

Standard 2: Contextual Understanding

*Reflective Essay*

Context is part of a fluid, changing system. Anticipating, understanding, and responding to context requires active leadership. Systems change theorists such as Edward Deming (1994) and pioneers in developmental psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978) assert that in order to influence a system (i.e. learning at a student level), we must understand the factors that influence it.

The goal of the educational system is for students to learn and apply knowledge and skills so that they become independent, contributing members of society. While the appearance of this takes many different forms, the focus of educators is on students. The learning process can be impacted by a myriad of systems including: community and social norms regarding education, familial value of education and support of the schooling process, individual factors such as gender, culture, learning support needs, building issues such as maintenance of the school, school environment, behavioral norms and expectations in the building, learning materials, teacher-student relationship quality, instruction, assessment, reinforcement of learning. Many more complex interactions exist that make up the context of learning.

The four core building blocks for leadership to which I referred in my discussion of Standard One – relationship, knowledge, accountability, and sacrifice – have important applications in understanding context as well. Taking the time (relationship, knowledge, sacrifice) to become familiar with issues that impact learning gives you credibility in your accountability. Robert Pianta (1999), a psychologist from the University of Virginia, has long studied the impact of teacher-student relationship quality on student adjustment and success in learning. Though much of his work focuses on younger children, the principles apply to

secondary age students as well. He asserts that you must have some understanding of the internal and external factors that impact a student in your classroom. The work of Ruby Payne (2004), in her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, also speaks closely to this issue. She concludes that educators must understand the linguistic and socio-cultural constructs that shape student's experiences of the education system. This is particularly important for students whose culture and socioeconomic experiences are not congruent with the middle class culture of public education. When school leaders actively learn about what put their students at risk and what makes them resilient, they can better understand and support the challenges faced by classroom teachers. This accountability for knowledge and understanding strengthens their relationship with the staff.

Acknowledging and addressing even a fraction of these issues in planning for the learning process can overwhelm a leader. One might say that they are all important to student success. This would be true. However, approaching contextual understanding in a thoughtful manner is possible. Approximating the approach many primary teachers use to introduce a new book can be useful. Inexperienced readers don't just jump right in and read a new book. They go about it systematically. They talk about the cover and the title, making predictions about the story. They might do a picture walk of the book to get a little more information. This could be followed by listening to a read aloud or searching for familiar words. The point is that leaders should approach understanding and planning for contextual factors using a deliberate process. The work is not finished once factors are identified, but the process is applied again and again in order to deepen and strengthen their understanding of how they relate to learning.

My efforts in this area of leadership (both in the classroom and at a colleague level) have yielded tenfold benefit in my daily work. Even a basic understanding of the point of view of

high school students through their music gives me a connection to them. Knowing and acknowledging the pressures faced by the school secretary develops a strong allegiance between us. Recognizing and addressing the underlying communication of a student with behavior problems (e.g. their need for structured, positive attention) can help them change in a powerful way. I have made these types of ‘active interactions’ part of my skill set as both a teacher and leader.

### *Related Artifacts*

An important and very relevant artifact to Standard Two comes from a paper that I co-authored on the achievement gap. “Rosa Parks Elementary Case Study: The Question of the Achievement Gap” closely examined issues correlated to student learning. This paper considered several contextual factors related to school achievement across gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. We were asked to demonstrate an understanding of the factors by discussing how they impact school outcomes and to investigate and address possible interventions. Strong alignment between curriculum and district standards support teaching what is very important. The element of relationship also surfaced as a critical component in intervention with poor achievers. Noting this element again and again in professional literature and anecdotal accounts of intervention reinforce that it is a key ingredient to making a classroom a productive learning environment (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

## *References*

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