Educational Platform

Nadine T. Keyworth

City University

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I have always viewed teaching as less of a job and more as a ‘calling’. Even when tired, I find joy in the path I chose for myself over twenty years ago. For the majority of my career, I have taught middle school students, and I have enjoyed travelling ‘the emotional rollercoaster’ of life with many groups of amazing adolescents. As I began the process of formally articulating my educational platform, I began to recognize that what I believe now has been shaped and refined through the amazing students I have taught through the years. In addition, it has been impacted by the many leaders and colleagues I have had the pleasure of working with over the years. On my current journey, through the MEd in Leadership, I have continued to refine my beliefs as an educator, grounding many of them in research and reflection through experience.

**Student Outcomes**

“Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story” (First Peoples Principles of Learning).

I believe in the power of story! I aspire to have students understand the stories of those who came before whilst encouraging them to add their voices and stories to the world. I build community through story and literature, for great literature can help us break away from focusing on what makes us different and help us see the universal struggles and triumphs that make us human. Through enjoying, analyzing, and sharing stories, I hope students leave my classroom recognizing that we all strive to belong and be accepted, that we all struggle at times and need to ask for support and guidance, that the human experience transcends our differences. My goal is that students leave my room identifying as both readers and writers.

Math skills are necessary, but equally important is understanding that Math is all around us, not just in Math class. When teaching all subjects, but particularly Math, my aim is that students recognize the real-world connections to their learning. Each year, I hope that students leave my class with greater confidence in their Math ability. I spend a lot of time encouraging them to work together in Math, and in the past few years have adopted the mantra in my room that “friends don’t let friends do Math alone”.

I believe in the power of learning forward. I expect my students to take risks and to fail. Through failure, they develop resiliency. Making mistakes is where the real learning takes places; therefore, I want my students to understand that we all make mistakes, it’s what you learn from them that matters. Through failure, I want them to see that there is a strength that they develop and can apply to other aspects of their life.

Finally, I want students to leave my classroom with greater ownership over their own learning. Students need to take ownership over their learning, and one the best places to start is by having clear learning targets, because these provide clear expectations for performance (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014). Furthermore, I work towards helping students learn to track their progress, monitor their own experiences, thus investing themselves in their own achievement and growth. Feedback is a key component of helping students internalize ownership over what to do next and how to do it better, (Chan et al., 2014). My purpose, as their teacher, is to provide advice that can move learning forward after noting what they are doing well and what they need to do (Hattie, 2012). Ultimately, helping students understand that learning is a journey that does not stop when school is over.

**Instructional Climate**

I believe classrooms need to be dynamic spaces, where students participate in activities where they have been co-creators in both the design and implementation, where their passions and interests have been honoured and are recognized as valid vehicles for demonstrating their learning. Classrooms need to be enticing spaces where the ownership of learning results as a function of positive relationships between educators and students, where collaboration has resulted in making curriculum belong to us, thereby encouraging students to be active, critical learners, instead of passive receptors (Fried, 2001). I am a strong advocate for educators to design learning opportunities that allow all students to explore the questions and concerns they have about themselves and the world (Brown & Knowles, 2007).

#### I acknowledge that at times, it has felt paralyzing to be everything for every student. In the realities of a modern classroom it is impossible to differentiate and individualize everything, for time is not infinite and if educators attempted to do this with each lesson, we would quickly find ourselves burning out. Instead, through experience I have come to understand that planning starts through the cultivation of a positive instructional climate of belonging, trust, and acceptance. This starts from the first day, by simply taking time to honour each child’s chosen name, learning names, even if they are hard for you. The relationship needs to be reciprocal; teachers need to allow students to know them. Students enjoy it when I tell them stories about my own children and my life experiences. It allows them to see that I am more than just a teacher, that I, too, have had triumphs and failures, good days and bad moments. Additionally, the first days are critical in establishing attachment between the students and the teacher. In my early years of teaching, I remember being told ‘don’t let them see you smile until Christmas, they need to know you are in charge’. However, this advice never sat well with me, it felt inauthentic; ultimately, I never really followed it. Instead smiling and creating a relaxed, mutually respective environment was my strategy. Years later, when my daughter was born, someone gave me a copy of Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté’s book “Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers”, and while reading it realized I was an attachment teacher. I have always understood that in September, adolescents are looking to either attach to each other or the teacher. If they don’t trust you, then they will attach to each other, making behaviour issues a greater likelihood down the road (Neufeld & Maté, 2004). Subsequently, smiling and taking time to learn and understand each student’s interests and passions allows me to connect with them and motivate them. Tollefson and Magdaleno (2016) argue that the essence of success in any school is having leaders who understand the socioeconomical, cultural, and historical backgrounds of the community as well as the students it serves. Without positive relationships, where students are seen, heard, and respected, I believe it becomes difficult for a child to feel safe and want to learn. My job, then, is to know the whole student and understand what each of them needs from me to be successful. In the end, it’s about creating an environment where openness, empathy, and kindness flourish, while still teaching and fostering the skills necessary for academic and social success; ultimately, creating a community where we all feel included and respected, where we are all just human.

I believe that classrooms and schools should be designed to promote innovation and collaboration amongst students and staff. I view my classroom as ours, not mine. I always strip the walls and reset the furniture, allowing us to organically create the space that is necessary for students to grow in. The seating is flexible and moveable, allowing for constant change, trying different configurations and combinations to match changes in the room and activities. Ultimately, I want to structure the space to allow learning opportunities that support a sociocognitive view of learning, based around Vygostsky’s belief that a crucial part of cognitive development is having opportunities to interact verbally within the social environment (Vygotsky, 1976).

The heart of education for me is the relationships I build with students and colleagues, through empathy and active listening. Relationship building with staff and students needs to be done with authenticity, because although “being authentic is not a requirement for success,” it is “if you want that success to be a lasting success”(Sinek, 2009, p. 69). In our diverse school landscapes, it is important that we don’t attach ‘a single story’ (Adichi, 2009) to both our students and our colleagues, instead taking time to understand their unique perspectives. We spend a lot of time cultivating relationships with students, but often forget the importance of fostering relationships with each other. As educators we need to respect and understand the backgrounds of each other. If teachers do not feel understood, acknowledged and respected, they are less willing to participate wholeheartedly (Hamilton, 2016) in school initiatives that execute the school’s vision. Furthermore, if teachers in a school do not feel acknowledged and respected for their views and opinions, they will not feel that they belong and are valued. I agree with Barth (2006) that “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 accomplishments than anything else”( p. 1). By ﻿“approaching the world through the relational ethic of caring, we are more likely to listen attentively to others” (Noddings, 2010, p. 391). Through active listening, I believe we can see how the beliefs of individual teachers align versus diverge with the values of the school, and we can utilize caring to find commonalities. As team leader at Yorkson Creek Middle School (YCMS), I have to sometimes navigate the inconsistency between beliefs and values and use both active listening and the relationships I have built with colleagues to build bridges between other staff members. Feuerverger (2011) talks about “the necessity that classroom teachers and students find common ground in the midst of seemingly insurmountable differences,” going on to note that “teachers need to be border crossers who create bridges filled with genuine dialogue” (p. 77). I believe the same notion can be applied to teachers towards each other. We need to choose to be ‘border crossers’ through ‘genuine dialogue’ to create and cultivate positive relationships amongst each other, ensuring that beliefs and values within a school stay aligned.

**Instructional Organization**

Many students begin to disengage from learning and school during middle school, often demonstrating more negative attitudes towards learning coupled with a decrease in effort (Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano, & Fulmer, 2014). Therefore, I believe it is important that educators in middle school create environments that are responsive to the changing needs of young adolescents, with an awareness of the social emotional needs of students during these critical years (Brown & Knowles, 2007). I believe in organizing my classroom lessons around the premise that the process is as important, if not more imperative than the product. When I can, I try to construct interdisciplinary learning opportunities for students so that they understand that learning is more than just subject based, instead that all aspects of learning connect together in amazing ways. This echoes the ideas of Whitehead (1929) who believed that teaching should focus less on concepts in isolation and more on the connections between them. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to learning, when possible, allows students to see the authentic connections that exist between subjects and the applicability of learning to contexts outside of the school setting.

In our rapidly changing world, it has become more important than ever to ensure that the education system engages students in learning experiences that will be transferable into their futures. That is why in recent years I have become passionate about the utilization of the design thinking process as a connection between subject areas. Design thinking enables students to see their learning as a cyclical process, where they can be in control of the questions they need to ask in order to make necessary, timely adjustments their learning. “Through design activities, students learn about planning, collaborating, and building a common vision of success” (Davis, 1999, p. 11). Instead of completing worksheets or passing exams, student designers “need to consider such issues as the needs of the audience, the distribution of work in the group, the management of time and resources, and the deadline” (Hsiao & Liu, 2002, p. 311). Furthermore, design thinking “provides a robust scaffold for divergent problem solving, as it engenders a sense of creative confidence that is both resilient and highly optimistic” (Carroll, 2014, p. 16). Ultimately, the design process better prepares students for the demands of a rapidly changing world where critical thinking, collaboration and creativity are crucial. As an educator, my hope is that students can see that all tasks can be refined and improved upon if they go through a design cycle, and that learning does not stop at the end of a unit; we are always learning.

**Community**

“Our concept of a school community is one in which individuals come together as whole people, bringing their diverse perspectives, practices, cultures, beliefs, values, and traditions into the “space” that will become a community” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 124).

I believe schools exist as a key components of communities and should be places where parents should feel welcome to come and be part of the conversation. ﻿ As such, I value the role of a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) in the school, and I believe that they should be empowered in conversations around the development of goals and culture in a school. Parents live in the community that a school serves, most teachers do not. As such, parents have insight into the aspects of the community that educators may not always see and understand. Not all parents want to be involved in the PAC, but the very existence of the PAC is an invitation for parents to be part of the conversation towards building an authentic community (Block, 2008). I agree with Sergiovanni (1994) that schools can never be a replacement for family and neighborhood; however, “as schools become communities, they facilitate the strengthening of family and neighborhood” (p. 13).

At the classroom level, communication between school and home is critical. I try to cultivate relationships with parents, taking time to listen to their perspective about their child, for they know them best. At the beginning of the year I always send home ‘parent homework’, in which I ask parents to write to me about their students interests, strengths, and stretches. I enjoy when these emails and letters start pouring in, for as a parent I realize that we want our children’s teachers to understand how we view them. When I became a parent fourteen years ago, the shift in my perception of the role and perspective of parents was massive. I began to see the interactions through a new lens. When I make a tough phone call home, my empathy is deeper, I understand that it is hard to hear that your child is struggling in any capacity. It was also after my daughter was born that I started sending positive messages home frequently. Once a week I send an email to the parents of five students to let them know how well their child is doing, trying to make a personal connection to a recent activity or action. I’ve had many parents email me back and thank me for these emails, a small drop of my time for a bigger impact on theirs.

**Beliefs and Experience**

From my formative experiences as a new teacher, I have evolved and adapted throughout my career. Each year refining how I view myself as an educator and how I view the students in my class. I was fortunate in my earlier years of teaching to experience some vastly different school climates. After my practicum in an inner-city school, my first extended assignment was in a ‘typical middle class’ neighbourhood. The following year, I found myself in a fundamental choice school, where parents believed they had input in every decision I made. From that point on, I found myself bouncing around through a variety of schools, not by choice, but by circumstance. I frequently found myself at the wrong end of a seniority / contract issue, never really putting roots in a school until over 10 years into my career. Due to the fact that I had to experience such a diverse set of schools in the first 10 years of my teaching career, I know I have a better understanding of the complexity of the role of teacher, and how this role can alter based on the culture of a school and the community around it.

As a result of so much movement, I have never felt an attachment to a physical classroom. I have though developed an appreciation for the uniqueness of each school and class I get to work with each year. I view classroom ecosystems as complex and organic. Each year I enjoy the process of watching the individuals in a new class come together. You can’t predict how each new class will react to each other or to you, for what influences our identity changes through our experiences together. As such, I believe the culture of the classroom is not static, it evolves and is created through the shared experiences of the teacher and the students. The classroom teacher is thus tasked with honouring what students bring into the classroom, recognizing both their academic and socio-emotional needs. This same premise can be extended to schools. A school community is not static, and we need to honour the changes that occur throughout a school year and respond to events and individuals who many influence the school in both positive and negative ways.

I am drawn to the idea that we collectively own the knowledge of the world, that we make sense of the world through how we interact with the objects in the world. For example, as an avid reader of fiction, I know the author has written his or her words with purpose; however, I believe that the reader helps put even deeper meaning into the text. The words of the author coupled with the experiences of the reader, meet in a perfect symphony of understanding. That is why a friend can recommend a book they loved to you, yet you barely finish it, for your experiences and knowledge are not necessarily connecting with you. A book can be beautifully written, but not draw you in, for you may not be ready emotionally to connect with said book. I believe as individuals; we develop our own truths. This is a critical understanding that I bring into the classroom and my decision making, and why I believe that choice and voice becomes so critical in promoting learning and literacy, especially in young adolescents.

I believe, we engage as participants in our own acquisition and construction of knowledge. I believe that teachers are designers of lessons, learning conditions and so much more. As a teacher, I start the year with a sense of where I would like to go, and my students then becomes my co-designers in how the project will unfold. Together we react to the unexpected, reflect on what could have gone better, then implement a new course of action. The lines between student and teacher can blur, as we collectively develop our own little ecosystem that works for the whole, not just me, the teachers. In this co-development of a classroom culture, I become lead learner, not the owner of all the knowledge in the room. As 'lead learner' I recognize that my passion for learning is what led me to teaching, and it is my love of teaching that fuels my passion for learning.

My reflective practice is a critical element of my professional life. At the core of this reflective practice is my insatiable desire to constantly learn and improve upon my practice. When I stop learning and challenging myself to achieve new levels of personal and professional growth, then I believe I stop being an educational leader in the classroom and in the school. I believe it is important to ask students for feedback about my teaching and lessons, and as such, I give them opportunities to honestly reflect on lessons and activities that we have participated in. Through building a community of trust through positive relationships, I believe that the majority of the feedback is honest. In fact at times, it has been brutal and I have had to step back and not take it personally, instead utilize it to fuel my own growth.

**Institutional Context**

﻿ I believe that we need to be better at viewing schools and school districts as communities versus organizations, for in viewing them through this lens, we can see all the levels working together for the betterment of students, not for the pursuit of individual agendas within the organization (Thomas J. Sergiovanni, 1994). However, in reality, it often appears that the competing agendas forget about the ultimate goal of educating the minds and souls of students. In my 20-year career I have walked the picket line too many times, and as I write this, there is once again stress within the organization as teachers look for more money and better learning conditions. I have struggled my entire career between my calling to teach children and the structures of various organizations within education that have impacted my ability to do what I love. I understand, as a child who grew up with a father who worked in a unionized environment, the power and importance of unions. However, I have often struggled with being at the wrong end of contract language, feeling that it does not always allow for the best educators for school communities to stay there.

With the recent flood of new teachers in British Columbia, I believe that we can do a better job of mentoring them effectively. In fact, I believe we can do a better job of structuring professional development for all educators. Runhaar (2017) notes that districts should establish “professional development policies should cover all the stages in teachers’ careers”, which will help teachers be guided towards opportunities that help them actively develop skill sets they need to be successful (p. 644). I believe districts need to ensure that all teachers, but particularly new teachers, feel supported from where they are and develop goals in mind about where they need support and how they can grow.

British Columbia’s newest curriculum has allowed for increased flexibility in how individual teachers approach content in the specific areas. This curriculum shift has allowed for the threads of possibility for interdisciplinary lessons to occur. The introduction of the curricular competencies has allowed for a common language to weave through all aspects of curriculum. I believe it is a step in the right direction, but I also believe that it is not an invitation for teachers to do whatever they want in their classrooms. Teacher autonomy is a word that is often has been misused and poorly understood. The curriculum allows for greater autonomy of how to deliver curriculum, not autonomy to teach whatever we want to. I believe that there needs to continue to be structured opportunities provided by districts and the ministry to ensure that all the initiatives around education are implemented for the greater good of the students in the system.

**Leadership Behaviours**

As the oldest of four children, my first leadership role was that of big sister. As a young child, I loved planning and organizing events for my brothers, including setting-up a classroom in the basement. As I moved into my teenage years, I found myself gravitating towards leadership roles in high school through student council and sports. From the early years of being a big sister, through my teenage years to now, the caretaker role is one that I have a naturally gravitated towards. My caretaking instincts are closely woven throughout my personal and professional life, where I try to ensure people feel accepted, respected and that their contributions to my life are acknowledged. Empathy is a strength I have utilized to cultivate meaningful relationships in all aspects of my life.

From my early years of teaching, I have found myself in leadership positions, through choice and circumstance. I have long held the idea that teacher leadership takes on many forms, but that leaders in any capacity need to have a strong sense of why we behave the way we choose too. At times, I have been viewed as impulsive, but I would say that I am more instinctual, a person ruled by my ‘gut decisions’. Sinek (2009) notes, that when we are clear in why we make the decisions we make, our ‘gut decisions’ will make sense. I have used my ‘gut’ on many occasions to guide me through personal and professional decisions.

I see leadership as being earned through our actions, similar to an Indigenous point of view, where "individuals were recognized as community leaders based on their demonstrated talents, experience, wisdom, and integrity," and as such "their recognition as leaders was based on community consensus and this recognition had to be earned in the eyes and within the context of the cultural values held within their communities"(Cajete, 2016, p. 368). Effective leadership is built on trust, integrity, and strengthening of relationships (Fullan, 2005). Before vision and initiatives can be implemented, trust needs to be established within a school community or organization (T.J. Sergiovanni, 2012). The building of relationships and the establishing of a culture of trust makes it possible to implement vision and for people to feel valued and understood, even under demanding conditions (Fullan, 2005). Furthermore, I believe that leadership is also not just about leading, but also about building the capacity within others. Leaders need to trust the talents of their staff and help cultivate their initiatives and ideas. The need to utilize and leverage these strengths to help them implement vision and goals. It is important that leaders work with others, collaborating and implementing vision that ultimately benefits the students we teach. As Grade Eight team leader for the past three years, I have worked with the team to create goals that align with the school goals as well as the hopes we all have for our students. I appreciate the opportunity that I have to collaborate and learn with others, and the different perspectives that we provide each other. As mentioned previously in this platform, for me the heart of education is relationships I build with students, parents, and my colleagues. I try to ensure that this echoes through all that I do – as a leader in the classroom, the school, and in other endeavours I pursue in education.

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