In Search of High-Level Thinking: A Principal's Guide to Effective Leadership Through Instruction

Marc Cutillo

The University of Pennsylvania

Popular culture has long had an obsession with the phrase "The lack of evidence is not the evidence of absence." The philosophical argument, many times overused, speaks to a logical axiom that, in principle, we do not need proof to determine something exists. This is scientific certitude. When it pertains to educational achievement though, this aphorism is not acceptable. The burden of proof lies upon all educational leaders to show that learning is being accomplished - and accomplished at a high level of achievement for all students in their school.

Learning in all constructs is important for a principal, but two areas are of critical importance for their ability to act as a gateway to other curriculums and personal development - literacy and social studies learning. Mike Schmoker (2006) stated that "literacy, rightly acquired, profoundly affects students' life and career options, their understanding of the world" (p. 52). Jacques Barzun stated "No subject of study is more important than reading… all other intellectual powers depend on it (as cited in Schmoker, 2011, p. 95). Influential philosopher John Dewey (1916) has written that social studies subject matter is "to enrich and liberate the more direct and personal contacts of life by furnishing their context, their background and outlook (p. 211). Literacy arts and social studies learning are the backbone for living out the ideals of our democratic schools.

Proving this learning exists relies upon evidence in many forms that fall under the umbrella of quantitative and qualitative data. They are two sides to the same data coin, yet only one provides the deep insights possible for a leader to understand the intricate capabilities of his or her students. In regards to literacy and social studies, proof of learning relies upon our ability to disaggregate qualitative data, with all of its conditional responses.

This is not to say we should cast aside quantitative data as unnecessary. It is quantifiable numbers that allow for the diagnostic assessments principals need to identify larger systemic problems. Quantitative data can mitigate potential biases in qualitative methods, and when combined with other collections, can provide valuable measures across time and different subsets (Bernhardt, 2004). This data can display how a school may or may not be reaching different socioeconomic groups, grades, or different ability learners. It is a natural entry point for further observations. In his lectures on action planning, Dr. Warren Mata of the University of Pennsylvania explained that quantitative data can be particularly useful for quick analysis, which can be used by responsive principal leaders to inform action plans (personal communication, September 7, 2013).

Paying close attention to the numeric data is part of an educational leader’s skill set, but not one to be used as an ends. Solely using quantitative data, especially that is dependent upon national or state assessments to assess high-quality learning, is flawed in design. It leads a principal to incomplete conclusions based upon standards based skills tested.

This analysis frequently leads principals to institute a curriculum of coverage and not uncoverage (Wiggins & McTighee, 1998). The idea of coverage vs. uncoverage is put forward by Wiggins and McTighee to explain the difference in teaching that embraces deeper understanding using deep critical analysis and teaching that is perfunctory and by rote. All too often schools, led principals in search of increased test scores, fall into the trap of trying to cover the most amount of material hoping the material covered will be assessed. This scattershot way of instruction is a poor attempt to influence quantitative data. The alternative is uncovering material by inquiring about the concepts in and of themselves. When principals direct schools to uncover the

curriculum, they engage in the deeper thinking that evaluates what is important to learn, organically reaching the needed breadth of content (Wiggins & McTighee, 1998).

The limitations of quantitative data naturally beg the question of what qualitative data must be used in order to indicate a high-level learning among literacy and social studies. The answer to this is simple in name, but complex in usage. I believe the best evidence can be found among the strong written and spoken argumentative abilities present among a student population.

The ability to argue effectively should not be underestimated. Strike (2007) named the facility to argue as one of the reasons schools exist - in order to achieve the examined life that Socrates championed for centuries ago. Schmoker devotes pages of citations in his book *Results Now* detailing the importance argument has in a literate human. He called “argumentative literacy the soul of an education” (p. 58). Christopher Lasch labeled argument the “essence of education” that prepares a democratic society for self-governance (as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p. 69). Of course, the ability to form a strong argument can only be accomplished through a critical analysis of information present. This information, almost always is coded in text. Consequently, the higher-order learning abilities inherent in argument is facilitated through the critical analysis skills used in reading, writing, and speaking across curriculums.

Higher-order thinking is a term thrown about extensively and imprecisely in many educational circles. With that said, an exact definition is not needed to stress its importance. To simplify, it’s an inter-related adeptness in which someone can parse information, analyze its veracity, apply it to varied circumstances, and ultimately use it as the foundation for new material (Marzano, 2007; Schmoker, 2006). It reflects the essence of the famous Bloom’s taxonomy of thinking, but should never be relegated to just those skills (Marzano, 2007).

This type of meaning making is absent in many students today, yet is vital to creating well-formed argument. Schmoker (2006) laments on the ability of college students to write with a purpose, to discuss a topic with analysis of complex pros and cons. The absence of this ability is what separates those who simply master skills from those who can dexterously apply them at will across life situations. More importantly, in our American system it is what separates those with the power to change lives, and those who simply know of the power (Schmoker, 2011). The ability to make meaning on a higher level provides the key to economic and social mobility.

In his book *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Mike Rose wrote about students who are absent of the literacy skills needed to make meaning. His account eschews the more normalized version of high-level thinking skills as the mediator to a good job, instead speaking to the liberating power of literacy on an individual's self-concept and self-efficacy. He wrote: "It is not just a few bucks more a week that's at stake; literacy, here is intimately connected with respect; with a sense that they are not beaten, the mastery of print revealing the deepest impulse to survive" (p. 216).

Looking for evidence on the spectrum of higher-level thinking is dependent on the ability of a principal to recognize and promote the building blocks of sound argument. The ability to comprehend text in order to support a view is not just one of these building blocks, but the mark of intelligent students. As principal leader it is important to watch the ways in which comprehension takes place. Ivey and Fisher (2005) warn against the confusion of teaching comprehension skills with testing comprehension. The former relies heavily on the sort of skills-based instruction of standardized tests. It is inauthentic and not indicative of advanced thinking.

Principal leaders need to search for qualitative evidence from students that their comprehension is rooted in meaning-making. This metacognitive approach rests on years of research that shows “comprehension is a proactive, continual process of using prior knowledge, metacognitive awareness, and reflection to make sense of a text” (Ivey & Fisher, 2005). This comprehension is best done through authentic literacy experiences - the type of activities governed by student choice, interest, and close purposeful reading (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Schmoker, 2006).

The evidence of high-level skills in social studies is almost identical in theory to literacy. James Banner wrote that skills to study history are based in “knowledge and thought: writing well, constructing arguments, reading critically, assessing evidence” (as cited in Schmoker, 2011, p. 134). Wineburg remarked that social studies students must be taught to “argue with the text” in order to discover the truths by which we can deride meaning in our social lives as it relates to laws, cultures, politics, and community (as cited in Schmoker, 2011, p. 133). With its heavy reliance on argument, social studies naturally require the authentic literacy skills detailed earlier.

Despite this similarity in theory, higher-level evidence in social studies can be differentiated. Social studies thinking should present itself in the fundamental ability to engage oneself in the cultures, civics, and democratic life surrounding a student. As Christopher Herman, headmaster at AIM Academy, mentioned in his lecture at Penn, content knowledge has been digitized in the form of a smartphone. 21st century skills like application and the ability to support one’s opinion have not (personal communication, November 3, 2013).

It follows that high-level learning within social studies can additionally be evidenced by the application of content through argument in order to increase citizenship. Mere content acquisition is fleeting and useless in affecting change within one's life. Walling wrote of this importance in civic engagement. He advocated for engagement that would require students to "evaluate, take, and defend positions on current and historical issues" within government (2007).

It needs to be noted that a well-reasoned argument among students is not predicated by only having meaningful interactions of text. If that were so, the importance of a teacher would shrink to austere measures that checked for completion and not understanding. Teachers are needed to model the skills, to ask the pertinent questions by purposeful inquiry and design (Wiggins & McTighee, 1998). Creating essential meaning from text responsible for establishing an authentic argument requires a deconstruction and construction of information (Gambrell & Mazzoni 1999). Effectual teachers model this inquisitive behavior, in essence teaching students how to learn.

The role of effectual teachers and principal leaders that can inspire students to reach high-levels of learning is blatant, but the causality should be underscored. In a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, John DeFlaminis stated the best causality of student achievement is teacher effectiveness and school leadership respectively (personal communication, December 8, 2013). In his presentation he cited literature which remarks on the symbiotic relationship between the two and the ability of a leader to affect teachers. It is with this in mind that that effectual leadership practices should be extrapolated.

Leaders cannot take on the sole responsibility for a successful school. The increased demands on time and accountability require principals to take new approaches in leadership that historically has been rebuffed. This is where the practice of distributed leadership becomes a powerful tool in accomplishing a school's goals. In the advanced model of distributed leadership put forth by DeFlaminis, the principal is never at the center of decisions, but a part of a dynamic structure that shares leadership and decision-making (2013). While never relinquishing final approval, the principal allows for competent teacher-leaders to aid in the process of improving learning outcomes within a school. This shared leadership model is essential in fostering two interrelated psychological factors of an organization that have causal relationships with student achievement - motivation and trust.

Teachers must be motivated to actively involve themselves in improving their practice. According to Evans (1996) effective leaders "invigorate performance and inspire commitment to change by engaging their people in the pursuit of shared goals" (p. 68). He noted when people feel ownership in their decisions they raise their ability and engagement. John Gardner (1990) warned of the autocratic leadership models and how it results in decreased motivation. He believes the overwhelming majority of workers in organizations do not perform to their ability due to a lack of ownership in decisions. These assertions contribute to a growing body of literature on the effectiveness of distributed leadership in student learning (DeFlaminis, 2013).

Motivating teachers to affect classroom practice is only one part of a very multi-faceted relationship with teachers. Druskat and Wolf (2001) wrote that effective leaders learn to regulate the emotions of a group. Distributed leadership models that rely upon teams should be treated like living entities on their own. Leaders need to regularly assess the emotions of groups in

addition to individuals. This requires an emotionally aware leader especially in times of discord. This emotionally aware principal resonates with staff and directs the feelings towards positive action cultivating an atmosphere of cooperation and trust (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Leading changes in a schools pedagogies, curriculum, or culture must take place in order to raise student achievement. The ability for a school leader to initiate this change lies in his or her ability to gain trust since they must change the very static systemic features of school life, behaviors, norms and beliefs of practitioners (Evans, 1996; DeFlaminis, 2013). However, the ability to gain trust and influence only comes with the deep understanding of how change is perceived by those being asked to do so. An effectual leader understands that change causes confuse, conflict, and challenges competence (Evans, 1996). Principals wanting to implement this change need to create awareness how current practices violate the shared goals of education implemented through distributed leadership. This persuasion requires emotional awareness and tact, an ability to empathize and resonate with their teachers. As Dr. Judy Brody of The University of Pennsylvania mentioned, “You must practice how to confront and influence in a non-threatening way (personal communication, December 9, 2013).

Understanding the culture of a school’s teachers and the school itself plays to a leader’s ability to affect student achievement as well. This broadens to encompass the student’s cultures, too. Ivey and Fisher (2005) remark that “teachers who understand their students’ background prior knowledge, interests, and motivations are much more likely to make the connections that adolescents crave.” This should be no different among principal and teacher relations. In both instances, an empathetic understanding is essential in forging trust and strengthening relationships - both of which affect the ability of a principal leader to impact student outcomes

through organizational change. Principal leaders must take the necessary time and investment in order to learn the many cultural differences present every day within a school.

While fostering the sense of trust within a school is vital to enabling teachers to perform their best, it is implicit in a principal's job to be a strong leader who responds to teacher ineffectiveness, too. Avoiding the reality of a teacher who needs support or corrective action only serves to lower the achievement of students. Conflict is a part of a thriving organization. Daresh (2007) implores administrators not to avoid conflict, but to work with it. Dr. Brody warns that good leaders document and hold accountable poor teachers (personal communication, November 22, 2013). In the pursuit of collegiality, we must not excuse poor behavior.

Perhaps the most important way a principal leader can ensure high standards of achievement though, is by being the instructional expert and leader of the school. Countless academics cite the importance of instruction as the best way to improve student outcomes (DeFlaminis, 2013). High-level thinking occurs only through superior instructional practices. While principals must trust and distribute their leadership to teachers in order for them to improve their own practices, it falls on the principal to be the expert and make changes as necessary. This requires a principal to design curriculum with outcomes in mind. Leaders must take the time to understand the most effective methods, best practices, and audit curriculums, making sure that the proper amount of uncoverage is being displayed within the classes (Wiggins & McTighee, 1998).

Much like principals are tasked to audit the curriculum of courses and make sure the proper questions are being asked in order for students to engage in high-level thinking, it is incumbent on principals to ask the proper questions in their school. The right questions are

steeped in ongoing inquiry. Costa and Kallick (2000) list questioning and posing problems as one of the habits of not just an effectual leader, but intelligent humans. Principals should be astute in responding to all of the data present in order to make sense of their school. Responding to data should not occur during yearly benchmarks but should be habitual and ongoing. It is only through this constant inquiry and combining of quantitative and qualitative data that principal leaders can ensure that high student achievement is taking place at all times for all students.

References

Bernhardt, V. (2004) *Data analysis for continuous school wide improvement*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education

Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (2000). *Habits of mind.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Daresh, J. (2007). S*upervision as proactive leadership.* Long Grove, IL:Wave Land Press.

DeFlaminis, J. (2013). *Distributed leadership: Building leadership and learning capacity in schools*. PowerPoint presented at the school leadership session Philadelphia, PA.

Dewey, J. (1916). The significance of geography and history. In *Democracy and education.* London: MacMillan.

Druskat, V.U., & Wolff, S.B. (2001). Building the emotional intelligence of groups. *Harvard Business Review.* pp 80-90.

Evans, R. (1996) *The human side of school change.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Gambrell, L. & Mazzoni, S. (1999). Principles of best practice: Finding the common ground. In *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*. Eds. L. Gambrell, L. Morrow, S. Neuman, & M. Pressley. New York: The Guilford Press.

Gardner, J. (1990). *On Leadership.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Goleman, D., Boyatiz, R., & McKee, A. (2002). Resonant leadership. In *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Ivey, G., & Fisher, D. (2006). Learning from what doesn't work. *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 63, 7-12

Marzano, R. (2007). *The art and science of teaching.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Rose, M. (1989). Crossing Boundaries. In *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and the Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results Now: How we can achieve unprecedented improvement in teaching and learning.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Schmoker, M. (2011). *Focus: Evaluating the essentials to radically improve student learning.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Strike, R. (2007). *Ethical leadership in schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Walling, D. (December 2007). The return of civic education. *Phi Delta Kappan.*

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). Understanding by design. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.