

GROWING, LEARNING & LIVING

How Can We Keep Doing Hard Things?

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“Researchers (Cooperrider et al. 1995; Gergen 2009; Orem et al. 2011) have found that we live in a world our questions create because what we ask people determines what they discover and shapes their ability to imagine, plan and create their future reality.”

~Michelle McQuaid (July 2017)

As some of you may be aware, I am fresh back off a six month (January to June) Educational Leave. During my time off, I explored, talked and wrote on several themes – human and organizational growth & development, leadership, positive psychology, formative assessment, executive coaching, governance, human motivation, communication, equity, teaching & leadership standards, and standards for effective teacher organizations. As part of my UNB programme, I acted as a teaching assistant to Dr. Lyle Hamm (aka Steamer) for an MEd course ‘ED 6009: Responsive Leadership for Culturally Diverse Schools and Communities’. My world as a student researcher and teaching assistant caused me to surround myself with many questions. As McQuaid’s quote above suggests, my greatest challenge came in finding the question(s) that could possibly create a future reality I was interested enough to pursue.

So many questions, so little time...

Like many a PhD student before me, time was both my friend and enemy as the sands of six months sifted quickly through the hour glass. Eventually, the kaleidoscope of topics and themes became clearer and several questions I was curious about began to emerge...

As NB teachers, how do we know when we are doing a ‘good’ job? How do others know? What measures do we use?

How do ‘we’ (teachers & administrators, students, parents, district & provincial leadership, elected representatives, the media and public) define what educational ‘success’ looks like? How do we evaluate our public education system?

Defining the undefinable...what makes us great?

In an effort to improve education for all students, several jurisdictions have been trying to identify the characteristics of good teaching and then design policies to promote them for years now. Developing teaching standards – or a description of what teachers, as professionals, are required to know and be able to do – has become a popular pastime. New Brunswick is no exception.

As a new teacher, I was met with teacher standards à la Charlotte Danielson’s *Framework for Enhancing Professional Practice* (1996). As a new staff member of NBTA I was tasked with providing input on *New Brunswick Standards for Beginning Teachers* (2007), *CAMET Leadership Standards* (2010), *Standards for the Renewal of Principals and Vice Principals in New Brunswick*. In my Executive Coaching Certification, I became aware of the *Standards for the International Coaching Federation*. I am sure my standards list could go on...

In some of these contexts the ‘standard’ discussion was couched in an aspirational tone. It was about defining the work in order to self-assess. The goal was to develop a common language so that those who are part of the profession could build a personal professional development plan and be supported. In other contexts, it was about support and training from a source provider point of view. For example, what courses should we assure universities offer in their B.Ed. programs.

Regardless of the intended start point, most of the conversations I’ve encountered stray to the ‘measure’ of an individual compared to the job. Essentially, how do we ‘know’ or ‘prove’ when someone is doing a ‘good’ job?

The reality is, our work as teachers is exceedingly complex at the best of times. Defining it is rather like trying to pin Jell-O to the wall...a messy endeavour and no two attempts will result in quite the same experience.

The missing standard in a profession of heart...

All this thinking about educational standards led me to explore standards of other professions – especially those that were ‘teacher-like’- professions of the heart if you will. I looked at standards for social workers, health care workers, counsellors, coaches, and even those who are called to ministry. It was during this activity that I had an epiphany - almost every other ‘helping’ or ‘heart-full’ profession has a set of standards with self-care at its foundation. The message is therefore clear - if I am to do my job well, **maintaining my health and wellness is a key professional responsibility.**

I see your fear and it's big. I also see your courage and it's bigger. We can do hard things.

~ Glennon Doyle

Once I came to this awareness, I have asked myself more questions...

- *Why is it that we seem to celebrate the teacher that is so 'committed' they never take a break?*
- *Would knowing that looking after ourselves and maintaining balance in our lives was a job requirement and professional expectation of our work change this martyr mentality?*
- *What if the health of students and teachers were a measure of educational success in our system?*

Setting reasonable standards for ourselves...

After a lifetime of living and working with and for teachers there is one thing of which I am confident...no one can set a higher standard for teachers than they will set for themselves. Even when it is to their own detriment. Perhaps it is this knowledge that has led me to propose to you perhaps the most important question to consider: **'How will I maintain my health and wellbeing so that I can be up for all of the challenges this school year will bring?'**

Negotiating our 'New Normal'

Speaking of the challenges, I've avoided using the word COVID until now. I will confess that for someone who thrives on human connection and is a hugger, this pandemic has been a struggle. It has removed or minimized my favorite parts of the work and amplified my least favorite. That leads me to this question: *As school begins during a pandemic, how do we as teacher leaders negotiate this 'new normal'?*

While I can't pretend to have the answers, I will end as I began, on the theme of asking the right questions. The following is an excerpt from Michelle McQuaid, a best-selling author on workplace wellbeing, recent Instagram post:

Lately, our team has been asking some messy questions, with even messier answers.

Works Consulted:

- Danielson, C. (2020, August 11). *The Danielson Group*. Retrieved from The Danielson Group: <https://danielsongroup.org/downloads/framework-clusters>
- Doyle, G. (2014). *Carry on, warrior: The power of embracing your messy, beautiful life*. New York: Scribner.
- McQuaid, M. J. (2020, August 11). *Lately, our team has been asking some messy questions, with even messier answers*. Retrieved August 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDvrvqPpjQxW/>
- Nóra, R. (2018). *OECD Education Working Papers*, No.174. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1787/f1cb24d5-en>

- *How do we make space for pain, without falling into despair?*
- *How do we continue to experience joy, when so many of us are suffering?*
- *How do we make and measure progress when our targets shift with every news cycle?*
- *How do we keep showing up when we really don't feel like it?*
- *How do we know when we shouldn't show up?*
- *How do we balance our courage and fear?*
- ***How can we keep doing hard things?***

Perhaps this last question is the only for which I will offer any response:

"We can do hard things.

We humans have an uncanny ability to learn. We grow. We overcome. We adapt. We rest.

We change our minds. Make amends. Laugh. Blow milk out our noses when laughing. We plan. We cease. We strive.

There is no end to what we can do."

by Glennon Doyle from Carry on, Warrior

I believe in you! I believe in us!

Virtual hug,



Book Give Away:

Tweak your interest?

Drop me an email (ardith.shirley@nbta.ca) with the subject line 'Book Giveaway' and you will be entered to win a copy of *Tools to Engage Students in Meaning Making* by Jay McTighe & Harry Silver!

