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# Commentary: Leading for deeper learning: why a human vision of schooling demands a human vision of leadership

Commentary

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This issue marks a heartening development in educational scholarship. It brings together research on deeper learning with work on educational leadership, offering us new and detailed empirical evidence about what it takes to transform an industrial era school system, featuring mostly rote and disengaged learning, into modern schools that create passion and purpose for both students and adults. Building on earlier work on the importance of symmetry (Mehta and Fine, 2019; Roberts, 2012), I argue here that birthing this new vision of schooling requires a similarly transformed vision of leadership.

We should not underestimate the magnitude of leadership that is needed to create this transformation. As has been amply documented in the scholarly literature, modern schooling was born in the early 20th century during a period of industrialization in which the goals of schooling were to sort and batch-process students, assimilate them to American values, and reproduce inequalities of race and class. The ambitions of contemporary reformers – to build a system in which students see meaning and purpose in their learning, to challenge longstanding hierarchies in schools and in society, and to change the grammar of schooling in ways that would make learning more fluid, dynamic and connected to the world – are not things which the industrial era public school system was created to do.

Leaders face what organizational scholars call third order change – not simply changing the settings on the dial, but rather significantly rethinking the purposes of the system itself, which, in turn, requires changes to both the mindsets and the structures which permeate educational institutions. Particularly challenging is that this transformation is necessarily distributed – it will need to be held and led by many teachers, principals and other adults in schools. At the same time, most of these people have never experienced the kind of schooling that we are trying to generate, and, in fact, have considerable experience in the traditional system that we are seeking to hospice. Thus leaders have to negotiate a paradox: the work needs to be led by many people who have not themselves experienced what they are trying to create.

More challenging still, schools sit in an ecosystem of parent, community, district, state, federal and college expectations, all of which, on the whole, tend toward an institutionally conservative vision of schooling. State tests, district pacing guides, advanced placement exams, college admission standards and parental concerns about their children's prospects all work against significant change. As our wise mentor David Cohen said to Sarah Fine and me midway through our study of deeper learning in American high schools: "Well? Have you found any yet? There are no incentives for it."

Thus while this issue mostly focuses on school-level leadership, in the longer run, change at scale will require leadership across all levels of the system. Provinces and states can change the competencies that guide the system, moving away from detailed subject-matter dictates and toward broader and more human-centered expectations for learners. Over time, they can also shift modes of assessment from standardized tests to performance-based forms of assessment. Colleges can stop seeing students as the sum of scores and grades, and employ vehicles like the Mastery Transcript Consortium, which provides portfolios of student work.



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Districts can lead this work in some of the same ways as schools, but on a larger scale. There is no magic bullet. All the same, we could see a world emerge in which many actors, in patchy and uneven but connected ways, gradually start to pull in a new direction, motivated by a shared vision of what schooling can be. But all of this will require leadership, which is why the topic of this special issue is so important.

What is the nature of this leadership? Below I sketch a few of the qualities that I see as essential for deeper learning leadership. To develop this composite sketch, I draw on the pieces in this special issue, five recent books that describe deeper learning schools and their leaders (Dintersmith, 2018; Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Martinez and McGrath, 2014; Mehta and Fine, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2021) and three books describing earlier generation deeper learning schools (Meier, 2002; Nathan, 2009; Sizer, 1996). I also draw on what I have learned from skilled practitioners, particularly the many talented district and school leaders who have been part of the Deeper Learning Dozen, a longstanding collaboration to advance system-wide deep learning (Watkins *et al.*, 2018). I have also been influenced by a number of scholars who have written about humanizing schools, including John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Nel Noddings, Michael Fullan, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Angela Valenzuela and many others. While what I describe below is never fully realized, I will describe the ideal of what these leaders and schools are seeking to achieve.

It begins with *stance*. In deeper learning schools, people treat each other like human beings. The goal is to raise young people, not simply to transmit knowledge. Care and relationships are the foundation for everything else. Tasks are grounded in purpose and meaning. Students are capable people who need to exercise control and agency over their learning. Faculty aim for each student to be known and cared for. People are different, and deeper learning schools seek to honor and embrace these differences. Schools are models for the democratic, humane and peaceful world we are trying to create. All means all; deeper learning schools are committed to help each student cross the graduation stage with dignity, purpose and options (Kaser and Halbert, 2017).

These are *human* values. They are about care and connection, building communities of a size where people can be known and valued. They see the people in our charge as young people first, and “students” second; they see our fundamental responsibility as helping those young people find passion, purpose and opportunities to flourish. They do not hide behind bureaucratic structures; they are fundamentally flexible and entrepreneurial in trying to find ways to meet people’s felt needs. They have the energy and optimism to try different possibilities, and the wisdom to recognize what is important and what can be discarded.

These values are important for adults as well as students, a connection Sarah Fine and I have called *symmetry*. Deeper learning leaders recognize that both students and adults are under their care, and that, to flourish, both have similar needs. If students need autonomy, competence and relationships to flourish (Ryan and Deci, 2000), so do adults. If students need agency and choice over their learning, so do teachers. As a leadership strategy, using valuable adult time for powerful learning experiences is perhaps the single most important strategy to advance deeper learning because it helps teachers see and understand what it is that leaders want them to create. The vision here is less to “train” than to create communities in which teachers and other knowledgeable professionals – from within and without the school’s borders – exchange ideas, educate one another and grow together.

To bring these values to life requires *cultivating communities* of the right sort. To walk into a deeper learning school is to feel a certain energy, a hum of purposeful activity, as people young and old are engaged together in meaningful work (Hansen, 2022). Such an atmosphere requires not only reimagining the tasks that students engage in; it requires building a culture in which people can take risks and fail forward, with the right blend of challenge and support, rigor and joy. Such cultures are built through big things like rituals and routines that affirm the values of the community, and through countless small interactions and decisions that

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model and reinforce those values. Trust is a valuable resource in all schools, but it is the lifeblood of deeper learning schools, which place a high premium on the reciprocal relationships among all parties involved in the schooling process. Trust also enables people to challenge one another, to push each other's ideas, and to ask hard questions in a shared pursuit of excellence (Meier, 1995).

Leading for deeper learning is also about trying new things. Deeper learning leaders are *pioneers*, seeking to develop new approaches to learning, new ways of attacking inequity and new structures to support young people in their flourishing. They are *curious* – willing to rethink existing structures and try new ones that may or may not work. They are changing key aspects of the “grammar of schooling” to make more connections across disciplines, between age groups and between school and world (Martinez and McGrath, 2014; Mehta and Datnow, 2020). They are informed by evidence, but tend to be impatient with “best practices,” and instead are more excited about developing new repertoires or adapting existing practices to new situations. They see schooling as dynamic rather than static, ever changing as new ideas or developments emerge from many different quarters, and they see this change as something to be embraced rather than feared.

At the same time, they recognize that if this work is going to be infused across their organizations for the long run, they need to *think in systems* and develop *sustainable structures*. There are many schools that have tried one or another student-centered practice but have not been able to sustain it (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Deeper learning schools need to work for adults as well as students, which means that additions must be balanced by subtractions (Reich, 2022), and that teachers need to find a workload they can maintain. Many secondary deeper learning schools seek to reimagine the ways that adults and students interact, combining subjects, eliminating or lessening tracks, and reducing teacher load so that teachers can form deeper relationships with students. New teachers must learn how to teach in ways that are different from those they were taught, and all teachers need to be part of communities which enable them to grow their practice. Creating more personalized communities also often requires deeper learning leaders to see these issues as systemic and to work cooperatively to develop structures and practices that make work inside their organizations manageable and sustainable.

To accomplish these goals, deeper learning leaders are *organizers*. Michael Fullan, perhaps our most astute observer of how change happens in schools, said in 1993 that change needs to be both top-down and bottom-up (Fullan, 1993). In more recent writing, he and Andrew Hargreaves have emphasized that leadership comes from the middle (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2023). In other words, significant change requires leadership from all parts of the system. The job of the person with the most formal authority is to unleash, direct and shape this effort and energy. Leadership is co-creating a shared vision, and giving people space and support to own and carry forward this vision in ways that make sense to them. Deeper learning is a particularly good umbrella because it is a big tent; pursuing deeper learning can be connected to a range of other worthy and related goals, such as culturally responsive pedagogy (Darling-Hammond and Oakes, 2021) and restorative justice (Fine, 2024; this issue). In contrast to models of leadership that emphasize positional authority, compliance and “driving change,” part of what is distinctive about deeper learning leadership is that it draws people toward a shared vision, connecting that vision to their intrinsic motivations and moral purposes, and creating opportunities for agency within a broadly shared coherence (Fullan and Edwards, 2021).

A critical part of advancing this vision is *storytelling* or *weaving* a coherent narrative that makes people feel included in forward-moving work. Deeper learning work is counter-cultural in that it asks people to let go of much that is familiar in favor of a future that is not yet quite defined but has many more possibilities. Leaders need to take concrete developments and connect them into a broader story that helps to give people meaning and purpose in their

work. Paradoxically, they need to highlight the tension between prevailing practices and the vision of what could be – which is what creates the energy for change – and, simultaneously, to identify ways that people in the organization are already taking steps consistent with the new vision – which is what makes change feel achievable (Berger and Johnston, 2015). In our work with the Deeper Learning Dozen, we have had members of our community physically engage in weaving to illustrate that a key job of the leader is to weave together many pockets of what is already happening into a new vision.

This vision is critical for all students but is particularly important for students who historically have not been well-served by the education system. Deeper learning leaders recognize that it is the least engaged students who most need a new approach, whereas it has been the most advantaged students who have had at least some access to deeper learning opportunities. They also *see equity holistically and ambitiously*; the goal is not simply to close test score gaps, but rather to make sure that all students can bring their full identities to school, and to share power with communities in the effort to create shared agendas for improvement. In a world where there is increasing performativity around diversity, equity and inclusion issues, deeper learning leaders are relentless about actually making changes and seeing whether those changes improve the experiences of marginalized students.

Finally, being a deeper learning leader requires *courage*. Moving away from conventional ways of teaching, integrating students across tracks and rethinking other traditional structures will almost necessarily draw pushback from parents and other institutionally conservative stakeholders. It is much easier to talk about “21st century skills” in vision statements or portraits of a graduate than to actually translate ambitions into concrete changes that might occasion resistance. At the same time, deeper learning leaders need to be good *listeners* (Safir, 2017), keeping their ears to the ground and carefully reading the context to know when to push and when to take a step back. This combination – a resoluteness of conviction, combined with a careful and ongoing willingness to listen to those in one’s charge – is critical for advancing deeper learning.

Courage. Humanity. Stance. Symmetry. Equity. Curiosity.

Community Cultivator. Systems Thinker. Pioneer. Organizer. Listener. Weaver. Storyteller.

These words paint a picture of a certain kind of leader, one who cares deeply about human beings, who is as attentive to culture as to structure, and who has the bravery to transform a school from its familiar form into something that is uncertain but potentially more compelling. The words also suggest commitment to a certain set of human and humane values. Human schools need human approaches to leadership.

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