A Paradigm of Power and Possibility

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At the base of the Principal’s leadership and professional responsibilities is the ultimate power to create a model of ability and respect for every student. No matter the size of the school, age of the students, tenure of staff or status of the community, every principal can create a potent paradigm promoting ability over disability, and opportunities over impediments. The power of this paradigm can impact students, staff, and the entire community, far beyond the school campus.

In schools and communities today we read about autistic students who are difficult to interact with and autistic boys scoring winning baskets. We observe and classify learning disabled students struggling in our classrooms and we listen to tales about referring behavior disordered students to alternative schools. These descriptors are commonplace and tear apart our classrooms and schools. This practice has continued for years. As school leaders, principals have a professional responsibility to stop the use of language that relies on deficiencies or diagnoses to describe our students and schools.

Using people first language, language that puts the person before their disability (Snow 2004) alters the reliance on deficiencies and deficits. For instance, our autistic students become students that benefit from visual supports, repetition or routine; learning disabled students are better known as students who learn differently and behavior disordered students are students for whom we are promoting social competence.

This language differs from past practice when schools used the students’ needs or disabilities to define services, programs, classrooms and even the students themselves. Although the disability is only one of many characteristics, our students are not their disability and their potential cannot be predicted by their diagnosis.

This deficit paradigm resorted to grouping students based on what students were not able to achieve. Students were labeled and clustered together, reinforcing like-mindedness. These practices were prevalent when a determination was made regarding how students would be served. Yet these descriptors, used for efficiency, became labels limiting opportunities. They placed deficits and disabilities in front of students and placed obstacles in their paths. Labels meant to refine teaching began to define humanity.

As a principal, creating a positive paradigm became my primary goal. It was my own past that propelled me to remove this deficit perspective from the school day. I had experienced a school culture where deficit perspectives empowered teachers to become experts at predicting and limiting the educational future of their students based on fact and fiction. In these classrooms teachers’ expectations and instruction were limited. Even when student learning was evident, teachers failed to introduce new material, fearing student frustration. Repetition was their strategy for success.

Research has shown when teachers hold these deficit perspectives they lower the quality of education for students. The scope of the curriculum is contracted, and the modalities in which students are asked to represent their learning are constricted. Teachers holding these perspectives offer less instruction,
they spend less time with students and speak to them less frequently (Boner, Dworin, May and Semingson 2009).

The production of my paradigm

Early in my career, I taught students with special needs in a self-contained classroom and worked tirelessly to extend the students’ abilities. Offering to colleagues that my students were more similar to other students than not, my classroom became an environment of possibility. No matter how hard we worked, I discovered my students were held to another standard. Colleagues peered into our classroom window and bombarded me with limiting comments. The membership of my students, in that school, was illusory at best. We were continuously measured according to what we could not accomplish. The district plan was to design a class specific to one disability. Educators considered this an effective model. Consequently, we became known as the behavior disorder class, the behavior disorder students and I was the behavior disorder teacher. The disability label preceded our day, classroom and year. It defined us.

My next teaching assignments consisted of early childhood special education and elementary classrooms in a nearby school district. In the early childhood special education class we embraced the developmental theory and taught the whole child (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). We acknowledged students’ strengths and designed learning that honored students’ interests.

Over time early childhood special education became a service, not a destination, as students with special needs moved into the prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms with supports and services following them. There were many challenging moments and labels were present as we moved students, but we learned to honor each student’s abilities and found better ways to describe and understand all of our students. We talked about kindergarteners needing visual supports or adaptive equipment, and preschoolers who required additional adult support. It was far from perfect, but the underlying perspective was that every student belonged, and with attention and accommodations they could experience success.

Much like a family we learned about and from one another. We acknowledged disabilities but we honored abilities. We talked differently about our students, and we taught differently. We promoted student learning and we engaged in adult learning. We created a powerful people first paradigm.

Reforming a paradigm

More recently, as a principal I was charged with reforming an early learning center serving children with special needs from birth through kindergarten, to a birth through third grade school. My work would bring students, families, and teachers from primary special education classes into our early learning center. The primary special education classes had been defined around deficits. Classrooms were based on disabilities. Curriculum was designed to address weaknesses and placed an inordinate amount of value on deficiencies. Moving primary students into an early childhood model would not only present a developmental framework for learning, it would move students, staff and families away from a disability model.

In To Teach: The Journey of A Teacher, William Ayers reminds us that labels are limiting and in the human-centered act of teaching, all attempts to create definitive categories lower our sights, misdirect
our vision, and mislead our attention. They offer a single lens concentrated on a specific deficit despite educators needing multiple ways of seeing a child’s ever-changing strengths.

The early learning center classrooms were not defined by deficits (e.g. the autistic class or the learning disability class), rather by age. We did not rely on grouping students around things they could not do. We used a people first paradigm that spoke of young children first, and followed that with descriptors of need. We talked about our preschool and kindergarten classrooms. We did not describe them as special education rooms.

On a personal level, this reform brought together my past experiences as an early childhood teacher and a teacher, for students with behavior challenges. I understood the differing paradigms. I had taught in each of them. I knew about the prowess of the ability paradigm and about the destruction of the deficit paradigm. I was determined to avoid the latter.

I had every intention that students, families and teachers joining our school would do the same. We would begin with the use of people first language. We had changed the name of our school to eliminate the connotation of disability. We were an early learning center. Teachers were expected to change the ways they described their students, classrooms and curriculum. They needed to design learning that aligned with the students’ abilities and interests as a strategy for addressing weaknesses. Not only was I expecting teachers to talk and work differently, I wanted them to feel differently about their teaching. An ability first paradigm was prompting changes. It forced the loss of past practice, familiarity and autonomy.

I was able to see the opposing paradigms that students and families often experience in schools. The ability paradigm of early childhood was meeting the disability paradigm of special education as students moved into the elementary grades. For us the technical changes of attending or working within a new early learning center were erupting into adaptive challenges as I was asking teachers to think, work and feel differently about the learning and growth of our young students. Adult learning was proving more difficult than student learning.

Nurturing paradigms and growth

Planning this reform occurred over three years. The launch for the reform was offered in a state of the art family development center at a neighboring state university where best practices and current research for teaching young children prevailed. My initial enthusiasm for this reform was diminished shortly after our launch day when I realized my colleagues’ dispositions did not replicate my passion for this project. My concerns were confirmed when we met monthly to study topics relevant to the tenets of early education. A continuum from readiness to resistance surfaced.

Leading this reform meant honoring the differing paradigms or pasts of the teachers. Much like differentiated instruction in our classrooms, my leadership became differentiated. I needed to offer leadership on a continuum, including position power, personal power and principle-centered power (Fairman and McLean 2003).

Position power represented the power-over strategies authorized by my administrative position. When I perceived the need to translate our goal, an ability paradigm, to resisters my role as administrator took over. At this point my role was one of telling. There were non-negotiables. We would not separate
children based on their disabilities and we would not allow disabilities to define our students, classrooms or school.

For another group of teachers personal power or power with strategies allowed me to balance facilitation with reciprocity. This was a participatory point on the leadership continuum. Teachers were sharing in the decision-making. Working together meant providing additional information and expertise, modeling the application and experiencing the impact of this ability paradigm. These teachers left our monthly trainings fortified and better equipped to implement an ability paradigm.

Lastly, the principle-centered power allowed me to empower teachers whose personal goals, values, beliefs and behaviors already aligned with an ability paradigm. For this group I was delegating responsibilities. These teachers were intrinsically motivated and their teaching exemplified students’ abilities and interests. They understood disability but they did not allow it to define their students or classrooms.

The differentiated leadership continuum fostered incremental growth and altered our paradigm and perspectives. Just as I expected the teachers to honor students’ strengths, this continuum allowed me to nurture the strengths of each teacher. I continued to match my leadership style to their readiness levels. Students were learning, teachers were learning, everyone in our community was learning. Most importantly, we were changing. We were no longer defining or predicting our students’ futures based on diagnoses or disabilities.

Final Reflections

None of us wish to be recognized or remembered for our deficits. Nor should we allow these deficits to define our classrooms and students. When principals and teachers employ ability over disability and opportunity over impediment we will better define our students and better design our schools.

The power of a principal is limited. The power of a paradigm is unlimited. The ability paradigm nurtures and honors the unknown potential in every student. As a leader it is the principal’s responsibility to acknowledge the conflicting paradigms in their schools and communities, teach others about people first language, and model beliefs and behaviors that defy placing limits on students. The power of the ability paradigm rests within many. Principals need to exert and extend it each and every day. Differentiated leadership is an administrative tool to nurture the process.

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