

Task 3: Reflective Thinking and Generative Conversation

System Assumptions and Beliefs

The beliefs and assumptions within the charter network I teach appear to be consistent across all three schools and grade levels. The assumptions that exist as an underlying set of shared convictions can be explained through the values and artifacts in the day-to-day routines throughout the school. “There are three levels of culture: artifacts and creations, values, and basic assumptions” (Evans, 2001, p.42). To identify the culture of my school, I explored these three levels starting with the artifacts, leading to the values, and eventually gaining an understanding of the assumptions. To begin, the pieces of evidence that exist in the daily structures consist of a sense of visible support and teamwork. Each classroom has two full-time teachers, in addition to support staff that come in the classroom daily to provide differentiated small group instruction. On any given day, the principal at my school will be seen in a classroom assisting students, coaching teachers, or even leading a small group in instruction. Planning meetings are consistent and thoughtful. Strong collaboration can be seen within these meetings as teachers, curriculum advisors, support staff, and the principal work together to ‘double plan’ and unpack the week’s lesson plans. In addition, the school integrates EL practices daily, ensuring students can successfully access the English language in the classroom. Despite this, students are encouraged to speak their home language at school and their culture is recognized and celebrated within the physical environment and curriculum. These “visible” artifacts are influenced by the values and assumptions at my school.

As a school, we are data-driven in our planning and teaching alike. A shared value of growth mindset is accepted and practiced among all educators in the building. Weekly real-time coaching from administration and intentional on-going professional development shows this

value of a growth mindset. These artifacts and values can be explained by the invisible assumptions that set this “unique common psychology” in the building (Evans, 2001). There is a common goal of preparing students for the state tests. Although it is never explicitly stated, the planning and instruction are guided by the format of these tests and this data drives our curricular decisions. The charter school in which I teach is located in an urban town with high poverty and high crime rates. There is an evident drug problem within the community and a longing desire to succeed and push against the adversity many face. The charter school itself was created in 1995 by the community and teachers to provide students a quality education, as the local school district was chronically failing and taken over by the state. Because of these roots, preparing students to get into both a good high school and college is something that is yearned from day one. Families bring their children to Community Day Charter School to give them an opportunity they may not have had. The majority of families are immigrants from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Education for their children is top priority. All of this background and the commonalities shared by the school and community really give meaning to the system of values in our school. All the artifacts and creations visibly seen just by entering the school itself and spending the day observing the experiences at Community Day Charter School represent these values.

Analyzing Mental Models

To be an agent for change in a situation involving others requires inquiry into mental models and beliefs of all individuals. Prior to implementing any kind of new intervention plan among my grade level; I would need to have an initial meeting with all those involved, as well as continuous ongoing meetings to provide opportunities of reflection, questions, and feedback on the process. To begin, I would advocate my new idea during our ELA curriculum meeting to

ensure all other are present. The other heads in the room would include: grade 4 teachers, grade-level curriculum advisor, ELA curriculum advisor, head of school, and the reading specialist. All of these individuals would have a role in the change I am addressing. I would begin by stating my opinion and ideas in regards to the current ELA intervention plans, followed by a statement of inquiry to invite the thoughts of others. Using the example in the Leading With Inquiry table on page. 108 of the Senge (2012), I would follow the format of “Here’s how I think, and here’s how I came to that conclusion.” I would follow this up with “What do you think about what I just said?” and “What am I missing here?” It is important that I inquire the thoughts of other while advocating my new idea. In addition to this initial meeting, I would also be sure to continue to explore the mental models of others when/if this new change takes place. Providing those involved with this new plan an opportunity to reflect and provide feedback is another important piece to this ongoing dialogue. As an action researcher, I would want to implement changes and new ideas as they come to the table.

Exploring the mental models of these other individuals during both planning meetings and ongoing reflection meetings requires a specific plan as to what components of the system I need to address. First, I would want to inquire about the initial thoughts of the ELA intervention block as I stated above. I would follow this up with guiding this discussion into planning how we can make changes as necessary based on the agreement of the group. The next step requires a dive into the most recent benchmark data. I find it necessary to allow others the chance to interpret the data on their own prior to discussing it as a group. During the discussion of the data in an effort to target areas of need for instruction during intervention, I would begin by asking the others involved to identify patterns or issues they noticed based on the student scores and item analyses. This will allow us to point out trends and areas of growth most necessary.

Addressing this desired change means I need to recognize the mental models of others both before the process and during the process.

Ladders of Inference

The diagrams below show the ladder of inference for both teachers and administration/curriculum advisors (leadership team). This provides a closer look into the mental models of the components within the system. As shown below, each ladder begins with the same observable data, but from different perspectives. Both the teachers and leaders notice this misuse of the intervention block in the daily schedule. Working up the ladder on inference, each component reaches the conclusion of realizing that something must be done. Once all individuals come together and address these mental models, the dialogue can be consistent, respectful, and targeted toward the agreed upon desirable change.

Diagram. 1:
Teachers' Ladder of Inference



Diagram. 2:
Administration & Curriculum Team's Ladder of Inference



Team Learning Design

According to Senge (2012), team learning is recurring and requires regular willingness of those involved. “This does not merely mean making one-time decisions or setting static roles and following through with discrete tasks. It means continuously talking, with respect and deliberation, about the issues that must be understood and resolved” (p.115). Designing team learning activities as a support to the desired change means the system of components directly involved must all work together with a common goal. Although all are individuals with differing ideas and opinions, the desired change must remain at the center of the dialogue. This ensures alignment within the process. Starting dialogue will run much smoother if the group has come to an understanding of respecting one another, in addition to addressing the mental models that

exist within the group. The dialogue will then lead to conversations of inquiry. Senge (2012) outlines a list of ground rules that helped me in designing the following team learning activities. “Begin with an invitation” (p.117).

The first facilitated team learning activity would consist of an opportunity for all members to have an initial meeting to openly discuss this desired change. Before looking at data, or even discussing intervention plans, I would want the group to come together and simply discuss the existing ELA intervention block and everyone’s thoughts on the strengths, needs, and wishes. I would make sure this meeting had a flexible flow of dialogue by avoiding any type of meeting agenda or specific goals. This would be an opportunity for all individuals to share opinions, ask questions, and really get to know each other’s mental models.

The next team learning activity would involve us meeting again, no agenda in hand, to discuss potential intervention ideas and teaching practices we each would advocate for. Before making any decision whether or not to go forward with this desired change it is important to establish an ongoing routine of dialogue and connection with the other members of the system. As the facilitator I would take the opportunity during this meet time to map out the shared ideas. I would do so on a large board for everyone to see as we connect ideas and add on to each others thoughts. Most importantly, I would do this to ensure we stay on topic and our dialogue contributes to the desired change. “During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together-not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility...” (p.117). I would envision that this type of meeting would occur a few more times to really dig out our best ideas and practices, as well as come to the meetings with new ideas based on the reflections from the previous dialogue the group had.

In addition to facilitating conversation centered around best teaching practices, personal experiences with the students and thoughts on next steps, taking a look at quantitative data is an important component of this desired change as well. Within my school, students are measured on their reading and writing ability using informal classroom assessments, discussion observation records, STEP reading assessment system, and benchmarks. Sometimes balancing all of these different forms of assessment can be challenging and time consuming. Therefore, I would present to the group my idea of how to effectively use this data to guide our next intervention steps. My thoughts would be to use both the STEP reading assessment and the latest benchmark data to create a targeted plan for students. The informal classroom assessments and observations would then be used as ongoing assessment data during the intervention process. Analyzing this ongoing data each time we meet would keep the dialogue alive and refreshed. After presenting this idea, I would follow up with a prompt or two from the Leading With Inquiry chart in Senge's (2012) text. I would ask either, "What do you think about what I just said?" or "Do any of you see this differently?" These two questions would lead the dialogue into a continuous inquiry of the desired change.

Once the group has agreed upon the ways in which we would use the data to drive our planning, I would then spend some time organizing this data by student performance, item analyses, and standard mastery. It is my hope that from here, we are able to come up with instructional plans, student groupings, and teaching methods to lay the foundation for this new ELA intervention plan. These team-learning experiences would continue throughout the implementation of this daily intervention block. In an effort to respect the group members' time and sometimes limited flexibility, I would be sure to ask when each member could meet

regularly to continue the dialogue. The remaining team learning decisions would happen as inquiry progresses during the process of reaching the desired change.

References

Evans, R. (2001). *The human side of school change: reform, resistance, and the real-life problems of school change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Senge, P. M., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Kleiner, A., Smith, B., & Dutton, J. (2012). *Schools that learn.: a fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents and everyone who cares about education*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.