action plans to the action plan of the principal on their board? Were there any surprising details in the teacher contracts? Were their minds changed by their discussion with the principal on their board?

Suggested additional reading:

Mendelsen, R. (2009). *Why it's so hard to fire bad teachers*. Retrieved September 17, 2018 from <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/why-its-so-hard-to-fire-bad-teachers/>

Activity 2: Strategies for managing professional conflict in the workplace.

Relevance of this challenge. The nature of educational administrative work is changing for several reasons (Pollock, Hauseman & Briscoe, 2013; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Pollock, 2016; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017). The rise in administrative responsibilities runs parallel to a rise of mental health issues among administrators (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Pollock, 2016; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017). Although there is an expectation that administrators will pay closer attention to mental health and the well-being of students and teachers (Pollock, Hauseman & Briscoe, 2013; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Pollock, 2016), there is a need for an increased focus on administrator mental health and well-being (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017). Putting strategies in place to protect one's own mental health and well-being falls mainly to the administrators themselves. One of the greatest sources of stress for educational leaders is managing professional conflict in the workplace (Henkin, Cisdone & Dee, 2000). Since conflict in the workplace is inevitable, and a great source of stress to administrators, it is important that future administrators have strategies in place for managing stress—such as conflict—in the workplace. Strategies for managing stress will help protect administrators' mental health.

Purpose of the activity. Several top-level educational leaders note that understanding their own *why* enables them to manage conflict and to make difficult decisions with more confidence (Higginbottom, 2018). Understanding one's *why* gives one a filter through which to make choices (Sinek, 2009). Therefore, to prepare administrators, and future administrators, to manage conflicts, it is useful for them to determine their *why*.

Instructor guidelines. Students will independently complete the Golden Circle below (Sinek, 2009) from the outside inwards, outlining *what* they do, *how* they do it, and *why* they do it.

If students struggle with the why section (for example, if they claim they are a principal because that is their job, and they work for money to support their family), instructors will remind students that the why aims to understand what in one's job motivates them and inspires them. Here, a principal's why might include elements of making the world a fairer place by ensuring all students' needs are met. Instructors may provide the following questions to get discussions started:

- Why does education exist?
- Why do you get out of bed every morning to go to work?
- Why should anyone care about your work?

Once students have found their why, they can share their findings to the class. From there, it is important to have a discussion about whether or not their why would impact the way they approached the conflict in this case study. For example, would their why have been better satisfied by “taking the teacher to task” or by pairing her with an effective teacher? Might sharing one's why have helped the other person understand another's perspective?

Suggested additional reading:

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York, NY: Portfolio.

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