Collective Mobilization: A Discussion on a School Leader's Ability to Create Culture

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"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Although John Kennedy's famous quote has been co-opted as a platitude by anyone wishing to have others assume greater responsibilities, it was once used as a clarion call to action for a generation of Americans entering an era of social and political upheaval. Fifty years later, Barack Obama used a similar appeal to stir the country. Three words - "Yes we can" - propelled an electorate to galvanize in numbers never seen before. Kennedy and Obama channeled what many successful politicians and scholars understand very well. No matter how transformational a leader might be, they must rely on mobilizing others into action to affect lasting change.

In matters of school leadership, the foundations are no different. A school leader must discover ways to motivate, unite people, and improve student achievement in the face of bureaucratic constraints and environmental change. Faced with these challenges, it is enticing for leaders to take on the role of transformational hero. But that role almost always comes at the cost of lasting school-wide change. Mintzberg (as cited in Fullan, 2001, p. 134) lectures on organizations stating, "it's a question of building strong institutions, not creating heroic leaders. Heroic leaders get in the way of strong institutions." What school leaders must recognize is that their job's success is not so much dependent on what they do, but on the culture they cultivate to support what others do.

Common understanding defines culture by a wide-set of parameters such as a group's norms, beliefs, habits of thinking, climate, and practices. In organizations and schools, it is the tacit and explicit structures that govern much individual thoughts, feelings and perceptions that result in observed behavior. Individuals learn from existing culture and tend to act in accordance

to its rules, whether toxic or beneficial, oftentimes being the cause behind a school's success or failure. Schein (1992) notes, "one of the most decisive functions of leadership is the creation, the management, and sometimes even the destruction of culture" (p. 5). It is incumbent upon leaders to embrace an understanding of a school's culture in order to positively affect it for success.

Before extrapolating upon the process of shaping school culture, it is necessary to acknowledge the particular contexts of schools. Schools exist in environments of inconstancy. Persistent reform efforts, teacher turnover, the evolving of student demographics and latest pedagogical models are just a sample of the decisions and changes leaders must grapple with. Fullan (2001) warns leaders of the futile and dangerous efforts of trying to stop or direct this environmental influx. Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja (2000) claim "businesses [like schools] cannot be directed along a linear path… The challenge is to disturb them in a manner that approximates the desired outcomes" (p. 6). This needs to be recognized by school leaders. We are called to embrace change in ways that reconcile its complexity and uncertainty with the goals of student achievement. I believe this begins with fostering a culture of learning - a culture that doesn't look to halt change - but embraces it to adhere to its goal.

This is no easy task. Cultures are designed to resist change. By their nature, cultures are formed only after surviving adaptations. A great many schools exist in a culture where survival means holding tight to antiquated norms and practices, often at the expense of true student learning and development. Even flourishing schools encounter difficulties due to culture in the face of change. In a lecture at The University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ball remarks about the challenges of many high-achieving independent schools to embrace data because it clashes with

the culture of autonomy that teachers are imbued with (E. Ball, personal communication, January 12, 2014).

Sergiovanni (2007) states "to be successful at culture building, school leaders need to give attention to the informal, subtle, and symbolic aspects of school life" (p.146). Surely leaders can derive a sense of purpose from this view of culture, but fostering a culture of learning in teachers and students can only become practical when the framework inherent for its existence is present. This includes such structures as a motivational, stable and safe school climate, a student behavioral system that deals with conduct and ethics in positive terms, and an attention to one's individual needs. Dr. Dawson of The University of Pennsylvania presents a compelling argument about struggling inner-city schools when she presented on the ability to motivate staff (D. Dawson, personal communication, January 13, 2014). She recalled theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory which postulate that individuals will not be motivated to reach their potential, to self-actualize, until their more basic needs are met. These needs, things often overlooked in struggling schools like physical space and personal respect, must be addressed as part of the necessary structures allowing for learning cultures to exist.

One need that I believe often goes neglected, yet is essential for mobilizing a culture of learning, is the need to be validated. All humans wish to have their voice heard, not so others can acquiesce to their opinions, but simply for someone to accept and value them as important and worthy to the discussion at hand. Validation does not need to accompany elaborate praise or formal rewards. For me, it means that not one individual - teacher, student, or parent - is overlooked. During my time in the classroom, I have felt my ability to listen (not to be mistaken for agreeing) to all students was paramount in gaining collective trust and building a positive

class culture. As a principal intern, that feeling has been buttressed. The collection of personal

trials and troubles that I, an intern with scant authority, have heard by simply visiting teachers

and asking them how their day is going has been astonishing. It speaks to our collective need to

be validated and listened to. Moreover, as it relates to student learning, it creates a necessary

structure to mobilize groups toward action - trust.

It falls upon a leader to create an imbedded culture of learning once structures, both

concrete and affective, are in place. With a scarcity of time to do this, principals must learn to

distribute leadership. The idea of distributed teacher leadership can be a precarious proposition

for schools who have not established trust. Principals often recoil at the thought of recasting

traditional power structures and delegating responsibility to others. However, it is a necessary

part of collectively mobilizing a staff towards school improvement.

In developing teacher leaders, principals must be cognizant of their continual role in

legitimizing the leaders to other staff, as well as supporting leader development. Allowing for

material resources, notably time, is one of the core structures that a principal needs to provide.

However, research suggests that human resources such as trust, respect, direct teaching of

leadership skills and socialization are more critical to the development of teacher leaders (Kruse,

Seashore & Bryk, 2004). Among Murphy's list of functions that promote teacher leadership, the

concept of recognizing the importance of a teacher leader's role, "finding ways to legitimize

effort and success" (p.139), is supported quite well. This coincides with my belief in the

importance of validation. When done properly, distributing leadership can act as a vital role in

fostering a learning culture. It also creates an ancillary benefit of freeing school leaders to tackle

a task which requires much dedicated time, improving teachers' instructional practice.

I could replace the words "improving teachers' instructional practice" with "teacher evaluation," but that would neither align with my beliefs, nor would it suggest creating a culture of learning. The task of teacher evaluation has become nonsensical. On the side of the principal, it is a rote chore with forms and domains that give off a clinical inauthentic feeling. Marshall (2012) likens it as a dog-and-pony show where teachers spend weeks preparing an ideal lesson in preparation of an announced visit that yields little indication to what truly goes on in teachers' classrooms. On the teacher's side, evaluation has become a mistrusting endeavor mandated by districts with the likelihood of becoming a "gotcha moment." The challenge then becomes how does a school leader use the task of teacher evaluation to support learning, and moreover, how does it become meaningful to the point where the staff takes improvement into their own hands.

R. Evans (personal communication, January 13, 2014) stated that much of a principal's interactions in dealing with staff lies in a delicate utilization of pressure and support. This is where I believe the answer to teacher evaluation rests. In my view, I am both an evaluator, looking to see where performance needs to improve, and coach, looking to demonstrate the "how" of improving a teacher's instruction. Naturally, I am not the first to liken my role as principal to athletic coach. However, I am dubious that those who see their role in similar ways sincerely act the part. Coaches need be dedicated tutors who help teachers through explicit modeling of strategies and with dedicated developmental support that advocates for risk-taking and personal growth. Coaching is about far more than offering words of encouragement.

Balancing the tension between evaluator and coach is an art by itself. Daresh (2007) writes of many models of supervision, one of which, clinical supervision, approximates the evaluator/coach role quite well. The assumption behind this supervision is that it is teacher

directed, clinical in its approach of analyzing practice, carried out in an environment of collegial

trust, and formative in substance. It is an ideal practice of improving instruction, and yet Daresh

makes note that it is to be conducted by peers, not supervisors. Although it is certainly powerful

to have peers conduct improvement, I do not see a reason why this cannot also come from

supervisors who have built in the structure of trust. When combined with related models that

allow for teachers' inherent differences in predispositions and experience, it forms a solid

framework to inform my role as evaluator and coach.

In my teaching internship, I was tasked with a teacher improvement project which I

modeled after the clinical and developmental supervisory models. It began with an area of

improvement identified by the teacher, consisted of multiple observational visits, was revised

through formative feedback sessions, and jointly evaluated through a reflection process. While

this process will not replace the formal evaluation procedures in public schools, I believe it has

great merit in improving a teacher's practice. This method compels teachers to inquire into their

practice with a focused lens on improvement underpinned by scholarship and data.

This model coincided with my personality. It values trust and cooperative learning, yet

not at the expense of a clinical model steeped in academic knowledge. What I found paramount

in this project was the formative evaluation that, like an athletic coach, allows for mistakes.

Traditional teacher evaluation neglects fostering risk-taking in order to verify personal

competency. Formal evaluations have a purpose within school systems, but they do little to

nurture teacher learning. Personal teacher improvement projects, like the one I completed, allow

for opportunities to formalize the learning process that teachers need to engage in. Dweck (2006)

advocates against schools that promote teachers and students operating within constraints that

ensure marginal success in favor of those that explore ways of improvement with the very real

possibility of failure. In essence the process is prized over the outcome.

What I have described is an ideal scenario. It is a scene that I have confidence can exist

when school leaders learn how to dissolve cultures that inhibit progress, and institute the

supports for a new culture of learning that mobilizes everyone to take ownership of the learning

process. It reflects the style of how I approach my profession, yearning for new information and

allowing a learning culture to develop through an increased capacity to trust. However, principals

are still called to assess. A culture of learning is only as good as what exactly is being learned

and transmitted to students.

In my last semester's studies I have acquired new knowledge on precisely what can be

regarded as quality learning in regards to two very complex disciplines in school - math and

science. In my school experiences, I have noticed that the majority of teachers and administrators

recognize quality reading instruction, but cannot identify the characteristics of quality math

instruction. In addition, they tend to treat science as an elective, and not a subject which, when

taught properly, expertly models our cognitive thinking process. Perhaps adults' interactions with

daily reading give them a better understanding of the cognition that involves deriving meaning

from text. Still, this reason is no excuse, and aspiring school leaders need to guarantee their

schools are engaging in high-quality math and science instruction.

One of the biggest misconceptions in math and science teaching today is the absence of

worthwhile and rigorous instruction. Weiss, Heck, and Shimkus (2004) reflect much of what I

have noticed in the classroom: "lessons using a multitude of innovative instructional strategies

cannot be productive unless they are implemented in the service of teaching students important

content (p. 27)." Well-intentioned teachers clamor to raise the engagement level of their classes, often using flexible grouping, hands-on manipulatives and differentiated instruction in math and science classes. These are wonderful strategies, but only if they are aligned to a learning goal "that is at the appropriate level, taking into account what students already know and can do, and challenging them to learn more. (p.28)" Engagement must not be superficial. Students must be engaged by actually seeing the problem given as something worthwhile of discovery.

In my internship experience, I observed a mathematics class that exemplified this. The lesson was concerned with the conversion of units in the metric system. The students were highly engaged at the SMART Board, utilized their own authentic index cards with shortcuts of how to move the decimal point, and were grouped intentionally by ability. There was a clear understanding of what the goal was, but the class provided no worthwhile or rigorous instruction. Furthermore, it taught math in an algorithmic nature. Heibert et al. (1997) warns of teaching students in methods that do not "foster students' understanding of mathematics as an investigative process. (p.24)" Lannin (2004) advocates for the use of explicit and recursive reasoning to problem solve. This entails students thinking authentically of one rule to solve a problem, and then discovering ways to generalize it. This is important for students so they can make patterns and apply math to multiple scenarios. School leaders must be wary of math and science lessons that are taught without the nature of student driven discovery. As any adult can prove, this type of concrete teaching is easily forgotten over time.

On the other end of the spectrum lie teachers who teach rigorous lessons, but fail to properly engage students. While it is less prevalent in math where teachers seem to understand drill and kill methods are passé, in science instruction there is still a widespread use of textbook

driven learning. School leaders need to do all that is within their power to revise curriculums to combine what the National Research Council (2011) calls the "integration of (such) knowledge and abilities with the practices needed to engage in scientific inquiry and engineering design."

Both math and science are susceptible to a great degree of teaching that elicits the reproduction of information and algorithms. Historically, teachers have viewed a wide knowledge base as the springboard towards further learning. Current research stresses we rethink that strategy (NRC, 2011; Marzano, 2003). Marzano laments that American school systems attempt to cover between two and three times the number of math topics and between four and nine times the number of science topics as our counterparts in Japan and Germany who score better on worldwide tests (2003). Principals should take notice of this long overdue educational shift in curriculum. As a school leader, I want to look for depth over breadth. More precisely, I am searching for the ability to understand at a deeper level.

Practitioners often talk of this understanding, but rarely unpack what it means. Understanding involves cognitive measures. It is the final step in a metacognitive approach that results in being able to take a concept and apply it to various scenarios (Hiebert et. al, 1997). True understanding eschews student parroting in favor of approximate explanations related to a student's own schema. Understanding can only happen when students connect new information to already held beliefs. In this context, which is the basis for constructivist learning theories ranging from Piaget to Dewey, the evidence that school leaders must search for needs reframing.

School leaders are called to search for understanding by looking for evidence from students who can communicate understanding through multiple means and connections. The more connections that concepts can be exhibited through, the deeper the understanding exhibited,

and the greater the chance a student has at reaching high levels of cognitive demand like creating new knowledge. Specific teacher practices should elicit this understanding.

Hyde (2007) suggests that we should teach understanding in mathematics much the same way we teach understanding in reading: through cognitive exercises such as making connections to other math, looking for patterns, carrying out plans, visualizing, and inferring. Hiebert et. al (1997) stress that teachers create social constructs in the classroom predicated upon constant reflection and communication. These types of tasks, explicitly modeled by classroom teachers, are the types of practices that foster new meaning. Weiss (2004) advocates that students should be encouraged to create multiple meanings, so that they may increase the ownership of their reasoning. In my previous math lesson discussed, the teacher observed had the opportunity to have students move decimal points through recursive reasoning, multiply by ten, or explain why converting one unit to a larger unit results in a smaller number, yet none of these cognitive approaches were used. The lesson lacked true understanding.

The same principles apply for science. As I mentioned earlier, scientific inquiry and practices closely model the logical problem solving capabilities of efficient humans. Recent scholarship in science teaching understands this and stresses the importance of *doing* in science. Bybee (2011) states the "aim for students at all grade levels is to learn how to use evidence to formulate a logically coherent explanation of phenomena and to support a proposed solution for an engineering problem (p. 39). If this is the goal of science instruction, to which I agree with, then all science instruction should be taught with an end goal of having designed a solution for a problem. This means that teachers must explicitly model and engage students in asking questions and defining problems first. It is no longer acceptable to simply tell students that photosynthesis

is a way for plants to convert energy. Scientific teaching must begin with inquiry that leads to practices that reveal answers (Pratt, 2011). When appropriately challenged, these answers will add to a student's understanding.

It would be remiss of me to not admit the idealistic nature of the scenarios I have discussed above. Mobilizing a staff into a culture of learning for both teachers and students does not happen through theory alone. I anticipate challenges that will make all of my learning seem impractical; the stuff of ivory-tower academics, and yet, there is one idea that will hold me to my espoused beliefs in creating a culture of learning. Henderson and Milstein (2003) believe the number one way that schools build resiliency in students, the ability to overcome, is through creating an environment of caring personal relationships. I completely agree, but I believe it goes further. It applies to adults as well. In a befitting cycle of sorts, the trusting relationships needed in collectively mobilizing a culture of learning are the same trusting relationships needed to overcome obstacles, changes, and challenges. School success is not a matter of me, but of we.

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