

CAPSTONE PAPER: School Leadership for 21st Century Relevance

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The world of teaching is ever-evolving and shifting as society transforms and grows towards new understandings. Therefore, school leaders must follow suit. The role presented to all those who lead within education is first and foremost to become reflective and humble practitioners. As Barth (2001) states, “We cannot take others where we are not willing to go ourselves” (p. 27). As a result, connecting and communicating to those who follow effectively requires leaders to become the people they are asking others to be. One must inspire and guide others towards positive and transformative change, but one must first reflect and open themselves to their own transformation. It is then that the work begins of nurturing and leading others to grow and develop in reflective and transformative practice. This work is complex and exacerating, but if established, it creates a community of learners, who are beautifully and honestly led towards becoming lifelong learners; who will transform the world and communities they grow in towards creativity and truth.

Effective school leadership requires an openness to personal reflection and humility. According to Barth (2001), “Teachers and students go hand in hand as learners, or they don’t go at all” (p. 23). If a leader is unwilling to see themselves as a teacher, student, and learner, the work will go no further. Barth (2001) goes on to say, “Learning is a humbling act! Pride keeps me from admitting when I need help; when I see others doing something great or profound, it keeps me from rejoicing with them and being thankful for their gifts” (p. 23). If a school is to become a learning community, there must be a humbling of self, requiring constant self-reflection. As a school leader, one should always encourage their staff to grow and mature in their practice. Staff growth and development may look like peer collaboration, professional development, or seeing something in them and encouraging them towards expanding their experiences. As an effective leader, one should keep a growth mindset and inspire those in their care to do the same. “True leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to” (Collins, 2011, p. 13), and this freedom comes when teachers feel their voice is valued and they are considered

instructional specialists. A school leader needs to be present, seen, and available to staff, students, and families. There needs to be mutual respect. This respect and trust are built through helpful feedback and resources, words of encouragement, support, and consistency. Integrity and dignity create an environment of excellence that provides a base for one's leadership. School staff, students, and others in the community will not always remember the provided pedagogical suggestions or resources. Still, they will never forget how they are treated and receive communication. We begin to shift school culture and communication in this reflection and humility.

According to McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston (2008), "if culture is to change, the first thing that must be addressed is how people lead" (p. 12). It begins and ends with leadership. "The key to great leaders is self-reflection, commitment to leadership, commitment to a culture of change and embracing personal power" (McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston, 2008, p. 17). To be a self-reflective leader, committed to change, and embracing personal power is a cocktail for transformation. The humility to reflect and acknowledge that change is necessary begins by recognizing that it is not one person's job to create community. We need each community member to get to where we need to go. Yet, the school leader must recognize they have the power to encourage and inspire such change. Without their leadership, a community can only go so far. This lack of progression is seen most starkly in cultural transformation. "Beliefs and unconscious biases determine actions and practices...our actions and practices inform how our systems develop...and our systems reinforce the beliefs that shape them, effectively constraining any effects at change" (Berg, 2018, p. 85). School districts in recent days have been attempting to train their leadership in culturally responsive practices. The hope is to challenge bias systems throughout schools and communities. But often, there is little acknowledgment that this process is deeply personal. All people have biases within their beliefs, which affect the systems they develop and the ways they enact or fail to enact change. If one is willing to do this reflective work they are ready to invite others into the process. In Khalifa's (2018) work, *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, he establishes a starting point for

school leaders as they begin this reflective process:

1. Identify and understand the oppressive contexts that students and their communities face.
2. Identify and vocalize one's background and privilege, understand how they are directly involved or complicit in oppressive contexts.
3. Push colleagues and staff to critically self-reflect upon their personal and professional role in oppression and anti-oppressive works and to eventually develop responsive school structures (p. 61).

To first know one's community in which they are serving and recognize and then reflect on how one enters that space as a school leader. What biases are brought and how one contributes to the oppressive context is key to caring and guiding those entering shared learning spaces. As personal reflection continues, the difficulty becomes how one draws others into such consideration? Those who may be resistant to change, culturally responsive teaching, and reflective practice? Where do we start? How do we get people to begin to question and consider? School leaders and those on their team may develop affinity groups, book clubs, and culturally responsive professional development, but this is such a vulnerable and sensitive space, team building and continued commitment to community building must be at the forefront of such change. Berg (2018) asks a guiding question, willing considering how to enter this work, "Under what conditions would educators, who have significant investments in current beliefs, practices, and systems agree to reconsider them" (p. 84)? Then as a school leader, it becomes one's job to challenge preexisting conditions that need changing and building together, the conditions that allow for cultural transformation. Much of this is determined by the trust created and how school leaders choose to communicate, on all levels and about all things, whether personal biases, student assessment, instructional feedback; it all must be done with a growth mindset. No one is beyond change, and everyone wants to be seen and known. It is here that we begin.

So much is communicated with our bodies, context, and how we present ourselves. Often a

word barely has to be uttered to tell someone exactly how one feels. McCaskey (1998) observes that “Images, setting, and body language are not just adjuncts to communication. They carry the messages; and indeed, in some cases, they *are* the messages” (p. 120). This physical communication reminds school leaders that as they walk around the building and speak to others, they constantly communicate as they position themselves in a classroom. How they set themselves, the look they give, and a gesture makes, tell others if they are cared for or seen, valued and supported. These nonverbal interpersonal communications must be considered as leadership traverses through the school community. It most definitely must be considered when engaging in feedback.

“Feedback is fraught and complex because human relationships are fraught and complex” (Stone & David-Lang, 2017, p. 48). Building a community that is open to reflective practice will recognize that a school is built on relationships. If these relationships fail to develop, it is nearly impossible to give feedback in any area of practice, whether about personal biases, instructional observations, or anything requiring reflective practice. It takes both parties to enter into a constructive discourse about practice, and both need to be willing and humble moving forward. According to Stone and David-Lang (2017), “Being good at receiving feedback doesn’t necessarily mean agreeing with the feedback—rather, it means engaging in the conversation with an open mind and heart and then making a thoughtful choice about whether the feedback is useful” (p. 49). This is a personal process that requires relationship, trust, and face-to-face communication. It is pivotal while entering into effective communication that school leaders can continuously place themselves in the shoes of those they lead to enable empathy and compassion to rule the moment. “The more one can get curious, open one's ears, mind, and heart, and walk through the familiar terrain as a visitor, the more likely one will be able to emerge with new insights and revelations that can lead to more clearly defined problems and new solutions” (Silver & Cohen, 2018, p. 42). Because of this, one needs to organize a time to see people face-to-face and build those relationships. Teachers need to be seen, and if they are not, they will feel unsupported and alone.

Teachers who think this way will not be performing to their best ability or potential. Working as a team is key to having a healthy space for learners to learn and thrive. Communication is essential to working together and hearing all voices. This is key when providing and receiving feedback from leadership, but this is essential in allowing colleagues to collaborate and build relationships as they work towards a shared vision. “When a school expects and supports collegiality, and incorporates a scaled evaluation system devised by teachers in conjunction with administration, guided by professional development is born that benefits both the individual and the school” (Gaston, 2004, p. 158). There is a dance here that contributes to a harmonious learning environment. Still, a toxic space can be developed if there is a failure to incorporate collaboration with administration, colleagues, and saturation of professional development. “Without understanding and practice, expectations and follow-through, teachers experience fear and competition among themselves. The symptoms include a breakdown in school communication, an increase in competition among teachers, a lack of trust that one is valued and supported” (Gaston, 2004, p. 161). If these practices exist, then a school leader and their flock are positioned well to enter into personally, culturally, and instructional reflective spaces that will contribute to a transformative learning community for everyone it touches. This then becomes the foundation for school leaders and teachers to work side-by-side to construct and elevate classroom instruction.

All learners come to the learning environment with various experiences and literacies. These experiences and literacies need to be respected and given voice in all content areas, but it is a requirement in the Social Studies and Literacy Classrooms. The student’s voice develops the inquiry and the content, which builds the foundation for the study structure. Facilitating spaces that allow students to see that they have the researcher within; they can be the detective of their minds is an effective way to create lifelong learners. “Inquiry teaching requires students to take the lead in their learning by investigating a given problem or issue. Inquiry is beneficial in teaching students to gather and analyze data” (Zepeda & Mayes, 2014, p. 164). Here in this inquiry space, we see the love of learning swell. In

student choice of content, establishing their questions and thoughts around a particular study area is essential in developing people who love to learn. The importance of creating spaces for students not just to learn but to love and establish joy in a topic, subject, or area will transform a classroom towards unbelievable transformation. “The joyful learning process requires and builds on noncognitive skills as well as academic knowledge. Skills such as resilience, persistence, determination, and a willingness to problem-solve lay the foundation for joy in learning” (Erekson, 2014, p.86). It all builds to this creating a school community of learners who love to learn, are committed to personal and academic growth, and are critical thinkers. This is what school leaders should be building in themselves and those they lead and serve.

When observing and participating in the instruction and learning in Social Studies Classrooms, this love of knowledge can be richly encouraged by developing student abilities’ to inquire and question. Erekson (2014) gives some insight into the kinds of questions that will begin to produce the same skill in students:

- Why do people do what they do?
- Who makes the decisions?
- Who is in charge, and how did they get there?
- Who is following, and why?
- Who wants what, and what is the result of these desires?
- What changes as the years pass (p. 129)?

Here, modeling is “asking students to think like an expert, building their critical thinking skills and confidence as social studies learners” (Erekson, 2014, p. 506). This coupled with small group learning, will create an opportunity for students to take some risks and more easily be heard and hear the thoughts and ideas of others. This is also a way for differentiated learning to take hold. If a school leader sees the level of student development in their Social Studies classrooms, they are off to a brilliant start. Morrow, Gambrell, and Pressley say that “Teachers, through their use of quality interactions and their choice of comprehensive and community-supporting classroom practices, can create learning

communities that support students' social and academic development" (loc 649). This act of inquiry and small group work is thriving in this learning space. Students' literacies in the Social Studies space will contribute to their further learning as they engage in co-curricular activities.

The goal of a literacy teacher, to "create a positive classroom learning community providing a risk-free context in which students can engage in learning at their level of expertise and comfort. In this environment, students are willing to take on learning challenges and make mistakes—all necessary to continue learning and development" (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2018, loc 622). Students can bring all their literacies into the learning space in such an environment. They can express themselves and communicate ideas that they otherwise would shy away from discussing in the classroom community. This enables students to be honest about their struggles and difficulties. Sharing such thoughts can be challenging, especially if the student is not reading on grade level. For a practitioner to have a profound understanding of equitable practice will provide a positive learning environment. It is imperative for "the classroom teacher must be adept at identifying student needs through ongoing formative assessments and providing appropriate whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction"(Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2018, loc 659). The more assessment a teacher can collect to establish where a student is in greatest need of intervention and areas of greatest strength, the more effective individual instruction will be. It is vital to provide time and feedback to analyze such assessments effectively. Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley (2018) also offers four practices that invite students to be active and allow for formative assessments to be observed: "These include building relationships among community members, fostering a sense of collective responsibility, promoting ownership of literacy for all community members, and reflecting on the community's learning" (loc 752). Leadership should promote and observe such activities and provide professional development surrounding the creation of such environments in a literacy classroom. Here, teachers get the kind of transparency they need from students to help establish a context to learn and grow together. "In classrooms that nurture learning

communities, students are more likely to be reflective, engaged, willing to take risks, and thereby tackle increasingly more challenging tasks and texts (Watkins, 2005), all important portrayals of a “growth mindset” (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2018, loc 1180).

Owning one’s leadership and personal power in that space is imperative to the success of any school. Each school needs a leader. There is a need for a person willing to give a vision and inspiration when there is none - someone who will take the initiative and make difficult decisions. When leadership fails to be this for their people, toxicity will follow. Through being someone of humility, integrity others will want to listen and be led. Building a community that is open to change and being vulnerable about their weaknesses and strengths takes trust and time, but it starts with the one who wears the title leader. Culture, instruction, and school climate will shift as others feel the support and care of a leader who wants the best for the community. It is here where all the practices and beliefs meet.

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