

Leading with Heart

Emotional Leadership and the Power of Storytelling



Self

Staff

Students &
Community

by
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“The most effective leaders are those who are in touch with their leadership stories... The story shapes our attitudes, actions and reactions. When we know our stories, we know ourselves.”¹

I opened our first staff meeting of 2024 by sharing a video clip of the New Year address given by Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mary Simon, Governor General of Canada. In her address, Simon called on Canadians to commit themselves to kindness. She acknowledged the challenges presented by climate change and global conflict in the preceding year. She acknowledged that Canada had made “important strides” towards reconciliation and remarked that people were adapting to change in various ways, one of which was kindness. She spoke in English, French, and her first language, Inuktitut. Simon introduced the word “ajuinnata”, which means “never give up”. She ended her remarks by asking Canadians to “commit to action, no matter how daunting the situation may be,” and to face the challenges over the year ahead “with a renewed sense of unity.”

Self

I intentionally selected Simon’s clip because it resonated with me, both personally and professionally. After the recent loss of my father during a time of both global conflict and an increase in antisemitism worldwide, I was becoming disheartened. Professionally, I was highly committed to equity work, but the barriers in the system made this work feel challenging. Simon’s words were a reminder to continue to push forward and be hopeful.

Her words also aligned with conversations I was privileged to have with Dr. Wanosts’a7 Lorna Williams, Professor Emerita of Indigenous Education, Curriculum, and Instruction at the University of Victoria. Dr. Williams talked about the power of sharing stories as an important stride in equity work. She also remarked that, during challenging times, there is often a greater focus on conflict than there is on connection:

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Tichy 1997, p.77

I gave our staff a few minutes to quietly reflect on Governor General Simon's address, and the meaning of the word "ajuinnata". I asked them to consider choosing a word to guide them as they thought about the year ahead. The images evoked by the collective words were powerful. Before our next meeting, I had their words printed on journals. The journals were gifted to all staff to invite reflective writing and to encourage participation in our book club, which was exploring Jo Chrona's *WAYi WAH!* and Lisa Baylis' *Self-Compassion for Educators*. My word was HOPE.



The focus of our book club combined important themes. It proved to be a powerful mix, as we learned more about how our education system underserves Indigenous children, and thought deeply about our own assumptions, while also emphasizing the importance of educator self-care. The format of our meetings was designed to be intentionally open and supportive, allowing story sharing to evolve in an authentic way. Our final session was co-facilitated by our Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Coordinator, alongside our district Indigenous Education Consultant. Several of our staff shared their vulnerabilities and challenges. One person became emotional when reflecting on how they worried for learners as school holidays approached, and how they were struggling with workload demands as a full-time classroom teacher. Their connection to colleagues in the book club allowed them to receive the support and encouragement they needed. Our leadership team also met with them privately, and worked to provide extra support, care, and time.

Taking part in UBC's Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP) opened my eyes to the deeper complexities of leadership in times of struggle, conflict, and crisis.

It was the feedback I received from Dr. Linda Kaser – the TELP lead alongside Dr. Judy Halbert – following the submission of an assignment that led me to reach out to Dr. Williams. The TELP assignment had included a personal story of my father's experiences as a Jew in an Arab country in the 1940s when he was persecuted and forced to flee, and the current concerns about the rise in antisemitism. I was grappling with what felt like silence in educational settings, and at the same time I was trying to support colleagues and families who also felt this way. I was worried about how we, as leaders, were responding to, supporting, and navigating issues of polarization and global conflict, and whether we were giving space for all members of our communities to feel safe to share stories.

Dr. Williams shared an impactful story with me, one that gave me new hope. When she was searching for ways to support Indigenous learners in British Columbia many years ago, she came across the work of Dr. Reuven Feuerstein. Dr. Feuerstein had studied ways to help Jewish refugee children from Arab countries (like my father), and orphaned Holocaust child survivors. He developed the mediated learning approach and spent decades of his life researching ways to help improve outcomes for vulnerable learners. Dr. Williams was inspired by his work, and their connection would end up as a long-lasting friendship that spanned more than 20 years. It was transformative to listen to the story of friendship between these two educators – one Indigenous and one Jewish – who were both looking for ways to help children who had experienced trauma and disconnection from their home cultures.

Dr. Williams was profoundly impacted by Dr. Feuerstein's work, so much so that she attributes some of her own learning and work – including her contributions to the development of the First Peoples Principles of Learning – to his influence. This has helped me see the Principles in a new light, as universal ways of learning, culturally responsive practices and ways of being that help us all work within an imperfect system in ways that are inclusive, accessible, supportive, and holistic. This is true for children, as much as it is for our staff. When we incorporate the Principles in meaningful ways, we improve the well-being of staff, students, and families.

In the journal article, 'Toward a New Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools', we are reminded that many of our leadership programs focus on the managerial aspects of the jobs, often leaving out any emphasis on well-being.

*"Many of these programs concentrate on the administrative, communal, and instructional facets of the job (Lashway 2002; Militellow et al. 2009; Murphy 1992). However, there is a dearth of knowledge about handling relationships and emotions, even though this is vital to the sound management of teachers and other knowledge workers. Based on our conclusions, principals are advised to champion faculty wellness."*³

We need to strive for genuinely trusting environments – and safe spaces – to allow educators to share stories. I hope that by continuing to keep emotional leadership at the centre, our staff will further strengthen their connections and become a more cohesive team, one that finds meaning and purpose in our collective work.

Despite the everyday demands of the job, our team is very involved in creating a belonging and connected community. They care about each other and our learners. We have numerous inquiry grants (Social Emotional Learning, Library Learning Commons, Learning Environments and Literacy) as well as teacher-sponsored student-led clubs. We recently started a staff wellness committee supported by a district grant. We offer nutritional snacks,

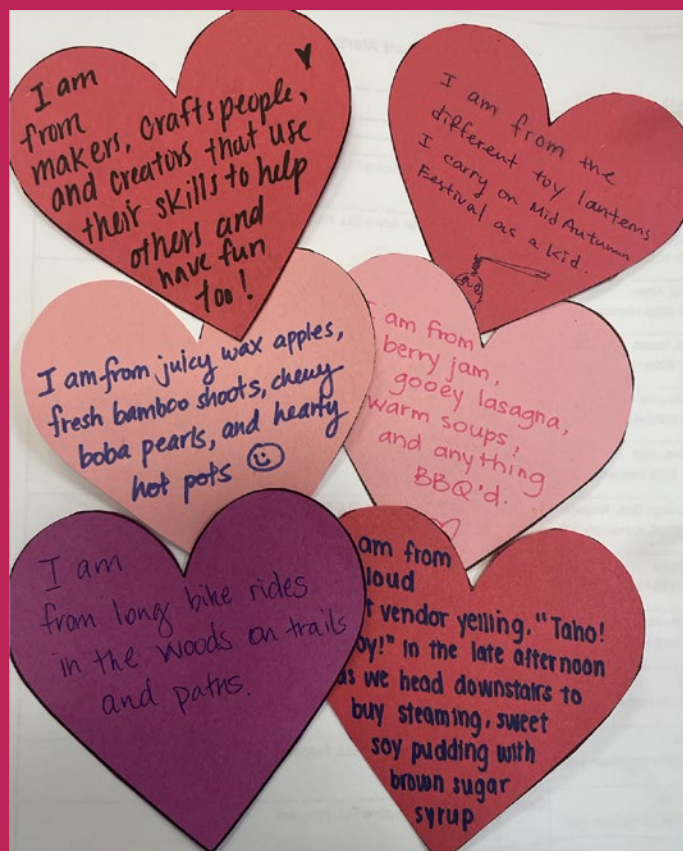
and wellness activities, and share topical articles related to education (the most recent was Jonathan Haidt's "End the Phone-Based Childhood Now", in The Atlantic).

Valuing well-being is helping to grow an environment where innovation is supported, creativity is encouraged, and distributed leadership is valued and embraced. Staff find meaning in their work and are motivated to do what is needed. As our next staff meeting approached, I was delighted to receive an email from a teacher who led our Shenanigans Squad, asking for time at the start of our meeting to distribute paper hearts to each staff member filled with uplifting and complimentary messages written by other staff members.

Being intentional about caring and strengthening our faculty relationships helps to encourage and instill commitment in our work. A deeper focus in this area can be transformative:

*"Emotional leadership conveys a message of healing. More specifically, it draws on works in the fields of psychotherapy or medicine that explore the building of narratives as well as emotive aspects of healing, with the objective of promoting wellness, emotional homeostasis, and proper functioning."*⁴

When I reflect on what has been one of the most heartbreaking and challenging years of my life, I am heartened to know that my time as a student in TELP has, as Monique Gray Smith would say, "held me up". Although they may not realize it, my staff has done the same, and Dr. Williams' gifts to BC public education have left me both grateful and hopeful.



Students & Community

As we value and care for our educators, we must also align our support for students and families. As Dr. Williams commented during one of our talks, *"It's very important that people understand that people here in Canada and in the United States have had very few opportunities to really tell their stories and to have them heard. And you know, we still have such a limited and narrow view of the people who make up the population of Canada which leads to a real lack of understanding."*⁵ Learning more about our parent community helps our educators better understand the stories of our learners and their families.

In my pursuit of gathering stories, I was recently connected to a group of educational leaders in Nanaimo who are working with a newly-developed Collecting Story Toolkit. I began sampling the toolkit by meeting with our Indigenous families following our learning update meetings. I found that the key to these connections wasn't necessarily the specificity of the questions, or in some cases the initial answers, but rather how the questions led to genuine conversations and story sharing. The sharing helped me understand more about what our families are experiencing, both at home and at school. I hope they felt heard and that we are beginning to foster more trusting relationships. Rethinking and being intentional about how I spent my time during learning update meetings allowed me to focus in on some families in our school community in a meaningful way. I am curious about sharing my findings with our staff and have a hunch that this might help them "commit to action" to deepen their teaching and learning about reconciliation and equity. I am also curious about possibly adapting this tool for use with staff and/or students.

The focus of sharing stories and building a connected community was extended into the start of this school year. In September 2024, I worked with interested staff to create a school wide mural focusing on belonging.



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The mural was inspired by Yuval Zommer's *Big Book of Belonging*, and we incorporated George Ella Lyon's inspirational "I Am From" poetry project, which added literacy and identity reflections to the artwork. The resulting mural is a collective art piece that honours and celebrates the diversity of our identities, experiences, histories, interests, and backgrounds. It incorporates stories and contributions from students, staff, families, trustees, our Assistant Superintendent, and our Superintendent. In Zommer's words, "*The Big Book of Belonging celebrates the wondrous connections between humans and the natural world.... Because we all belong to nature and nature belongs to us all.*"

The mural created opportunities for conversation, sharing, and learning about different members of our community.

I also came across a helpful insight shared by Andy Hargreaves at the BCSSA fall 2024 conference. Hargreaves shared 12 guiding principles to help guide civil discussion about difficult issues – the principles remind us that now, more than ever, we need to come together. We need brave leadership to facilitate and support discussion and story sharing related to difficult topics.

The final slide of Hargreaves' presentation included this quotation: "*The closer we get, the better we lead, the more courageous we become.*"



Promoting Identity in Schools:
12 Principles to Advance
Inclusion and Equity

When I circle back to the beginning of 2024, I see it as the start of a remarkable and focused journey, one of hope and connection, and one driven by the determination to never give up. Through the conscious act of setting aside time to share stories and really listen, we are improving the well-being of all members of our school community and setting the necessary conditions for more learners to cross the stage with dignity, purpose, and options.