

**THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SCHOLARSHIP,  
LEADERSHIP, AND AGENCY IN EDUCATION**



by

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**2016**

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***Education is both an art and a science.*** Just as parenting involves much more than feeding and clothing our children and raising them safely to adulthood, educating our children involves much more than teaching them the content of a curriculum. Too often in our public schools today we view education in terms of the one-dimensional output goals we have set for our students rather than in terms of the multi-dimensional input processes required of us as educators. The ability of our students to realize their own enduring, individual goals for a fulfilling career and functional lifestyle – that is the task we are charged with.

The works of Fullan, Sergiovanni, Greenleaf, Critical Theory scholars, and others suggests that, while demonstrating scholarship capacity toward those one is charged with serving as well as scholarship of self and others is at the core, there is more. Whether a teacher, a principal, college professor, dean, or superintendent, the roles of leader and advocate serve a vital and complementary function. Our responsibility as educators includes the demonstration of leadership towards those we lead – our students, our staff, and each other. Our duty also obligates us to be forceful and committed advocates for those we serve, as well as for self and others.

This means quite simply that, while our own scholarship and the academic acumen we pass on to our students is certainly the core of our purpose, it is not the whole job. There is more. Much more. We must be more than an Ethernet cable that connects a database of knowledge with the minds of the children. After all, when these children leave our care they will be adults or on the verge of adulthood. They will be tomorrow's leaders, tomorrow's parents, tomorrow's businessmen and women, and tomorrow's educators.

The word “educate” comes from Latin roots meaning “to rear,” “to train,” “to build up,” and “to lead.” As today's leaders, we must lead and not just teach.

*“We must be more than an Ethernet cable that connects a database of knowledge with the minds of the children.”*

We take the supple and magnificent minds of the sons and daughters of the families in our school districts under our wing for half of their waking hours during half of the days of their lives from kindergarten through graduation. They are scarcely more than toddlers when we get them from their parents, and they are adults when we give them back to society. We compete with private educators for the privilege of educating and shaping these decision-makers of tomorrow. We tout the benefits and advantages that only a public education system can provide for society as a whole, and we know these advantages require the participation of the vast majority of school children in order for us to fund and realize our vision. And we understand that we must not only have the curriculum but also the tools, the time, the dedication, and the attitude to give each of them what they need so that we can close the achievement gap and empower their spirits in preparation for the tasks and challenges of adulthood.

Scholarship is not enough – and neither is leadership. Agency is the third pillar we must master in order to make sure that we are complete educators with the ability and drive to keep any child from falling through the cracks of an incomplete and imperfect system.

It is impossible to deny that not only the content of the brains, but also the content of the mindsets, the spirits, and the character of the young adults emerging from our educational system is a reflection of our worth as educators. It is not our job to usurp the role of the fine parents of our district, but it is absolutely our responsibility to provide the stewardship and guidance our children need during the most formative hours of their most formative years.

It is our responsibility not only to introduce them to facts, but to *challenge their minds, unleash their talents, let them discover their inherent worth and competence, build their confidence along with their abilities, and release their natural human spirit so that they may discover and appreciate the limitless possibilities* that life has to offer them. We must do our part as educators to motivate them to seek and find their own vision of fulfillment and their own niche and inspiration for contributing to society and to their own fortune and wellbeing. Their success depends on our skills and abilities, not only in scholarship but also in the realms of leadership and Agency.

Education, like parenting, is a holistic process. If the knowledge we teach is to be effective and meaningful, we must consider the whole child and not just their academic proficiency. It is how these young adults perform, live, and cope once they leave our care that is the real test of our educational system – and of our worth as educators. If we don't prepare them for the wonders, pitfalls, challenges, and treasure of life, then we have failed.

Education and educational reform is the duty of everyone involved in the educational experience – the teacher, the principal and school administrators, counselors, superintendents and board members, and everyone at the District Office as well. Responsibility, credit, and blame run both uphill and down. We must synchronize our efforts and our resolve, and we must build a new paradigm of education as a team of professionals – as a team of worthy scholars, inspiring leaders, and committed advocates. Our task is to make ourselves better and fulfill every dimension of our role as educators. If we can do that, the rest of the process will take care of itself.

Based on years of research and scholarly studies throughout the profession, the driving force behind the optimization of the education of the future must include three important pillars: ***Scholarship, Leadership, and Agency.***



In order to create the processes that will transform the educational experience and enhance the core competency of our children – as human beings and not just as students – public education must expand its vision of the role that educators play in the teaching, learning, and administrative processes involved.

## **Scholarship**

A three-pronged transformational process still involves scholarship as the heart of our reason for existence, and the first dimension of well-rounded students and educators. Simply stated, scholarship might be seen as "an attitude, an intellectual posture, and a critical frame of mind... an internal value system, maturity, and foundational competencies of our discipline." (David Hodge Carolyn Haynes, University of Miami, 2008)

Our teachers need to know their stuff, and our students need to learn it. This is familiar ground and something we dedicated much of our time to. In fact, we're very good at it. We fall short from time to time, but we keep a constant eye on the knowledge of our teachers and the advancement of our students. But, of course, critical scholarship involves more than the credentials and abilities of the teachers; and effective pedagogy involves much more than turning on the font of knowledge in front of a classroom.

The transference of scholarship from teacher to student begins with an inspired curriculum, moves through inspired pedagogy, and culminates with an inspired mind. As with a transaction in the marketplace, the product has to be good and the salesman has to be effective if the end user is going to “buy” it. The best curriculum is pointless without a good “delivery” mechanism, and the best teacher is impotent without a quality curriculum. But unlike a marketplace transaction, the acquisition of knowledge requires the opportunity for the teacher, the student, and the content, to grapple, to work toward meaning making.

*“...scholarship might be seen as “an attitude, an intellectual posture, and a critical frame of mind...”*

It’s been said that you can lead a student to knowledge, but you can’t make him or her think. It’s time to reject that “blame the customer for not buying our product” kind of mentality. We have endless examples of teachers very knowledgeable in their pedagogy and skilled in instructional methodology, making students want to learn and eager for more knowledge. The definition of pedagogy must be expanded from Merriam Webster’s “The art, science, or profession of teaching” to something much deeper and more fundamental. An effective pedagogue must know more than the subject matter being taught. A teacher must also have the strategies, techniques, and human insights necessary to be a motivator, a psychologist, and a “student whisperer” to make real education happen. This must be done, not simply for the class as a whole, but for every individual student.

### ***Teaching is a means to an end and not an end in itself.***

A teacher-centric system must make room for a method of instruction that is designed around the student and learning. To quote the *Report for the Hewlett Foundation Program on Deep Learning*, “We believe that the days are coming to an end when teachers stand in front of classrooms and deliver boring lectures to passive students sitting in neat rows based on pre-determined curriculum that engages neither.”

Although there is no shortage of efforts toward more enlightened student-centered methodologies, we keep running into the same wall: How do we measure our results to the satisfaction of the politicians, boards, standards committees, and administrators without making the system an unworkable labyrinth of bureaucratic red tape?

The Hewlett Report pondered this dilemma regarding the immense promise of the new Common Core State Standards. In the formidable opinion of the team of scholars behind the report, the implementation of CCSS could go very wrong if it just sets another target that teachers must meet, making them feel like they have another target on their chest. This kind of measuring stick makes teachers feel as though they are being set up as

the ones to blame and fire when things don't go according to plan. There is plenty of evidence of states and districts using student performance to evaluate teachers and administrators using often simplistic objective measures that try to measure complex subjective tasks.

Teachers begin to fear failure and look for ways to avoid risk, and more of their energy gets caught up in trying to survive or change the evaluations than in making the new standards work. Or they just don't get enough preparation and support in the best ways to implement this new and frightening system. And it's not their fault. In the past we have told them that they will be judged on how their students perform on certain tests, and then we criticize them when they teach to the test.

Let's judge the system before we judge the people we task with implementing it. Let's learn about the beast we've created, discern the best implementation methods by observing many, train and groom our instructors over time, and improve and perfect the system before we pass judgment. And let's incorporate subjective human criteria to judge subjective human performance.

## **Leadership**

But scholarship is just the first pillar – the one that gets all the attention. Fully prepared young adults also need to experience (and learn) leadership if the public school system is to provide a great nation with the human resources it needs to thrive. As we prepare our children for college, careers, and life, it is essential that we integrate a brand of educational culture, practices, pedagogies, and broad-based policies that will contribute to create transformative district communities. This is the essence of leadership.

As Leithwood suggests, "...leadership cannot be separated from the context in which leadership is exerted. Leadership is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organization, the goals being pursued, the individuals involved, resources and timeframes and many other factors." Our leadership role is a complex one.

Leadership begins outside of the classroom with the development and implementation of a coherent vision with a moral dimension based on ***purpose, values, and principles***. By a moral dimension I am not referring to brand name religious morality, but rather to a broader human morality that has found a timeless consensus across all religions, belief systems, and ethnicities. "Thou shalt not kill," for instance, regardless of what you think of its origin, has stood the test of time to become a universal human principle and not simply religious dogma. We follow it because we choose to, we

want to. We follow it because we believe in our core that it is right. That is the strength and power of a moral code. Let's compare a system of morality to one of obedience.

A system of obedience *indoctrinates* us to follow artificially created rules "because I said so" or because we have to "or else." That's fine for a toddler who might need help making decisions, but it's not fine for school children.

*"...leadership cannot be separated from the context in which leadership is exerted. Leadership is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organization, the goals being pursued, the individuals involved, resources and timeframes and many other factors."*

A system of morality *instills* us with the desire to follow inspired leadership because we want to follow that which we see as a natural truth. Real leadership instills broad human values that inspire and expand fresh human minds. The first of those values must be that learning is good, exciting, worthwhile, cool, and even exhilarating. When the mind is receptive and engaged, then and only then can we transfer knowledge and instill a fundamental desire to learn. With that desire comes greater success in the classroom and beyond.

Leadership may require each of us to break down different barriers for different children. Leadership requires us to gain the trust and respect of the children we serve. The test is simple: If the children will not follow you, then you are not yet a leader. The truth is, all of us have work to do in that department. Leadership abilities will develop faster if we implement a system of substantive collaboration, design a comprehensive research-based latticework of professional growth and leadership plans for staff, and behave with the highest degree of self-respect and integrity.

The hidden bonus in providing inspired leadership is that we will generate inspired and inspiring leaders for the next generation. As leaders, we become role models that active, healthy minds want to emulate. Volition as opposed to coercion is the power of leadership. If they want to learn, they will choose to learn; if they choose to learn, they will learn. That is why we must be role models and leaders.

## **Agency**

The infrastructure of dynamic and effective education is not complete without agency. This is truly the human link to each individual student that provides empowerment and enfranchisement for students who would otherwise not realize their full potential or fall through the cracks entirely. Each student needs something, and each class as a whole

needs the power of our united support. Without this piece, the entire system will become dysfunctional and fail.

But the scope of agency does not end with the student. Educators must advocate for themselves and for the tools they need. They must advocate for change when they see dysfunction or discover a better methodology or course of study. They must advocate to politicians, school boards, the District Office, parents, the community, and even local merchants when they see a need that is going unmet. Agency is simply applied leadership in the pursuit of solutions to issues that we see and know must be acted upon.

Agency can come in many forms. It can close the achievement gap for students who need individual help. It can level the playing field for students who cannot yet compete or blend with the main stream of the student population. It can provide the tools and technology needed for teachers and students to be at the top of their game. It can change the system with input that will make everyone more successful. It will identify and overcome injustice and obstacles for teachers. And it will apply a moral compass to guide us toward a brand of social justice that will not pick winners, but rather will identify and give a hand up to those who do not yet know how to win.

## ***Agency is hope, justice, and improvement***

Agency is hope, justice, and improvement. It requires empathy, courage, patience, and skill. It requires caring enough to go through the “hassle” of actually doing something when an issue is seen. If a surgeon sees a cancer and just lets it grow, she is not a moral person and she is not doing her job. The built-in protections that the system gives us can make us lazy if we lose faith or just stop caring. But we too must all be committed to “first do no harm” and then to do all that we can to make our system just a little bit better every day.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, it’s about the children, the future, and the prosperity and contentment of our entire society. But we can’t fix the end; we can only fix the process that leads us there. The system is us, and its functionality and success are reflections of the strength and enthusiasm with which we hold up the pillars of scholarship, leadership, and agency.

Lee S. Shulman, president emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, hits the nail on the head when he reminds us that we are all members of at least two professions: our discipline, whether it is a field of study or administrative expertise, and our profession as educators. He goes on to say:

In both of these intersecting domains, we bear the responsibilities of

scholars – to discover, to connect, to apply, and to teach. As scholars, we take on the obligation to add to the core of understanding, skepticism, method, and critique that defines our fields and their ever-changing borders.

To his discussion of professionalism, Shulman adds the need for pragmatism and a kind of “active scholarship” that allows us to reflect on and improve our own skills as educators. He says:

The professional rationale is critical, but not sufficient. We also have a practical rationale for pursuing the scholarship of teaching and learning. Such work helps guide our efforts in the design and adaptation of teaching in the interests of student learning. By engaging in purposive reflection, documentation, assessment and analysis of teaching and learning, and doing so in a more public and accessible manner, we...support the improvement of our own teaching.

By applying the same kind of analytical insights, research techniques, and powers of observation that we routinely use in the scholarly advancement of a field of study or the creation of a curriculum to our own processes and methods in our role as educators, we can move beyond the role of scholars to the responsibilities of scholars – to lead, advocate, and expand the envelope and impact of public education as usual.

Education is perhaps the single most critical element in the lives of our children. An education that bestows them not only with knowledge, but also with the kind of inspiration, motivation, and confidence they need to make wise and responsible decisions. In fact, education has the possibility of improving the lives of our children in ways that no other institution can.

The three pillars described in this essay are designed to have us consider what their collective impact can be on the transformation of schooling. ***If applied with clear purpose, they can affect the resourcefulness, leadership, and compassion our educators use to improve themselves, empower their role, and reach students.*** There are things we can learn from our innovative teachers who think outside the box. There are things we can learn from the micromanaging systems of assessment and oversight that have challenged us time after time. It's time that we realize there may be better and more holistic methodologies of bringing inspirational and

motivational verve to ourselves, to our capacity and influence as educators, and to the minds of our young students.

The New York Yankees aren't perennial champions because they find and gather teams that are the most knowledgeable in the sport of baseball. They succeed because they find and nurture the people who know how to translate the knowledge they have into results on the field. They don't select a pitching coach simply because of his academic knowledge of curve balls and sliders; they select him because he can convey the fundamentals and advanced techniques to the pitchers, because he can make them believe in themselves and their abilities, and because he can make them want to get the results that will serve them and the whole team well.

Public schools are full of highly qualified and brilliant teachers. Their job – and ours – is to lead our children to a place of passion and discovery and to help each and every one of them cross the finish line with the confidence and will to succeed.

We have the people, and we have the desire. Now we need the right plan – a plan that will refocus our efforts not only on the scholarship of the educators, but on the passion with which we lead and the compassion with which we develop agency for our own success and that of each and every student.