Paying Off Our Education Debt

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I am exhausted. And exhilarated. At first I thought it was physical exhaustion - not having my summer siesta time, leaving the house early and coming home late, running errands in the late night hours - but as I reflected on the past week, I realized it wasn't just physical. In so many ways, my mental capacities were completely taxed. New thoughts on leadership, dialogue, deeper learning, equity and mindsets were swirling, constantly. They were swirling, combining, fractioning and creating chaos all while I tried to answer my kids' questions about their schedule, where their bathing suit was and what we were having for dinner. Thoughts were colliding and I was forming new questions and connections every minute. Things I had thought before were expanded on and solidified and things I hadn't thought about before were discovered, mini explosions interrupting while my children regaled me with camp songs. In this paper, I attempt to make sense of this mental tornado by reflecting on the relationship between leadership and dialogue, the role of experience in education, and the marriage of mindsets, deeper learning and critical pedagogy as a method for addressing our nation's education debt.

Don't worry, I know what to do! I mean, could you explain that further?

A reflection on the role of dialogue in leadership

Weeks before class started, I was comfortably relaxing on the train, enjoying a gorgeous coastal view while casually reading through our course reader. And then, suddenly, I read this: "What people resist is not change per se, but loss… A key to leadership, then, is the diagnostic capacity to find out the kinds of losses at stake in a changing situation…" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, p.112). And one sentence later, this: "Adaptive leadership almost always puts you in the

business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through those losses to a new place" (pp. 112-113). I sat up straight and thought, "Oh...shoot. I knew I should have studied psychology" and then slumped back down, faced with the magnitude of realizing the potential losses I have asked my colleagues to face this year. This idea, so straightforward and yet so profound for me in this moment, suddenly made my coming work crystal clear. As I work to push our staff towards change—increasing rigor, raising the bar, expecting more from their students—I am going to have to figure out what they have at stake in order to be able to support them and "help [them] tolerate the discomfort they are experiencing" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, p. 119). Already, teachers have asked, "What happens if I start to lose students? What if it's too hard and they stop coming? What do you want me to do then?" Their jobs are funded by student attendance, making this an extremely difficult personal conflict for many teachers. I do not yet have any answers, but Heifetz & Linsky's article has allowed me to begin to thoughtfully reflect on how to plan for observations, analysis and potential interventions that will need to occur if and when potential losses become reality. This article humanized the teacher experience of being asked to do more and to do differently in an unstable environment.

Throughout my Odyssey experience this week, I have been reflecting on the power of dialogue when supporting people through discomfort - the power it holds to help us face challenges and the power it holds to bring people closer together towards shared understandings. During his visit with our class, High Tech High founder Rob Riordan shared that dialogue is one of the two most essential components of deeper learning and that he likes to think of High Tech High not as a project-based school but as a dialogue-based school. Hearing this, I was taken back to Paolo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he discusses at length the need for

dialogue in the fight for liberation. “Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind… Whereas faith in humankind is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue, trust is established by dialogue” (p. 90-91). Freire also argues that hope cannot exist without dialogue (p. 91). In reflecting on these beliefs, I have realized that open and constant dialogue will be my most powerful tool in supporting my colleagues through their potential fears and perceived losses this year. There is no other way I will be able to truly understand their challenges, successes and worries. It will also be my most powerful tool in connecting with students who are being asked to rise to higher expectations in an attempt to understand their experiences. Through facilitating diagnostic and supportive conversations, I will be able to build increased trust with teachers and students and we will be able to work through challenges collaboratively, “liberating” ourselves from the oppression of low expectations that have marked our past.

With this in mind, I jumped into various Odyssey activities ready to practice “dialoguing” with others. I was eager to participate in a project tuning for a teacher grappling with her final product for her project idea. My turn came to ask a probing question in an attempt to understand her dilemma and I tried...except I had an idea already of what I wanted to share. I bumbled trying to frame a legitimate question - so much so that the facilitator cocked his head to the side and said, “Well, that wasn’t really a question, was it?” (One identifying characteristic I reflected on during Diana Cornejo-Sanchez’s identity web activity is that I am hot-headed and always have an opinion ready to share). I left the protocol still trying to figure out how I could have framed a legitimate question aimed at genuinely gathering a deeper understanding of the presenter’s dilemma, realizing that this style of dialogue—seeking to understand others’ fears, losses and challenges—will be challenging for me as I tend to jump to conclusions and solutions quickly.

As I work this year to support teachers, I need to start first by strengthening my questioning skills. What types of questions will probe for understanding without being leading questions? What types of information do I need to gather to be able to truly identify fears and perceived losses? While I have a strong understanding of questions—closed-ended vs. open-ended, leading vs. non-leading, etc…—when push comes to shove and I am in a space where questions are natural and organic, and concurrent with my own opinions forming, I have discovered I have much more to practice about effective questioning in order to be an effective adaptive leader. "To practice adaptive leadership, you have to take time to think through your interpretation of what you observe, *before* jumping into action" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, p. 124). This patience, observation and analysis before speaking and acting must be part of my work in the coming months and years.

Me, a scientist?!

A reflection on the role of experience in education

The day I received my project slice information, I was honestly less than thrilled. I was assigned to a science group and science is my least favorite subject. I often joke that I could care less about how or why things worked, all I care about is that they work. I arrived to our slice group hesitant, unsure and less than confident but ready to engage as best I could. The first day was a bit rough - it was hot, we were outside and I was uncomfortable. However, at the end of the day we were given time to process our observations from throughout the day and discuss all of the possible essential questions we were considering diving into for our project. I was thrilled to hear that members of my group were interested in examining some aspect of the oceans, my

personal first choice. On day two, I arrived with a bit less trepidation and after a lovely morning walk and some wading in the water, our group settled on our essential question and the rest of the day flew by. Exhibition came and went and while our project turned out to be very different from those of the others in our slice group, our work was well received and I discovered that I had enjoyed the process of collecting specimens, observing and wondering. For the first time in my life, I had enjoyed science in a school setting. And by working closely with the other members of my group, I had actually been successful.

Dewey (1938) writes that education must be built on experiences in order to be meaningful. His theories are based on what he describes as the "organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 25). My introduction to being a learner in a project-based setting was indeed organic and gave me something I had never had before in any science class - a genuine, meaningful connection to a science topic that I actually cared about and enjoyed studying. Because we had the freedom to choose our area of study, decide on our own essential question and complete physical research outside of the classroom, I was given an open door to walk through onto a level playing field where I was able to compete because I was interested and had some prior knowledge. The process was also a social one; I was not alone in my wonderings and learnings which allowed me to become part of a scientific community.

Dewey (1938) also writes, "When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process...the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities" (p. 59). Our slice facilitators were exactly that - leaders of group activities. They did not know the answers we were seeking and openly shared they knew very little about any of the topics we had chosen. Their lack of knowledge did

not at all affect my ability to gain knowledge; it was the opposite. Their openness to exploration and their encouragement of curiosity paved the way for my learning to take the shape it needed to in order for me to be engaged. As a school leader working to move our school towards a deeper learning model, but without extensive official classroom experience in this model, I appreciate this example of how to lead without being an expert. I return again to the need for dialogue with my staff in order to understand and support their challenges, even though I am not an expert myself.

After spending our two project slice days together, our group became close. We had done little team building but much academic learning together and this was enough for close bonds to form. I saw this reflected throughout the Odyssey experience and in my interview with one Odyssey participant, he shared that the thing he valued most from his week was the collegiality that was built. Thinking about one of the essential questions for this course, "How do we galvanize new teachers around a shared vision for teaching and learning grounded in the design principles of the school?", the success of High Tech High's ability to build strong, collaborative relationships amongst staff was evident. Through the common experiences the faculty shared, a common understanding of the school's vision was built. I was reminded of an Educational Leadership article in which the author states, "The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else" (Barth, 2006, p. 8).

In my current work, I am preparing for our school's annual schoolwide in-service. The in-service is the start of our professional work for the year and consists of two full days of learning together. It is our chance to share our vision, develop relationships and set the tone for

the year. Normally, we do team-building and revisit our mission statement. This year I am wondering how we might incorporate academic experiences, with teachers in a student role, in lieu of, or in addition to, traditional team-building activities as a way to build collaboration and relationships around challenging academic tasks. Will that help to galvanize our own teachers around a vision of providing transformative learning experiences to all students? How can we provide experiences that push our staff outside of their comfort zones to places where they can succeed in new ways and feel how good it feels to be challenged as a learner in a safe way? I feel this is an essential component in motivating teachers to challenge student desires to just "get in and get done" with their diploma; the teachers must experience transformative learning experiences in order to understand the value in them before being able to engage in making this vision come true. In "Equal Opportunity for Deeper Learning", the authors share research demonstrating that students who were given difficult material ultimately "remarked that they felt 'smarter' because they had been challenged—and pushed themselves—to grapple with material that took them time to grasp" (Noguera, Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2015, p. 291). As a school, we must challenge the myth that all our students want is a quick diploma and to get on with their lives. We must confront them, push them and support them through more meaningful learning tasks if we truly want to make an impact on their lives and their self-perception as learners. And in order to do this, our teachers need to feel the importance of transformational learning and the power it holds.

Growing roses in concrete, one mindset at a time

A reflection on the role of academic mindsets in paying off the education debt

> No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (Robinson as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 74)

In her 2006 presidential address "From the achievement gap to the education debt: understanding achievement in U.S. schools", Gloria Ladson-Billings eloquently describes the depth of educational disparity in America by addressing the moral, historical, sociopolitical and economic shortcomings in our country that lend themselves to an educational inequity as great as our national debt. Her work provides a foundation for understanding the magnitude of the equity work facing educators today.

> In the case of education, each effort we make toward improving education is counterbalanced by the ongoing and mounting debt that we have accumulated. That debt service manifests itself in the distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do in communities serving the poor and children of color. (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 346)

Her article begs the question as to what well-intentioned educators can do, in the microcosms of their own classrooms, to address this seemingly insurmountable load of debt affecting our students of color and attempt to provide them an equitable playing field in their educational experience. In "Note to educators: hope required when growing roses in concrete", Duncan-Andrade (2009) provides some foundation for this work by arguing the importance of developing critical hope when educating urban youth of color. "Critical hope demands a committed and active struggle 'against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth

inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair' (West, 2004, pp. 296-297)" (p. 331). He goes on to describe the elements of critical hope: material hope (such as wraparound services, tangible resources and effective teachers), Socratic hope (the belief that by truthfully examining the pain and actions of an unjust society justice will come), and audacious hope (the need to struggle alongside one another as a collective group working towards one goal) (pp. 331-335).

It is the Socratic hope and audacious hope that resonated most strongly with me, particularly as we dove into our Socratic seminar to examine the relationship between critical pedagogy and deeper learning. Through our discussion, it became clear that the question my colleagues and I wanted to consider was not whether or not critical pedagogy and deeper learning were at odds with each other, but how the two can be married in a consistent way in order to truly begin to address educational inequity through the type of learning that has proven to be most effective for students, particularly those of color. As Duncan-Andrade (2009) writes, "The best of the research in our field defines 'quality' in teaching by our ability to produce student growth across assessment measures… To accomplish this, we have to bust the false binary that suggests we must choose between an academically rigorous pedagogy and one geared toward social justice" (p. 331). It seems to me now, after a deeper reflection this week, that marrying social justice topics and examinations of inequity through deeper learning experiences must be a precondition for any educational institution hoping to address issues of equity and make progress towards paying off our education debt. Rob Riordan shared his view that subject matter is relevant only in that it provides a lens for examining the topics in which we are truly interested in. This belief opens the door for examinations of injustice to be the foundation for all learning, no matter the subject area, and in doing so, allows educators to build Socratic and

audacious hope with their students by not shying away from the issues that our students often suffer through silently.

Duncan-Andrade's (2009) argument for the need to build critical hope in students led me to a deeper examination of the role mindsets play in engaging disenfranchised youth to want to do the hard work educators may demand. "Students need to think of themselves and school in certain ways in order to want to learn and in order to learn successfully" (Dweck, Walton and Cohen as cited in Farrington, 2013, p. 265). What mindsets need to be cultivated in students in order to motivate them to want to want to walk the painful path towards a better world by engaging in deeper learning with a social justice lens?

Farrington's (2013) article "Academic mindsets as a critical component of deeper learning" lays out this work. "...[T]he most fruitful way to improve academic perseverance and to help students build the other competencies associated with deeper learning is to attend to the development of positive academic mindsets" (p. 266). Without academic mindsets, Farrington argues, students have no motivation to engage in school, in critical thinking, in questioning and in other activities associated with the type of transformative education Duncan-Andrade (2009) argues for.

I have found this to be true in my work with high school dropouts who return to school. They arrive with goals, motivated to change the path their life has taken and while they know it won't be easy, they have high hopes for the best. However, they often do not have the skills needed to succeed as a student and old habits crop up quickly. My students get frustrated easily, they fear taking risks for fear of looking stupid, they do not publicly ask questions or make educated guesses. They do not know how to work with others or persevere through challenging

academic tasks. As a school, we have identified the importance of cultivating growth mindsets in our students and have worked to implement curriculum and practices to build students' self-confidence in their abilities to grow and learn. The work has paid off, as we've seen retention increase and have tangible stories of students on the verge of dropping out, only to be persuaded to stay through growth mindset messages from their teachers. As our new year begins, though, I have found myself wondering how to continue this work. Growth mindset is an established part of our schoolwide teaching practices - what now?

Farrington's (2013) article explains that it is not just growth mindset; it is also ensuring students feel that they belong in our academic communities, they can succeed at school and they feel that their work has value. This last part—founded in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience—is the hardest part for our school as we move to enhance what has traditionally been an individualized credit recovery model. Our students enroll with low skills and have only nine months to a year to finish all of their high school credits for their diploma. How, then, my staff asks, can we provide meaningful learning experiences that meet everyone's credit needs, provide room for skills acceleration and also work with inconsistent attendance and variable class times? We have not yet found a concrete answer or a model that works for all, but our work has just started. I believe that by beginning to think about "the people that [our] students [can] become from having participated in their educational experiences" we can work towards increasing the relevance and rigor of the work we ask of students (Farrington, 2013, p. 270). In working towards developing a more holistic understanding of mindsets and broadening our focus from growth mindset to academic mindset, the focus on the inherent value of student work having meaning must be prioritized. Rob Riordan stated that to have value, all work should be a gift to

someone. Whether or not work is an actual gift, we must move towards inspiring students to produce work they can be proud of, work that is a gift because it was hard-earned and led to student growth.

Paolo Freire (1970) writes that oppression "is accomplished by the oppressors' depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo" (p. 139). There is a myth in our society that certain youth don't care about their education. My colleagues understand and will be the first to challenge this - but there is another myth that haunts us and prevents us from challenging our students. Many teachers I work with believe a myth that students want their credits and their diploma, to get in and out as quickly as possible, and nothing else. I argue that this is not true. When forming "deep and caring relationships" with students (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 336), it is clear they want to be seen as intelligent. They want to be validated as thinkers, creators, artists and designers. Our students want to belong to an academic community - but they don't know how. By not challenging this myth, teachers allow for the enemies of hope to crop up and students continue to graduate, proud but possibly not fulfilled and definitely not transformed. If we are to truly support the transformation of those who come to us seeking a different path, we must find inspiration in Farrington's (2013) impassioned plea that "We should no longer accept the myth that struggling students don't care about their education or that failure is the best they can do" (p. 271). We must challenge our students by building academic mindsets and providing learning experiences that are meaningful, relevant and transformative - even in just ten hours a week.

And so…?

A reflection on next steps

Throughout this paper I have identified various goals for my professional work in the coming year: to improve my ability to dialogue for understanding and plan relevant interventions, to provide opportunities for my staff to feel how powerful certain educational experiences can be, and to support staff in cultivating academic mindsets in students, not the least of which requires increasing the value of the work they assign to students. I have many questions to guide this work - and fewer answers.

Here is what I do know, however. I will need to increase the amount of time I spend with teachers and find ways to visit more sites more often. I will need to move past the discomfort I feel when being the random visitor in a classroom by identifying sites that may benefit from my support and working to build trust with those teachers and their students through frequent visits. I will need to self-direct some professional learning on questioning and facilitating conversations meant to diagnose and support staff challenges. I will also need to consider this advice: "To change someone's behaviors, you've got to change that person's situation… For individuals' behavior to change, you've got to influence not only their environment but their hearts and minds" (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 5). I will need to remember to work with hearts and not just minds, as my tendency is to use logic, data and evidence when persuading others. Heath and Heath also share these words: "What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity... What looks like laziness is often exhaustion… What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem" (pp. 17-18). Remembering this can guide my observations and analysis of situations I am working to change. And lastly, through increased site visits, teacher dialogue and asking the right questions of my administrative team, I will need to identify and analyze the bright spots.

“To pursue bright spots is to ask the question ‘What’s working, and how can we do more of it?’” (Heath & Heath, p. 45). In those classrooms where deeper learning is happening, where critical hope and academic mindsets are being developed, what are those teachers doing? What specific practices can we pull from those classrooms to disseminate schoolwide? As a team, we know where these bright spots are, but up until now we have not intentionally identified the elements that make those classrooms models to live up to. This, with the rest, will also guide my work this year.

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Personal Learning Plan (PLP)

The **Personal Learning Plan (PLP)** is an evolving touchstone document used to develop your learning goals and reflect on your growth as an educator and leader throughout the program. PLP reflections may be shared with your program director, advisor and critical friends and be used to guide reflective conversations throughout the year.

Name: Rachel Wegner _____
Date created: 8/14/2018

PLP Reflection: Please use the following prompts to guide your PLP reflection.

1. What are your ***hopes and dreams for your learning*** through this program?

- Become an adaptive leader
- Develop ability to diagnose challenges, needs, fears
- Develop theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to face leadership challenges
- Learn to support teachers through change, towards improvement
- Become a better questioner and more confident facilitator of adult learning experiences
- Develop the confidence to lead from in front, not just from behind

2. In regards to ***developing your craft as an educator,***

   a. What can you ***celebrate***?

- Developing student-centered learning and assessments
- Connecting with and developing relationships with students
- Challenging students and meeting their individual needs

- Cultivating growth mindsets and changing students' self-perception of themselves as learners

b. How would you like to ***grow***?

- Marriage of critical pedagogy and deeper learning
- Project design
- How to have difficult conversations about difficult topics in a safe and supportive way
- Develop ideas and plans for using social justice and equity issues as a lens for all student work

3. After looking at the ***"Effective Leader"*** document, reflect on the following aspects of your ***development as a leader*** (from within or outside the classroom):

a. What can you ***celebrate***?

- Leading from behind, leading as example
- Planning and facilitating effective professional development
- Promoting students' development of 21st century skills
- Designing school structures to promote collaboration amongst faculty
- Fostering collegiality by creating safe spaces for learning
- Shaping a learning environment where growing from mistakes is valued and faculty and students are willing to take risks

b. How would you like to ***grow***?

- Build the confidence to lead from in front
- Incorporating systems thinking to improve JMCS operations
- Learn about design thinking processes
- Support teachers/colleagues in creating student-centered, constructivist approaches to experiential learning
- Cultivate intrinsic motivation in students and faculty by creating conditions for choice, passion and play
- Develop shared vision, purpose and design principles with faculty, and align actions with core values
- Seek to understand, listen intently to others and mindfully guide courageous conversations with respect

4. As you think about your ***Master's Project (and/or course projects):***

a. What ***inquiry questions*** are emerging about your practice?

- How can I support the transformation of JMCS classrooms into environments of deeper learning?
- How do we measure deeper learning - its presence, its effectiveness?
- How do we align skills acceleration, credit needs and meaningful learning experiences in a limited amount of time?
- How can I motivate and support teachers to challenge students' self-perceptions and limited life goals?
- What fears do teachers have about moving away from a credit recovery model?
- What goals (true, honest, deep) do teachers have for their students during their time with us? What do they need to support these goals to become reality?

  b. How might any of these evolve into a ***Master's Project (and/or course projects)?***

- Working to cultivate academic mindsets in our students through staff professional development
- Building a deeper learning framework of learning specific to JMCS and supporting this with tangible resources, examples, training
- Leading volunteer small learning communities of teachers looking to enhance their practice
- Identifying "bright spot" classrooms and working to scale their most effective practices schoolwide
- "Creating and sustaining a shared vision of what effective learning and teaching look like" (Noguera et al., p. 298)

5. What are your ***professional goals*** and how can we ***support you in realizing them***? (*Residents Only:* What would your ideal residency experience look and feel like to help you grow in this direction?)

My professional goals consist of all the ways I'd like to grow as listed in #3. If I had to consolidate, I would say:

1. Build confidence as a school leader to face challenges and to lead not only from behind, but also from in front when necessary
   NEED:
   - Theories and practices for leading for change

2. Support JMCS' teachers' ability and increase their desire to provide transformative learning experiences for their students
   NEED:
   - Theories and practices for leading for change

- Instructional support in planning and evaluating deeper learning experiences

3. Develop a shared, schoolwide vision of what effective teaching looks like for our sites and create systems, structures and supports for allowing this vision to take hold
   NEED:
   - Theories and practices for leading for change
   - Deep evaluation of effective teaching practices and deeper learning components