



# Mirrors Before Windows

By Steven Katz

The expert knowledge base in education is filled with an inventory of evidence-based practices. These are curated in an ever-growing body of resources and more are being added every day. Highly successful school districts embrace these practices and use them to define what we have described as the “intelligent expectations” for the system.<sup>1</sup>

That said, it will come as no surprise that efforts to define, communicate and support the introduction of evidence-based approaches into schools doesn’t guarantee meaningful implementation. We’ve previously suggested that “what works” might be

better described as “what’s *supposed* to work.” Indeed, a sobering finding in another important domain, healthcare, is that only 50 per cent of all evidence-based practices that have been shown to work ever make it into routine general practice; and moreover, for those that do, it takes an average of 17 years to get there!<sup>2</sup>

What we are talking about here is the elusive quest for “quality implementation.” We define quality implementation as a process through which intelligent expectations and practices get realized. This process involves a critical mass of people in any given organization doing their best to apply and experiment with what’s supposed to work, assessing impact relative to the



intended outcomes, learning about what worked, what didn't and why within *respective* contexts, and then making the necessary modifications.<sup>3</sup>

The phrase “respective contexts” is a key one because it holds the clue as to why this quest for quality implementation is just so elusive. While it's great that “what's supposed to work” has been shown to work somewhere for someone, that's not particularly helpful if that somewhere isn't where you are and that someone isn't you! In other words, context matters; and it matters a lot.

What we need then is a both/and strategy. We need an appreciation of both the centralized “intelligent

expectations” and the localized “responsive contexts” of implementation. These two sides of the improvement ledger need to work together, like a pitcher and catcher in a baseball battery. Exemplary organizations that show evidence of this synergy have been described as having solved for “stagility”— a made-up word that blends stability and agility.<sup>4</sup> Organizations that have both stable and agile elements are three times more likely to be high-performing than those that are agile but lack a stable core, and four times more likely to be high performing than those that are stable but lack agile elements.<sup>5</sup>

Intelligent expectations help us to plan the work, but contextual realities are instrumental in helping us to *work the plan*. Research tells us that once a direction has been

set, the probability that the plan will become reality is low. The contextual ingredients of people and culture contribute to 72 per cent of the barriers to success for even the most robust intelligent expectations.<sup>6</sup> And the notion of contextually relevant implementation underscores that context isn't noise to ignore, but rather a central ingredient to lean into in ensuring quality implementation.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the work of implementation must be embedded in the contextual realities of schools and it must be led by the leaders in our schools.

Principals occupy the “sweet spot” at the nexus between the intelligent expectations of system direction and the responsive realities of local context. They are our *stability* experts. They are in the best position to execute the work of implementation, and, by extension, they are in the best position to lead the learning in this space with and for others – their own colleagues – who share their contextual realities and experiences.

Most school leaders, when asked to describe the contextual factors in our local environments that make quality implementation challenging, will focus on those aspects of people and (organizational) culture that are external to themselves. They might describe the varied and complex needs of their school communities, the proverbial challenge of fail-to-fills, a shortage of key resource roles, long-standing staff who are set in their ways or a lack of experience amongst newly appointed staff, a limited cognitive and emotional bandwidth for “new things” and any number of other “realities.” Taken together, these contextual realities then coalesce as the “yeah buts” of change and find expression in responses like “there’s no problem with the way we currently do it,” “this is not in our purview,” “we don’t have time for this” and “we don’t agree with this.”

The notion of contextually relevant implementation suggests that treating these realities as noise to filter out is a mistake and doesn’t work. Rather, the objective is to lead and invent within the constraints of context. And doing this asks leaders to appreciate what is often the most salient and influential ingredient of context – their own thought patterns. This shift to the self first is one that I describe as looking in the mirror before looking out the window. It means explicitly acknowledging the implicit suite of cognitive biases within ourselves that work as barriers to the process of quality implementation as defined above. Details about these cognitive biases have been written about elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> but briefly they include the fact that we:

- Don’t think through all the possibilities (binary bias)
- Focus on confirming our hypotheses, not challenging them (confirmation bias)
- Pay too much attention to things that are salient (vividness bias)
- Consider ourselves to be an exception (illusory superiority)
- Believe that doing nothing is less risky than doing something (omission bias)
- Hide our vulnerabilities (imposter syndrome)

Leaders who learn to look in the mirror and recognize the ways in which these biases are problematic, first for themselves before doing so for others, will likely see more success with quality implementation. They will enter what Adam Grant refers to as the “rethinking cycle,” a mental process that iterates through humility, doubt, curiosity and discovery.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, they embody “confident humility,” the gold standard of leadership practice, which means being secure enough in your expertise and strengths to admit your ignorance and weaknesses. But be careful. Contextually relevant leadership behaviours need to reflect *both* words in that phrase. Otherwise, confidence without humility will appear as arrogance, and humility without confidence will land as insecurity!

Despite our best efforts at curating evidence-based practices, mobilizing them effectively remains a challenge. The importance of leaning into context and making necessary modifications accordingly is essential. As leaders in this educational journey, we’d do well to polish our mirrors before we open the windows. [CP](#)

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<sup>1</sup>Katz, S., Dack, L. & Malloy, J. (2018). *The intelligent, responsive leader*. Sage.

<sup>2</sup>Balas, EA, & Boren SA. (2000). Managing clinical knowledge for health care improvement. *Yearbook of Medical Informatics*. Schattauer. 65-70.

<sup>3</sup>Donohoo, J. & Katz, S. (2020). *Quality Implementation*. Sage.

<sup>4</sup>Dewar, C., Keller, S. & Malhorta, V. (2022). *CEO Excellence*. Scribner.

<sup>5</sup>McGrath, R. (2012). How the growth outliers do it. *Harvard Business Review*. January-February.

<sup>6</sup>Dewar, C., Keller, S. & Malhorta, V. (2022). *CEO Excellence*. Scribner.

<sup>7</sup>Katz, S. & Giannopoulos, E. (2022). Contextual relevant implementation. *Principal Connections*, 25(3) 10-11.

<sup>8</sup>Katz, S. & Dack, L. (2013). *Intentional interruption*. Sage.

<sup>9</sup>Grant, A. (2021). *Think again*. Viking.