

Intense moral purpose

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Leadership in schools is about making a difference in the lives of all learners regardless of their family background, socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, or geographic location. School leadership involves increasing the learning of all students as well as closing any 'gap' between groups of students.

A quick glance at the PISA results shows that Canada is one of the top performing countries in terms of both quality and equity. There is more to this story, however. Despite some recent improvements, there is still a significant gap across Canada in the success of Aboriginal learners and increasingly there is concern about how newcomers from some parts of the world are faring in Canadian secondary schools. In the province of British Columbia, focused attention is beginning to be paid to the learning needs of children in care – a population that was virtually invisible, until a determined child advocate (Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, Representative for Children and Youth) began examining the performance evidence and identifying the discrepancies. Advocates for children would agree with Fullan (2003) who contends that these learners need school leaders who are:

Immersed in disciplined, informed professional inquiry and action that results in raising the bar and closing the gap by engaging all students in learning. There is no greater moral imperative than revamping the principal's role as part and parcel of changing the context within which teachers teach and students learn.

(p. 11)

Our strongest leaders are working hard to close any gaps in performance and are deeply concerned about the needs of their most vulnerable learners. They are persistent in their efforts to create more even learning 'playing fields' so that every young person can do well. Vulnerability, a term first used by Doug Willms (2003), implies that circumstances for individual learners can improve through learner and

educator effort, with school and community support.

School leaders with intense moral purpose for quality and equity, must be informed by an honest appraisal of how well the school is serving the needs of vulnerable learners.

Leaders look critically at the available evidence of learning, especially as it connects with underserved groups and learners from challenging circumstances. Ignoring some of the more 'brutal' realities for learners is not an option. Listening deeply to learners about their experiences with poverty, racism, homophobia or sexism not only builds respect and understanding, it also fuels the fire of moral purpose. Honestly confronting our areas of weakness and failure, as well as understanding and building on our current strengths, are essential.

Despite the rhetoric about caring about learner success, not all schools place the needs of their learners at the heart of their work. Sometimes through history, a lack of awareness or a lack of courage, schools and whole systems have developed cultures more attuned to the desires of the adults than the learning needs of the young people attending school. Changing cultures that have been developed for the convenience of the adults, rather than for the imperative of creating positive life chances for every learner, requires leaders with passion, intensity, persistence and ethical drive.

Ethical practice, passion and purpose

Robert Starratt (2004), after considering the nature of ethical leadership for many years across a range of settings, has concluded that ethical educators need to combine three key virtues – the virtues of responsibility, presence and authenticity. Starratt claims:

What differentiates exceptional educational leaders from their colleagues is the intensity and depth with which they exercise these virtues in their work.

Their role as educators necessarily involves their humanity as well as their role as citizens. The work of education is a deeply human work and it is intrinsically a work of citizenship as well. The authentic and responsible educator is one whose own authenticity is channelled and poured out in authentic relationships with learners, in authentic relationship to the activity of learning itself and in authentic relationship to the human, academic and civic curriculum that constitutes the joint work with student-learners.

(2004, p. 106)

The ethical qualities that Starratt describes are what make the work of school leadership simultaneously so challenging and so rewarding. Leaders face dilemmas every day in their pursuit of a higher quality and more equitable learning world. They balance the tensions between applying an ethic of care and an ethic of justice as they work with individual learners and the school community as a whole. They bring to life an ethic of critique as they engage in interactions with staff, learners and families, making sure that the vulnerable learners get fair treatment and that the needs and wants of more privileged learners do not automatically prevail.

The strongest leaders model a strong ethic of professionalism with an intense and practical focus on what is best for individual learners as well as what is best for the community of learners. Considering and understanding varied ethical perspectives demands leaders who have strong cognitive skills as well as a clear sense of personal values. A well-developed sense of personal identity can help school leaders when they are confronting difficult ethical decisions. The development of a strong school identity gives meaning and direction to the lives of faculty, learners and their families.

Developing a school identity

School leaders have long been exhorted to create a strong school vision or mission. We have seen too many schools spend an inordinate amount of time developing lofty mission statements and compelling vision statements that all too frequently have become not worth much more than the glossy paper on which they have been

written. The notion of school identity is more action-oriented and tangible.

James Spillane, Emily Benz and Elisa Mandel (2004) provide some useful perspectives on the role of the leader in creating strong and unique school identities. In *The Stories Schools Live By*, Spillane and his colleagues describe school identity as an internalized cognitive structure of what the school stands for and where it intends to go:

[I]dentity is especially relevant when it comes to an organization's capacity to learn and innovate. Scholars argue that while organizations can engage in minor changes to their existing routines without changing their identity, fundamental change in an organization's routines necessitates changes in organizational identity.

(2004, p. 4)

As schools move from a sorting orientation to deep learning for all, a fundamental change in the identity of the school is required. A relatively simple identity-oriented question for any school leader is to consider the entrance and interior organization of their school building. Is there consistency between what the school says it values and what can be seen in the school? Is the first impression given to learners, families and visitors entering the school one of an intense focus on learning? Are there displays of student learning connected with this focus and are at least some of the displays at the eye level of the learners? What does the allocation of learning spaces say about what the school values? Are new teachers relegated to the most unappealing spaces until they outlive or outlast teachers with the 'best' classrooms? Are learners with special needs in attractive learning spaces or are they hidden away in some dark corner of the building? Are display cases gathering dust with relics of a bygone era?

School identity, as we conceptualize it, is not focused primarily on choice or competition. It is about every school creating a positive distinctiveness that builds pride for learners and their communities. We expect all leaders to be able to talk with pride about the identity of their own school – and of all other schools in their district or community. Parents want to have confidence in their children's school and in the system as a whole. We have been influenced by the thinking of Darrell Bricker and Edward

Greenspon (2002), in their book *Searching for Certainty: Inside the New Canadian Mindset* as they claim that Canadians are much less interested in the ranking of schools than in knowing that every school is a good school.

It is our observation that schools that develop a strong learning identity regarding the growth of both the intellect and character of their learners also seem to have secured the confidence of their local community. We have seen a small rural school combine its skills in filmmaking and cross-country skiing to forge a unique identity and to generate considerable interest and support from residents and families in neighboring villages. At a middle school serving a large immigrant community, it has become a tradition for every student to research and prepare a multi-media presentation on a topic of special interest to their parents and accessible to them in their own language. Topics include requirements for a driving licence, understanding standing the tax system, obtaining health benefits, or preparing a CV. Schools that have made service learning a way of life as a result are positively changing the interactions between community members and adolescents. School leaders sometimes use their own passions and talents to create a stronger school identity. We admire the experienced principal who was able to take her own love of dance and music and create a robust performing arts identity in a remote community. Other urban school leaders have built on the strength of their technology resources to create innovative and responsive programmes that shape the school's identity. Many schools have embraced environmental education and healthy living and are strengthening their school's identity as a result.

Whether it is a focus on healthy living, technological innovation, the arts, science, the environment, oral story telling, service learning, or outdoor recreation – the possibilities are numerous and are limited only by the imagination of the school leader and the staff. Once a strong identity has been established, it also must be sustained until it truly becomes 'a way of life' that leads to changes in learning and in the experiences of the learners. Once the visible change in learning becomes part of a new school story, the new identity creates a sense of renewed purpose. Spillane and colleagues note in their paper:

School reformers often dwell on how new structures, routines and tools can enable schools to learn and change in order to

prove student achievement. We argue that while structures, routines and tools are critical, they are unlikely to be sufficient on their own; they need a compass, a sense of purpose. We suggest based on our analysis that organizational identity as embodied in the story that teachers and administrators tell about their school may serve as that compass.

(p. 38)

If school identity provides a moral compass as Spillane suggests, then leaders must also be concerned with issues of sustainability. What will happen when the formal leader leaves? Will the work continue? Will the identity of the school continue to provide a sense of purpose and direction?

Sustainability and purpose

Part of a leader's responsibility is to develop a clear direction for the school. As part of direction-setting, leaders pay attention to the unique and positive identity for the school and they exercise their leadership in such a way that the momentum is sustained over time. As leaders with moral purpose they consider the issues of sustainability from their first moments in their schools. Will the improvements and the changes they have initiated continue after they leave? Will their schools become genuinely transformed centres of learning?

From personal experience, we can appreciate the disappointment and cynicism that arises when initiatives are not sustained after a change in formal leadership. A staff can only hold a course or direction for so long, without the support and involvement of the formal leader. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) spent many years researching reform implementation in a number of Canadian and American schools and from this study they developed seven principles for sustainable leadership that are directly connected to moral purpose. They suggest that school leaders need to ensure that leadership lasts by creating meaningful changes and planning for the future. They talk about the importance of breadth when they say that leadership spreads by developing the identity and direction of the school collectively and by distributing leadership. They emphasize the need to be socially just so that all students and other schools benefit. Further, they

recommend that leaders exercise resourcefulness by providing intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives, allow time and opportunity for professional learning development, be cost effective without being cheap and carefully handle resources to support all learners. From their perspective, leaders promote diversity to enable educators and families to adapt and prosper in increasingly complex environments by learning from one another's diverse practices. Leaders are activists in engaging assertively with the educational environment in a pattern of mutual influence, activating personal and professional networks and forming strategic alliances. Their final principle is that leaders ensure school and system support for sustainable leadership by developing improvements that last over time – by distributing leadership and responsibility to others and by sustaining themselves so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out (adapted from 2006, pp. 1–7).

Taking seriously the principles of sustainability as described by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) is work that frequently goes beyond the scope of the individual principal. District, provincial, state and national leaders need to be very careful that in their enthusiasm for new initiatives or in their desire to respond to a variety of demands, they do not work against sustainability by moving school leaders too quickly. We have seen in our case study schools the churn that occurs when leaders are shuffled too frequently. Rapid turnover works directly against moral purpose. Moving schools to deep learning requires sustained effort.

Conclusion

Leading the shift away from a sorting system where there is success for some towards a learning system where there is deep learning for all is at the heart of moral purpose. School leaders committed to this new work understand that they must build on the existing quality of their school, create new forms of quality and be persistent in their drive for equity. Leaders help to build a strong sense of school identity, are brutally honest in their appraisal of their school's strengths, create a sense of direction and pay attention to the importance of sustainability.

In addition to an individual leader's mindset of intense moral purpose, this is work that also requires cooperation, collaboration and teamwork. Individual teachers working in isolation cannot be expected to meet the needs of every learner. The work is simply too hard and a team approach is

required. The same case can be made for schools and for school leaders. School leaders who are passionate about learning and improvement know that they must build a strong team both within and outside the school. This requires high levels of trust and emotional intelligence.

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