The Case for Empathy as a Standard for Principal Certification

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Abstract: *Although empathy is cited as a favorable leadership disposition in research, school principals are typically unsure about the role of empathy while performing their duties. Through a review of literature, this paper discerns specific strategies that should diminish principals' confusion about empathy and lead to more empathic, inclusive school leaders and schools.*

INTRODUCTION

In *Nobody Left to Hate*, Aronson (2000) titled Chapter 6 "Root Cause Interventions, Part 2: Building Cooperation, Empathy, and Compassion in the Classroom." In this chapter, Aronson (2000) shared an excerpt from the book *Birdy* written by William Wharton. One of the main characters in Wharton's book, Alfonso, a sergeant in the military, developed an immediate dislike for an enlisted man, Ronsky, who worked in the same office.

When Alfonso learned about the trauma Ronsky had experienced at Normandy, Alfonso's reaction made a profound statement about empathy and the importance of taking into consideration the perspectives and experiences of other people. "Before you know it, if you're not careful, you can get to feeling for everybody and there's nobody left to hate" (as cited in Aronson, 2000, p. 126). In addition to helping Aronson (2000) decide on a title for his book, Alfonso's new outlook provided inspiration for principals tasked with creating inclusive and empathetic schools.

To further make his point Aronson (2000) went into detail about highly supportive working environments and the impact culture can have on how people feel about their jobs and going to work each day. If one likes their job, quality relationships likely exist in the office, or building, and the people in the environment likely support each other.

Later, in the chapter, Aronson (2000) described a work environment where there are cliques, and where the people in that environment compete instead of support each other. He compared the toxic work environment to the culture that takes place in most high schools, and, sadly, most high school students would find the comparison accurate and compelling. If Aronson's (2000) understanding of how most high school students feel about school is true, it is up to educational leaders, especially building principals at all levels, to accurately measure students' apprehension about attending school and develop action plans that will improve students' school experience.

The sub-title of Chapter 6 in *Nobody Left to Hate* -"Building Cooperation, Empathy, and Compassion in the Classroom"- hints at an impediment to improving students' experiences in schools. If cooperation, empathy, and compassion already existed in classrooms, there would be

no need for Aronson (2000) to explain how to include them. Unfortunately, many school leaders neither think they need to be empathetic, know how to be empathetic, nor think their positions allow for displays of empathy.

Singh and Dali (2013) corroborated that school principals were confused about the role of empathy in the performance of their leadership duties. "The school principals confirmed that they needed to be empowered to a greater extent on how to implement the empathy competency" (p. S75). For their study, Singh and Dali (2013) interviewed and conducted focus groups with fifty school principals to learn how the principals felt about empathy as a competency for being a school leader, and also to learn how their participants perceived their own current competency as an empathetic school leader. These researchers found that the empathy competency was not a written standard of the Advanced Certificate in Education School Leadership program. Instead, the participants discussed the empathy competency as a work-integrated learning competency (WILC). Rather than empathy being a requirement for certifying school leaders, the principals discussed the empathy competency as something they learned on the job.

Singh and Dali's (2013) work was important for exposing that principal standards typically do not include an empathy competency, and that empathy is not regularly taught as a necessary skill in higher education programs that train school principals and other leaders. Despite those omissions, empathy regularly appears in leadership literature that is intended to support principals and other school leaders as they learn and gain experience through work-integrated activities. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that empathy is a necessary skill/disposition for being an educational leader and to reveal leadership skills that, when exercised consistently, quite naturally advance a school leader's empathy competency.

Goleman (2015) analyzed competency models of one hundred and eighty-eight companies to develop lists of "ingredients for highly effective leaders" (p. 3). What he learned was that emotional intelligence, which includes an empathy component, proved to be twice as important as cognitive and technical skills for jobs at all levels. Further, Goleman (2015) identified that leaders and people in other high-ranking positions in the companies he studied demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence.

Goleman identified five components of emotional intelligence and described them in his book, *On Emotional Intelligence*: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (p. 3). As empathy could have been referenced under any of the other components, it was significant that Goleman listed it as a component of its own and defined empathy as "thoughtfully considering employees' feelings - along with other factors - in the process of making intelligent decisions" (p. 16).

High performing businesses throughout America rely on Goleman's (2015) conclusion that exceptional leaders rank very high in the components of emotional intelligence. Although *On Emotional Intelligence* was based on business models, the qualities he identified as crucial for top-level leaders are equally applicable to excellent school leaders, especially principals.

Similar to Aronson (2000) who devoted most of an entire chapter to empathy and Goleman (2015) who listed empathy as one of the five components of emotional intelligence, Sprenger (2020) devoted a chapter to empathy in her book *Social Emotional Learning and the Brain*. In her discussion of the relations between empathy to brain development, Sprenger (2020) explained that while children's brains are not fully developed, empathy evolves as a person matures because the "supramarginal gyrus" (p. 44) continues to develop over time. Her point, that the more we use the brain to advance empathy, "the better it works" (p. 44) becomes very important for school leaders. Empathy must not be dismissed as an innate emotion or skill that one displays or does not. The

transformative school leader must widely circulate the value empathy can bring to students and a school's culture, as well as the knowledge that empathy can be learned and evolved.

Tomlinson and Murphy (2018) went even further in elevating the role of empathy in school culture by proposing that leaders make an empathic school their "due north'' for decision-making.

> What if we set our sights on creating an environment where our central and shared goal, as we teach and lead, is to understand the experiences and perspectives of those who share our space to make decisions based on what would serve them best? (p. 1).

EXTERNAL CONTROL

Reviewing the literature on empathy and leadership has already uncovered at least two strategies for helping principals and other school leaders learn to develop a welcoming culture and a more empathetic school:

- Enhance the prominence of empathy by moving it from a competency learned through work activities to a minimal level of proficiency stated specifically in standards for certifying principals and all school leaders.
- Provide ongoing professional development for certified principals and other school leaders to advance their knowledge and understanding of empathy and eliminate the confusion about being an empathetic leader that currently exists for those in leadership positions. Even if empathy was immediately added as a documented competency for school leaders, the bulk of practicing leaders have never been trained in what empathy is or how to practice empathy for the benefit of students and others.

A key misconception by most practicing and aspiring principals, and just about everyone else, is that external control is useful for managing behavior. Although nearly all principals justify their practice as being "for the benefit of students and others," almost none completely grasp their reliance on external control or the damage to "students and others" caused by external control. The truth is that punishment, a regular form of external control implemented by principals and parents, can be dramatically harmful, especially for children affected by previous trauma. To best "benefit students and others," principals must learn and exercise more empathetic practices. External control, in reality, meets only the needs of those imposing control and does not address the needs of "students and others" very much, if at all.

"We choose to do what we believe will best control the world around us so that it becomes closer to one or more of the pictures we select from our quality world. Our biggest problems arise when we try to control other people" (Glasser, 1998, p. 75). Glasser's (1998) theory posits that all behavior is a choice and that trying to control others' behavior is a waste of time because, "...the only person any of us can control is ourselves" (p. 75).

Nearly all of the examples Glasser (1998) supplied throughout *The Quality School* discussed how controlling behavior by teachers affected students. With limited revisions, Glasser's work can be modified to show that some principals depend on a leadership style that relies almost solely on external control and involves few, if any, behaviors grounded in empathy. Table 1 compares Boss Principal behaviors to the behaviors of the Lead Principals:

Table 1
Boss Principal behavior compared to Lead Principal behavior

Boss Principal	Lead Principal
Principal sets the task and standards without consulting the teachers.	Principal engages the teachers in discussions of quality instruction and provides time for planning and collaboration. The Principal makes a constant effort to fit the job to the skills and the needs of the teachers.
Principal does not compromise; teachers adjust to the job as defined by the principal.	Teachers are continually asked for their input.
Principal tells rather than shows and rarely asks for input for how something might be done better.	Principal supports teachers in their efforts to improve instruction. Individual strategies where teachers reflect on the quality of their instruction and share the responsibility for improvement with the principal.
Principal supervises work and determines the quality of the work.	Principal does everything in their power to provide the best tools and workplace as well as a noncoercive, non-adversarial atmosphere.
When teachers resist, the principal uses coercion to make them do as they are told.	Principal utilizes coaching techniques to help teachers construct their own understanding.

Adapted from Glasser (1998, pp. 27-33)

On the one hand, principals who operate using lead principal techniques may not have been trained in empathy and instead learned empathy through work activities or in other ways. However they came upon it, the lead principal behaviors represent practices that embody empathy and better meet the needs of both teachers and students.

On the other hand, there is nothing in the behavior of boss principals that suggests they are empathetic, have been trained in empathy, or they care about empathy at all. Boss principals often put their own needs above all else and rely on coercion to control and manipulate others.

A useful measure for distinguishing a boss principal from a lead principal is how the principal applied Maslow's Hierarchy (1954) when disciplining students and when evaluating teachers. A boss principal uses fear and coercion to control students with punishments like detention and suspension.

While punishment never meets the needs of any student, the boss principal meets their own need for control when using punishment to control students' behavior.

In contrast, a lead principal understands that for a student to improve their behavior, they must take responsibility for the behavior and participate in a plan to change it. A lead principal who takes the time to help a student construct their own understanding of any behavioral incident meets the student's need far better than a punishment that never required the student to consider how they might improve their behavior.

Teacher evaluation, too, should be about meeting the teacher's needs. A boss principal will typically observe a teacher and take notes on what they observed. In the post observation conference, the boss principal usually does all the talking while they tell the teacher what they saw while checking off the boxes in the summative evaluation without ever engaging the teacher in a conversation about their instruction or asking about and addressing any of the teacher's needs.

The lead principal meets with a teacher in a pre-observation conference and engages the teacher in a discussion about their strengths and also where they would like to improve according to the state teaching standards. The lead principal partners with the teacher to develop a plan for improvement. In the post observation meeting, the lead principal listens intently as the teacher discusses their instruction. The lead principal paraphrases and asks probing questions, but the teacher has the floor for approximately 80% of the meeting.

Much of the value of Maslow's tiered approach to meeting needs is that empathy is built into every tier. A lead principal who effectively employs Maslow's Hierarchy (1954) and is conscious of putting students and staff needs before their own quite naturally cultivates an empathetic culture and school.

IMPLICATIONS

One of the problems with supporting principals and other school leaders in becoming more empathetic is that the word empathy has been defined in a variety of ways and has a range of implications. Tomlinson and Murphy (2018) addressed the semantic perplexity of empathy by offering "the idea of an empathetic school" (p. 2), and they affirmed that if an empathetic school was to become the desired state, the principal would have provided crucial leadership.

Even boss principals would claim to be empathetic, and according to the many meanings of empathy, they might even be able to defend that position. It is not necessary to have a universal operational definition for empathy or to quibble over whether leaders should be mostly empathetic, rational, or compassionate. More important to the development of leaders is to agree that both empathy and compassion are useful competencies for principals. When empathy and/or compassion become desirable, even required, competencies for principals, training and ongoing professional development will help both aspiring and practicing principals better understand how to practice empathy and build empathetic school cultures more robustly.

Becoming a lead principal and effectively employing Maslow's Hierarchy of Skills are two concepts that have been discussed for facilitating the creation of an empathetic culture, and there are more. According to the literature on school leadership, principals have an opportunity to promote an empathetic culture in their school through the following leadership techniques and skills:

(a) understand mental models.
(b) accomplish a collaboratively developed mission and vision.
(c) learn how to be a cognitive coach and practice continuous improvement. In the following few paragraphs, I unpack these ideas a bit.

UNDERSTAND MENTAL MODELS
Senge described the negative impact of not interrogating our extant mental models as follows: "new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting (p. 175).

The example of Alfonso and Ronsky discussed earlier represents well the importance of mental models and the cognitive challenges that result when one is presented with new information that "conflicts with deeply held internal images." Consider how the following realities tested Alfonso's existing mental models:

- There was much about Ronsky that Alfonso did not like, but it was Ronsky's habit of spitting that Alfonso found most disgusting.
- Those who fought at Normandy were heroes, and Ronsky's habit of spitting was a manifestation of trying to rid himself of the bad taste in his mouth from the horror he survived when watching his buddies die there.

The social facts embodied in both statements challenged Alfonso's existing mental models, and he was forced to re-examine what he truly valued and believed. Alfonso's conclusion, "Before you know it, if you're not careful, you can get to feeling for everybody and there's nobody left to hate" (cited in Aronson, 2000, p. 126) was a testament to Alfonso's character and willingness to see things differently when presented with new information. He came to respect Ronsky after learning of his participation in the Normandy invasion and the reason why Ronsky spit. Such is the power of challenging our own mental models and helping others learn to examine and challenge their own.

A failure to examine and challenge mental models explains why there are so many boss principals and boss teachers in schools. From the genesis of public schooling in the United States, operant conditioning and stimulus/response theories have been the predominant motivation techniques taught to educators. Thus, principals have developed the mental model of utilizing external control because there were few examples of another principal leadership style in their training; it is equally rare to find a practicing principal with a motivational style that does not require control theory techniques. Even though B.F. Skinner acknowledged that when practicing control, one should employ only positive reinforcement (Fancher, 1979), it is rare to find a school that does not rely on at least some forms of negative reinforcement, even coercion and punishment.

Due to the predominant mental model of control in principal training and practice, questions to practicing and aspiring principals about how they learned empathy and employ empathy in their leadership style often confuse them. These principals have not felt empowered to challenge the norm and to use more compassionate supervision or discipline strategies. As well, there are hardly any resources in principal training programs that teach the aspiring principal motivation skills that lead to creating an empathetic school environment. If progress is to be made toward a more empathetic culture, principal training programs and professional development for principals will need to be quite purposeful about including knowledge about social and emotional learning, teaching, and leadership.

ACCOMPLISH A COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOPED MISSION AND VISION.

The leadership process of a collaboratively developed mission and vision is an exercise that is often overlooked in the practice of many principals. Either principals define the purpose of their school on their own and do not communicate that purpose to anyone, or a mission statement is written and them put aside and never referenced again. "No school has ever improved simply because the staff wrote a mission statement" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 34). These scholars also stressed the difference between writing a mission statement and living a mission statement. A common practice of many school principals has been to spend quite a lot of time developing a mission statement, which they then put away and never look at again.

Kaplan and Owings (2015) defined mission as "a clear and motivating purpose focused on student learning" (p. 108). They stressed the importance of staff sharing their own values about what the purpose of their school would be. The understanding principal knows that those who meet their needs through teaching are motivated by being able to work hard at a cause that aligns with their own values and beliefs. It is predictable, then, that if the purpose of a school is never discussed and later defined in a written mission statement, or if the teachers' values are never considered in that purpose, staff will be perplexed about the worth of their daily efforts.

If the mission is collaboratively developed, however, then it is the principal's charge to ensure that the mission is communicated and enacted in relation to every action the school generates towards improvement. Following the development and adoption of a collaboratively developed mission, a vision/strategic plan can be written with goals to advance the mission. The vision/strategic plan is only beneficial, though, when the purpose i.e., the mission, is designed to motivate teachers to continuously improve to meet the needs of their students.

LEARN HOW TO BE A COGNITIVE COACH

Cognitive coaching has been described as supporting a "teacher's existing strengths while expanding previously unexplored capacities. When teachers talk out loud about their thinking, their decisions become clearer to them, and their awareness increases" (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993, p. 1).

Practicing empathy works in tandem with cognitive coaching. Instead of the principal setting standards and eventually making the teacher the object of an evaluation by lecturing about what he observed, the two work together to determine where improvement is desired or needed. Then, instead of supervising the teacher's work and also determining its quality, the principal partners with the teacher to develop a plan for improvement and a method and instrument for measuring the improvement. The most important step in cognitive coaching, though, is the principal's skill at asking probing questions, paraphrasing, and restating key points in an effort to help the teacher reflect about how to improve their teaching. Clearly empathy is central to this process.

While aligning empathy with motivation, Goleman (2015) essentially provided a recommendation for the impact of cognitive coaching:

> That's where coaching and mentoring come in. It has repeatedly been shown that coaching and mentoring pay off not just in better performance but also in increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover. But what makes coaching and mentoring work best is the nature of the relationship. Outstanding coaches and mentors get inside the heads of the people they are helping. They sense how to give effective feedback. They know when to push for better performance and when to hold back. In that way they motivate their proteges, they demonstrate empathy in action (p. 18).

PRACTICE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement is a natural outcome of empathetic practice. When it is implemented with fidelity, bossing strategies diminish the likelihood of continuous improvement while lead principal behaviors increase the likelihood for improvement. Teacher evaluation specifically becomes an important responsibility that is notably best accomplished through

continuous improvement processes that allow the teacher to participate in their own improvement instead of becoming the target (and usually casualty) of a principal's evaluation.

Continuous improvement eliminates the rating and ranking of teachers while also providing ongoing training for everybody. Coercion and fear are eliminated in a culture of continuous improvement and pride in workmanship is restored when teachers are provided the opportunity to share their ideas and be included in organizational decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Langford & Cleary, 1995).

CONCLUSION

The importance of being an empathetic school leader has been supported well by researchers who have sought to improve the development and improvement of school principals. Yet, when interviewed about the role of empathy in leadership, school principals shared that they were "confused", and they needed to be "empowered" to be more empathetic (Singh and Dali, 2013). The confusion and misunderstanding of the role of empathy in the performance of school principals seems to explain why too many principals operate with the mental model of a boss principals regularly or resort to external control and coercion tactics in countless, sometimes overwhelming circumstances.

Based on the findings of this research, four immediate improvements would seem to make empathy a required competency and a regular component in the training and evaluation of school principals:

- Include proficiency in all five components of emotional intelligence in published standards for school principals.
- Revise and improve the training and ongoing professional development of school principals to include social and emotional intelligence more robustly.
- Teach aspiring principals and practicing principals to examine and to challenge their mental models regularly.
- Eliminate the confusion about an empathetic leadership style so aspiring and practicing principals fully understand that their empathetic leadership is essential for developing an empathetic culture and school.

The following are examples of knowledge, skills, and practices that will quite naturally increase empathetic leadership:

- Understand mental models.
- Accomplish a collaboratively developed mission and vision.
- Learn how to be a cognitive coach.
- Practice continuous improvement.

Those responsible for training and providing ongoing professional development for principals can make curriculum revisions that will include at a minimum these suggestions for training that will quite naturally help aspiring and improving leaders be more empathetic.

FUTURE STUDY

An important part of these musings that has not been fully explored is the comparison of a boss principal to a lead principal and the motivation techniques that define these two leadership styles. Similarly, more research comparing intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation techniques that support leaders' learning and continuous improvement is needed. To reduce or

eliminate the confusion about the value of empathy as a leadership proficiency, aspiring and practicing principals must also understand the learning styles of children better. In this regard, research about social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed schools has helped educators better understand students and how to best support their learning. The knowledge of these innovations needs to continue to expand and research needs to be conducted on how practicing and aspiring principals become aware of how to apply SEL practices and trauma-informed school recommendations. Finally, principals need more knowledge and training about adult motivation and how to best support teachers to focus on learning (rather than privileging teaching) and to support students' growth and development as they consider the variety of ways students learn.

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