

“I STRIVE FOR
CHALLENGE
RATHER THAN
MERELY ‘DOING
MY BEST’”

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VIGNETTE

The middle school is located in a working-class neighborhood in San Francisco. Fifty percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and the population is a rich mix of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Joe Truss, the principal, has worked hard with staff to create a positive school culture and climate. It's reflected in the school's motto: *"We work hard to create a positive school climate where students are recognized for their growth."*

As the school leader, Mr. Truss and his leadership team worked hard to help teachers improve the adult culture and student climate. By every measure, the social-emotional tenor of the school had improved. Yet, when the staff sat down to review its quarterly achievement data a few years into the process, it was clear that improvement in relationships and belonging wasn't translating into improved instruction or increased student learning. He recalls a particular spring staff meeting where they gathered to look at data. Many teachers expressed concern and confusion. They thought for sure academic scores would change. Many shrugged their shoulders in defeat, pointing out they were "doing their best."

However, Mr. Truss wasn't satisfied with the status quo when it came to student learning. He took on the challenge of helping staff build on their climate success and going to the next level with a focus on improving student learning through academic conversation. He thought it was the perfect

vehicle for improving instruction by giving students more ownership and opportunity for meaning making. But he soon realized that the same teachers who worked diligently to improve the climate for the children and their families held low expectations and deficit thinking around their students' readiness as learners to carry academic dialogue and discussion. This approach was going to require more self-directed student learning and more capacity building to help all students be active participants, especially those learning English. This reality stretched many teachers beyond their comfort zone. Teachers had gotten used to compliant student behavior—being quiet, talking only to answer questions, and going along with lecture as the primary mode of sharing content. He remembered teachers expressing skepticism about students being able to handle the levels of independent learning necessary for effective academic conversations to flow in ways that went beyond the superficial to deepen understanding.

"We were talking specifically about supporting students to use academic conversations in the classroom to build their skills to do project-based learning," he recalled. "I heard teachers saying things like, 'Well, I don't feel comfortable letting them talk at length,' or, 'I don't feel comfortable when I'm not holding the whole class together. What's going to happen to my classroom management if I turn over control to them?'" Others agreed. "I can't trust that they're going to be on task," another said. How does the leader challenge the staff to go beyond "doing their best" to move to their "growing edge," which can feel scary? He challenged them to get smarter together, using a multipronged approach that included collaborative inquiry and professional development around student and teacher capacity building rather than a singular focus on the technical solution of one-off strategies.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

The vignette illustrates this chapter's main message: improvement requires challenge—challenging our mental models about what students can do, challenging our teacher beliefs about pedagogy, and challenging deficit thinking that holds us back from becoming warm demanders of students' cognitive development. School leaders recognize that we won't achieve equitable outcomes simply by "doing our best." The mindframe in this chapter highlights an important point about leadership: *change can be challenging for adults*, and it is the main job of the school leader to help people navigate the challenges of change rather than retreat into the status quo of "doing our best," especially when trying to advance instructional equity that builds students' learning muscles.

When you finish reading this chapter, you should be able to take this message as a basis for explaining

- how the significant Visible Learning® factors of instructional leadership, collective efficacy, and monitoring teaching impact on learning work together to synergistically move the needle on equity;
- why “doing your best” can be an expression of deficit thinking rather than lack of effort, and what a leader must do to challenge limiting beliefs about the learning potential or motivation of diverse students; and
- what we need to understand about “change management for equity” that leverages challenge in positive ways in adult learning communities.

WHICH FACTORS FROM THE VISIBLE LEARNING® RESEARCH SUPPORT THIS MINDFRAME?

Teacher Estimates of Achievement

The factor of teacher estimates of achievement is foundational to educational equity. If teachers don't believe in certain groups of students' capacity for growth, based on race, culture, linguistic capacity, or socioeconomic status, then their efforts to accelerate learning through powerful teaching will be limited. What complicates this Visible Learning® influence is the history of racial segregation and colonization in the United States and other countries. In the past, to justify systems of racial segregation and colonization, many institutions, including schools, perpetuated a set of deficit narratives of racial difference. Despite slogans like “all kids can learn,” many of those deficit narratives are still with us.

The one heard most often in school settings is what microaggression expert Dr. Derald Sue calls “the ascription of intelligence” (Sue et al., 2007). This narrative says that certain racial groups have more intellectual capacity than others. In her book *SchoolTalk: Rethinking What We Say About and to Students Every Day*, Mica Pollock, Professor of Education Studies and Director of the Center for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE) at the University of California, San Diego, points out that these negative narratives about which groups are smart and which are not as smart play out in schools in cloaked and coded ways that she calls “smart talk” (Pollock, 2017). Too often, we readily accept these unexamined beliefs about the limited capability of diverse, historically marginalized students to self-motivate, actively engage, or productively take on rigorous learning to explain chronic achievement gaps. These deficit beliefs are mostly unconscious and often go unexamined.

School leaders have the challenge of surfacing and dispelling these narratives that drive teacher estimates of student achievement. That means articulating what success looks like so that teachers don't mistake cultural differences in learning for intellectual deficits. An equity-focused school leader understands that just telling teachers to have "high expectations" doesn't get rid of deficit thinking, nor does implicit bias training alone. Instead, he or she is skilled in helping teachers trace these deficit narratives in their instructional decision making and then leverage professional learning processes to support the construction of new narratives about student capacity by proving them wrong through collaborative inquiry.

Collective Efficacy

Once teachers have high estimates of achievement for all students, school leaders have to leverage collective efficacy to ensure that all students are making significant progress toward high levels of learning. Collective efficacy is the perception of teachers in a school that they possess the necessary skills and that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on student learning. From a school leadership perspective, it means helping staff develop a shared belief that their collective skill and knowledge in teaching can push student outcomes to higher levels, especially for those who have been historically disadvantaged.

Too frequently, educators get caught up in the "*pobrecito* syndrome." *Pobrecito* roughly translates from Spanish into "poor baby," and the "syndrome" is how Dr. Pedro Noguera, author of the book *The Trouble With Black Boys . . . and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education* (2008), describes well-meaning people who don't expect much of students who are poor or from a historically marginalized racial group. The thought goes, "Poor baby, of course he's going to underachieve, he's disadvantaged!" As a result, a teacher may feel that he or she is doing his or her best for a student with perceived limited intellectual capacity. Collectively, teachers may feel they cannot accelerate student learning to get more than a year's growth in a year's time when students are far behind grade level. Instead, they opt for "protecting" the students by lowering the bar rather than building their adult capacity to help students carry more of the cognitive load during instruction.

Because of this misguided desire to protect the self-esteem of poor or so-called "minority" students, we often accept these narratives and the resulting "poor baby" stance that lowers expectations and dials down rigor. Many teachers have been told that a quiet, compliant classroom is the pinnacle of success, while the research is telling us that for students to be academically successful, they must be active,

cognitively independent learners who can accelerate their own learning. School leaders with an equity focus help teachers understand the elements of a successful learner's habits of mind and skills. The school leader doesn't let teachers mistake cultural differences for intellectual deficits. Instead, he or she is able to articulate a rich description that values and leverages students' funds of knowledge and ways of learning that lead to academic success.

In addition, the school leader helps articulate what successful teaching looks like that develops this type of student. He or she shows the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning, focusing on instructional decision making and pedagogical content knowledge rather than "one-size-fits-all" strategies.

Providing Formative Evaluation

When we think about instructional leaders who are monitoring teacher performance, we often picture them doing surprise walkthroughs and conducting classroom observations in the back of the room with clipboard in hand, evaluating teacher performance frequently. Part of instructional leadership is shaping the path toward success—supporting and evaluating teaching through regular classroom visits and provision for formative and summative feedback to teachers. School leaders who provide formative evaluation are focused on getting everyone in the school working together to monitor teaching impact on learning. According to leadership researchers such as Michael Fullan (2015), the research suggests that there is greater impact when the school leader helps the faculty get focused around a small set of core pedagogies, and then creates a culture of reflective practice aimed at helping teachers get better at coaching student "learning to learn" processes rather than launch new initiatives to raise test scores. The learning leader focuses on encouraging "safe-to-fail," small-scale experiments that allow emerging possibilities to become observable—teachers can see small student changes that can snowball into big learning gains. These small experiments are not just random stabs in the dark or focused on strategy implementation. Instead, they are anchored in sound pedagogy and spotlight student learning moves.

The school leader who strives for challenge is also leading adult learning by paying attention, along with the staff, to the cause and effect of teachers' new instructional moves on changes in students' awareness of their ability to manipulate their moves to improve performance. This means the school leader creates the conditions for several different types of feedback loops for both teachers and students (e.g., learning conferences as part of assessment for learning structures, student-led conferences to increase student agency and awareness as learners). Some schools have used Japanese-style lesson study or "Looking at Student Work" protocols as part of their formative feedback loops.

Others have focused on Jim Knight's (2007) instructional coaching method to help teachers become aware of instructional decision making that changes students' awareness of their learning. Monitoring our impact on student learning and seeing changes we didn't believe were possible can be the catalyst for reshaping our mental models about student capacity and motivation based on deficit narratives we didn't realize we'd internalized. In addition, the school leader is creating a social-emotional container for adults to manage their own emotional responses to challenge and being stretched into their zone of proximal development.

WHERE CAN I START?

Being a school leader who strives for challenge and creates the conditions for others to do the same requires that they first build their own emotional intelligence and social-emotional capacity to support other adults through change, especially when addressing issues of deficit thinking, low expectations, and underdeveloped instructional practice that decelerates student learning.

Assess Current Reality So You Can Understand What's Producing the Outcomes

School leaders can benefit from taking time to assess the current status of the mental models influencing teacher decision making. Too often we jump to a solution without really understanding the problem. When we strive for challenge, we begin by understanding the nature of the challenge. To do that, you have to first understand the system that produces the results you are currently seeing play out in classrooms. Take two to four weeks to get a sense of the "systemness" in your building. Systemness is a term coined by Michael Fullan (2015) and it means the way different parts of a school's policies and practices come together and create an outcome or result that wouldn't happen by any of the individual components acting by themselves.

Model Using Errors as Information for Improving

Often teachers need to see what it looks like to use different types of data, including failed attempts or prototypes, to improve. Using the principles of improvement science, let them see you engage in rapid cycles of inquiry to try high-influence strategies and fail fast to quickly improve some aspect of your school leadership or school process. This helps teachers see failing not as a bad mark against them, but as information to be used to get better. It also requires making time to do a postmortem on failed prototypes to understand what went right as well as what went wrong and why.

Leverage Social Neuroscience to Make Challenge Feel Fun and Doable

Managing our emotions is an important part of embracing challenge. School leaders must understand the neuroscience behind change and challenge. Incorporate activities that get teachers' brains to reduce the stress hormone cortisol, and instead focus on activities that release dopamine. Dopamine is connected to our perseverance in the face of doing hard things. It makes us lean into a challenge and helps reduce the anxiety and stress related to it.

CHECKLIST

Consider the following the next time you engage in school improvement planning:

- Ensure teachers are able to surface the mental models that influence their expectations by discussing the dominant narratives that you were exposed to as an educator.
- Work toward shared agreement with your teachers about which teaching moves lead to student learning success.
- Create structures and reallocate time to support teachers working together to improve their practice.
- Create a variety of feedback loops, including tools like video and low-inference transcripts that provide timely formative data to help teachers iterate on their instructional decision making.
- Pay attention to your own cultural competence and emotional intelligence as you manage the social-emotional side of change in your adult learning community, especially when addressing historical inequities.

EXERCISES

1. Build your stamina and fluency for talking about issues of deficit thinking disguised as merely "doing our best." Start with *scripting*. For two weeks, practice active listening across your school and try to identify the three or four most common statements about "those

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kids” or “those families,” or other deficit-oriented comments that come up in various settings. Then, taking one statement at a time, write a script for how you would respond to such statements in the future.

2. Model using low-inference transcripts and video as forms of feedback in low-stakes ways to get teachers and coaches comfortable using them to gather data in their classrooms.
3. Create a thirty-day or sixty-day challenge across the school to encourage small, high-leverage changes among your faculty until these changes become new habits or old habits are broken. Notice what gets in the way of making the changes.