

Reflections on EAD 801

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Over the last few months, in addition to taking the EAD 801 – Leadership and Organizational Development course, I have developed a new found hobby. This hobby is bread-making and, even if I say so myself, I have become rather good at it. At least, this is what I'm told by those who are subjected to my loaves at community gatherings.

The process of learning this bread-making skill, and what I have learnt in this course have interesting similarities especially when I think of the ingredients and effort that go into bread-making as well as into the art of leading.

So, if you will excuse my metaphorical connection, which attempts to link my major insights, shifts in thinking and overall learnings of this course to the essentials of bread-making, I will proceed. It is my hope that through this reflection and the questions that I pose at the end of this essay, I will have been able to show the extent of the influence this course has had on my own approach to leading (especially in a Culture of Change) and hopefully the benefits of applying what I have learnt.

Flour is clearly the largest component of bread dough and functions as a binding agent. It pervades all aspects of the bread and literally holds it together. For me then, the flour is like the mission and vision of a school. These core beliefs need to infuse and permeate all that the school is about. So often, that very element is only placed on the front door of the school or hung on a hallway wall but never manages to work its way into the hearts and minds of those that live and work within its walls.

A little while ago, we were due for an MSA (Middle States Association) reaccreditation visit. The visiting team's initial comments were very complimentary. "You have a beautiful campus, your teaching staff seems to be made up of wonderful people (they had just had their first dinner with us), the students appear engagingly diverse. We look forward to an interesting visit." This first bit of affirmation, however, was contrasted by a concern, "Where," one of them asked, "are your school's mission and vision statements. I don't see them posted around the school." Apparently this was/is an MSA expectation. We of course have them in all our literature but for some reason had not emblazoned them in a plaque. Clearly, the crisp outer crust of our bread was expected to be in full evidence and the school community was expected to be constantly visually reminded of these statements. What, though of the heart of our school? Our then School Head, who was known for being able to think on his feet, and obviously faced with this over-sight ... after all the work we did in preparation for this visit, quick as a flash responded with, "Don't look for the mission and vision statements posted on the walls – because you won't find them. Observe the students while you are here and see if it is written in the way they behave. Look to see if it is written on their hearts." Our students, over those days, lived up to these expectations and we were reaccredited.

Another essential ingredient in bread is the rising agent - yeast. It is by no means as clearly visible as the flour and is one certainly doesn't use as much. It is, however, an organism that infiltrates every part of the bread and gives it 'lift' or direction. This relatively small quantity is made up for by the quality of its effect on the bread. This is perhaps then the same as having Fullan's Moral Purpose evident in the school. Just a little bit of moral purpose can cause a great reaction, and in a school community this can be the make or break of a successful organisation.

It has been quite sobering for me to understand the extent to which moral purpose has an influence of an organization.

The school at which I am at present working has, from my perspective, started to lose its moral purpose. As I commented in my research project, because of the amount and frequency of staff turnover, I believe that the school is so busy playing “catch-up” with this phenomenon of transience that it has possibly forgotten how to maintain its moral purpose. The yeast in this 156 year-old establishment has begun to get old. Its ability to contend with the diversity that it so gladly embraces, is at a low point. It feels as though there are so many different voices, from so many different perspectives, that those looking to follow don’t seem to be able to ascertain what the school stands for. The result is that many people on the staff simply close themselves into their classrooms, care (very well) for their students, but don’t happily venture opinions or get involved in the life of the school as much as they could. It feels as though we are overdue for a concerted effort by the leadership to re-envision the school or at least to make the desired student outcomes (so clearly published online) all that more attainable.

I also believe that a moral purpose is created or enhanced by the careful and methodical time spent working on developing agreed upon beliefs and norms, and then ultimately a shared Mission Statement that encapsulates where an organization/school is headed as it works through change. This we did at some stage, several years back, but it has not been revisited as often as it should. As Fullan comments, and I am sure our course’s small group felt, when we developed our beliefs and norms for our (fictitious) school, “... a sense of moral purpose on the part of employees is important and can make a huge difference in the performance of the organization.” I found myself wishing that we could literally follow through with creating our small-group’s school.

What is also essential to grasp is that in order for an organization/school to be sustainable in a “non-linear world” (which is also something I reflected on in my research project), leaders need to hold onto their Moral Purpose and cultivate their knowledge, understanding and skills in a world that doesn’t offer step by step guidelines for working in a culture of change. In essence a leader needs to be able to adapt when necessary to different leadership styles in order to provide sustainability. Successfully engaging with this “complexity science” as Fullan puts it, sees leaders grappling with the “mysteries of life and living” and succeeding. Having many of the complexities of leading in a culture of change - where you are often not clear about what surprise tomorrow will bring - articulated and then practically addressed, is what, for me, makes Fullan’s thoughts indispensable. He provides an arsenal of perspective that, if understood and practiced, can allow for a very constructive and dynamic process, through his Framework for Leadership model that will lead towards a shared goal.

And so, back to my bread analogy. In order to activate the yeast I have to add it to warm (body temperature) sugar-water. If the water is too hot it will kill the yeast. If it is too cold the yeast will simply not work. This body-temperature sugar-water is the same as having just the right amount of Goleman’s “body-temperature” emotional intelligence (EI). Without this attribute in the school’s leadership, the result can be a resentful, fearful, apathetic and often, immovable staff. In a culture of change this can be an obstacle that is insurmountable.

As a leader, if I am to exercise EI, I need constantly to ask of myself how I aid my staff in attaining the goals, stated aims, objectives and expectations over the year. This would help me to make sure that I know the specific needs of my teachers. A school leader must be a facilitator and never get in the way of good teaching and learning. This is the water that moistens the dough

and, ultimately, bread or final product. Perhaps one could also see it as that which “oils the works”.

The antithesis of this, unfortunately, was something I saw in the same head of school I mentioned earlier. He had immense academic intelligence coupled with an unbelievable ability to articulate that which was in his head, but he had a very little social intelligence. He would run ahead of the rest of us with an amazing (almost dazzling) vision for the school and had an unbelievable sense of what he wanted and how he would get it. He could do his job and apparently ours as well if, as he often seemed to believe, we were not up to the task. He was clearly an authoritarian and pacesetter leader. At the time, this was certainly not what we needed. (I wonder if it ever is.)

Fullan comments that the pacesetter style of leadership affects the school climate negatively and I certainly agree but I found that the authoritarian style, which only sometimes managed to mobilize our staff towards a common vision and goal, often left all but the most thick-skinned and self-assured educators feeling quite inadequate.

I worked quite closely with this leader on several school development projects (curriculum and programs, as well as physical infrastructure) but often felt as if he was assuming all the work - clearly he didn't suffer fools gladly and the more we charged ahead, the more I felt like a fool. There was clearly not enough water to help the dough to be elastic enough to work.

There were certain elements of his work and personality that I admired and aspired to - the fact that he was so driven and clear thinking was an inspiration. But, as time went by and now on reflection of his leadership, I think I have learnt more about what not to do with a team of educational professionals.

Something that he seemed not to consider but that I believe as essential, is to remember that an organization such as a school is a living breathing organism that changes, grows, feels pain, delights in, aches, grows some more ... and there are so many things to take note of and from which to learn. If a school's leaders do not stop to reflect on that which those around have to offer, the leader starts to lose these benefits and misses out on so many opportunities to learn.

Over three summers I attended several institutes on leadership through the Principal's Training Centre (thePTC.org). One of my greatest learnings from this time was to remember to self-reflect. To self-reflect of course without beating oneself up, which is sometimes quite hard as a leader. Self-reflection helps one to be aware of the social dynamics of an organization and helps one to lead and guide gently but firmly. With this carefully cultivated aspect of EI, much of the job of leading is made significantly easier.

The water in bread making has to have sugar in it for the yeast to be activated. The yeast, as far as I understand, feeds on the sugar, thereby helping it to grow and to do that for which it is added in the first place – to make the bread rise. A leader that exercises a well developed EI will always “sweeten” the way that a community operates and help it to “rise” or grow.

Another small additive to bread dough is salt. This amazing ingredient makes the end product all the more flavoursome. Again the quantities have to be just right. Too much salt, apart from the obvious health risks, can render the bread inedible. Too little and the flavour is not enhanced. Bread without salt for me, is like teaching without the guidance and direction of colleagues who function as teacher leaders. You are left with a strange taste in your mouth that has you wondering what was missing. Salt-less bread is edible but is just not quite as successful as you would wish. It is often not successful at all. Some would say that it looks and feels like bread but it certainly does not taste like bread.

The term Teacher Leader (TL) was new to me in this course but mostly only in name, as I have used various terms for this function in the various schools at which I have worked. In my present school we have worked with the calling TLs “master teachers”, “mentors” and “coaches” and all have been met with varied success. What has caused a significant shift in my thinking has been the application of the “teachers as Leaders Framework” that is spelt out in Crowther et.al’s. book on developing teacher leaders.

This framework delineates what it is to become truly inculcated in the school community and then to function as a leader from within the ranks. It has become more and more clear to me that, whereas, school leaders fulfil an essential role that helps the school to function administratively, TLs function in an indispensable role that helps colleagues to feel part of a Professional Learning Community. They facilitate learning in the school community by creating as many opportunities for discourse on what it is to be a teacher. They develop a positive school culture and take good ideas and make them succeed. They always strive for excellence and, most importantly for me, as Crowther et al. puts it, they constantly “convey convictions about a better world”. This forward thinking attitude could well be the saving grace for the world of tomorrow.

This then brings me to the last part of bread-making, before the actual baking of the dough. I have found that if I do not knead the dough several times, it never has the same lightness and integrity of structure than when I do. My children laugh at the amount of beating and slapping, stretching and pulling I do to the dough before I form it and put it in the oven. My five year-old daughter also feels quite sorry for it and asks if it feels any pain.

Pain it would feel if it was the reculturing and change process in schools of which Michael Fullan speaks. Our school is no exception and sometimes the pain can be quite overwhelming.

I live and work in a place that is defined by change simply because of the transient nature of our staff and students. In addition to the stresses of continually saying goodbye to people and hello to others, over the past few (maybe 4) years, the school has changed the class timetable almost as many times. This coming year, our Principal (Head of School) of 2 years has decided on a move from a 3 school model (Elementary, Middle and High) to a 2 school model (KG-6 and 7-12). The administrative structure is being changed again, and has already changed during this principal's tenure. We have extensive facilities building on the go, with a new gym and residence hall just completed and plans to start on the high school building and other residence halls - all good stuff but disruptive none-the-less. The board seems distant and disengaged without a clear sense of what is happening "on the ground" - this 25 member strong reliquary meets only twice a year. And, somewhere within this, teaching and learning needs to and, for the most part, does take place. People, though, are left feeling battered and weary at what is clearly a "restructuring" but involving very little conscious, proactive "reculturing".

Strangely enough, it has been my experience that with extensive restructuring there is always an inadvertent reculturing. I believe that this inadvertent reculturing is probably of the most dangerous sort, as it is not defined or consciously established and certainly through no collaboration that leads to consensus. There is certainly lots of time to meet (at different levels) but the result is often, using Andy Hargreave's term, "contrived congeniality". The question is indeed "... who owns it?" and, "where is the sense of identity?" It leaves the "oldies" feeling that the original mission is being lost and the "newbies" unsure of what we are all about.

So where are the positives in all this? The kneading, and in some cases –pummelling – that comes with change is a painful but necessary process. In bread, it gets out any air pockets what could erupt during the baking process and ensures that all the ingredients are very well mixed so that they become more useful than the sum of their individual parts. This, in essence, is how a successful team of educators could and should work. Each accommodates and compliments the other’s strengths and thereby ensures that the desired end product - that of student learning, is achieved.

I was delighted to see Roland Barth spell out the essential attributes of a leader as a culture builder. If, or when, I get back into a leadership role, I will put his attributes on my wall as a management mantra (I hate the word management but it works for the alliteration).

“Expect, Relinquish, Trust, Empower, Include, Protect, Recognize, Share responsibility for failure and, Give credit for success.”

These are the essential elements of cultivating great teacher leaders in a profession where, as Barth continues, “All ... can lead”. This will begin to allow for a shared vision and a sense of collaboration with purpose. Hopefully this would also draw out those who “lead alone” (positive as this is) to become part of the shared vision because all can begin to own it.

So, what now of this collection of ingredients, mixed together, given time to rise, kneaded, given more time to rise and kneaded again and again? Now it needs time in the oven to bake, much like what this reflection has done for me. It has taken the duration of this course to mix, rise, have my thoughts kneaded and eventually placed in the oven to change into the end product. Here, however, my metaphor ends as I have to see this process of becoming a more informed and hopefully better leader as something that can never end.

I am left then with a few lingering questions and thoughts that, as I seek to answer them, will hopefully keep me on the path of life-long learning. One has to do with what the best type of leader is to lead in a culture of change. Is there a specific combination of leadership styles that works better and how does personality affect leadership? My experience is that it is difficult to ascertain the exact ratio of a specific personality type to good leadership, but I can't help feeling that developing aspects of one's personality can have an effect on how successful leadership can be.

On another level, and having lived for almost a decade in an international school in a foreign land and dealing with a diverse populace, I am left wondering as to the benefits inherent in an organizational structure such as this. Are international schools at the cutting edge of globalized education or, as has also been my experience, wallowing in the mire and pain of a transient populace without time to focus on a specific moral purpose and hopefully its impact on the world? Lest I/we forget, teaching and leading, in schools is not an end in itself. All that we as educators in schools should be geared towards is enabling the next generation of learners to live, lead and relate appropriately towards one another and the environment so that they are able to transmit it as well, if not better, to the next.

One of the main objectives or purposes of international schools is to enable their students to gain a clearer understanding of what it means to be living in this "global village" and to gain a greater understanding of their responsibility towards it. Others also place an emphasis on creating the leaders of tomorrow and actively attempt to instil in their students a sense of what it is to lead in the world of tomorrow. I trust that, on balance, the difficulties of living and schooling in these environments never outweigh the amazing potential and opportunities for learning that these schools provide.

In conclusion, perhaps the words of a noteworthy leader, who always considered himself as a fellow traveller in the exciting pursuit of knowledge, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the eminent academic and ex-president of India, better expresses that which I have attempted to say. He said, "The aim of education, is not the acquisition of information, although important, or acquisition of technical skills, though essential in modern society, but the development of that bent of mind, that attitude of reason, that spirit of democracy which will make us responsible citizens." I have to consider these ideals as essential pursuits in any leading that I do with both my staff and students.