

Theory of action

A teacher's moral purpose to make changes to benefit students helps shape a school goal and clear vision.

by Denise Ell-Mansueti

We cannot always
build the future for our youth,
but we can build our youth
for the future.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Who am I and where am I going? To fully understand my leadership work and my leadership plan one must first understand my moral purpose. I am not the formal leader at Douglas Fir Elementary School. Presently I am a grade four teacher and have worked at Douglas Fir 13 of my 23 years as an educator. I am also a parent who has had the experience of raising both a high

achieving student and a low achieving student as defined by the British Columbia public education system. School has been a breeze for our son who is a logical, organized, critical thinker. On the other hand our daughter, who is creative and full of imagination, did not fare as well.

It became extremely frustrating as she moved through the school system with little or no assistance. Advocating for our daughter was a

continual battle. Testing situations became our family's worst nightmare. Her oral communication was exceptional (fourth year university level in grade 10) yet oral presentations were never recognized as an option of assessment. Once she reached middle and high school her poor academic standings were devastating and she was humiliated and ridiculed publicly for late assignments and often would not hand in completed assignments for fear of the ridicule that she would receive. Yes, this sounds like an exaggeration but unfortunately it is not. Our daughter was lucky as she had a family that was familiar with the education system and could advocate for her as she pushed through a structured and stringent system, yet this is not the case for the majority of struggling students.

One evening my daughter and her friends (of all academic achievement levels) were reflecting on their school experiences and I was fortunate to be included in the conversation. They asked, "Why do schools want

us to fail? Why do teachers not give us opportunities to redo tests, or to redo papers? We never even see our papers again! We won't cheat; we just want to know how we did. Yeah, but even when we get a grade it is the same every time. I always got Bs and would wonder how do I get an A?" Needless to say I was inspired. I had a tremendous amount of theory to support the use of Assessment for Learning but now I had a narrative mindset (Kaser & Halbert, 2009) straight from the most important people, the learners.

I went to work the next day and repeated the story. To my surprise few of the staff were interested. My thought process was clearly different. I believed that it was our moral purpose to make changes. Kaser and Halbert (2009) stated that "the moral purpose mindset asks you, as a school leader, to explore what the notions of quality and equity mean, and to consider the implications of developing new forms of quality" (p. 4). The conversation with my daughter's friends, her experiences in school, along with the indifference from my colleagues reflected that a lack of quality and equity existed.

Richard Elmore stated in his article, *A Plea for Strong Practice* that "in our society, educators are usually people to whom things happen, not people who make things happen" (2003, p. 9). This statement resonated within me because I wanted to be an educator who made things happen, an educator who made school and learning exciting for all learners (students and adults). At my school, Douglas Fir Elementary, Elmore's statement rang true; certainly some teachers working at Douglas Fir were waiting for things to happen. We were cruising along in the system. Learners were growing, stu-

dents took advantage of the sports program and attendance was good. No need to change what was working. Based on this and the above reactions I realized I needed to share my learning and maybe offer the "something" they were waiting for, but how? I started off by taking a deep breath and forged forward, keeping my moral purpose of quality and equity for all learners at the forefront of my mind.

I began by considering my intentions? What was my real purpose for sharing my new found knowledge? I formulated two intentions that I wished to share with the staff; 1) to understand the power of using formative assessment in the classroom 2) To experience how an inquiry question encourages reflection of the actions taken to improve student achievement. As I was formulating my ideas I began to realize that my true inner intention was to reignite the staff's curiosity about student learning. My intention was to make the shift from a sorting school to a learning school (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). By making the change from setting school goals to developing

an inquiry question Douglas Fir was beginning to shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

I then considered a theory of action or a "story line that makes a vision and a strategy concrete" (City et al, 2009, p. 40). Since I am not the formal leader of the school I began developing my theory of action by creating opportunities for professional conversations with the formal leader and with staff who were interested. I presented some foundational theory about Assessment for Learning (AFL) which created healthy debates based on formative and summative assessment. More staff began to "drop by" my classroom asking me to show them how I used AFL. Soon after this period of time I attended a district literacy meeting regarding school goals. The school goals in our district were too broad and it was suggested that we reshape the school goals into one inquiry question. I immediately realized the window for opportunity had arrived.

I returned to the school and presented the district's focus and suggested we use our next Professional



Denise with her students at Douglas Fir Elementary.

Learning Community (PLC) meeting to reshape our school's goals. I then introduced the "spiral of inquiry" (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p. 76). The spiral of inquiry enabled the staff to establish a clear vision in their quest to develop an inquiry question, but more importantly it gave the staff a direction to follow once the question was formulated. By using the spiral of inquiry we were able to identify an important challenge, generate an improvement question, and develop the necessary criteria for success (Kaser and Halbert, 2009). The spiral of inquiry reassured the staff that the inquiry question was important and that "an inquiry – orientated approach to improving learning is not linear, sequential, or fully predictable" (p. 76) and its unpredictability would make it important to revisit and adjust along the way. With this understanding Douglas Fir staff was not only able to reshape the goal into an inquiry question but also decided to include the use of AFL strategies. The agreement to use AFL strategies was not a complete "buy-in." However, after it was explained to the staff that "best practice" was happening at Douglas Fir and that AFL could easily be incorporated into their present practice only a few remained skeptical. Recognizing the current "best practice" of the staff was important as it respected what they were already doing and they then trusted that I was not suggesting a complete change of their instructional practice.

It is important to note at this time that the issue of trust did not develop over night. I had the good fortune to have worked with the majority of teachers for many years and trust had been established through past experiences. Tschannen-Moran (as cited in Mitchell & Sackney, 2009,

p. 77) has found that, "when teachers perceived greater levels of trust in their school, they reported a greater sense of efficacy; ... trust was necessary for schools to reap the benefits of greater collaboration." To retain this trust I would need to ensure that "teachers are confident that they will be given the support they need to develop the more effective practice" (Timberley, 2008, p. 7)

How am I doing? While developing the school's inquiry question I utilized three of the four inquiry mindsets (Kaser and Halbert, 2009). I have "listened to the narratives" (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p. 77), and asked myself "how to develop a new storyline" (p. 77). I have begun to "challenge theories of action" (p.77) and I will continue to reflect "both individually and with a trusted colleague" (p. 77). I am aware that I have not utilized the benefits of appreciative inquiry. Kaser and Halbert state that "many school leaders find that the use of appreciative inquiry as a form of investigation infuses renewed energy into their school's community" (p. 67).

Through the next steps of our theory of action it will fall on me to continue to renew the energy and to

build capacity by supplying the staff with resources, information and constant support.

Where to next? Douglas Fir staff has committed to implementing learning intentions and criteria over the 2010 – 2011 school year with the understanding that we will expand our focus to implement other AFL strategies over the next two years. The next steps are in the planning process and will involve adult learning by offering opportunities during staff meetings and PLCs to discuss and share successes and concerns when incorporating the AFL strategies. The PLC sessions will also include time to share archived webcasts which offer samples of AFL in practice across the province. A book club has been organized using the book, *Targeting Assessment in the Primary Classroom* by Shirley Clarke (1998) to begin to build a strong AFL foundation. I have made the book available as an option for interested staff to read over the summer months or they have the option to join the group in September. A second book, *How to Give Feedback to Your Students* by Susan Brookhart (2008), has been made available for those teachers who would like to

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forge forward.

I have established a critical friend (grade 2 teacher) within the school who will be working on a cross grade learner project (Kaser & Halbert, 2008) with my grade four class. As Timberley and Earl stated (as cited in Kaser & Halbert, 2008, p. 3) “significant change in schooling depends on the creation of new knowledge for the adults making the decisions.” I wanted to make changes in my classroom as well and by exploring something new I can then share this strategy with staff and invite others to incorporate this practice into their classrooms.

Without my formal leader’s understanding of distributed leadership this opportunity to build capacity and to recognize the importance of quality and equity for all learners would not have materialized.

He gave me the trust and respect to move forward with my knowledge. My leader realized the truth behind the statement, “Powerful leadership is distributed because the work of instructional improvement is distributed” (Elmore, 2003, p. 10). He paid attention to “who knows what and how that knowledge can strengthen the organization” (p. 9) and improve a school.

Teachers at Douglas Fir Elementary have begun professional conversations around Assessment for Learning, standardized testing and summative assessment. They have formulated an inquiry question focused on student achievement and are ready to learn more about AFL. Conver-

sations and education are happening and Elmore’s (2003) article stressed that one way to improve schools was through instructional practice and that “bad policy happens in part because of educators’ weak knowledge and weak practice” (p. 10). Douglas Fir is just beginning but our knowledge is growing and our practice is strengthening. My dream is that no other child will experience school the way our daughter did. My dream for learners today is that every educator “makes a shift from an emphasis on teaching to a focus on deep learning and to shift from learning for some to learning for all” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p. 17). 

Denise is a teacher leader, who is passionate about school change and equity. Denise is currently working on Vancouver Island and holds a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Vancouver Island University.

Know More

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