

DAF
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Clarifying Purpose

What It Is

- ▶ Clarify the overarching purpose of improving all learner outcomes to create a focus toward which everyone works on a day-to-day basis.
- ▶ Develop a deep understanding of the overarching purpose from which to focus specific actions.
- ▶ Link actions to the central purpose of the work.
- ▶ Co-construct the process of clarifying purpose.
- ▶ Ensure a relentless focus on learners by being “keepers of the purpose.”

Why It Matters

- ▶ An explicit shared clear purpose provides direction and avoids dissipating the limited time and energy available in schools.
- ▶ An overarching purpose, driven by a social justice motivation, keeps the work going when things get tough.
- ▶ A narrow and deep approach that is explicitly designed for transfer to other areas is more effective than doing many things at once.
- ▶ Schools are busy places, and educators can need encouragement and permission to focus on a few key things.

How I Do It

- ▶ Work closely with leaders and teachers to co-construct and clarify a shared purpose.
- ▶ Be keepers of the purpose. Point out drift from the focus to those who may be too close to the work to

see it. Name the purpose to remind leaders at key times.

- ▶ Relate and deliberately link all actions back to the purpose and current focus.
- ▶ Check in with others about purpose and ask these questions: How does this fit with what we are doing? Why are we doing this? What will be the impact on learners?

Key Challenges for Me

- ▶ Making sure that purpose is co-constructed in genuine ways by those tasked with making the changes
- ▶ Getting a shared and deep understanding of equity necessary for improving all learner outcomes through changing educator practices
- ▶ Remembering to regularly and explicitly return to the purpose
- ▶ Staying strong as the keeper of the purpose even when there is disagreement

What I Should Notice

- ▶ How clearly can people articulate the purpose and the reasons for the activities being undertaken?
- ▶ Is the school or district channeling its energy and time into work that is part of the agreed purpose, or are there many distractions?
- ▶ Is the main focus becoming part of “how we do things” rather than an add-on or optional extra?
- ▶ Is there a relentless focus on improving learner outcomes?



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Clarifying Purpose

What: Description of the Concept

The overarching purpose of taking an adaptive expertise approach to the facilitation of improvement in schools is to improve outcomes for all learners—in particular those who are not well served by their education systems. This means the purpose must be responsive to the context and the learner’s culture and intended to achieve transformative change, not tweaking the status quo. The purpose is driven by valued student outcomes that, in this framework, are broadly conceived to include academic, social and emotional well-being, engagement and participatory outcomes, and also outcomes valued by families and communities. Social justice and improving equity are the fundamental purposes of school improvement. Keeping this purpose clear, shared, and understood by everyone is a key element of facilitation.

It is important to reframe the presenting problem in terms of the purpose of the PL, particularly keeping the focus on the students and their learning.

What: Description of the Deliberate Act of Facilitation

Clarifying purpose with those tasked to make the changes means unpacking the “main thing” where the main thing is improving student outcomes.

The overarching purpose drives where to plan the focus of educator actions. Clarifying the specific focus of the work together is a strategic action of facilitation, as the plan of work becomes clear and shared, increasing the likelihood of successful change and importantly, prevents everyone from becoming overwhelmed by the size and scope of the task. Attempting to address outcomes in too many learning areas simultaneously is unlikely to be effective. Once success has been achieved in one aspect of students’ learning, the focus can become the transfer of effective practices to other areas of learning.

It is essential to have an overarching purpose and agreed-upon specific focus to deliberately return to as leaders and teachers may become distracted by daily or urgent demands, can’t see why change is necessary, or start to focus on other issues and forget the central thrust of the work we are doing. This can involve clarifying misconceptions and confusions that have arisen or going deeper into the work as needed along the way. Sometimes leaders and teachers need facilitators to be keepers of the purpose, acting as a conscience for them regarding student learning. This can be a support for them, particularly when other people and organizations may be vying for school attention and resources, which distracts from the main purpose. A relentless focus on learners, accompanied by a deep understanding of and commitment to social justice, is needed to embed real change in schools.

“It’s about student learning and, as leaders, if there are potential issues or problems . . . how are you going to work out strategies to ensure that whatever we do has an impact on student learning? That’s the key thing.”

(Facilitator)

Why It Matters

A clear sense of purpose, linked to specific foci and actions, keeps the focus on learners, sustains motivation, and avoids energy becoming dissipated (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014). Research on teaching for transfer suggests that a narrow and deep approach that is explicitly designed for transfer to other areas is more effective than doing many things at once (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998). Trying to do too much at once requires excessive amounts of unsustainable energy and often creates burnout, typically with little demonstrable effect. It is not uncommon to find schools focusing on achieving wide-ranging impact rather than using a narrow focus.

If the overarching purpose is not focused on improving student learning for all students, then change work might serve to exacerbate differences between the students who are doing well and those who are not, rather than ameliorate them (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Proposed actions, hunches, and ideas need to be tested against the purpose of improving outcomes for marginalized learners to ensure that change improves valued educational outcomes for everyone.

How I Do It

Spending time co-constructing understanding of the overarching purpose is necessary to getting long-term commitment and shared vision. Working out how the purpose looks in each school context makes it real for the leaders and teachers. Facilitators can help keep the purpose front and center by reminding leaders and teachers of their shared purpose, especially when decisions seem to be drifting away from the focus. Asking questions such as “How does this link to our purpose?” and “How will this help us improve outcomes for our marginalized learners?” at key points could be effective. These questions reinforce why the changes are important. Being explicit about how all actions link to the shared purpose keeps work on track.

Co-constructing meaning in particular situations helps to clarify purpose and improve communication.

Key Challenges for Me

There are two points in time at which clarifying purpose poses particular challenges: at the beginning of working with a new school and once work has been under way for some time. At the beginning of new work with a school, it can be challenging to get a shared understanding and commitment to the overarching purpose and how the proposed actions might address that purpose. Leaders and staff may not see the urgency or necessity for change, or they may not believe that working with a facilitator using knowledge and inquiry-building methods will make a substantive difference for learners. This can be particularly uncomfortable when discussing social justice and equitable outcomes as these discussions may surface deep-seated biases and deficit thinking. Making sure that a school-based interpretation of the purpose is genuinely co-constructed can be a key challenge in these circumstances.

“Sometimes you need to help them sort through the stuff because the urgent drives out the important.”
(Facilitator)

As work proceeds, it is important to remember to come back to the purpose frequently. It is easy to get busy and distracted and to forget to check and make sure that actions are still aligned with the overarching goal. Keeping the purpose front and center in everyone’s minds helps to embed the new ways of working.

What I Should Notice

If the overarching purpose is agreed, then leaders and teachers will be able to articulate the purpose and the reasons for various activities being undertaken. This may need prompting at the start; however, over time leaders and teachers will start to work as though the purpose is embedded in their thinking and an accepted part of how the school works rather than an aim imposed from outside the school or by leaders within the school. Remember to check whether leaders and teachers see themselves as advocates of social justice. If this is not present, then concepts of equity will need to be surfaced and engaged as improvement outcomes will be compromised.

Facilitators should notice that activity in the school should become increasingly focused and explicitly aligned with the overarching purpose. When purpose is clear, a sense of urgency about improving learner outcomes will become the focus of professional discussion and professional learning (PL) as well as classroom practice.

Further Reading

Robinson, V. M. J. (2011). *Student-centered leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2014). *A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry*. Melbourne, Australia: Centre for Strategic Education.

Vignette 1a: Clarifying Purpose

P Penny is working with her teachers in a staff meeting. They are talking about the teaching and learning of reading because their inquiry focus is accelerating students' progress in reading. Penny is aware that while the teachers might know that the focus is on reading, they are probably not clear on what the overall goal might be, so there is a risk that their efforts will be piecemeal and not address the issues evident in the student data.

Co-constructing clarification of purpose	Penny: So, let's see if we can express our central concern, our main thing, as a question that could help us focus our inquiry. What do you think is the overall goal?
	Maria: I guess it's to get better results in reading, raise achievement, you know, higher scores . . .
	David: I think it's about changing our practice, being more engaging—better reading materials, more relevance.
Co-constructing clarification of purpose Keeping the focus on learners	Penny: So, there's two pieces there: student achievement and teaching practice. I think one of the issues that feeds into both of those ideas is low rate of progress. Have a look at the data. Their results are trending lower over the past three years. Is it the kids or maybe the approaches we are taking?
	Diana: That's true. It's harder to see that when you are looking at a list of scores. It doesn't really show their overall progress. I guess it's important to look at different sources of data. Could our overall goal be to address that trend somehow? Make progress quicker?
	David: Accelerate progress.
	Diana: Yeah, accelerate—we could try a few things to do that.
Co-constructing clarification of purpose	Penny: So, you are saying that our overall goal could be to accelerate progress in reading, and then we could work on different strategies that might contribute to that goal? A question might be this: What teaching techniques accelerate progress in reading?
	Maria: It might be broader if we say "How can we accelerate progress in reading?" because it might not just be teaching techniques. It might be sharing with parents or something.
Co-constructing clarification of purpose Keeping the focus on learners	Penny: Sure. So, our overall purpose is to accelerate progress in reading. Great! That comes from the data and focuses on our learners. We could make a big difference doing this together.

Vignette 1b: Clarifying Purpose

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Fran is visiting a middle school that she hasn't been into for a semester. She is checking in with the principal (Mark) and leadership team to see how they are going with implementing inquiry as part of their staff PL strategy. Their meeting begins with a presentation by the department chair for science (Pamela) about the introduction of new robotics materials and software into the sixth-grade science classes. Fran becomes aware that the team has moved away from the central purpose it had agreed on last time she visited.

	Pamela: All in all, I'm really pleased with the response from the teachers, and the students love it, of course—new and different, and very hands on.
	Mark: It looks fantastic, what a great initiative. I wouldn't mind getting to play with it myself. I'm really glad we invested in this—and proud of the staff for the way they have taken it on.
Keeping the focus on the overall purpose Trying to link actions to the central purpose	Fran: It looks amazing, and clearly everyone has really enjoyed doing it. How does this fit in with what we've been looking at? With the use of inquiry? Was it part of that work?
	Mark: Well, not really. It kind of came up as an opportunity to purchase the equipment, and so we went ahead with it.
	Pamela: It certainly relates to the students doing inquiry. It's all focused around problem solving and trying things out.
Keeping the focus on the overall purpose Focusing on learners Developing deep understanding of the purpose	Fran: Okay, so let's look back at what we were talking about last time we were together, about PL. Tell me about what you've done in that area. Our overall purpose was to implement teacher inquiry in order to raise student achievement, focusing on science. Maybe we need to look again at the difference between teaching through inquiry and inquiry into teaching—it can be hard to get a hold of to start with.