Leadership Lessons from Ecosystems

By Usha James and Warren Woytuck

Data, evidence, continuous improvement, achievement, screeners. These words may feel cold and clinical to educators, especially those who came into the profession because of their compassion and love for young people and their hopes to see youth flourish. Words associated with data-driven approaches may also feel violent to students, families and staff who are connected to communities that have been harmed by data-driven decisions and practices.

The inherent tensions between the mechanisms of data-driven approaches and the warmth of compassionate action beg a fundamental question: how can we reconcile these seemingly opposing orientations?

One promising possibility lies in **leaders adopting a critical inquiry stance.**

Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2009) conceptualized inquiry as a stance rather than a mere protocol or process. We propose extending their conceptualization to critical inquiry as a stance. At The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC2), we have developed a robust conceptual framework and approach (Gini-Newman and Case, 2015) for guiding and sustaining critical inquiry for all learners. We have learned through working with school systems over the last 30 years that when leaders and educators adopt a critical inquiry stance, we are able to combine curiosity and inquiry-mindedness with the inclination and the ability to think critically about our own practices. And perhaps most important, with a critical inquiry stance, we develop a reflex to reflect about how we may intentionally or inadvertently uphold systems and structures that perpetuate and cause harm.

Adopting a critical Inquiry stance requires both individual and collective vulnerability, which can often feel challenging and sometimes unsafe. How might we support ourselves and staff in taking this approach? Many leaders find it helpful to reimagine educational organizations as ecosystems, a metaphor that invites a more holistic and empathetic understanding and safety for vulnerable reflection. By embracing the ecosystem metaphor and intertwining it with a critical inquiry stance, leaders can set in motion three vital disruptions:

1. **Disrupting deficit-mindedness:** Instead of locating a problem within individual learners or educators, an ecosystem metaphor invites us to inquire into and think critically about broader environmental factors and systemic practices.

2. **Disrupting siloed thinking:** Rather than examining slices of data in isolation, engaging in critical inquiry through the lens of ecosystems challenges us to view a single data set as just one sign of how healthy our ecosystem might be and prompts us to inquire further fostering deeper insights and more nuanced responses.

3. **Disrupting short-term solutions:** Using a critical inquiry stance along with an ecosystem metaphor can help us think beyond immediate short-term solutions, guiding us to "dig" beneath the surface of challenges and issues to uncover root causes and engage all members of the ecosystem in meaningful collaboration.

Disrupting deficit mindedness

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) describes how Indigenous Peoples cultivate squash, corn and beans together rather than in isolated rows or fields, recognizing the reciprocal reliance that contributes to the plants' coexistence. If a plant falters within an ecosystem, we don't blame it for poor "performance." Instead, we inquire into its relationships with other key plants and surroundings. Does it need more sunshine? Is it being crowded out? Does the soil provide the necessary nutrients?

In our school ecosystems there remain all-too-frequent examples of students being implicitly and explicitly blamed for their lack of success or engagement. How might we overcome the inclination to locate the problem within the child, their family or community? When we think about what is required for individual students to thrive, the ecosystem metaphor and a critical inquiry stance invites us to question how well the surrounding environments support the student. Adopting a critical inquiry stance towards our own practices prompts us to ask how we might be

inadvertently depriving a student of the nutrients their mind, body or heart require to learn and flourish.

Disrupting siloed thinking

In Kyoto, the timing of "peak cherry blossom" in the spring has been tracked since 812 AD. Every year, scientists record the number of days into the new year before the number of cherry blossoms reaches a peak. On its own, the date that a single cherry tree blossoms is a small fragment of information. However, if we broaden the inquiry and connect that data point with other observations, it can yield rich insights about significant changes in a local ecosystem as well as the biosphere.

Similarly, the ecosystem metaphor can also help us disrupt the siloed thinking that is often observed in education organizations. Siloed thinking constrains our ability to grasp the complexity of educator, student and community experiences within education organizations. When we examine data – be it related to achievement or attendance or belonging – in isolation, we risk oversimplifying issues and overlooking influential systemic factors. When we adopt a critical inquiry stance, we see each individual piece of data as a catalyst for further inquiry and we develop processes and systems to layer data and look for patterns across different data sets, remaining curious and open-minded to what the analysis might reveal.

Disrupting short-term solutions

Ecosystem science can also help us see that actions to resolve an immediate situation, although they may be necessary, are not always enough. We also need to design actions that are likely to have lasting and significant positive impact. For example, if soil is lacking in nutrients, we can quickly apply local fertilizer to support the plant. However, if we don't attend to regenerative processes that will enrich and restore the soil over time, our remediation actions are unlikely to have deep and lasting impacts.

The demands, pressures and constraints of education leadership conspire to create a reliance on short-term solutions. This is often seen in the context of student behaviour. When concern about an incident or an ongoing pattern of behaviour is identified, leaders understandably feel the pressure to find a quick solution. However, a combination of deficit-mindedness and siloed thinking can lead us to believe we have understood a problem deeply enough to enact an effective solution. Instead, how might a single story, incident or data point become a catalyst for further inquiry?

In her book *Troublemakers* (2017), Carla Shalaby provides numerous examples of what this might look like. She describes how genuine and compassionate critical inquiry into student behaviour can "allow us to view children as complex and beautiful human beings rather than caricatures of troublemakers … We can instead treat trouble-making as a verb – a process, an action, a system. We can ask, "How does trouble get made as these children interact with school?" (pp. 151-152).

Student behaviour is just one example of the many contexts in which, often, the most effective action we can take is to seek to better understand, to engage in further inquiry. Through intentional and systematic listening and learning, more compelling and comprehensive options present themselves and the act of paying attention can itself repair, heal and transform.

Conclusion

Leading for broad, deep and lasting change requires us to understand our educational systems in a more nuanced and connected way. Combined with carefully selected concepts from ecosystem science, a critical inquiry stance can transform the way we think about our leadership and its impacts. Data will truly become both a window that helps us more clearly see learners, and also a mirror that helps us more clearly see ourselves. ⊂⊃

Usha James has led The *Critical Thinking Consortium* as Executive Director since 2016. Prior to that she was a secondary teacher in York Region District School Board and a teacher educator at OISE/UT. **Warren Woytuck** is a Director with The *Critical Thinking Consortium*. Warren has been a K-12 teacher and elementary and junior high school principal for more than 25 years. His diverse professional background includes leadership experience in government and not-for-profit organizations.