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The Adaptive Challenges of Leadership in Maine Schools

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by Richard Ackerman, Ian Mette, and Catharine Biddle

Abstract

The current landscape of educational leadership in Maine schools offers a range of challenges and uncertainties that are seldom acknowledged or appreciated. These challenges can expose significant gaps between clinical, research-based knowledge and leadership practices in schools in Maine and across the United States. These endemic issues constitute adaptive challenges. Solutions to the leadership challenges raised by these issues don't come quickly or easily and are, in fact, inherently confusing because they don't have easy technical answers. In the context of schools, they include responses to the endemic challenges of poverty as it affects families and children in Maine, as well as the nature of instructional leadership to provide better supervision and evaluation of teachers. These issues also inform the principles and practices that guide the development of school leaders in Maine through the educational leadership program at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development.

"Am I going to continue to do the thing I was trained for, on which I base my claims to technical rigor and academic respectability? Or am I going to work on the problems—ill-formed, vague, and messy—that I have discovered to be real around here?" And depending on how people make this choice, their lives unfold differently.
—Donald Schön (1995: 28)

A few years ago, old friends came to visit our little village on the coast of Maine. During the course of the visit, Roland suddenly started to seem quite disoriented and confused. His wife, Barbara, said, "We need to get him to a hospital with an emergency room and fast. I worry that he's having some kind of stroke!" Barbara, who had recently retired as head of surgical nursing at a major teaching hospital in Boston, knew what she was talking about. We jumped in the car and headed for the local hospital about 10 miles away. Just before we pulled up to the emergency room doors, Barbara asked, "Do they know what they don't know?" Since what was happening to Roland at that moment seemed quite uncertain, Barbara worried that the emergency room doctors might rush to judgment by way of a diagnosis and treatment rather than take the time to consider his puzzling symptoms. She was concerned about potential significant gaps in the clinical knowledge and practice in a small rural emergency room. She feared the emergency room physicians might assume they had the answer when in fact they didn't have all information and knowledge needed to accurately diagnose and treat what looked to be an uncertain problem.

Many school leaders and teachers experience a version of the *emergency room* dilemma every day. They constantly face challenges embedded in the core work of schools—teaching and learning—that do not lend themselves easily or always to technical expertise and solutions. School leaders and teachers must do this within the larger contexts of national and state educational policy and policymakers who often assume that complex social problems have simple solutions. Thus, it can sometimes be difficult for local school leaders, who lead at the intersection of policy and practice, to admit honestly, "they don't know what they don't know." What, then, do school leaders do with the genuine questions and uncertainties they have about the myriad issues that come with leading a school and a community?

School leaders likely respond in several ways to this question. Some are willing to view prevailing challenges to their work as leaders and educators for what they are—"ill-informed, vague, and messy" (Schön 1995: 28). Examples are easy to name: dealing with the endemic issues of poverty in Maine, promoting positive student behavior, providing quality supervision of teachers that improves instructional practices, and—likely the most ubiquitous of all—influencing student learning. Some school leaders are willing to approach these issues with

disciplined methods of inquiry that emerge from experience, intuition, and trial and error; they ask questions, reach out to new knowledge bases, and keep an eye on their own uncertainties as they muddle through. Many educators (perhaps most), however, feel the need to approach uncertain problems with presumed models of technical rigor and practice despite that such technical expertise does not always apply to the messy and uncertain zones of their practice. Indeed, as Schön (1995) posits, depending how school leaders and teachers make this choice, their lives and the lives of the adults and children around them unfold very differently.

The current landscape of educational leadership in Maine offers a range of challenges and uncertainties that are seldom acknowledged or appreciated. These challenges can expose significant gaps between clinical, research-based knowledge and leadership practices in schools in Maine and across the United States. These challenges include responses to the endemic contexts of poverty as it affects family and children in Maine, as well as the real work of instructional leadership to provide better supervision and evaluation of teachers. These issues also affect our work in developing sound principles and practices to facilitate the development of school leaders in Maine through our educational leadership program at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. Solutions to the leadership challenges raised by these swampy issues don't come quickly or easily and are, in fact, inherently confusing because they don't have easy technical answers. They are what Heifetz (1994) calls "adaptive" challenges.

UNDERSTANDING ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

The term *adaptive challenges* refers to situations where there are no known solutions to the problem or where there are too many solutions with no clear choices. Adaptive challenges, by nature, require flexible thinking and responses, which also means they are fluid and change with circumstances. As such, adaptive challenges are volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous in nature. Solutions to this type of challenge usually require people to learn new ways of doing things, as well as to have the ability to change their attitudes, values, and norms to adopt an experimental mindset (Heifetz and Linsky 2002)

Adaptive challenges require adaptive leadership, leadership based on the principles of shared responsibility and continuous learning. Moreover, adaptive

challenges are full of unknowns, so an experimental or learning mind-set is essential. Doing the same job better, longer, and with more help will not solve an adaptive challenge. There is, especially for beginning school leaders, the tension between being too authoritative and being too collaborative (Jentz 2009). However, to respond to adaptive challenges effectively, leaders need to develop the interpersonal capacities that enable them to work as part of a team. Developing these interpersonal capacities has been the central focus of our teaching and research at the University of Maine. From our work with students and reflections on our own teaching, we have developed insights into how leaders perform and how they learn to perform better in their schools (Ackerman et al. 2011). As such, in a view we share with many other leadership theorists, the *great man theory of leadership*—a notion where a single person, the great man, is able to solve all problems by himself—is passé (Heifetz 1994). The great man theory does not withstand the test of adaptive challenges for a few key reasons. No leader, no matter how brilliant, knows everything and has all the answers. And, even if the leader has the answer(s), she will need to work with others to overcome the complexities of an adaptive challenge. To state it succinctly, teamwork, and the ability to motivate and inspire others, matters. Furthermore, working in a team ensures knowledge is spread across more people, reducing the likelihood of similar problems arising when formal leadership experiences turnover.

The issue of how to reconcile adaptive challenges in education systems is a *wicked problem,* meaning there is no easy way to identify a cause or a solution (Margolin and Buchanan 1995; Mette et al. 2017). When leaders believe they must be certain about problems that don't have easy technical solutions, they can feel inferior to policymakers—who often present the problems as just requiring technical rigor—and unable to implement solutions. Some school leaders may be unaware or ashamed of their own confusion, so they hide their confusion and bluff, deny, blame, or take charge, as they react to complex problems with easy technical answers (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski 2002). Since the challenges are complex, technical answers will not work, which may result in leaders being more uncertain and confused about what they don't know.

Many, if not most, conceptions of leadership focus on the external aspects of leadership behavior, emphasizing what the leader *should do* without taking into

account who the leader is and how he is made aware of his own vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Leadership is practiced at a busy and sometimes hazardous intersection of personal and professional realms, where there is often a thundering flow of traffic. It is frequently thought of as a life of service in which personal wishes are turned toward the needs of others. Yet, school leaders frequently find themselves sandwiched between the need for technical rigor required by educational policies and the more ambiguous dilemmas they encounter on the ground in schools, especially in relationship to the work of leadership itself (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski 2004).

> Leadership development is perhaps one of the most vexing adaptive challenges facing public education systems....

How then, given the pressures around policy implementation, is it possible for a school leader to take on the tasks of discovering and changing his attitude toward what he (and others) don't know? How can a leader better incorporate the perspectives of others in addressing the wicked problems that adaptive challenges pose for schools? Perhaps most importantly, how can our society better contribute to finding solutions for these complex problems and serve as a resource and a starting place for growth?

We have been exploring principles, practices, and methods for helping school leaders develop such attitudes and performance capacities (Ackerman et al. 2011). We have engaged with our students in the arduous work of honing skills, judgment, and knowledge to address the adaptive challenges facing the PK–12 public education system across Maine and the United States. As such, we have worked hard to co-construct spaces and opportunities for our students to learn how to mobilize people to demonstrably improve student learning.

It is critical for the development of our students' leadership skills that we understand their ability to address adaptive challenges in a more personal way. To become more comfortable in acknowledging what they do not know, as well as more confident and competent in leading others in addressing complex challenges, new school leaders need to acknowledge their own vulnerabilities (Brown 2012) and see their vulnerabilities as opportunities for improvement rather than as a reason to retrench into defensiveness. Operating from this reconfigured mind-set means leaders can acknowledge their limitations and be open about reaching out for what they need to lead effectively. We believe it is of primary importance for Maine schools that school leaders develop a well-rounded sense of self, grounded in their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, intuition, imagination, and resourcefulness.

We see three pressing and fundamental adaptive challenges facing the state. First, there is a real need to alter the common paradigm on leadership development itself, moving away from solely technical solutions to more holistic approaches to leadership. Second, it is vital that we help school leaders address the pressing issues of poverty in Maine in a way that acknowledges the roots of poverty as an adaptive challenge that requires both community leadership and school leadership. Third, we need to shift away from policy-driven practices of simply evaluating teachers and develop leaders who are more capable of providing formative feedback as instructional leaders to improve student achievement. Understanding these three wicked problems as genuine adaptive challenges for Maine educators is a first step in addressing them.

Leadership Development

Leadership development is perhaps one of the most vexing adaptive challenges facing public education systems, namely, because there is not one defined technical solution to developing future PK–12 leaders. Of course, many authors and publishing houses would have you believe that there is one solution if you only buy their book and follow their interpretations of leadership (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005; Northouse 2018). Although there is comfort in this assumption, it flies in the face of everyday reality for practicing PK–12 leaders. The reality is that educational leadership programs must teach aspiring leaders to (a) accept uncertainty in their work, (b) gain balcony perspectives about their own leadership to reflect upon how this fits within their public school system, and (c) empower educators to reflect upon practices, exercise their own professional responsibility, and contribute to the learning organization as a whole.

Two important abilities lie at the heart of effective leadership: the ability to persuade a group of people to change and the ability to mobilize the same group to action (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). How do aspiring leaders develop these skills? We believe that the ability to translate the theory of leadership into action lies with developing leaders who are able to handle uncertainty in their own organizations as well as the vulnerabilities they perceive within themselves. Through guided development, aspiring leaders can transform their tacit beliefs about leadership into explicit habits and communication messages about leadership styles and actions (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

To encourage such growth, leadership development programs need to encourage aspiring leaders to analyze the messages and actions of their schools and districts and to critically question if these best support the students and families of the communities they serve. The goal is to develop an independent moral compass that informs all future leadership actions. This process can cause feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability, especially when attempting to mobilize people to change. And herein lies another challenge to leadership development, namely, the struggle to separate who a person is from what is expected of formal leaders by others within their school or school district (Donaldson 2008). The intersection of personal and professional is often the greatest source of conflict for school leaders. "How do I negotiate the politics of my school district and community? How do I best support teachers? How do I create a distributive leadership structure that empowers the school to function more as a learning organization? How much power do I really have to make a decision?" These are all questions that leaders can and should pose to themselves.

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for educational leadership development is disrupting an old but deeply embedded notion that aspiring leaders should be able to provide quick, technical answers to problems that are actually complex and nuanced. Yet, adaptive challenges are best solved when leaders have developed interpersonal skills that support cognitive coaching, that is, where leaders empower others to think through their problems and determine their own solutions (Costa and Garmston 2002). Cognitive coaching, however, requires the deliberate creation of a culture where leaders invest in the development of people rather than programs, with the embedded belief that supporting the growth of individuals will lead to the betterment of an organization

(Kegan and Lahey 2016). As such, it is crucial that leadership development focuses on developing a culture where educators perceive there are no weaknesses but rather only opportunities for improvement.

Addressing Poverty in Maine

Enacting school leadership that alleviates rather than exacerbates the challenges associated with poverty is another clear example of an adaptive challenge. Changes in the structure of the global economy have shaped a world in which widening economic inequality defines the everyday existence of educators (Iceland 2013). Although this inequality affects different places and social groups differently, poverty—which in the United States is politically defined in absolute, rather than relative, terms—affects about 41,000 children in Maine alone (US Census 2016). There are many adverse effects to child poverty including toxic stress, adverse effects on child development, lower career and educational aspirations, and decreased feelings of belonging, agency, and civic engagement (Berliner 2013; Gorski 2013).

> ...addressing poverty within the context of school leadership requires an adaptive approach.

Often, schools address poverty as a technical challenge, as another deficiency present in individual students that can be overcome through high-quality instructional practices and efficient organizational management (see for example, Payne 2005). Certainly, recent federal and state reforms emphasize that leaders ought to be thinking about poverty in this way. However, evidence from the last 15 years of high-stakes accountability for schools has not seen marked improvement in how our schools serve poor children.

Because there are many competing explanations for how and why poverty occurs (Bradshaw 2008; Jennings 1999), addressing poverty within the context of school leadership requires an adaptive approach. Some beliefs about poverty may be well-established lines of argument that stem from cultural explanations, pointing to individual motivation to work, questionable values or morals, or the transmission of these behaviors from one

generation to the next. There is strong research evidence, however, that poverty is a systemic issue rather than a cultural one (Gorski 2013; Iceland 2013), which means that leaders need to directly address these beliefs and systems in order to design effective strategies for assisting struggling families.

Leaders who prioritize equity and support for economically marginalized families must find ways to engage and transform these beliefs within their community and at the district and even state level. Didactic interactions with community members and faculty, however, are unlikely to change long-held beliefs (Freire 1970; Nagda et al. 1999; Nagda, Kim, and Truelove 2004). While it is tempting to believe that simply presenting people with data that contradict their personal beliefs will change their attitudes and behaviors, there is better evidence to support approaches that begin in dialogue and transformative experiences.

> …the hyper-focus on teacher evaluation reinforces the belief that there are technical answers to solving the complex problems of low student achievement….

Critical dialogue involves considering how members of a community wish to engage with each other. It requires mutual trust between the participants, a certain comfort—particularly by the facilitator—with ambiguity and conflict, and a belief that transforming the way we relate to one another begins with practicing new ways of relating to one another. Dialogue, however, requires many things: common time, common space, commitment from the participants, and openness on the part of the facilitator to invite participants' vulnerability. Some of these challenges are technical—time, for example, in the context of a school day and school year in which there never seems to be enough time. The adaptive challenge, however, is for the school leader to cultivate a readiness within herself to create and hold these common spaces, both organically and in planned ways.

Differentiating Supervision from Evaluation

A third troublesome adaptive challenge facing educational leaders throughout the state of Maine is providing meaningful supervision to teachers. When we use the word supervision, we separate it from evaluation. Supervision is defined as formative feedback used to support reflection on instructional practices (Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon 2014; Zepeda 2017), while evaluation is defined as summative feedback used to document teacher performance and make decisions about teacher retention (Hazi and Rucinski 2009; Oliva and Pawlas 2004). Part of the problem facing educational leaders is that the terms are often used as synonyms (Mette et al. 2017), when in fact they mean very different things.

Evaluation has been increasingly used as a policy tool to target teachers with classrooms that produce low scores on standardized tests. Rather than address the complex social problems many students face today, educational leaders often feel pressure from state and federal policies that rely on teacher evaluation to increase focus on student achievement. In Maine, a recent analysis of performance evaluation and professional growth (PE/PG) systems found a large majority of districts focused more heavily on evaluation (Fairman and Mette 2017), which contributed little to the improvement of teachers' instructional skills. Moreover, a focus on teacher evaluation promotes the notion of school leaders exercising power over, compared to power with or power to, teachers (Berger 2009). In short, the hyper-focus on teacher evaluation reinforces the belief that there are technical answers to solving the complex problems of low student achievement (Mette and Reigel 2018).

Supervision, on the other hand, serves a human development function that honors adult-learning theory through individualized professional development opportunities. Creating an educational environment that values supervision, however, is an adaptive challenge that requires school leaders to embrace their own vulnerability and accept uncertainties in their ability to serve as an instructional leader. Perhaps the greatest tension for an educational leader to acknowledge is that she, in fact, might not be the strongest instructor in a school! But acknowledging personal shortfalls, however, not only allows for tapping the expertise of other instructors, but it also provides a greater self-knowledge and opportunities for leadership improvement.

To provide high-quality supervision, educational leaders need to be able to coach. By coach, we mean

encouraging all educators in a school to see each other as conversation equals. Such leaders truly listen to what others have to say, encourage and promote autonomy within the school, suspend judgment when someone tries and fails at something, and allow conversation to breathe life into how formative feedback supports instructional growth (Knight 2016). This adaptive challenge requires interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection among leaders and, if addressed correctly, builds capacity among members of an educational organization.

Policy Implications and Conclusions

We believe there are important policy implications to support innovative leadership throughout the state of Maine by improving leadership skills, addressing poverty, and differentiating supervision and evaluation. A relatively straightforward way to improve the skills of school leaders is for leadership development programs to work more closely with practitioners to address problems of practice (see Mette and Webb, this issue, for a discussion of such a program). Working together to understand the underlying challenges facing individual school districts may lead to opportunities to disrupt some of these problems. Such collaboration allows a group of stakeholders interested in improving education to alter the blame cycle (e.g., preparation programs do not produce good educators, poor families do not see the value of a good education, teachers do not try hard enough to help students succeed). Additionally, there is power in acknowledging that neither researchers, practitioners, nor policymakers have a solution to some of these adaptive challenges.

Many students and families in Maine are confronting the systemic issues of poverty and trauma associated with changing economic opportunities, rural isolation, uneven access to support for substance abuse and addiction, and lack of access to mental and physical health services. While a focus on technical solutions to poverty within school systems won't produce improved living conditions for students, there are ways for policymakers to improve educational opportunities for students living in poverty. Throughout the country, and here in Maine (Mette et al., forthcoming), there are pockets of community-school partnerships that attempt to address the systemic issue of poverty by

- decreasing mobility rates of students moving from school to school;
- providing access to free meals through food pantries throughout the weekend;

- increasing access to mental and physical health for students and family members;
- increasing access to neighborhood resources through community mapping; and
- strengthening home-school communication and support structures.

To encourage these types of activities, however, policymakers should reconsider how create incentives and provide resources to school districts to meet the basic needs of students. With help in meeting students' basic needs, schools could then focus on instruction, and thus increase student achievement.

Additionally, schools need to focus more on the supervision of teachers (developing formative feedback structures for instructional improvement) rather than the evaluation of teachers (assessing teachers on a continuum that offers no targeted development to improve instructional practices). As the most rural state in the country, and one with a declining population, we are ill prepared to evaluate teachers out of the profession. We need instructional leaders who will meet teachers where they are in their professional ability, provide feedback that allows for reflection and improvement, and empower them to drive their own professional improvement around high-quality instruction. While Maine's PE/PG system for teachers includes facets of supervision, over 85 percent of the focus of these systems is on evaluating teacher performance (Fairman and Mette 2017). If policymakers want better instructors who will be able to support higher student achievement, they need to create policies that honor adult learning, support autonomy among teachers to grow professionally, and create conversations with teachers who value experimenting with new teaching strategies.

Maine students, educators, and communities deserve thoughtful and collaborative leadership to address the varied adaptive challenges that schools face. In this article, we propose that it is acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, for school leaders to acknowledge what they know along with what they don't know. We recognize that adaptive challenges may cause us to feel nervous and vulnerable. Yet, what is the real leadership alternative? Should leaders act, even with false confidence, as if they know what they are doing when they don't? In this article, we suggest that Maine needs an increased tolerance around the ambiguities of the adaptive leadership challenges in schools. We need to stop seeking simple, easy answers for problems that

require strategies that honor interpersonal relationships, forge a genuine sense of community, and reward efforts of educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers who reach out to new knowledge bases and collaborate on deeper levels.

This is a beginning. When leadership learning starts to question basic personal and organizational assumptions and values, new ways of interpreting events can emerge. The insight and the practices that follow such changes may enable leaders to behave more skillfully, compassionately, and courageously. In short, Maine must learn to adapt its policies and leadership practices in the face of emerging societal issues. Most importantly, we need to learn more about what we don't know if we are to make our schools the bedrock of our communities and offer Maine children a brighter future. 🐾

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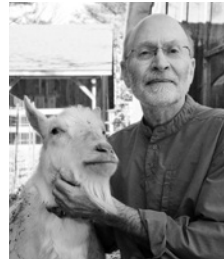
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Catharine Biddle is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine. Her research focuses on ways in which rural schools and communities respond to social and economic change in the twenty-first century. She is particularly interested in how schools can more effectively leverage partnerships with external organizations or groups to address issues of social inequality and how nontraditional leaders—such as youth, parents, and other community members—may lead or serve as partners in these efforts.

Ian M. Mette is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Maine. His research interests include teacher supervision and evaluation, school reform, and bridging the gap between research and practice to inform and support school improvement efforts. Specifically, his work targets how educators, researchers, and policymakers can better inform one another to drive school improvement and reform policy.