



Leadership: “Walking the Talk”

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Educational leaders have an incredibly weighty task before them. They must inspire and cultivate a culture of learning in their communities among students, teachers and families. This involves building relationships and developing trust among all stakeholders. Trust is imperative in order for the leader to be the “head learner” or “leading learner” in their school (Barth, R. S., 2001, p.26). Being the lead learner involves many things: taking risks, making mistakes, practicing resiliency, and sharing this learning with one’s faculty. Furthermore, modeling being a learner is key in cultivating an environment that ensures students are engaged in challenging literacy and social studies learning. Barth states it best in *Learning by Heart*, “You can’t lead where you won’t go” (p.27).

In order for a leader to make the best decision about “where to go,” he/she needs to gather and analyze data. Some of this information should be data about how faculty perceives business is being done and how they are “doing” the business of the school. “If a planning team does not know how the school staff does business in reality, it could be creating plans and structures that might never be implemented or might not lead to the desired outcomes” (Bernhardt, V., 2004, p.979/5807, *Kindle*). In addition, it is important to know the attitudes and beliefs of faculty just as it is important to know the attitudes and beliefs of student learners in one’s classroom. Brody, Zimmerman and Moffett state that negative beliefs can cause learning to slow down or stop altogether (*ASCD.org*, Special Topic/ Pushing the Envelope in Supervision, 1995). Using data to get a good picture of what is happening in the school allows the leader to create solid strategic plans and structures to shape a school’s program (*NAIS.org*, Principles of Good Practice, 2012). When using data to create a plan, setting goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (S.M.A.R.T goals) are an important part of planning

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improvements to ensure students’ success (O’Neill, J., 2000, p. 49). Once an issue is defined, utilizing an in-depth inquiry process will help a leader to: define and refine a question, devise, implement and monitor a plan which will all ultimately lead to an increase in student success. The need for clear and concise communication is necessary to implement plans, to build trust with students, faculty and parents, and to facilitate professional development. Costa and Kallick remind us that “fuzzy language is a reflection of fuzzy thinking” (p.31).

Educators also need to be equipped with what best practices are in the areas of literacy and social studies through receiving regular professional development. Teachers need to be provided time to collaborate with colleagues, plan lessons, and then reflect individually and as a community. Evans states in *The Human Side of School Change* that, “All training should be coherent, personal, and continuous, but this is especially vital to improvements that ask educators not just to change their materials and teaching techniques but to change their basic beliefs and the way they conceptualize their work” (p.796/3861 *Kindle*). Just as a teacher would not send a student off to a performance based assessment without first teaching them how to do it, a leader should not send their teachers off to teach without giving them the best training possible.

In order to develop the abilities of others, and have faculty “continually engage in a renewal process,” there needs to be time for reflection (York-Barr, J., Sommers, W., Ghere, G., & Montie, J., 2006, p.4825/7237). It is especially important that reflection be built into this process and that the leader continually model reflection as a part of *their* learning process. Reflection allows for “the identification of discrepancies between beliefs and actions” (Arredondo, Body, Zimmerman, & Moffett, *ASCD.org*, Special Topic/ Pushing the Envelope in Supervision, 1995). This allows for learners to look closely at their beliefs and then change the

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quality of their work. In order to create a culture of change and also build trust, reflective writing and conversations will help develop these same qualities in his/her own faculty.

Curricular decisions regarding a successful literacy and social studies program need to fully utilize best practices; however, a leader needs to understand that “... decisions made about the adoption of programs, changes in practices, or the rejection of programs cannot be done quickly and without serious thought regarding practical, financial, social, or political consequences” (Daresh, 2007, p.283). Technology introduces many new instructional tools that have the potential to benefit teaching and learning, but it introduces a new pressure for leaders to respond quickly to the next, newest thing. The 21st century reality of technology and the speed in which information can be exchanged poses a new problem. It can be a challenge for leaders to take their time to make thoughtful decisions. This is another example of where reflection and shared decision-making with experienced faculty can be beneficial in making the best decisions in order to achieve high levels of student engagement and achievement. Asking for continual guidance and reflection from faculty and parents is important in order for leaders to help maintain a curriculum that is best for students across grade levels.

Choosing material that is “enduring, at the heart of the curriculum, needing uncoverage, and potentially engaging” are four criteria that will help guide leaders, or rather *lead learners*, in cultivating an environment that ensures students are engaged in challenging literacy and social studies learning (Wiggins, McTighe, 1998, p.23). I believe that these criteria can best be accomplished by utilizing a project-based learning approach. Project-based learning (PBL) is a pedagogy that evolves from the belief that students learn best by experiencing and solving real-world problems. PBL involves students being able to tackle real-world problems, having control

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or *voice and choice* in their own learning, teachers acting as facilitators of learning, and students working in collaboration on projects much of the time. Research also supports that when project-based learning is implemented correctly, students retain more information over a longer period of time, they perform better on standardized tests, they have better problem-solving and collaboration skills and they have a better attitude towards their learning (*Edutopia.org*, Project-based Learning Research Review, 2012). Project-based learning allows the real world to enter into the lives of children in school because subjects are not taught in isolation; rather they are authentically integrated as they are in real life. The more school mimics the real world, the more invested our learners become highly engaged in what they are learning (Rose, M., 1989, p. 212).

Curriculum that supports deep reading, writing and discussion time for students also supports high level literacy engagement across disciplines. Student voice and choice is not only important in an instructional method such as project-based learning, but it is also important in all teaching methods that support high levels of student learning. In *Learning from What Doesn't Work*, Ivey and Fisher state, “If we want our students to comprehend what they read, we must begin by letting them experience texts that make sense to them” (p.12). We need to know our learners—what they like, what they don't like, how they comprehend the world and their experience in it, in order to know how to best support them in their learning journey. Allowing students to have voice and choice in their learning provides student buy-in and engagement in the material. Additionally, it allows for respect and trust building between lead learner and co-learner (i.e. teacher and student) in the classroom.

Furthermore, teachers need to find real purposes for students to write and to be engaged with real audiences. Teachers should also create experiences for students to share their learning

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in a collaborative space with other students (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p.59, p.62). Leaders can model this for teachers and students by blogging. Blogging is a tool that allows for students to engage in authentic literacy experiences online. This online literacy experience “may require even greater amounts of higher-level thinking than offline reading” and writing because students are engaging in multiple literacies at the same time or at the very least, one right after another. These literacies can involve understanding the new language of various blog formats, critically reading to comprehend what is being written on the blog, providing the author with a comment in order to respond to the writing and finally, the ability to critically evaluate the source of the information (Gambrell, Morrow, 2015, p.7229/9775, *Kindle*). Schmoker states that, “Generous amounts of close, purposeful reading, writing, and talking, as underemphasized as they are in K-12 education, are the essence of authentic literacy. These simple activities are the foundation for a trained, powerful mind – and a promising future,” (Schmoker, M., 2006, p.52). Learners can engage in “close, purposeful reading and writing” through blogging. This medium also provides students the opportunity to have an authentic audience such as parents, students in their classroom or students from across the globe because it allows readers to respond to their writing immediately after it is published. Students are motivated to continue to edit and revise their writing like never before. Blogging also facilitates ongoing reflection because many times learners reflect on what they have learned inside and out of the classroom through writing a blog post about it. *Leaders* can model this by sharing their thoughts, ideas, and reflections in a blog. What learners read, write and talk about should be authentic and “should map to the purposes for which we as a society use literacy: to communicate, to learn, and to enjoy” (Morrow, Gambrell, 2011, p.1581/9775 *Kindle*).

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Authentic literacy experiences, whether it be through a project-based learning approach, blogging, or a more traditional method such as reading a book and then responding through writing a letter to the author, all “...foster a set of essential, intellectual ‘habits of mind,’ as Meir and author Ted Sizer called them. These practices include the ability to: critically examine evidence in a text, see the world from multiple viewpoints, make connections and detect patterns, ideas and perspectives, imagine alternatives (What if? What else?), and understand residents (What difference does it make?)” (Schmoker, M., 2006, pp.55-56). These habits of mind are also important when considering social studies curricula. Social studies is a subject that educators can easily integrate a project-based learning approach which also incorporates authentic literacy and service learning opportunities. In order for learning to be engaging and relevant for students, educators should utilize the 21st Century Skills Map created by National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the advocacy group Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21). Skills on this particular map include: “Creativity & Innovation, Critical Thinking & Problem Solving, Communication, Collaboration, Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Information & Communication Technologies Literacy, Flexibility & Adaptability, Initiative & Self-Direction, Social & Cross-Cultural Skills, Productivity & Accountability, and Leadership & Responsibility” (*Districtadministration.com*, Schachter, 2009). These skills can be easily integrated into project-based and service learning opportunities as well. Focusing on these skills will allow students to relate more to the curriculum and thus be more engaged with their own learning because their learning will be *real*. Again, learning should be current, relevant and either mimic or actively engage students with real world problems. The 21st Century Skills Map provides a basic map of what to do and how to do it.

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Furthermore, leaders need to work on building a democratic community where we have an “environment in which everyone has the chance to openly express his or her thoughts and feelings, in which these are received without argument or judgment, and in which this process is continued until larger understandings are achieved” (Burrello, Hoffman, & Murray, 2005, pp. 88-89). Leaders can model learning environments for faculty in order to set the tone and the expectation for teachers to create these environments for their own students. Teachers should be free to have open discussions and dialogue in a community setting such as a faculty meeting to voice their ideas and concerns. It is important for leaders to try and model their beliefs in helping to create a healthy culture of learners in his/her school. Teachers need to allow students the space to have discussions, to deliberate, to debate, and to reflect communally. This will give students practice in what it means to be a citizen. Providing students opportunities to practice engaging in healthy discussions, where one is free to agree or disagree in a respectful way, conjointly builds their confidence to be actively engaged as citizens of their *own* communities.

Classrooms where students are involved in deep conversations with other students in their own classroom, as well as with students from around the globe, are practicing democratic values. Students need to be “... prepared for citizenship, which means being informed, responsible, and engaged members of society” (*Districtadministration.com*, Hermeling, Social Studies On the Outside Looking In, 2013). This extends beyond our country’s borders and technology allows us the ability to connect and practice empathy, tolerance, and a deep respect for all humankind. We are all citizens of this earth and leaders need to model how to be a global citizen for all learners in their school. “Teaching students about the world is not a subject in itself, separate from other content areas, but should be an integral part of *all* subjects taught” (Stewart, 2007, p.39).

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Students need to be globally competent which means learning other languages, and being actively engaged as citizens. Classrooms that integrate discussions about current events throughout the curriculum and promote service learning projects that grow from students’ interests and learning foster experiences that allow for high student engagement (Stewart, 2007, p. 10). Leaders can create professional learning communities that include colleagues from around the world. Moreover, leaders can facilitate Skype or Google Hangout sessions with learners from other countries and invite their students and teachers to participate in the experience. Being a connected educator doesn’t stop at the teacher level, it needs to also continue, if not begin at the leadership level.

Leaders need to model their beliefs about teaching and learning for all learners in their schools. Teachers, students, and parents need to see the leader of a school as *lead learner*. Being a lead learner involves establishing trust which then leads to building healthy relationships. Taking risks and being: empathetic, curious, creative, collaborative, resilient, passionate and joyful, are all important characteristics a lead learner must embody in order for high levels of literacy, social studies, and all types of learning to occur in their school. Leaders must “walk the talk” to be the best leaders they can possibly be.

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