

Nurturing Deep Connections: Five Principles for Welcoming Soul Into School Leadership

Rachael Kessler

"What are the 'inner' skills and strengths you have cultivated and sustained that make you a strong leader today?" I asked Bob Adams, the superintendent in Aurora, Colo.

"It's about relationship," he replied. Whether it was with his students in his days of teaching or with the principals and teachers he leads today, "the relationship is critical."

The quality of relationship came up again and again as superintendents around the country shared their thoughts and experiences about the soul of leadership.

"You begin to learn from people you connect with, some feeling about them. Some friendship, some connection. It's the human part of what we do," Adams said. "Principals come to me and say we need to recreate our culture. I ask them, what behaviors are you willing to change? Because you can't talk yourself into culture, just as you can't legislate morality. You do it by the way you behave, the way you relate and connect to other people.

"If in leadership your first resort is to use the power of your title, the relationship never occurs except that someone always knows that you have a title."

Adams conveys a more subtle power than the force of title or position. Fostering a climate for meaningful connection, his leadership works toward a transformation from within, which he distinguishes from "cosmetic compliance."

Often missing in the equations of school

reform is the dimension of soul. In my book *The Soul of Education*, I provide a framework for nourishing the inner life of students in ways that honor the separation of church and state and the deeply held beliefs of families and teachers.

This framework is organized around a set of yearnings or needs that students express in their questions and their stories about what matters most to them: the search for meaning and purpose, the longing for silence and solitude, the hunger for joy and delight, the creative drive, the urge for transcendence, the instinctual need for initiation and, permeating them all, the yearning for what I have called "deep connection." Many simple, ordinary, respectful practices can be integrated into classrooms to honor these gateways to the soul of students. But what does soul have to do with school leadership?

Soul Defined

Let's begin with a definition of soul-- not from a religious treatise but from an experience palpably felt in classrooms, in meetings principals hold with faculty or in meetings administrators have with their teams.

When soul enters the room, we listen in a new way. We listen not only to what is spoken but also to the messages between the words--tones, gestures, the flicker of feeling across the face. When soul is present in education, attention shifts. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. Questions become as important as answers.

In almost 20 years of exploring the

spiritual dimension of education, I found that the experience of deep connection stands out most in the stories of students, teachers and school administrators. A quality of relationship that is resonant with meaning and authenticity, deep connection was evoked again and again when superintendents and assistant superintendents from California to Colorado and Connecticut talked with me about the power of relationships, listening, empathy and compassion.

In a classroom, school or district where the soul of education is welcome and safe, deep connection allows masks to drop away. Colleagues begin to share the joy and success they once feared would spur competition and jealousy. They share the vulnerability and uncertainty they feared would make them look weak in front of peers and superiors. And they rediscover meaning and purpose in their collective responsibility for the children.

Deep Connections

The soul of leadership begins with deep connection to the self, the source of what administrators called "personal integrity," "resilience in the face of setbacks, criticism and even misrepresentation" and "the capacity to reflect and create opportunities for silence."

Next comes deep connection to others: "the ability to listen deeply to others, to their beliefs, dreams, opinions, visions and strengths;" "empathy and compassion;" and "respect for others who differ in any and all ways."

And for some district leaders, what most defines the soul of leadership is their deep connection to a higher power: "a sense of awe for infinite mystery" or "a relationship with God in which you learn to be humble enough to forgive and to use your influence only to help others."

Sustaining deep connection to themselves has become quite natural for the leaders with whom I spoke. This ease carries over to their one-to-one work with those they lead. Individually, they bring their capacities for listening deeply, respecting

others with fundamental differences, and connecting meaningfully with empathy and compassion. But for all of them, deep connection to community--bringing soul into their work with their teams--is a more daunting challenge.

As administrators reflected on what allowed them to sustain and strengthen their own inner dimension of leadership, the power of silence stood out.

Eileen Rowley of Farmington, Conn., was emphatic about the urgency of silence to maintaining her connection to herself now that she is an assistant superintendent, saying, "In this work, you're constantly supporting people's needs and thinking about policy. You're always giving out to others and you're constantly on stage. I can't go to the grocery store without someone knowing me. I need that stillness to come back into myself."

These leaders had discovered subtle ways to infuse silence into their leadership with others. "In small ways, I try to cultivate more of the stillness and less of the busyness. Sometimes it's about dropping away one item from the agenda," Rowley said. Adams, the superintendent in Colorado, offered: "I pose a question and then say, I don't expect you to answer me now. Just think about this, and then next week, let's talk about this again."

Leadership With Soul

"A critical sense of leadership is a true sense of empathy--the ability to stand on the other side of the mirror," Adams said, describing his belief that real behavioral change can only come through the depth and consistency of relationship that coaching provides. "There's never been a champion without a coach."

"I need to have an individual I can trust to talk with about issues that concern me," Howley said. The quality of connection to her own superintendent was her first response when I asked her what sustained her strength as a leader.

"I could be concerned about something a

principal said or did in a meeting," said Howley. "It sustains me that I have a superintendent whom I can go to who helps me think things through. He's a powerful influence in helping me problem solve."

When it's her turn to be the coach, Howley has discovered the humility and openness that leads to true listening. "I've had to cultivate a part of me that can listen incredibly hard to people, to try not to bring in my own biases and responses. It's hard when they're critical of something you're passionate about. But I really try to hear people. It requires an inner suspension of my own issues," she said.

An assistant superintendent in California wrote: "Accept that your truth is only yours." Another said, "I've learned to hear criticism and not get overly wounded, but to get curious and involved. I've learned to listen for the need expressed within the issue presented. And to sustain a sense of self even when my actions and decisions are purposely misrepresented by others."

Challenge of Fear

The issue of fear, of working with people who threaten and feel threatened, surfaced again and again. Some administrators were explicit about the current climate in which educators don't just feel threatened--they are threatened--by humiliation, intimidation and even loss of leadership and livelihood as accountability is measured almost exclusively on the basis of high-stakes tests.

"Many of our assistant superintendents have stopped coming to our professional development if the subject is anything but strategies obviously related to test scores," lamented one participant in a workshop for assistant superintendents. "Building and district leaders are feeling more competitive with each other because they're being publicly compared to each other, ranked in ways that make it hard to build trust and collaborative leadership."

While discussing their views on the soul of

leadership, a group of assistant superintendents in San Bernardino, Calif., offered poignant stories of healing relationships they had with students in the days when they worked as assistant principals. In each of their stories, a chronic troublemaker frightened about punishment grew into a committed student when, for the first time in his schooling, he felt deeply cared for.

I asked these school leaders how they bring this same quality of connection into their work with teams of principals. They sighed with frustration. "It's just so hard to make changes there when the system runs on hierarchy. How can we build that trust when people are so afraid to reveal themselves in a climate of fear?"

Superintendent Adams delved deeper into the systemic sources of fear: "In our society, we spend more time as critics than as builders. We seem to feel this entitlement to do that in a punitive way, an atmosphere of 'gotcha!' And that creates fearfulness." At a recent in-service program, he offered his school leaders an alternative message: "The thing to remember is, if there's enough love, fear can't exist in most places."

Teams with Soul

Working with groups, the challenge to move from fear, polarization, or even efficiency to soul increases. Yet meaningful connection in teams can dissolve this fear and build trust across the divides of beliefs, roles, hierarchy and competition.

When we introduce the value of soul into school reform, we are engaging in a radical enterprise: the gradual softening of the boundary between the public and the private self. We do so for a reason.

In every sector of society today, people express a yearning for authentic community, for opportunities to express more fully who we are in the places we spend most of our time. In the workplace, schools, towns and even in the political arena, leaders are responding to this call

by bringing in leadership tools that can foster more authentic expression.

While the call is loud and clear, the personal risks are high. Whether it is students in the classroom or adults in team meetings, some people are afraid to reveal themselves or feel it is inappropriate to do so. Our job as leaders is to acknowledge these risks and to respect that caution. If we want people to share their souls, we need to create environments where it is safe to do so.

Five principles of leadership are essential in implementing new strategies or structures, especially when we ask people to open their hearts or reveal the longings in their soul. I learned these principles first with adolescents, a time in students' lives when the world is full of rumors, cliques and bullying and when the risks of being authentic are the most dangerous.

These five principles undergird the practical strategies for creating a climate in districts and schools where the inner life becomes safe and welcome and people feel a part of a meaningful community.

*** No. 1: Personalize**

Create opportunities for your team members to reflect on and articulate their own personal goals in welcoming the inner life to schools. Sometimes this awareness emerges when they share stories of what inspired them to become educators or reflect together on their own sense of the purpose of education.

Howley, the assistant superintendent in Connecticut, uses the "five-minute biography," a technique she learned from her husband Patrick, a staff development specialist at the School Development Program at Yale University. People describe three decisions that have led them to where they are today, in this building, this district.

Says Howley: "You get to know something personal about each colleague. You see the threads that connect what we all care about. Even principals who strongly

prefer thinking over feeling as ways to lead have come to me with enthusiasm about the impact of carrying this into their schools."

Once your team has a taste of the power of inviting the personal dimension, collaboratively create the ground rules they need to feel safe enough to risk revealing their fears, their gifts, their mistakes, and their passion. Ask them a question such as "What conditions do we need to create for our meetings to become a place where you can talk about what matters deeply to you?"

After doing this with hundreds of educators and students, I see remarkable commonality in what they propose: respect, honesty, fairness, openness, commitment and genuine listening.

*** No. 2: Pacing**

Move slowly, gently, respectfully. Invite. Offer. Nurture. Affirm. Howley speaks of "a gentle way of moving leaders to identify what they need for themselves, a gentle encouragement about how to help each other grow and grow together."

For many educators, good pacing means providing lots of theory and research up front that demonstrates the connection between a soulful pedagogy and successful learning, between authentic community and a successful organization. For others it means a quick dive into experiential activities that provide an immediate felt sense of what this work is about and why it is urgent at all levels of the school. Find a balance and a pace that honors both.

Honor the principle of "skirt/scout." Most people want to learn as much as possible about others while revealing as little as possible about themselves. As a leader, you can design respectful opportunities for people to get to know each other gradually. Provide themes for discussion or for personal stories that honor the group's pacing in the slow growth from cooperation and companionship to compassion and communion.

* **No. 3: Permission**

"Leaders get into power struggles because they push and others resist," says Adams. "It's a natural reaction. But what will happen if you stop pushing? Some of the resistance begins to drop away. You have to take the time to watch and to listen to understand where people are."

When you stop pushing, you can let people choose when they are ready to speak or engage in any activity that may evoke a sense of vulnerability of heart, soul or body. If no one mentions "the right to pass" when agreements are being formed, the leader can assert this vital need.

You also can give people who opt out the dignity of being a "witness." This means that if they choose not to participate, they don't slip out to the bathroom or get a cup of coffee. Witnesses provide silent support to those who risk participation. They watch and listen for dynamics that those in the midst might never see. When the activity is over, the witnesses have an opportunity to share their observations if they want to.

* **No. 4: Protection**

Protect reluctant team members from the pressure to participate. As leader of the meeting, your ultimate responsibility is to protect your flock from interruptions, putdowns or other forms of disrespect such as dominating the conversation. "When I hear killer statements from someone in a meeting, I let them know quickly that they will be held accountable," said one administrator.

Adams fosters a sense of trust and authentic community in his cabinet through storytelling. "Sometimes I use it in serious ways and sometimes in humorous ways. Often stories bring meaning to what you are trying to say." Use your own heart and body as a gauge for depths that are safe. Tell the first story so you can model the level of vulnerability appropriate for your faculty/staff. Once you have established your willingness to

disclose, model the courage to pass when the day or subject feels too raw or you feel called to just listen.

* **No. 5: Paradox**

Model the willingness to hold the tension of apparent opposites: standards and soul, privacy and community, collaboration and authority, caring and rigor.

One administrator credited her leadership strength to the capacity to "deal with uncertainty and to create a meaningful direction out of chaos." Adams described a practice in openness: "You may come to me with the most bloody outrageous idea in the world, but I will listen to it. I take bits and pieces of wisdom from each person. I keep listening, not just to the words, but to the behavior."

Robert Johnson, author of *Owning Your Own Shadow*, speaks of "the art of taking the opposites and binding them back together again, surmounting the split that has been causing so much suffering." He calls this art the "religious faculty," saying, "It helps us move from contradiction-that painful condition where things oppose each other-to the realm of paradox, where we are able to entertain simultaneously two contradictory notions and give them equal dignity. Then, and only then, is there the possibility of grace, the spiritual experience of contradictions brought into a coherent whole, giving us a unity greater than either of them."

I heard this grace in the administrators I interviewed-a superintendent striving to maintain the paradox of collaborative and directive leadership styles, always watching for what was most appropriate in the situation and with the person involved. In another district, this same tension was held by the partnership between the superintendent and assistant superintendent: "My superintendent has a very directive style and I'm very collaborative."

Perhaps the most challenging paradox a leader must hold today is the tension between standards and soul. A school

based solely on "standards" could easily become an arid, numerical, test-driven landscape that cannot nourish true learning, turns teachers into managers and students into robots.

Conversely, a school based exclusively on "soul" could become lost in the inner world of its students, a pedagogical free-for-all where nothing is required and everything becomes an expression of each person's precious uniqueness.

But when both soul and standards are honored and school leaders ride the paradox, an environment for learning is created that is strong enough to hold all the tensions, trends and turmoil of American life.

Restoring Sweetness

Ultimately, infusing soul into leadership is about serving our students. Or as Janice Jackson, former deputy superintendent in Boston, puts it: "the imperative to deal with the inner lives of children while we develop their intellects."

It was the blossoming of wisdom, peace and leadership I saw in students when we honored this hunger that inspired me almost 20 years ago to leap into this once taboo territory of the spiritual dimension of education. I was spurred on by the self-destructive and violent behavior that persists when a spiritual void in youth leads to alienation, meaninglessness and despair.

To bring this experience of soul to the students in our schools, we need a chain of trust, reflection and meaningful connection that begins with superintendents and moves down to those who more directly honor these in students.

In the process of weaving this "soul chain," we will begin to redress the alarming losses signified by our national principal shortage and high teacher dropout rates. Without soul, without authentic and meaningful connection between and within people, between learning and our

lives and longings, we will continue to lose our school and classroom leaders.

A story is told about how the ancients set the stage for the love of learning: When the elders wanted to begin teaching the children Torah, they needed first to teach the alphabet. So they carved each letter on a stone tablet. Then they covered each letter with honey. The child would lick the honey off of the letter. And so, sweetness and learning would be one.

We can restore sweetness to learning. I'm not talking about the saccharine sweetness of "ac-cen-tuate the positive and e-lim-inate the negative." The sweetness of soul in education is about the joy of playing and learning together, of celebrating our gifts and triumphs. But it also includes the sweet poignancy of feeling our grief together as a community, or of discovering through authentic, open-minded dialogue the ally inside the colleague or parent we were afraid would thwart us forever.

While many forces threaten to put our schools on a diet of sawdust, we also can choose from a menu of principles and practices that offer an alternative that is more nourishing. The collected insights in this issue reflect a growing body of wisdom in educational leadership.

Without sacrificing accountability, without undermining quality, school administrators today can choose to cultivate in their own leadership and those they lead a host of practical strategies that allow us to genuinely nurture each other in the process of building school communities where learning can thrive and teaching can, once again, be a calling.

Additional Reading

Rachael Kessler recommends the following books:

Stories of the Courage to Teach: Honoring the Teacher's Heart, ed. by Sam Intrator, John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco, Calif.

Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers, ed. by Linda Lantieri, Beacon Press, Boston, Mass.

The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School by Rachael Kessler, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Va.

The Courage to Teach by Parker Palmer, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif.

The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America by David Whyte, Doubleday, New York, N.Y.

Rachael Kessler is executive director of the PassageWorks Institute, 2355 Canyon Blvd, Ste 104, Boulder, CO 80302. E-mail: rkessler@passageworks.org. She is the author of *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School*.

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