

# FLUX LEADERSHIP: LEADING FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE IN & BEYOND COVID-19

Sharon M. Ravitch, Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

## Abstract:

In this twin pandemic moment, educational leaders face increasing pressure to assume a transformative leadership stance committed to racial justice, wherein curriculum, pedagogy, policies, norms, and mindsets are critically appraised and transformed into a new normative state of anti-racism. Flux leadership is a framework for equitable, responsive, and agile leadership in this moment of ongoing, complex, multi-faceted change. Flux leadership creates the conditions for flux pedagogy through taking an inquiry and justice-focused leadership stance. The primary dimensions of flux leadership are: 1) Radical Growth Mindset; 2) Distributed Wisdom Approach; 3) Leading from an Inquiry Stance 4) Trauma-informed Leadership; 5) Radical Compassion and Radical Self-Care; 6) Responsive and Humanizing Leadership; 7) Leader Critical Pedagogy; 8) Racial Literacy; 9) Brave Space Leadership; and 10) Emotional Imagination and Inner-Resource Cultivation. Each dimension of flux leadership is discussed in the context of COVID-19 and movement for racial equality, justice, and peace. Attached to each concept framing are suggested practices for transforming schools, teams, and classrooms into brave space communities of practice—including online—during this time of radical flux, a time in which students need affirming and justice-generating learning spaces.

**Keywords:** Flux pedagogy, critical pedagogy, inquiry stance, racial literacy, trauma-informed education, brave spaces, crisis leadership, transformative leadership, anti-racist leadership, COVID-19 leadership, self-care, radical compassion.

“Everything is in a state of flux, including the status quo.” — Robert Byrne

## Context/s of Flux Pedagogy

In this moment of crisis, educational leaders' responsibilities are increasingly complex, including minimizing disruptions to students' academic experiences while trying to prevent cuts to staffing, funding, and other critical elements of the educational infrastructure. With (mis)direction from national leaders and inconsistencies between neighboring states, inadequate time to plan, and under extreme duress, leaders have been forced to transform schools and districts into sites of virtual or hybrid learning for the 2020-2021 academic year. The work to ensure that K-12 schooling, as well as higher education, endures the unpredictable effects of this global pandemic, with illness and mortality rates that will peak, plateau, and dip in cycles throughout the year, is relentless. Moreover, during all of this tumult, educational leaders are responsible for the wellbeing, engagement, and social-emotional learning of their students and for the crisis training and support of their teachers and staff. This tyranny of urgent demands has become endemic to leading through the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and structural racism/state-sanctioned racialized violence, with their life- and opportunity-killing impacts.

In addition to physically transforming the structure and process of schools, educational leaders face increasing pressure to assume a transformative leadership stance committed to racial justice, wherein curriculum, pedagogy, policies, norms, and mindsets are critically appraised and transformed into a new normative state of anti-racism (Love, 2019), in response to the surging centrality of the Black Lives Matter movement and continued public outcry for racial justice. To do so, leaders must be able to assess and build their own racial literacy and identity-based stress navigation skills. This requires that educational leaders understand the weaponized social construction of race (Omi & Winant, 2014) and how it is differentially used to re/produce the marginalization of students of color and indigenous students in schools (Horsford, 2014). This is vital to justice-focused school functioning in and beyond the current chaos, and it requires critical leader learning and a *radical growth mindset* (defined below).

The adaptability element of crisis leadership is essential right now since no one can foresee what next month or next year will bring and how it will impact teaching, learning, and leading. In this time of radical flux, *flux leadership* offers a set of principles, mindsets, and practices for being responsive to emergent school and community needs in inquiry-based, trauma-informed, racially literate, and compassionate ways. Flux leadership supports critical pedagogy, brave space group norming, equity-focused organizational and professional development, and leader self-care. The dimensions of flux leadership, while not new, are exponentially more salient right now as each points to ways that identity shapes experiences of this multifaceted crisis and

how critical approaches can help organize the confusion by offering ways into a radical new mindset (Ravitch, 2020) for educational leadership and pedagogical practice.

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I developed the flux pedagogy framework (Ravitch, 2020). Flux pedagogy is a mindset and corresponding set of practices for enacting critical pedagogy in this moment of radical flux. Flux pedagogy requires as it evinces an adaptive and compassionate pedagogical approach that views classrooms (including virtual ones) as complex adaptive systems of care (Ravitch, 2020). Over the past four months we have seen sweeping social response to state-sanctioned police brutality and the racialized carcerality of the United States. All aspects of life are in a state of flux now and for the foreseeable future. Students, teachers, and leaders are concerned about their families and communities, whose lives are disrupted in ways that affect daily experience, livelihoods, and wellbeing. Students, like those who teach them, have unprecedented concerns about their lives—what will happen next? How will today's realities shape tomorrow? What does all of this mean?

In this indefinite meantime, educational leaders are trying to make useful sense of it all. Leaders, teachers, and counselors feel these impacts acutely while attempting to do online what has always happened in live classrooms and schools, all while facing rapidly changing daily realities that are shaping schooling in paradigm-changing ways. During the pandemic, we've wrestled with the painful dilemma of worrying about our own safety and the safety of everyone out there protesting Black dehumanization, especially when met with the brutal reactions of law enforcement we've witnessed over these past four months. We see the widely diffuse existence of ingrained racism, White supremacy, and resistance/s to just and peaceful co-existence, to racial equity, to the humanization and safety of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). As I write this (August 2020), Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has shown (yet again) just how little she—and the “leaders” who empower her to degrade and regress public education—cares about students and educators by demanding a return to brick-and-mortar public schools amidst surging sickness and death tolls and without adequate support or resource allocation. Each of these non/acts is a violation of humanity, together they are almost too much for the mind to comprehend and the heart to take in, and students are left to make sense of these felt injustices, largely on their own, amidst rampant confusion, stress, divisiveness, and loss.

These are embodied leadership concerns in this extended time of flux—global displacement, schools and businesses closed; teachers, parents, and leaders juggling employment and family responsibilities, massive unemployment, sweeping financial struggle, people are worried about and responsible for their own health, family health, public health. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on a 400+ year pandemic of structural racism in the United States with unconscionable health disparities across communities of color and Indigenous communities, ongoing terror inflicted on Black America at the hands of the police, and the persistent racism that permeates our educational institutions as anonymous Black students and educators have taken to Instagram to post their stories of how Blackness is treated at their schools (see, for example, [@BlackPhillyStudents](#), [The Melanated Educators Collective](#), and [The Racial Justice Organizing Committee](#)). All this while Latinx immigrants are criminalized, caged, and subjected to systemic harassment, forced family separation, and a range of human rights violations at the hands of the United States government. Trumpism publicly amplifies the White Supremacy always systemically enacted in the United States beyond continued deflection and denial. So much to make sense of, heal from, to see beyond and lead through.

It's vital for educational leaders to acknowledge that we are not in what some refer to as a “new normal,” and there's no “new normal” coming—there is only constant change, now and for the future. This change is long overdue, and educational leaders must understand that reminiscing about or seeking an old sense of “normal” is problematic and, moreover, potentially re-traumatizing for teachers, students, and communities of color (Baker, 2020). Educational leaders must listen to, engage with, lift up, and advocate for marginalized voices and silenced concerns as a mission mode—and to do this—leaders need frames, approaches, and supports to make sense of these new realities and their implications for their leadership, teachers, staff, students, communities, and colleagues, and for the field of education as a whole. Seeking the kind of “normalcy” that resembles the racist, classist, sexist, ableist, settler colonial system we entered the pandemic with is no longer an option, as is clear in growing movements of change within and across industries. In schooling and education, this moment of forced restructuring creates new kinds of accountability, which while stressful, marks an unprecedented opportunity to disrupt and reinvent schooling, teaching, and the field of education, to eschew the transactional and socially reproductive and embrace the socially disruptive and transformational.

Watching the U.S. federal government and many state governments mishandle this pandemic and place already-marginalized, minoritized, and vulnerable populations at exponentially greater risk, makes the systemic racism of the U.S. education system ever-more clear to a greater number of people. The deep structural inequity, hyper-individualism, greed, and neoliberal transactionalism of the United States education system—with its sidestepping of racial equality and systematic marginalization and dehumanization of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian students and communities—must be countered by constructively critical, transformational, abolitionist leadership and pedagogical approaches (Love, 2019) that this moment of radical flux makes room for, and that our collective humanity demands (Cheng Thom, 2020).

In “The Pandemic is a Portal,” Arundhati Roy (2020) criticizes the Indian government’s similar humanitarian failure to provide equal protection for all of its people both before and during coronavirus. Roy contextualizes the COVID-19 pandemic within the long history of global pandemics that have radically altered the world. On this timeline of human suffering, Roy places the coronavirus pandemic as a necessary portal—an opening that we ourselves can, and must, widen to collectively enact global political, economic, social, environmental, and spiritual change. Roy inspires us to strategically and reflexively unlearn in order to remake forward,

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks, and dead ideas, our dead rivers, and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

For those of us ready to fight for educational equity, the emergent outcries for comprehensive change are a gateway to critical intersectional inclusivity (Pak & Ravitch, 2021), wherein schooling is enacted as a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). We must work together to build back not only better—but within, for, and through a radically new and different paradigm—a new house built with new tools (Lorde, 1988). To do so we must work to affirm, converge, and amplify our individual and collective stories, spheres of influence, and wisdoms as we shake the knowledge tree of education down to its socially reproductive, deficit-oriented, top-down-policy roots. We must collectively work to re/build education as a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994)—the generative convergence of liberatory policies and humanizing practices for justice and peace.

### **Introducing Flux Leadership**

“Pure experience’ is the name I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories.” — William James

This moment of social and educational rupture, upheaval, struggle, advocacy, and hope, of taking much of what we do in person online, of re/evaluating the “hidden curriculum of schooling” that marginalizes, oppresses, and deficitizes people of color and Indigenous communities (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013) provokes, as it underlines, the dire need for humanizing, equity-focused leadership and pedagogy. *Flux leadership* is a critical inquiry framework that supports leader learning agility, self-awareness, and cultivation of a radical growth mindset and distributed wisdom approach (terms defined herein). As a heuristic, flux leadership brings together and integrates critical practice frameworks—*inquiry as stance*, *trauma-informed care*, *radical compassion* and *radical self-care*, *critical pedagogy*, *racial literacy*, and *brave space pedagogy* (Arao & Clemens, 2013)—as the foundation upon which leaders develop, enact, and support asset-based and anti-racist organizational norms, processes, and structures.

Flux leadership integrates relational and critical pedagogy frameworks into a transformative leadership approach. It’s constructivist, student-centered, adaptive, and reflexive; it’s a humanizing framework that helps leaders examine the systems and processes of schooling towards the goal of fomenting transformative teaching and learning. Flux leaders support their teachers in enacting flux pedagogy—teacher pedagogy cultivated in and for an adaptive, responsive, racially literate, and compassionate inquiry mindset and ecosystem. Flux pedagogy supports trauma-informed pedagogy and balancing radical compassion for students (and teachers) with high-yet-humanely-calibrated expectations for learning, engagement, and performance (Eren & Ravitch, 2021; Russo, 2018). This multifaceted crisis moment necessitates that leaders build new mindsets and skills for inspiring transformative pedagogy and the co-construction of brave dialogic spaces that help students identify and process their feelings, including their trauma and distress. This requires that leaders cultivate a *radical growth mindset* for crisis leadership and equitable organizational development.

### ***Distributed Leadership Approach and Radical Growth Mindset***

The kinds of transformative action a flux leadership approach evinces both requires and relies on a *distributed wisdom approach*—a generative approach to organizational learning that centralizes shared wisdom to help leaders and organizations enact culturally responsive schooling structures and processes, emergent design class structures and curricula, resonant communication structures for meetings and learning spaces, and maximally supportive professional development sessions. In a *distributed wisdom approach*, a range of knowledges and kinds of expertise are uplifted through inquiry-based learning and professional development. One way this happens is through communities of practice that support racial literacy and identity-based stress navigation skills and foster the conditions for effectively identifying, naming, and pushing against real-time inequities within and beyond teams, classrooms, schools, and organizations.

A mindset is a self-perception or theory of self. People with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) understand that they get smarter as they learn through challenges, struggles, and mistakes; that they must learn directly in relation to problems as they emerge in

real-time, and further, that meaningful learning happens through dialogic engagement (intentional dialogue processes) (Ravitch & Carl, 2019) and self-reflection that is growth-oriented rather than self-blaming or ego-protecting. Leaders with a growth mindset view mistakes and struggles as opportunities for learning, they see themselves and others as a work-in-progress rather than viewing mistakes as weaknesses or fixed characteristics. This positioning of the dynamic (rather than fixed) nature of self—as always unfolding—distinguishes a growth from a fixed mindset, which views negative characteristics as unchanging. A growth mindset enables us to see past what we said or did in any given moment because we are committed to focused processes of self-development.

A *radical growth mindset* is an active growth orientation to self-learning enacted through self-reflection, relational inquiry, and a distributed wisdom approach. A distributed wisdom approach to learning broadly, and to uncovering implicit biases and deficit-based beliefs and how they shape leadership specifically, is crucial in this complex leadership moment. A radical growth mindset is self-reinforcing—growth happens by seeking out and reckoning with challenging ideas and perspectives within dialectics of mutual influence (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998) that help leaders build racial literacy and identity-based stress navigation skills to support them in facing professional struggles and mistakes with an understanding that learning necessarily includes vulnerability, being challenged, and engaging with a range of critiques in healthy ways. This is no longer an add-on luxury; it's a pedagogical imperative, a leader's ethical responsibility. A *distributed wisdom approach* decentralizes pervasive knowledge hierarchies—in all of their epistemological violence—to create openings for marginalized knowledges and silenced values to emerge and be centered as critique and guide. This paradigmatic shift is necessary to lead and teach responsively in (and beyond) this moment, as we stumble towards justice and peace.

Enacting flux leadership requires leader learning agility—the ability to actively learn and enact crisis leadership skills in periods of radical change. When leaders situate themselves as intentional learners in unfamiliar, challenging, and even threatening (in the identity sense) experiences, they are better able to apply emergent lessons in real-time. For example, when specific policies or understandings of equity-oriented topics such as structural racism or intersectional identities are challenged, leaders must be able to respond in informed ways that connect, not deflect, and that are justice-focused and supportive. Leading with a *radical growth mindset* means engaging with colleagues, students, teams, parents, and community members as active thought and action partners. This helps leaders foster the conditions for people to come together to identify and address current struggles—and the racial and socioeconomic disparities across them—as living texts that advocate for critical intersectional inclusivity and racial justice in schools (Pak & Ravitch, 2021).

Flux leadership creates the conditions for flux pedagogy through an equity-focused leadership approach. The primary dimensions of flux leadership are: 1) Radical Growth Mindset; 2) Distributed Wisdom Approach; 3) Leading from an Inquiry Stance 4) Trauma-informed Leadership; 5) Radical Compassion and Radical Self-Care; 6) Responsive and Humanizing Leadership; 7) Leader Critical Pedagogy; 8) Racial Literacy; 9) Brave Space Leadership; and 10) Emotional Imagination and Inner-Resource Cultivation. Each dimension is discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing movement for racial equality, justice, and peace in the United States. Flux leadership is a heuristic for equitable, responsive, and agile leadership in this moment of radical flux. After each concept framing are suggested practices for transforming teams, classrooms, and schools into brave space communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—including online—during this extending time of suffering, loss, and confusion, a time in which we all need more affirming and justice-generating learning spaces.

Importantly, the core theories that comprise flux leadership are not new; they are existing frameworks already generative to theory, research, policy, and practices that support equitable schooling and education. It's in their critical integration and application that they constitute a responsive, equity-centered pedagogical framework useful in this moment of leading through global, national, state, local crisis. A flux leadership mindset helps leaders to identify and examine deficit-based social constructions of race that shape curriculum, teaching, and schooling. This happens through collective reckoning—learning from multiple perspectives on personal, communal, and familial educational experiences (both before and during this global crisis) and how these are mediated by intersectional identities and systemic forces (Pak & Ravitch, 2021). These professional practices constitute core competencies leaders must have (and build) now. A flux leadership mindset enables leaders to work from an understanding of the impacts of structural racism on schooling and of how their social identities show up and shape what they offer—and do not offer—their school communities. *No Justice, No Peace* is now the floor of schooling, not the ceiling.

### Leading from an Inquiry Stance

“For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

— Paulo Freire

With all that's going on in the world—and in students' and teachers' worlds—leaders need frameworks and mindsets that help

them to identify, examine, and challenge their beliefs about who is knowledgeable and their assumptions about how learning best happens. Leaders must learn how to critically examine their own mindsets, tacit beliefs, and internalized knowledge hierarchies. Leading from an *inquiry stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) means that leaders show up—as their *raison d'être*—as reflective, curious, and engaged learners, not knowledge droppers or performative experts. This shift in power dynamics, when leaders centralize the wisdom of everyone around them to push into knowledge hierarchies, constitutes a *distributed wisdom approach*—in which all wisdoms are foregrounded, weighted equally in value, brought into conversation and hybridized. Co-creating intentional practices and processes for shared knowledge generation elevates everyone and is central to an inquiry stance. In this fraught moment wherein most students, teachers, families, and communities feel helpless, creating the conditions in which they can feel agentic and authentic in sharing feelings, perspectives, experiences, ideas, and concerns without fear is vital for learning, positive development, and wellbeing in and beyond school (Eren & Ravitch, 2021).

Leading through a *distributed wisdom approach* is transformative for leaders and their organizations. It's vital to situate yourself as a learner, to examine your ideologies, tacit beliefs, and implicit biases, to work to ever-more critically understand how these shape your ideas and professional practice. This requires critically reading self with disciplined, curious, and compassionate humility. Inquiry as stance, which is foundational to a flux pedagogy mindset, requires that leaders take a reflexive learning stance on self, professional practice, and the contexts—near and far, personal and societal—that shape their practice, their sites of practice, and understandings of that practice in and beyond the immediate setting. Through intentional, societally contextualized self-reflection that questions what they know and how they know it, leaders open up possibilities for authentic learning and growth. Inquiry as stance is a leader mindset that helps leaders upset normative ideas and knowledge hierarchies in order to foster an equitable school ecosystem.

Leaders working from an inquiry stance position everyone as “legitimate knowers and knowledge generators, not just implementers of others’ knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 18). A *critical inquiry stance* extends this further by questioning why, in many Western educational contexts, knowledge (epistemology) is valued over values (axiology) and ways of being (ontology) (Ravitch, 2020). A critical inquiry stance upsets traditional notions of what constitutes valid knowledge and who is a knower by identifying and challenging ways that traditional learning practices, which are steeped in White Western values and norms, are imposed on everyone as universal. Further, it exposes the invisible-yet-pervasive imposition of Western hierarchical logics including the devaluation of emotion, values, and Indigenous wisdoms (Chilisa, 2020). As Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen (2004) implores, “It is important to reclaim for humanity the ground that has been taken from it by various arbitrarily narrow formulations of the demands of rationality” (p. 51). The moment to reclaim this stolen ground is now, to stand together against current narrow formulations of the demands of rationality and their harmful reverberations in and across all of our systems.

The ability to identify and upset the tacit beliefs and value systems into which we have been socialized, which often undermine authentic connection and true collaboration, requires a willingness to question our own indoctrination into systems of performance and evaluation based on proscribed forms of social, cultural, and educational capital that reflect and perpetuate an imagined White ideal. This is what scholar-activist bell hooks (1994) refers to as *teaching to transgress*—going against the grain of imposed normative White Western value systems can be framed (and punished) as transgression. hooks and other critical pedagogues teach us that in reality, such “transgression” is vital to survival and wellbeing, a liberation from the indoctrination that separates us from the sources of our own most imaginative and authentic learning, and from equitably supportive educational ecosystems.

Critical thinking is an evergreen leadership value. In this fraught pandemic moment, replete with necessary, generative civil unrest that ebbs and flows, and that will likely continue to do so, particularly as we ride the wave of our upcoming presidential election in November, prioritizing relational authenticity by pushing into established hierarchical norms, foregrounding local wisdoms and kinds of expertise (e.g., activist expertise, community wisdom), and engaging multiple perspectives and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) within an ethic of interdependent care is vital for the wellbeing of everyone in learning communities. A critical inquiry stance fomenting humanizing and relational learning possibilities instead of sustaining useless, divisive (and even harmful) knowledge hierarchies and binaries.

Binaries are reductive and generally false, and in education, they can do harm (e.g., gender binaries marginalize gender non-conforming students, Black/White racial binaries in conversations about racism oversimplify what is lived in complex intersectional ways). Identity binaries preclude meaningful conversations about intersectionality, justice, and equity (Crenshaw, 2021). Relatedly, educational leaders must work to disrupt the “expert-learner binary” that confers dominance on a narrow knowledge hierarchy and marginalizes the experiences and knowledges of people and groups farthest from dominant power (Ravitch & Tillman, 2010). In shifting to a *distributed wisdom approach*, leaders can build a more receptive sensibility, be more responsively solutionary, and create possibilities for dialectics of mutual growth and reciprocal transformation (Nakkula & Ravitch 1998). These new communication pathways, norms, and processes, and the meaning frameworks behind them, help leaders to interrupt the transactionalism of schools and, in its place, to offer transformative possibilities through collaborative action.

## Suggested Practices:

- Inquiry is a powerful driver of emergent design professional development with teachers and curriculum with students, especially in times that require the ability to pivot quickly and responsively. Suggest and support inquiry groups—in-person and online—that/to enact a *distributed wisdom approach*. Introduce and regularly communicate the value of taking an inquiry stance on practice for deepening individual and shared learning; model and narrate this as ongoing, integrated professional development. Create structures and supports for inquiry group processes (aka communities of practice or professional learning communities) that people—students, teachers, staff—can offer and/or select into.
- Model, teach, and lead humble inquiry, the relationally attuned process of “drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person” (Schein, 2013, p. 2). Humble inquiry is an enactment of an inquiry stance in teams, groups, and classrooms; it requires intention, humility, emotional intelligence, and racial literacy. Importantly, humble inquiry becomes increasingly difficult as status increases. Teach and model humble inquiry as an ethic of practice with the expressed goal of creating a diffusion effect of engagement and support.
- Listen with curious humility to how socio-political/economic forces shape people’s experiences of the pandemic. This means seeking to understand lived structural inequity and intersectional identities as they shape the experiences of everyone in educational communities right now. Create a school/team/classroom culture that invites, affirms, and integrates authentic shared learning as a mission mode. This necessitates enacting humble inquiry to learn into the range of experiences of racialized and identity-based stress during the pandemic. Some examples include: 1) the particular vulnerabilities LGBTQ students may face in the pandemic (Reid, 2020); 2) racism faced by Asian and Asian American students, teachers, and communities as a result of Trump/ism’s anti-Asian discrimination campaign and its reverberations throughout the pandemic (Wang Yuen, 2020); 3) differential student access to resources and supports including privacy, safety, wi-fi, computer, school supplies, and other necessary learning resources; 4) the myriad ways Latinx communities have been targeted, harassed, and criminalized before and during the pandemic (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2020); 5) the systematic devaluation and marginalization of Indigenous students and communities by a settler colonialist education system (Brayboy, et al., 2015); 6) ways that Muslim students and communities are harassed and targeted in response to state-sanctioned Islamophobia (ADL, 2020); and 7) ways Jewish students, teachers, and leaders are targeted by anti-Semitic attacks and tropes, often made personally threatening and violent (ADL, 2020). Many people are multiply discriminated against given intersectional identities; remember this and moreover, remember that everyone is an expert of their own experience who can teach you things you need to know as a leader (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).
- Consider specific areas for development in your communication style (e.g., in conversations about equity and identity, do you tend to use support-responses or shift-responses?). Examine conflict patterns to gain insights into how others may perceive you. Remember that understanding has less to do with what is said/intended than with how the words are experienced. Your intention is only part of the story so move into your impact by stepping into your accountability. It’s vitally important to reflect on how your actions and the dynamics around you are mediated by your social identity and by people’s proximity to structural and organizational power. As you reflect, tune into and be curious about your 3Ds (denial, deflection, defensiveness). Invite yourself to challenging self-reflection (which is discomforting more than gratifying) and seek out honest dialogue with trusted peers that helps move your thinking forward. Work to build and support constructively critical dialogue between staff, students, and community members. Remember that practicing racial mindfulness requires intention and that having a radical growth mindset about this work is both grounding and liberating.

## Trauma-Informed Leadership

“Liberated relationships are one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, the understand that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging, to be in our dignity, and to be safe in community” — Adrienne Maree Brown

In this moment of collective trauma—our own, vicarious, secondary, and intergenerational trauma—leaders must be knowledgeable about and attuned to trauma as a necessary foundation for co-creating an affirming school community. Trauma-informed pedagogy foregrounds understanding trauma—personal, familial, communal, inter-generational—and its social-emotional reverberations as central to cultivating learning environments that are affirming to people who experience/d trauma, that recognize and lift up the resilience and resources of individuals and communities that have experienced/are experiencing trauma. Trauma-informed leaders understand the need to attend to trauma in ways that help people create the conditions to feel agentic in relation to their own trauma. Further, they see the transformative possibilities that post-traumatic growth can generate (Eren & Ravitch, 2021).

Leading a trauma-informed approach means understanding the need to, and how to, foster the conditions for organizational compassion, agility, and responsiveness to the daily effects of trauma on learning as a central ethic of practice. Trauma-informed leadership involves becoming knowledgeable about, and building informed and compassionate attention towards, the range of traumas that students, teachers, and families face and the effects and possible impacts of these traumas on learning and behavior in school communities. As well, it requires understanding how trauma shapes cognitive functioning and behavior, which shapes academic performance, relational skills, and engagement styles (Imad, 2020). Broadly, this means having a

concept of trauma as a part of community life to be seen and affirmed with compassion and humility.

Beyond simply rejecting deficit perspectives widely attributed to students of color and Indigenous students, leaders must identify and acknowledge identity-based stress and how it manifests in schools and educational systems. Racialized and identity-based stress grows from direct and vicarious discriminatory racial encounters that can impact individuals both during and after a stressful event (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). These discriminatory racial encounters can occur at interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels (and sometimes occur simultaneously); they are triggered in schools and classrooms with threats of harm or injury, where there are humiliating or shaming events, and where students observe or experience harm to other people of color due to both real and perceived racism and discrimination (Carter, 2007; Stevenson, 2014).

With all that's happening in the world, teachers, students, staff, parents yearn for a place to name, understand, and process their racialized stress in community—for their emotions to be seen, heard, and validated, to feel affirmed and connected and to feel a sense of control over their lives while the world feels so fraught and coarse. Moreover, students specifically need support as they learn to navigate the stress and trauma of the pandemics and build inner-resources for calm in conflict (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Attention to this aspect of student wellbeing and development is a necessary foundation for all kinds of learning (Imad, 2020). Thus, it's important to connect with each student and greet them by name as they arrive (including on a screen), begin with thoughtful and compassionate check-ins, and explicitly discuss the importance of each student engaging authentically as a form of community-building, learning, and self-care. It is important to give students opportunities to feel a sense of choice in their learning and to provide opportunities for them to engage in storytelling processes.

Trauma-informed leaders continuously work to understand the emotional dimensions of relational and organizational life and consider how trauma histories play out in learning situations, experiences, and contexts. It is vital to understand that while staff and students are all traumatized by the pandemic in a broad sense, all traumas are not the same. Moreover, while the pandemic and civil unrest is a kind of shared trauma, it lands into the lives of already-vulnerable populations in ways that can cause more severe diffusion effects. People already have trauma histories separate from COVID-19 that must be considered in relation to current stressors. Leaders need to connect with people to ensure that they feel seen and heard, and that they have access to support based on what they share. This is an ethic of leader compassion evinced by Muriel Rukeyser's (1968) words "My lifetime listens to yours."

Importantly, listening to another's lifetime requires that we gain critical distance from our own. Enacting a trauma-informed approach requires understanding how we view and interpret trauma within the frames of our own cultures and belief systems. For example, one difference between justice-oriented frames and White Western frames on trauma is the foundational assumption of the latter that trauma recovery means the reclamation of safety. This is built on a problematic assumption that safety is a resource that is "out there" for the universal taking (Cheng Thom, 2020). The implication of this false notion of safety is a limited perspective on trauma—that all people of color need to do to heal trauma, including racialized and intergenerational trauma, is to work hard/er in therapy or engage in more positive self-talk or self-care irrespective of structural conditions. As Cheng Thom (2020) avers, people of color are not necessarily preparing their bodies to return to a general sense of safety that's widely available. Assuming this uncritically negates the traumatic lived realities of structural racism since people of color may feel they're preparing their bodies/their children's bodies for struggle—training for healthy survival and the ability to experience joy in the midst of threat (Cheng Thom, 2020). A critical understanding of trauma, and the diverse and dynamic ways trauma is lived and conceptualized, is necessary to create inclusive trauma-affirming educational spaces. Moreover, understanding the transcendent power of post-traumatic growth is a defining leader stance in this moment.

#### Suggested Practices:

- Become familiar with trauma-informed pedagogy frameworks. Work to understand trauma complexly including how it manifests in online learning environments. Attune to the specific traumas and stressors of 2020—seek out therapists of color (e.g., Dr. Riana Elyse Anderson and Dr. Shawn C. T. Jones's [Our Mental Health Minute](#) and activist-therapist [Arya Baker](#)) as guides. Consider your own trauma, teacher, staff, student, and parent trauma, and the vicarious and secondary trauma felt for students. Understand that communities of color and Indigenous peoples reckoned with intergenerational racialized trauma prior to the pandemic and, importantly, that community-based stress compounds pandemic trauma in both specific and diffuse ways. It can also, importantly, prepare people to be resilient in the face of new trauma and stress.
- Learn about trauma, mental health, and wellness in these times. Work to understand the experiences of people with social identities different from your own. Be intentional in your work to understand the heightened alienation that may be felt by BIPOC and LGBTQ populations during these twin pandemics. Learn about the ways that identity-based stress can exacerbate feelings of alienation and imposter syndrome. Do not expect people to show distress or trauma in the same ways that you do, understand that this is mediated by individual factors as well as by power and role. Read up on ways that stress, trauma, and invisible emotional labor are felt even if not seen by everyone (possibly including you) in groups, teams, classrooms, and schools (yes including online). Make sure you take a critical inquiry stance on what trauma, recovery, mental health, and wellness mean across people, groups, and contexts with an understanding of inter- and intra-

- group variability (Cheng Thom, 2020).
- Build and work from an informed and critical understanding of the impacts of different forms of trauma on cognition and behavior; work to and build clear pathways for connection, conflict resolution, healing, change, and wellbeing (see, for example, [Imad's video on the effects of trauma on learning and in schooling](#) and this piece on [why Social-Emotional Learning Should be Priority during COVID-19](#)).
  - Create a culture of intention and care around language, curriculum, and pedagogy in relation to trauma and distress, mental health, and wellness. Integrate an asset-based understanding of trauma and post-traumatic growth into policies, procedures, curriculum, practices, professional development, and assessment of students and community members. See, for example, this piece on [online trauma-informed pedagogy](#). A leader's radical growth mindset about trauma (our own and others') is key.
  - Create opportunities for practicing emotional regulation, conflict resolution, restorative justice, identity-related stress navigation and racial mindfulness skills, and the cultivation of inner-resources for calm and clarity amidst stress and chaos. See [SAMHSA's guide on kinds/signs of trauma in youth](#) for leaders, counselors, and teachers and consider issues of equity, intersectional identities, and representation in everything you read about trauma.
  - Re-up your learning about how intersectional identities and community histories shape trauma with focal understanding of racialized and identity-based stress. Learn how to address identity-based stress in supportive ways that do not re-traumatize. Engage Dr. Howard Stevenson's educator-focused materials on racialized stress and trauma, for example, [Hearing the Lion's story: Racial stress can silence children. Storytelling can awaken their voices](#) and [TedTalk How to resolve racially stressful situations](#).
  - Seek out opportunities to affirm the strength, creativity, and resilience of individuals and groups that have experienced and continue to experience struggle and trauma; centralize a multiplicity of voices and wisdoms towards developing post-traumatic growth. As one example, watch Adrienne Maree Brown's [Compassionate Communities. Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change. Changing Worlds](#). Trauma-informed leaders work from trauma-care mindsets and understand that these values must be centralized within the functioning of schools and classrooms.

### **Radical Compassion and Radical Self-Care**

"Self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension—all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles." — Angela Davis

Leaders, staff, students, parents, and communities are exhausted. Educational leaders are exhausted at the start of this new school year, working at a pace and intensity that is not sustainable without additional support. This twin-pandemic moment lands into pre-existing identity-based privileges and oppressions in important ways. Leaders must take intentional care of themselves for many reasons including so that they have the energy needed to support their students, teachers, families, and each other. To do this, leaders must understand how social identities, in terms of their proximity to structural power and resources, are central to student and community experiences of this racially fraught and socially divisive pandemic. The working ability to conceptualize and articulate how systems of domination and marginalization show up every day at the individual, group, and community levels is of utmost importance for leaders.

Radical compassion is the internal imperative to understand reality in order to change it to alleviate the distress, pain, and suffering of others; it views suffering within its macro-sociopolitical and -economic realities and contexts in ways that are equity-oriented and liberatory. The concept of radical compassion stems from criticism of U.S. schools as places that create, exacerbate, deny, and neglect student distress and struggle rather being places that help students achieve optimal development by supporting their struggles, resources, and needs through compassion as a mission mode (Lampert, 2003). When enacted as a leader pedagogical stance, radical compassion helps educators build connection between ourselves and our staff and students and, through this, to see and invent new possibilities for mutual growth and reciprocal transformation (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998).

Radical self-care is the practice of radical compassion towards self. Practicing self-care has never felt more urgent than in these socially, politically, economically, medically, environmentally, and spiritually troubling times; it has become part of many people's lexicon, yet few consider its deeper vicissitudes, its relationship to social identities and issues of structural discrimination, and the promise it holds for transformative education that supports optimal development. Fewer yet consider self-care to be political. Radical self-care requires examination of social and political power and systems of dominance, grand societal narratives of deficit, and the cultivation of a radical growth mindset, which is built on a critical examination of how the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970)—how structural racism and discrimination mediate people's lives during COVID-19 and the spiraling of the United States in its reckoning. Radical self-care bridges the political and personal in ways that create the conditions for individuals to see that much of what they judge or blame themselves for is systemic and socialized into them as fact. As Brown (2017) states "We need to learn how to practice love such that care—for ourselves and others—is understood as political resistance and cultivating resilience."

Radical self-care transcends material pleasures to focus on the cultivation of liberatory narratives and routines that help people to lovingly revise parts of ourselves as a necessary dimension of our work to re-envision and reconstruct the world. As Audre Lorde makes visible through her activism, thought leadership, essays, and poetry—standing in and declaring her own power, speaking truth to unjust structural power and discrimination and to those who uphold it, taking joyful care of her body, mind, soul, and love as a Black woman were acts of powerful resistance, radical healing, self- and social transformation in a harmful White system with exclusionary logics and dehumanizing policies. Lorde illuminates how in a racist society, replete with misogynoir and intersectional marginalization, self-care is a radical act—a revolution. Lorde (1988) wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 77). This ethic of identity-mediated radical self-care as political stance illuminates current struggles for peace and justice in terms of how leaders of justice must be supported. The personal has always been, still is, and will always be—political.

In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds*, Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) positions radical self-care as an emergent strategy for shaping individual and societal liberation through shared healing, interdependent future-imagining and future-building. Brown’s imaginative approach to life-learning evinces the value of living in relationally generative, ecological, authentic, and ethical ways that create the conditions for sustaining personal and collective healing, healthy interdependence, and transformation. This is as much about unlearning as learning, about imagining beyond the confines of our individual and collective indoctrination into inorganic and dominating values and belief systems that do not serve us well since we understand that everyone’s wellbeing depends on everyone’s wellbeing.

Brown refers to this as an emergent strategy of radical self-help, society-help, and planet-help in which individual liberation connects in ever-more widening circles of liberation in a diffusion effect—a blossoming of equity and transformation. Brown grows the concept that “The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion” as an invitation to build our own responsive growth strategies and to integrate this into our leadership and organizational functioning as a mission mode. These roadmaps for personal growth, relational healing, and societal transformation, built on the margins of an extractive and exclusionary White America, are necessary. In these dark times, we are blessed by luminaries like [Adrienne Maree Brown](#) and [Kai Cheng Thom](#) who help us see liberated/ing ways of being.

As a leader, encourage and support radical self-care, engage in and model this yourself, and introduce it as part of an organizational culture that invites everyone to take care of themselves. By advancing discussions of self-care during such pervasive suffering and dis-ease, and by engaging in these critical conversations in our own lives, leaders help teachers, staff, and students develop their identity- and COVID-related stress-navigation skills including racial literacy, radical self-care, radical compassion. This in turn enables the development of authentic communication pathways that can be sustaining in these relentlessly trying times. Pedagogies of critical hope, love, and interdependent care (Freire, 1997; hooks, 2003) must be centralized.

Across these growth processes, leaders can learn, model, and teach that, as Holocaust-surviving social psychologist Viktor Frankl wrote (while imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp), that humans can create an internal space of transcendent power even, and perhaps especially, amidst moments of intense suffering, stress, and powerlessness. Frankl (1946) teaches us how to cultivate a safe inner-world within threatening and unsafe external realities, he avers, “*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*”

Leaders can cultivate this space as an inner-resource, an internal space of quiet curiosity they invoke in moments when calm feels inaccessible, when they experience physical and existential threat (Frankl, 1977). Leaders must give themselves and those around them not only permission, but enthusiastic invitation, to engage in learning the skills of humble inquiry—calm, non-judgmental, authentic curiosity towards ourselves and each other. Leaders must critically examine the ways we interpret, make meaning of, react to, and behave; working to notice, and compassionately challenge, our socialized knowledge, embedded cognitive distortions, and implicit biases—to see how they shape our leadership values and approaches. From this, leaders can work with communities to build bridges of capacity together, so that no one is left behind, so that the concepts of left and behind no longer even makes sense.

To build these inner-resources leaders use their *emotional imagination*, discussed in the final section, to cultivate an inner*third space* (Bhabha, 2004)—an intentional, creative, and reflexive space within that enables leaders to practice meta-analytic self-reflection towards deeper self-knowing, internal calm, healing, relational compassion, and the cultivation of a radical growth mindset. Given that leader wellbeing is significantly tested by increased exposure to organizational turbulence, this intentional and creative (rather than habituated) meaning-making space is essential right now. As leaders see unfolding in their own lives in this pandemic—“Due to increased demands on leaders, individual resources become more important for coping with challenges, including health and well-being as sources of resilience” (Holmberg, Larsson, & Bäckström, 2015, p. 155)—sustainable organizational transformation requires increased leader self-care, especially during the trying times of crisis (Hanson, 2018).

In this crisis, in which emotion and need are high and government support and guidance are low, educational leaders must build inner-resources as a central dimension of their leadership strategy. Leaders need crisis learning agility as they take care of their school communities and families, as they continue adjusting to rapidly exploding job responsibilities with no added support, coping with their own and others' stress, grief, and health concerns, resolving conflict, and learning into the moment as they keep moving forward with tenacity. While the world feels unsafe, leaders can model and teach that each person can—within self—create a reliable inner-space in which they can observe their own struggle and evaluate if their stress is a healthy kind that motivates or unhealthy kind that immobilizes (Hanson, 2018). Leaders can build—and help teachers, students, staff, and communities to build—a shared ethic of interdependence, conflict resolution, relational and self-trust and compassion, and self-care.

What's "radical" about radical compassion and radical self-care is their unwavering focus on embodied intersections between equity, identity, individual and social transformation. To discuss self-care without foregrounding social identities as lived dimensions of structural discrimination that significantly stress our bodies and minds undermines efforts for equity, creates false privilege and moral equivalencies that help people in power at all levels abnegate their own responsibility in upholding White supremacy, White entitlement, and gaslighting people of color, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations by acting as if they can herbal tea and face mask their way out of structural conditions that place undue stress, suffering, opportunity costs, and disproportionate disease burden on them individually and as a group.

In the news every day is evidence of how the pre-existing, chronic, systemic racism of the U.S. healthcare system already-in-motion before the pandemic creates a diffusion effect of racialized suffering during COVID-19. Radical self-care can help people feel calm within themselves while the world around them is chaotic. This includes identity and emotion affirmation, structures and processes of psychological support, storytelling, counter-storying, and re-storying processes (Khalifa, 2018; Stevenson, 2014), and cultivating racial mindfulness strategies that help students identify and skillfully manage identity-based stress (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). While radical self-care looks different across people, places, and time, it must include processes that help people identify, name, and compassionately attend to the ways that external, systemic pressures, structures, and constraints—in their presence and absence—shape narratives of everyday life, self, and possibility (Lorde, 1988).

A powerful approach to radical self-care is storytelling and re-storying, a process that can shift normativizing myths and socially constructed scripts that keep people locked into patterns not in the service of their wellbeing (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, for generations the concept of "normal"—a mythology steeped in White male heterosexual upper-class ableism—has been used to exclude, pathologize, and minoritize individuals and groups who "deviate" from a White dominant set of assumptions, values, and frames that undergird all facets of society and schooling (Annamma, et al., 2013). U.S. history cannot be separated from racism, eugenics, and settler colonialism. It is time to do away with deficitizing impositions of "normal" altogether by supplanting reductive and hegemonic language and narratives with complex, layered stories of our own and each other's diversity, uniqueness, multiplicity, and complexity (Annamma, 2017; Rosales Montes, 2019). Leaders must take a stance that ***no one is normal***—jettison this deficit-generating language as a form of radical compassion and radical self-care, choose language and ideas that re-story and re-humanize everyone.

Communal re-storying enables people to identify, reckon with, reframe, and move beyond the harmful myths and societal scripts that shape sense of self, hopes, and life choices (Stevenson, 2014). Re-storying helps people learn to re-view past experiences and conceptualizations of self that no longer serve them well (and perhaps never did). Learning to re-index formative experiences that shape self-narratives in ways that evince how the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970), is a powerful approach to building an authentic sense of self, healthy thinking, and liberating choice-making (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Importantly, re-storying can help people cultivate authentic and liberating stories, to hear their own inner voices that have often, as they learn in talking them out in community, been ignored (even by them) because they were buried underneath internalized social scripts (Stevenson, 2014). Re-storying helps leaders help themselves and each other to build counter-narratives to the grand narratives of deficit that people turn on themselves and each other, and to cultivate inner-voices that are increasingly liberated from harmful social constructions and cognitive distortions that rule people's inner lives and corrode healthy relationships (including with ourselves) if not identified, explored, and addressed. Radical self-care is the process of envisioning and enacting our bespoke-yet-relational paths forward into a healthier, less burdened, and more agentic vision of self in/and the world.

#### Suggested Practices:

- Nourish and affirm yourself daily. Listen to soulful music. Sit in silence. Read things that inspire you, create things that make you happy. Engage with social media accounts that uplift you, for example on Twitter: [@TheNapMinistry](#), [Joél Leon](#), [@KaiChengThom](#), [@ArayaBaker](#), [@OurMHM](#), [@KaitlinCurtice](#), [@BettinaLove](#). On the flipside, be intentional about your social media and news intake. Notice how you feel while engaging with social media; observe spikes in anxiety, anger, comparative angst. Set limits on your availability, create privacy for yourself, and set aside time to be alone with your thoughts without screens as often as possible. Unplugging and unwiring is essential to psychological and emotional wellbeing. Remember that engaging with social media does not necessarily connect us to our authentic selves, nor is it

- necessarily good for us. Be a conscious steward of your time and energy and work to notice what affects your vibration. Notice these inputs, they accumulate in your system quietly and then surface in bursts of stress, exhaustion, and burnout.
- Do reflective writing often when stressed. Create opportunities for others to do as well. Provide opportunities (including online) for people to write about how they're feeling. For example, start meetings/classes with "free-writes"—offer a writing prompt (e.g., "Today I'm feeling..." or "What I'm carrying into this school year is...") and a few minutes for people to write stream-of-consciousness. Each person can opt to share in, even just one sentence, to ground dialogue about how people are doing, including in relation to potentially difficult topics and emotions. Notice body language, eye contact (or lack thereof), general state of engagement. Check for signs of anxiety, withdrawal, loneliness, sadness, fear, anger, confusion. Check in.
  - Engage in humble inquiry. Check in with people by engaging in reassuring outreach including phone calls, emails check-ins, town halls, and sending open-ended questionnaires inviting people to share their pressing questions, needs, ideas, concerns. Follow up and be sure relevant others do as well—this must be systematized for consistency. This can be repeated as often as makes sense without burdening people, and should be intentionally tracked since we don't know how long the crisis will last and support efforts must be coordinated, not ad hoc.
  - A leader committed to radical compassion and self-care understands the need to push against asymmetrical power relations that cause "toxic positivity" (Chiu, 2020)—which is a kind of performative positivity in the face of challenges that, in its entitled deflection of responsibility and negation of relational authenticity, ossifies racial tensions and can even re-traumatize BIPOC teachers, staff, and students because such behavior is in conflict with people's lived experiences of discrimination and microaggressions in organizations. Leaders must cultivate critical understanding—their own and others'—of the imperative for all teaching to be based in, and to contribute to, authentic discussion and exploration of people's lived marginalization broadly and specifically in school communities, teams, and classrooms). When observing this behavior in others, the ethical use of a pedagogy of discomfort can evince less practiced and more authentic responses that can help people surface and process their assumptions and implicit biases, to see how they constrain their ability to genuinely examine and change their own problematic behavior and assumptions.
  - Prioritize radical self-care as vital for sustaining energy and wellness. Have people in the organization write self-care plans to consider what supports they need to face current stressors. This includes identifying inner-resources they wish to cultivate (i.e., wellness practices like meditating, mindfulness), and how these inner-resources relate to a broader self-care plan (i.e., plan for how to integrate healthy mind-body-spirit practices that support them through ongoing heightened stress). These memos, and any kind of reflective writing, can be a start-activity for radical self-care groups. Find ways to integrate self-care ideas into organizational professional development.

### **Responsive & Humanizing Leadership**

"We are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own. To a certain degree, our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defenses." — Adrienne Maree Brown

For leaders to be responsive to their constituencies and engage in humanizing leadership while the world feels so threatening requires leader crisis agility and responsiveness. Creating this crisis milieu is absolutely vital so that schools are in a position to respond to the array of demanding needs of urgent change for students and their families and communities. Leading through such extreme and continuously unfolding change requires a higher-than-the-usual-high tolerance for the unknown. Leaders must demonstrate that they can respond quickly, calmly, and with clarity, to make timely and culturally responsive decisions with a focus on the most vulnerable in the communities they serve. Leaders must be able to function not only the onset but the duration of the crisis at multiple levels (Darkow, 2018)—this is an emergent educational operating environment and leaders are our failsafe.

In this moment of global, institutional, familial, and inter/personal stress, leaders must actively consider how this time lands into each student's life differently in relation to status and finances, whether or not students have family or community supports, and how people have unique coping mechanisms formed from past experiences that may or may not serve them well in the present moment. The realities of COVID-19 and ongoing civil unrest add urgency to the call for *critical intersectional inclusivity* in our schools. As to Pak and Ravitch (2021) offer,

Critical intersectional inclusivity adds additional layers of analysis to enactments of inclusivity in groups and organizations. A critical intersectional analysis interrogates the ways in which traditionally inclusive policies and practices may disenfranchise, exclude, or repress some identities while privileging and advantaging others. A critically inclusive organizational environment or group ethos fosters the democratic participation, acceptance, and belonging of students and adults with a range of identities and continuously redistributes resources and opportunities until non-dominant identities are equally valued and foregrounded as dominant ones. Critical intersectional inclusivity recognizes and works to eliminate individuals' experiences with intersectional forms of marginalization within so-called inclusive organizations and groups.

This means considering representation in your organization and addressing marginalization within and across identity dimensions within an ecosystem of interdependent care for teachers and students. While students must remain everyone's focus and priority, it's vitally important for educational leaders to pay attention to teacher wellbeing in these moments of crisis, to help teachers face challenging pedagogical realities with a sense of structure, agency, and with the needed support for all they are being asked to do. In order to actively engage students during and beyond class time, teachers must quickly become facile in synchronous online teaching and, further, proactively support their students in learning these technologies as well. It is important that leaders work collaboratively with teachers to help them create the conditions for seamless, calm, and highly engaging learning environments for and with students. Leaders must do this in parallel for teachers. And moreover, be intentional about saving focus and energy for teachers to be caring and hopeful when engaging with them. This is vital to their sense of safety, engagement, and to their sense of belonging to a community of interdependent concern, justice, and care (hooks, 2003).

Learning and professional development during COVID-19 must centralize emotional wellbeing, help teachers, students, and communities develop the skills they need to traverse complex systems in chaotic times, build relational trust, and view pedagogical flexibility as an ethical stance, wherein everyone's wisdom and expertise are actively valued, shaking hierarchical norms and becoming more of a learning collective in a time of chaos and shared vulnerability (Hanson, 2018). For the social-emotional health and wellbeing of teachers, staff, students, and communities, leaders must actively engage in responsive and humanizing pedagogy. This translates into a receptive sensibility in relation to their own emotions and stress levels during communication and conflict. This enables leaders to communicate more effectively in fraught moments. For example, when communicating about sudden changes in plans given how overwhelmed and stressed everyone is in schools.

Specifically, leaders need to be aware of how people's situations, as they change throughout the pandemic, influence their ability to engage and collaborate in various ways. This is about flexibility as an ethic of leadership in a time of radical flux, being actively student-centered by working to understand individualized experiences in the context of broader sociopolitical forces and actively supporting students through this time. Now more than ever, students need help navigating the complexities of the world and of their lives. Issues emerge by the day—students are struggling to figure out their feelings about Black Lives Matter, #SayHerName, and #MeToo, the coarseness of social media, youth tend to have less relational outlets than when school was physically in-session. Young people are struggling, against the backdrop of a pandemic that's changed their lives in every way, to make sense of and navigate a social media landscape rife with bullying, misinformation, and stressful information related to their own struggles and fears.

An empathic and responsive teaching approach is essential right now; it's a form of radical compassion and self-care as well as a humanizing education stance. This syllabus statement, developed during the pandemic, is a useful pedagogical guide during this pandemic:

### **A Note on Learning in a Pandemic**

#### **No one signed up for this.**

Not for the sickness, not for the social distancing, not for the sudden end of our collective lives and collaboration together on campus.

Not for an online class, not for teaching remotely, not for learning from home, not for learning new technologies under duress, not for limited access to learning materials.

#### **The humane option is the best option.**

We will prioritize kindness and supporting each other as humans.

We will prioritize simple solutions that make sense for the most.

We will prioritize sharing resources and communicating clearly.

#### **Don't try to do the same thing online.**

Some assignments are no longer possible.

Some expectations are no longer reasonable.

Some objectives are no longer valuable.

#### **Foster intellectual nourishment, social connection, and personal accommodation.**

Accessible asynchronous content for diverse access, time zones, and contexts.

Optional synchronous discussion to learn together and combat isolation.

#### **Remain flexible and adjust to the situation.**

No one knows where this is going and what we'll need to adapt.

Everyone needs support and understanding in this unprecedented moment.

## Suggested Practices:

- Recalibrate the structure, content, and duration of meetings, professional development (PD) sessions, and classes. Discussion of online norms is necessary across contexts. Re-envision communication and process norms to push into power asymmetries and harmful hierarchies. Discuss reciprocity of efforts and supports in terms of equity and identity to set brave space and distributed wisdom norms for group work, meetings, and PD sessions. Teach online pedagogical innovation, confidentiality, inclusivity, and criticality. Share curated resources for equitable teaching approaches on/offline, re-imagine ways to engage people in these times of distance learning.
- Plan *Listening & Discovery Sessions* with different groups (e.g., teachers by grade level, seniors, families of seniors, affinity groups). Engage in active listening and structured perspective-taking processes. Be thoughtful about groupings with respect to issues of hierarchy, power, and confidentiality. Find a thought partner (and an inquiry group) to debrief these sessions and plan forward in ways that affirm people's experiences by responding to their concerns. Consider affinity groups.
- Logical thinking and emotional distress are embodied with an inverse relationship. Triggers activate the brain's adrenal system which governs emotion. This, in turn, eclipses the brain's logical functioning system (limbic system). Try to remember to breathe slowly and deeply (which shifts brain activity when we're anxious), take and give breaks for stretching and breathing to honor physicality in online meetings and classes. Consider beginning meetings and classes with intentional stress-reduction activities like breathing exercises given pervasively high levels of stress. Provide engaging learning structures and calm amidst chaos and conflict. Set and abide by clear start and end times, share clear and responsive agendas and class plans; learn, design, and set breakout rooms and collaborative learning formats ahead of time.
- Centralize student experiences, concerns, desires, and ideas in systematic and representational ways. Keep and make youth voices and experiences focal in conversations about learning challenges, policies, and processes. Brave space norming can help to create the conditions to foreground youth voices in conversations, classes, meetings, and policies in productive ways.
- Consider students, teachers, and staff with learning differences and disabilities proactively. Don't put all of the accommodating on students or staff. Part of this means not requiring students with disabilities or students who need accommodations to go through the disability office or formal request processes: reach out. This is an unnecessary logistical hurdle you can prevent.
- Re-examine evaluation systems, classwork, homework, and assessments. Explore the most responsive ways to achieve equally valuable learning outcomes given current challenges. Re-imagine bespoke evaluation and assessment frameworks that might make sense in this moment. Examine old lesson plans with teachers as an artifact of a pre-pandemic mindset and chart what's shifted and what the implications are for their pedagogy and expectations in this new school year.

## Leader Critical Pedagogy

"The world as it was, is, or will be, is beyond common sense, beyond natural understanding: it must be taught." — Masood Ashraf Raja

Critical pedagogy situates students as agentic knowers who investigate, question, and critique social and educational norms in relation to their own experiences; it is a framework in which students learn to challenge traditional educational practices that reinforce inequitable arrangements of schooling—students viewed as passive recipients of teacher knowledge transmission; it can also locate teachers as transformative intellectuals in systems that often deprofessionalize them (Giroux, 1988). Critical pedagogy positions students as critical citizens who have the will and skill to act as agents of change. Cultivating students' *critical consciousness* is part of a process of building education as an anti-racist practice of freedom (Freire, 1970; 1973; hooks 1994). It helps students work together to create the conditions in which they can cultivate a sense of agency in relation to what many experience right now as helplessness, confusion, and hopelessness.

In a Freirean conceptualization of critical literacy, real-life struggles are texts to read and decode as/in a process of building new, liberating literacies that interrupt and supplant Western hegemonic ones, and that help educators build culturally responsive teaching and schooling (Freire, 1970; 1997; hooks, 1994). The COVID-19 pandemic and movement for racial justice offer wide-ranging opportunities for the construction of new critical literacies—opportunities to re-read, re-write, and re-enact education as an agentic project of freedom-building and to reject oppressive structural constraints sedimented into the education system long before coronavirus. The texts of pandemic life offer wide-ranging opportunities for developing critical literacies that can evince informed action amidst chaos and upset. Reading inequities as texts of liberation means that leaders enact a mindset of critical intersectional inclusivity, a term that speaks to the need for recognizing and eliminating traditional structures, policies, and practices that disenfranchise, exclude, and repress intersectional identities while privileging others, which truly is the goal of critical leadership practice (Pak & Ravitch, 2021).

Education for critical consciousness refers to the development of critical understandings that enable reflection on social and political contradictions as grounding for action to improve life conditions as they are illuminated by emergent learning (Freire, 1973). As it pertains to teaching and leading during COVID-19, this creates openings for cultivating critical understandings of the arrangements and limitations of our own educational experiences and for transforming them as part of educational a movement of disruption and reinvention. This requires that we move into our most flexible and humanizing pedagogies, the pedagogies of critical hope and love (Freire, 1997; hooks, 2003), as we work to minimize opportunity costs by supporting abundance rather than scarcity in learning. This is the heart of critical pedagogy, and it's vital to engage with our students as active meaning and change makers (Love, 2019; Santamafía & Santamafía, 2013).

Leaders can learn a great deal from this crisis by reading it as a living text that offers opportunities to foreground, hybridize, and engage local literacies, values, and ways of being rather than relying on media and government to tell us what we value and need. This is necessary so that all educators stop deferring to a mythological, hegemonic center that reproduces White male dominance and pushes all “others,” along with their values, logics, resources, and needs, to the margins (Love, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As we construct critical literacies for this moment we rebuild education differently, but only if we reject the continued conferral of dominance onto people, structures, and processes that have corroded possibilities for true educational equity from the beginning of the U.S. To do this, leaders need to understand racial literacy within an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 2021). Leaders can't forget for a moment that each person's experience of the pandemic is shaped by pre-existing life conditions. Do not assume your experience is similar to staff or students, or that their experiences are similar to each other. Examining your implicit biases in this is vital.

Storytelling and re-storying are forms of critical pedagogy, intentional approaches to cultivating intra- and inter-personal awareness. Storytelling is powerful for all students, it engages them in inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making—stories are portals into their own interpretive processes and the experiences and perspectives of others. While in some educational circles storytelling is considered new, educators must be aware of the long oral traditions, including storytelling, of many peoples, communities, tribes, and cultures. Storytelling is increasingly centralized in the education of traditionally minoritized communities to center their wisdoms, affirm and contest false narratives of their histories, and ground and foment critical consciousness, civic engagement, and political resistance (Khalifa, 2018). As Brayboy (2005) shares, “many indigenous people have strong oral traditions...stories remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities; they have a place in our communities and in our lives” (p. 439).

In relation to societal narratives of deficit, counter-storytelling serves as an analytical tool for challenging dominant narratives and dominating stories by foregrounding the stories and storytelling of marginalized people and communities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Similarly, testimonios are first-person accounts, a form of narrative inquiry used by Latinx communities to center their knowledges, insights, and histories, to share and affirm collective, group, and individual experiences. Rosales Montes and Peynado Castro (2020) draw on El Ashmawi et al. (2018) as they explain: “Through our *testimonios*, we explore our lived experiences and bear witness to advance our own liberation, build bridges to reclaim and produce a collective account that is told by us and that is centered on our agency to overcome oppressive barriers” (p. 36). Storytelling is a deeply generative approach to learning, providing powerful embodied opportunities to build third spaces (Bhabha, 2004) of identity expression, affirmation, and preservation for all learners. It is particularly powerful when focused on re-storying, counter-storytelling, and counter-narratives in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), LGBTQ, disability, and trauma-informed communities given the powerful need to push back on dehumanizing grand narratives and the harmful policies, programs, and pedagogies they uphold.

Critical pedagogy is necessary for cultivating students' sense of agency and possibility in

relation to what's happening in the world and in their lives (Santamafía & Santamafía, 2013).

One way to approach justice work in schools is Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is an action research process in which leaders, teachers, and/or students work together as applied research teams. A generative approach to critical pedagogy and youth leadership cultivation is YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research), which “is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development based in social justice principles in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them” (YPAR Hub, n.d.). YPAR can help students:

**Redefine** expertise—youth produce knowledge about their own lives.

**Develop** inquiry, evidence, and presentation skills important to being agents of change in their schools and communities.

**Generate** findings to illuminate issues and generate resources for solving those issues.

**Promote** sociopolitical development and psychological empowerment to understand roots of problems facing their communities and build skills and motivation to take action.

**Evaluate** programs, policies, and practices that affect them (adapted, YPAR Hub, n.d.).

YPAR is a transformational experience for youth because it enables critical engagement with local data gathered by those living the realities they seek to understand and transform.

#### Suggested Practices:

- YPAR helps youth learn research, leadership, and organizing skills, collaborative data collection and analysis, and how to make findings actionable to inform school policy, practice, pedagogy, and community conditions. Explore [YPAR Hub](#) and [SPARC: The School Participatory Action Research Collaborative](#) for examples of youth-led school and community-based research. These sites explain YPAR, show what research-based advocacy looks like, show how YPAR helps youth co-create the conditions for their own learning and liberation. These sites feature diverse ways that YPAR engages youth in critical inquiry in/on their lives with focus on the systems (i.e., school, family, government) that shape their lived experiences and share examples of how youth can approach grade-level and school-wide YPAR to support collaboration and civic engagement. Includes examples of online, in-person, and hybrid YPAR models.
- Begin classes, meetings, and professional development sessions with a centering (even if quick) storytelling process. One example is “Flash storytelling,” which is a strategically timed storytelling process that helps groups and teams feel into what’s happening emotionally in relation to changes in the world, in their lives, and at work/school. Empathic listening is a necessary feature of storytelling sessions and can be taught as professional development in and of itself (Ravitch & Carl, 2019) so that people understand the role of radical compassion in groups, teams, and classrooms.
- Help teachers and students make critical connections between curriculum, course topics, and the twin pandemics through inviting students to write and share personal narratives and images in relation to being their experiences during this time in the world. Participatory practices of storytelling and photovoice (which is when a group will take, share, and narrate photo choices around a selected theme as a way to tell specific stories of place-based importance that might otherwise get lost) are generative. Relate stories to public narratives (e.g., blogs, news reports) to illuminate, affirm, and amplify a range of perspectives and experiences.
- Expressive and collaborative projects that are relevant and meaningful to students help create a forum for dialogue around their lived experiences of the twin Media-based projects such as film shorts and multi-media art installations about their experiences are generative and should be lifted up and amplified ongoingly. Identify and amplify critical leadership that happens outside of school including teacher and student activist groups like Black Lives Matter and the #SayHerName Campaign to bridge school with the social project of justice.

### Racial Literacy

“you are a story. do not become a word. one word. because you want to be loved. love does not ask you to be nothing for something.” — Nayyirah Waheed

Racial literacy is the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful encounters and navigate identity-related stress. In Stevenson’s racial mindfulness and socialization framework, “Read” means the ability to decode racial subtexts, subcodes, and scripts, to accurately interpret the meaning-making of actors and actions in racially stressful encounters that arise in relation to written materials, social discourse/media, and social interactions. “Recast” means the ability to reduce stress in racially stressful encounters using racial mindfulness and racial socialization practices which reduce, recast, and reframe racial stress in racially stressful encounters and helps people to build racial self-efficacy and confidence (Stevenson, 2014). This relies on telling, sharing, and taking in people’s stories of race, including our own.

Racial literacy includes reading race through the lens of intersectionality. As Crenshaw (2017) describes it,

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to [some or] all of these things.

Racial literacy requires a critical understanding of intersectionality and structural systems of power and domination. This is important to understand, it relates to how people locate ourselves in conversations about race, identity, and equity. In the United States people tend to understand and discuss race in black and white binary terms, as we see all-too-often in group discussions on identity. Racial literacy requires that leaders understand intersectional identities (i.e., being a Black woman means facing gendered racism, being Asian and transgender means multiple axes of oppression). As Dr. Howard Stevenson shares in racial literacy sessions—“*Everyone* has a powerful and important racial story”—meaning that we are all racialized beings living within a racialized system, we all have racial identities and racialized experiences whether we’ve been socialized to see and understand

this or not. Therefore, and importantly, we all need racial mindfulness and we all configure into racial literacy, racialized stress, and navigating identity-related stress. Leaders must read themselves into racial literacy and push back against identity binaries because they reduce people and are false.

It is absolutely crucial for educational administrators and teachers to stand up for intersectional racial justice, to understand clearly how intersectionality is central to conversations about structural racism, racial identity, and racialized stress. As representatives of a system that imposes racialized and identity-based stress on BIPOC students and communities, all school leaders and practitioners must take an active stand against school and district cultures and policies that engender or allow microaggressions, the imposition of White fragility, the masking of racial bullying and toxic positivity under the guise of safe spaces (Chiu, 2020). These meetings/ classes/ PD sessions, as teachers, staff, and students from marginalized identities in them know, are often White-dominating spaces that create racially stressful encounters for people of color (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Leaders must centralize racial literacy within an equity framework of critical inclusive intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2021; Pak & Ravitch, 2021). The Black Lives Matter movement is not just about racial terror outside the walls of schools, it lives inside of schools and classrooms as the Black@ Movement shows us so clearly.

Understanding where you are on the continuum of racial literacy happens through continued practice of “courageous noticing and admitting” to self (Edwards, 2016)—about your own patterns of tension, conflict, and struggle. Dr. Howard Stevenson’s work on racial literacy and navigating identity-related stress situates racial mindfulness as a central node of school leadership, with focus on the professional development and support of teachers, students, parents, and school communities as a whole right now. It’s useful in these learning moments to remind people that 1) racial stress matters and it is distinct from general stress and therefore requires specific skills; 2) racial encounters matter and must be attended to for healthy resolve; 3) it is vital to approach racial literacy as a practice of racial competence, not as an issue of flawed character; 4) organizational contexts broadly, and educational contexts specifically, are socialization hubs of avoidant and dysfunctional racial coping; and 5) people can resolve racial stress in everyday life which leads to better learning experiences, life experiences, and health outcomes (Stevenson, 2014).

Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal and Socialization Theory (RECAST), is an approach to developing racial literacy and learning to navigate racialized and identity-based stress through the intra- and inter-personal process of recasting imposed stories or versions of self. RECAST is a framework for understanding how people “anticipate, process, and respond when confronted by racially stressful encounters” (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019, p. 66). The resolve part means navigating racially stressful encounters toward healthy conclusion through communicating affection, protection, correction, and connection during racially stressful encounters, which requires preparation and practice. Through identifying and naming racially stressful situations and creating curious and compassionate awareness of our affective and cognitive responses in these moments, we can re-story ourselves in ways that are more agentic that make room for healthier experiences. Storytelling is a powerful practice for recasting and resolving racially stressful and traumatizing experiences in groups since it allows for neural coupling and empathy which leads to deeper understanding and authentic connection (Stevenson, 2014).

Being a racially literate leader means creating the conditions in which everyone in the organization practices racial literacy and mindfulness so that they can experience interaction through an active racial empowerment framework (Stevenson, 2014). This enables people—in this case teachers, staff, students, and families—to cultivate identity-focused tools and coping strategies that they can immediately employ when stressed or tense during conversations about identity and equity or in racialized communication. A racially literate leader understands there are always varying (and conflicting) levels of racial literacy and identity-related self-awareness as well as tolerance for tension and disagreement within groups and organizations (Stevenson, 2014). Leaders need new skills to read a room (or screen) to gain a sense of where people are in their racial identity development and with respect to their identity-based coping skills. Leaders must be able to feel into people’s discomfort, frustration, and seek out feedback on how to best respond to what’s shared and presented with a clear and steadfast vision of equity.

There’s no panacea for engaging racialized and identity-based stress—your own and others’—that emerges during conversations about race, identity, and justice. However, building your reflective capacity and skills in this area through creating your own individualized education plan for racial literacy is the first step. Once you’ve taken up this work as an ethic of your leadership, design and steward generative discussions in ways that contribute to 1) a more authentically engaged milieu, 2) less cognitive dissonance and increased capacity to cultivate and maintain equitable systems, norms, and processes, 3) a sense of community, compassion, connection, and belonging, and 4) the prevention and de-escalation of tensions and disagreements. Cultivating your own racial literacy is necessary in order to support staff and students to do the same. Racial literacy helps leaders build and sustain a learning culture ready to deeply examine issues of inequity, social identity, racial literacy, and identity-based stress and that can do so critically, supportively, and productively (Stevenson, 2014).

Developing racial literacy and racial mindfulness through storytelling is “a means of learning, confirming reality, preserving community, and conveying knowledge” (Khalifa, 2018) that allows educators to “ease into self-reflection and become self-critical

without public scrutiny” (Stevenson, 2014). In this crisis, wherein social identity directly shapes people’s lives broadly and their everyday pandemic experiences, racial storytelling is an important, powerful, vital tool for building understanding of identity-based stress and trauma; it helps leaders co-create the conditions for teachers, students, staff, and community members to engage in healing conversations about what’s happening in their lives in relation to the pandemic and current racial strife. Storytelling helps people feel into each other’s racialized experiences and share resources, challenges, and ideas; it helps people feel connected and valued, and over time, to understand the impacts of social, cultural, and political forces on individual and collective experiences. Further, it shows the generative value of equitable and authentic dialogue about racial inequality in schools (Melanated Educators Collective & the Racial Justice Organizing Committee, 2020).

For transformative leaders whose pre-existing experiences and racial literacy have been confirmed in these times, racial mindfulness is vital to ground yourselves in healthy rather than unhealthy stress that may lead to burnout. In this self-reflexive context, racial literacy is not just the ability to decode racial subtexts and understand how racism is inextricably linked to inequities in the United States. For BIPOC leaders, this requires recasting and resolving a relentless barrage of racially stressful encounters and microaggressions. For White leaders, it means being mindful and humble in interactions with students, staff, and families of color, and in racially stressful moments, seeing, taking responsibility for, and stopping our own and other people’s White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). For all leaders it means examining where and how your own privileges (i.e., race, social class, gender, ability, language, citizen status) leave you missing or misunderstanding others’ experience of marginalization and struggle in ways that hurt them, including opportunity-costing them out of being seen, engaged, and affirmed.

#### Suggested Practices:

- Stevenson’s (2014) CLCBE Racial Stress and Mindfulness and Management Model—**Calculate, Locate, Communicate, Breathe & Exhale** Calculate it (on a scale of 1-10, how stressful was the racially stressful encounter? Did it shift, spike?) **Locate** it (Find in your body where you feel the stress, be detailed.), **Communicate** it (Tell yourself, “I’m feeling stressed at the level of 9 and I feel it in my left leg which is twitching.” Tell a trusted peer or disclose within the dynamics of your work), **Breathe & Exhale**—is a powerful approach to individual and group processing of racialized and identity-based stress. For yourself, and then with staff and students, develop new routines and rituals that help build a positive relationship with thoughts and feelings about race and equity. And further, to foster understanding of the mind-body connection in racialized stress by seeing firsthand how emotions speak through our bodies. Engage in racial literacy strategies such as storytelling, journaling, debating, role-playing. Stevenson’s racial mindfulness approach is a game-changer, for more, Racial Empowerment Collaborative.
- Develop your racial literacy and identity-related stress navigation skills through engaging in CLCBE practices of self-reflection and dialogic engagement with focused questions relating to a recent racially stressful encounter and then teach others in the organization how to do this: *What did I notice about myself in the moment? How stressed did I feel and where/how did it affect my body? What did I hold back during the racially stressful encounter out of fear? If I had a do-over, what would I say or do differently to read, recast, and resolve the encounter? Do I have healthy racial comeback lines? What could those sounds like? Can I practice them with a trust person? Am I prepared for the next face-to-face racial encounter and how can I be?* Building the confidence and skills for future encounters is a necessary part of building racial mindfulness as individuals and in groups and school communities (Stevenson, 2014).
- Model and facilitate racial literacy and racial mindfulness. Attune yourself to the norm that people of color are often expected to do emotional labor for White people, to the ways that White fragility is imposed on staff and students (and faculty and leaders) of color, and ways that microaggressions happen without being named. Speak—and think—in terms of people’s complex lived experiences in and beyond the organization. Racial literacy requires and promotes critical intersectional inclusivity (Pak & Ravitch, 2021). For example, understand that the Black Lives Matter movement may feel marginalizing to some LGBTQ students so ensure there are spaces in which they can feel seen and affirmed (Reid, 2020). Relatedly, work on non-binary gender language and the language you use to refer to all minoritized populations. To model a radical growth mindset, invite staff and students to offer observations and suggestions to you relative to specific topics.
- Introduce and create opportunities for identity-based storytelling to help individuals and groups work on resolving racialized and identity-related stress and conflict. Reflect together on these storytelling processes to see what they help individuals and the group develop in terms of self-awareness, skills for comfort ambiguity and managing discomfort, racial mindfulness, perspective-taking, and empathy.
- Read and share works on differences between individual, organizational, and structural racism such as 11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism and Structural Racism and COVID-19: The Political Divide, Re-Opening the Society and Health Impacts on People of Color.

#### Brave Space Leadership

“If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed.” — Paulo Freire

Staff and students' learning experiences and wellbeing are always a leader's responsibility, but that responsibility has gotten exponentially wider and deeper since March 2020. It's vital that leaders 1) approach staff and students' (and your own) emotional wellbeing as central to learning; 2) help staff, students, and families traverse inequitable and complex systems and stressful relational moments within those systems; 3) work to build relational trust with and between students, staff, and leaders; and 4) view pedagogical flexibility as an ethical stance, wherein everyone's insights are actively called into play in a time of chaos and collective vulnerability (Melanated Educators Collective & the Racial Justice Organizing Committee, 2020). This vulnerability, if harnessed collectively with clarity and vision, can help move individuals and groups into their most resonant, uplifting, and humanizing pedagogies—the pedagogies of hope and love (Freire, 1997; hooks, 2003)—which is needed now more than ever.

Brave spaces refer to a set of communication and process norms that invite, create, and uphold the conditions for authentic, equitable, and critical dialogic engagement in groups, teams, classrooms, and organizations (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Brave spaces are a direct contrast to so-called “safe spaces,” which serve to uphold White male middle class heterosexual norms of communication. The cultivation of brave spaces requires leader and group bravery as well as ongoing leader modelling and engagement so that people feel comfortable enough to discuss educational, social, and group dynamic issues in ways that go deeper than what is typically discussed given identity-privilege-based norms that tend to marginalize people of color and undermine equality in groups (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Leaders must develop competencies and norms for enacting asset-based pedagogies and rejecting deficit-based ones in order to foster the conditions for authentic brave spaces rather than false “safe” spaces. Importantly, the promise of safe spaces sets up expectations that can ultimately create unsafe realities that are harmful and even re-traumatizing, particularly with respect to racialized trauma for people of color (Baker, 2020). As Colón (2016) avers “There is no space in the real world where harm can be prevented 100 percent of the time, and while we can collectively struggle for physical and emotional safety, the revolution lives in handling conflicts, even and perhaps especially violent conflicts, lovingly and bravely.” Brave spaces take a radical growth mindset to the relational realm vis-à-vis understanding individual roles in group communication norms.

Importantly, the very act of inviting the concept of a brave space as a departure from current practices that do not support BIPOC students, teachers, and communities, can mark the beginning of new group dynamics and accountability in organizations and classrooms because it acknowledges what anyone who is marginalized in the room already knows: those with social and institutional power (or proximity to that power) get to decide and reinforce what constitutes appropriate communication (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Leaders must ensure that brave space processes are brought to fruition in direct relation to the practices of racial literacy and racial mindfulness and that they are enacted with fidelity to anti-racism and critical intersectional inclusivity (Pak & Ravitch, 2021).

## Characteristics of Safe and Brave Spaces

Safe Spaces	Brave Spaces
Prioritize notions of politeness of some	Prioritize honesty and authenticity for all
Place primacy on a socially and positionally constructed idea of comfort when discussing difficult issues, comes with invisible rules	Acknowledge discomfort is inevitable in discussing difficult issues and invite it into the space as a constructive process/experience
Can lead to defensiveness, lack of authenticity and reflexivity, and deflection	Value risk taking, vulnerability, learning and being challenged to reflect
Narrowly define safety, usually stemming from a dominant White male middle class ableist perspective that is imposed as a normative backdrop	Contend that safety means different things to different people/groups and attend to the ways individuals see/experience it in order to reach group understanding and norms

Tend not to prepare participants for engaging in difficult conversations, reinforce “taboo topics” and marginalization of POC. Prepare groups for difficult conversations, develop understandings of critical dialogic engagement as professional development

(Adapted from Arao & Clemens, 2013)

Engaging in intentional processes of developing brave space norms is critically important, a single conversation does not create brave space accountability. In addition to specific norms, some groups develop a community or group covenant, such as this example of a Brave Space Agreement from the #LetUsBreathe Collective:

**By entering this space**

I agree to love myself and others.

I agree to be accountable for what I do and say.

I agree to struggle against racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, misogyny, shame, and other harmful systems.

I agree to handle conflict with love and respect, and without calling the police.

I agree that my gifts bring value to this space and I receive the gifts the space offers me.

(Colón, 2016).

Teachers can facilitate the development of brave space norms in classrooms, which can be developed within teams, groups, and classrooms. It is important that brave space norms be developed through a collaborative face-to-face (even if virtual) group process. For example, the Anti-Defamation League (2020) offers these norms for moving from a safe to brave classroom.

1. Be open to different and multiple viewpoints and perspectives, especially those that differ from yours.
2. If people share experiences and feelings that are different or unfamiliar to you, show respect by taking it seriously and understand the impact of your response.
3. Explore, recognize and acknowledge your privilege.
4. Even if you are uncomfortable or unsure, contribute and take risks.
5. Make space by sharing speaking time; try to speak after others who have not spoken.
6. Listen actively, even and especially when people say things that are difficult to hear.
7. View the candor of others as a gift.
8. Find ways to challenge others with respect and care and be open to challenging your own points of view.
9. Work hard not to be defensive when people challenge what you say or the impact of your words.
10. Commit to confidentiality and not disclosing what people say; at the same time, take responsibility for sharing important messages and themes outside the group/class. One way to think about this is: “stories stay, lessons leave.” (ADL, 2020).

Developing brave space norms that foreground collective accountability, authenticity, radical compassion, and radical self-care moves teams, classrooms, and schools forward.

**Suggested Practices:**

- Introduce Arao and Clemens’s (2013) “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice.” Develop critically inclusive and affirming brave space norms. Facilitate brave space norm-setting, understanding that changing communication norms in groups requires practicing your own racial literacy and identity-based stress-navigation skills both when times are easy and difficult.
- Take a brave space leadership stance. Announce your rejection of the inauthentic language and problematic false construct of safe spaces. Share that and how re-norming requires seeing, naming, and examining problematic and hurtful norms in groups. Focus on norms that protect BIPOC students and teachers and name White fragility and White entitlements to people of color’s emotional labor. Do and model “unpaid emotional labor check scans” and pay attention to patterns—make changes!
- As part of brave space norming, create a formal process for addressing inequities and microaggressions—including new kinds of microaggressions that stem from COVID-related assumptions—as they arise during meetings, PDs, community town halls, classes. Help people understand this concept in ways that connect it to their own behavior without promoting defensiveness (e.g., free-writes in a group that are kept private but elicit feelings about racialized stress that can then be worked through in scaffolded ways).
- Foster dialogic engagement and authentic collaboration by promoting opportunities for structured collaboration (on and offline) on equity and power, positioning this as central to learning (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). One example is to have people write an “Educator Identity Memo” to consider the role and possible impacts of identity/ies and positionality/ies on

pedagogy in pandemic/s. This kind of intentional reflexivity is vital to ethical practice. Memos are a useful tool for sense-making and thought development; they offer a way to examine and clarify thoughts with intention. Memos may include observations and reflections, commentary on things read, questions about praxis in/and the world right now, emergent relational issues and ethical dilemmas, critical events during this time, and/or documentation of how practice is changing in this moment.

### **Radical Growth Mindset and Distributed Wisdom Approach**

“I think it is healing behavior, to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it.” — Adrienne Maree Brown

A leader’s learning agility in crisis mediates the impact of the crisis on everyone in the organization, both during and after a crisis ends. Leaders need tools and frames to achieve balance between the professional, psychological, and emotional dimensions of their work throughout this crisis. This can be difficult in any crisis, it’s especially challenging to keep balance in a global pandemic with virulent racial inequalities and tensions. If emotions aren’t attended to with intention and skill, the current flux leaders are facing can create imbalances that tip the emotional scale (which is understandable, but avoidable). As discussed in the section on Radical Compassion and Radical Self-Care, leaders need inner-resources they can rely on as they enact consistently effective, relational, compassionate crisis leadership. Attending to leader psychology and emotions is the piece that brings together the flux leadership approach. This is because leaders are the primary instrument of change. As James and Wooten (2011) aver,

We refer to the capability to lead under extreme pressure as crisis leadership. Crisis leadership matters, because despite the damage that is caused by a crisis, effective leadership is the one factor that creates the potential for [an organization] to be better off following the crisis than it was before....Crisis leadership is a continuous process that involves developing a mindset for reflecting, adapting and learning from the crisis situation and its aftermath. This requires the ability to strategically scan the environment for knowledge....In a crisis situation, the individual leader’s learning should happen in tandem with the organization’s learning (p. 61)

Flux leadership supports leader learning agility in and beyond crisis—a leader’s ability to actively learn, grow, and build new skills through periods of radical flux. A leader agile in crisis engages a radical growth mindset wherein “failures” and “mistakes”—their own and those of their teams, stakeholders, and constituencies—are re/positioned as portals for focused growth, powerful learning, and transformation. Importantly, learning agility is not an intensive academic pursuit; it’s a set of inner-resources and inner-management skills that leaders can experientially cultivate (i.e., build on the job) through practice. Flux leadership is a mindset and corresponding set of practices that help leaders seek out, develop, utilize, and enact new knowledge and strategies for rapidly emerging problems as they position schools as complex adaptive systems of care. This mindset translates into learning agility—as leaders learn from unfamiliar, challenging, and even threatening experiences they apply emergent lessons in real-time.

An agile crisis leader effectively reads and responds in crisis while moving the organization towards a shared vision beyond it. Transformative leaders engage people through crisis in ways that elevate everyone, and, further, that create a collective sense of responsibility for the future. By creating a resonant vision of the future and investing yourself and others in working towards it amidst the tyranny of the urgent, leaders inspire and hold up the people around them, which has a significant impact on organizational ethos in and beyond crisis (Hanson, 2018). Further, a leader’s ability to read self and emotion in crisis as a reflexive mission mode supports being their most relational, creative, focused, and resilient. This requires leader awareness of the role of emotions in professional life and the skill to foreground this awareness regularly, especially in stressful moments—their own, ones they observe, ones they mediate. Crisis leaders engage their own emotions with compassion as part of their own radical self-care and to lead an organizational culture of relational trust, compassion, and wellbeing. This also translates into a leader’s ability to resist feeling compelled by pressure to accommodate a person, political body, or external idea that’s not in the best interest of their school community; they trust they can manage any blowback or strong emotions that arise from living their values as leaders.

Flux leadership foregrounds the stance that thriving is necessarily interdependent, it supports leaders in developing racial mindfulness and navigating their inner and relational worlds. It helps leaders to embody Indira Gandhi’s credo “You must learn to be still in the midst of activity and to be vibrantly alive in repose.” This stance helps leaders to take (and position) a distributed wisdom approach as the most generative path to individual, organizational, communal, and national healing, to collective growth and transformation. Flux leadership helps leaders:

- Develop self-reflection skills in/for their own practice and the practice of those they lead;
- Cultivate a receptive sensibility to many kinds of knowledge, expertise, and wisdom;
- Sustain and inspire motivation to continuously learn and grow through challenge;
- Embed authentic organizational feedback loops for humanizing change not accolades;
- Build critical understanding of intersectional identities in organizational experience;
- Navigate racialized and identity-related stress with humility, help everyone in the organization learn this by providing structures and supports;
- Foster an organizational culture of affirmed vulnerability, radical growth mindset, and distributed wisdom.

A flux leadership approach supports educational leaders as they level up their organizations in foregrounding shared vulnerability, disruptive innovation, and challenging assumed knowledge hierarchies, mindsets, policies, and practices.

Having a growth (rather than fixed) mindset is foundational to flux leadership. In a growth mindset, “the hand you’re dealt is just the starting point for development. Growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (Dweck, n.d.). However, given the generalized popularity of growth mindset leaders tend to forget that even if they like the idea of growth mindset “[I]t’s still not easy to attain a growth mindset. One reason why is we all have our own fixed-mindset triggers. When we face challenges, receive criticism, or fare poorly compared with others, we can easily fall into insecurity or defensiveness, a response that inhibits growth.” (Dweck, 2016). Addressing these fixed-mindset triggers, as suggested in the practice below, is vital to crisis leadership because they can derail even the best laid leader plans.

### **SEE & the Emotional Imagination: An Inner-Resource Cultivation Practice**

“We live inside an unfinished story.” Rachel Held Evans

To be effective, ethical, and accountable, leaders need to be aware of what affects us emotionally. Understanding the ways that cognitive and overall neural functioning mediate emotions and interpersonal and organizational communication is essential to effectively navigating racialized and identity-related stress and supporting others to do the same. Cognitive neuroscience helps us understand the continuum of physiological responses to daily emotional experience, including the science behind the popularized yet oft-misused and confused term *triggered*. A trigger is a moment or event that prompts strong feelings in sudden ways that can feel out of or beyond our control in the moment; one feels besieged by emotion, often unable to react in ways more befitting to our ideas in our calmer moments.

Understanding how to navigate moments of intense emotion—for self and as an expected part of organizational life—is a vital leadership skill. It is even more urgent right now as people return to school exhausted and with fraught emotions given everything happening to and around them in the twin pandemics we are all living and worrying through. Importantly, and this one really takes time to notice, process, and live into—our triggered reactions involve *projection*—we see unconscious aspects of ourselves in other people but we believe the emotion we feel is entirely about them and their actions, not at all about us. Our reaction to projections is somatic—we feel it physically even though it lays outside of our conscious awareness. Seeing and feeling into our projections takes practice. Learning to identify these processes within yourself is life-changing.

Moments that trigger us are significant and useful. Trigger moments (really, it is the unresolved pain underneath the moments) relate to when early needs—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—remain unresolved from our past and therefore surface in the present (Richo, 2019). These moments of departure from our more practiced ways of being are our most powerful teachers when we position them as such. Disturbing trigger moments are a portal to new self-awareness, resolve of hurt and healing, and intra-psychoic and relational honesty when engaged with a radical growth mindset. Leaders support this through the practice of consciously reflecting on, and inviting dialogic engagement in relation to, our most intense emotional responses. This work is a central leadership cultivation practice since it leads to increased capacity for leader presence and responsiveness (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). It’s useful for leaders to know that there are shared trigger archetypes, which include: 1) feeling self-conscious, 2) feeling discounted, 3) feeling controlled, 4) feeling taken advantage of, 5) feeling vulnerable, 6) relationship experiences, 7) boundary concerns, 8) feeling uncomfortable about what’s happening, 9) fearing what might happen (Richo, 2019). Understanding that these span personality types and social identities can help leaders identify them in problematic interactions.

Importantly, through practice leaders can slow down our knee-jerk emotional reactions so that events that were once emotionally laden no longer automatically lead to overpowering reactions; rather, we meet them with a reflective pause, and then an intentional response of space building (rather than an automatic reaction). When we create an inner-space between a stimulus and our response to that stimulus (ala Viktor Frankl) and use the space to identify our beliefs about, and explore the meaning of, the original experience, we can begin to give the original hurt our compassionate attention, to affirm and heal the feelings we felt as younger versions of ourselves so that they are resolved and unproblematic when new stressors present. When we do this, we see changes in our once-troubling and confusing behaviors (common ones are observing a felt need to “retaliate” by saying

something hurtful when feeling ego-injured or realizing that intense anger is eclipsing a more useful—though perhaps more uncomfortable—emotion such as sadness or grief, which we must allow ourselves to feel in order to resolve intense emotional experiences and the thought and behavior patterns that ensue/d from them).

We activate our inner-resources in response to upsetting stimuli, and in doing so we quiet the emotional part of our brain (the adrenal system) and can access the calm reasoning part of our brain (the limbic system) (Richo, 2019). By engaging this process through a radical growth mindset, we develop trust in ourselves—faith in our ability to build and access inner-resources to respond intentionally and with calm no matter the stimulus. Over time, we become so practiced at creating this inner-space that it becomes automatic, even in times of acute stress. This helps us cultivate the inner-resources we need to fully live into a radical growth mindset. Leaders no longer fear what intense or upsetting moments will surface in our leadership, we welcome the learning even with its pains and discomforts, because we understand it is a portal to our necessary healing and growth. This is crisis leadership at its best—building in the here-and-now and towards the future with equal parts tenacity, humility, awareness, and insight.

As we grow up, our socialization—at home and school—conditions us to believe in storied versions of ourselves, each other, and the way the world works. It's vital to engage our creative minds in unlearning the damaging parts of these storied versions of us in pursuit of our own healing and growth as leaders. In this pandemic moment, I offer the concept of the *emotional imagination*—the meeting place of the cognitive, creative, and reflexive dimensions of the human psyche. Imagination as a cognitive process invokes psychological imagery; it involves how people conceptualize, take in, create, and envision reality and possibilities. Emotional imagination shapes how people feel, visualize, make meaning of, and understand ourselves *and* the world and ourselves *in* the world—through a nexus of emotions and experiences that shape our thinking, often without notice or conscious processing.

When we harness our *emotional imagination*, we create inner spaciousness for conscious examination and revision of parts of self that remain folded in<sup>[1]</sup> and unseen even to us. Doing this with intention helps us to grow past behavioral and communication patterns that no longer serve us and those we care about and serve well (and perhaps never did). As children, we were not old enough to be agentic in naming our experiences or laying down our own narratives of those experiences and of ourselves—these were events that happened to and around us, ways we were subjectively interpreted and narrated, and stories of who we are told to us by the adults around us as truth. We had little control over what happened to us and even in how we interpreted what happened to us. Now, as adults, we can re-engage our emotional imagination as a portal into our most agentic selves, our most liberating re-storying of self, our healing, which opens up transformational possibilities within, without, and beyond.

Emotional imagination is a vital growth concept. Emotions shape thought patterns and vice versa—they are mutually reinforcing aspects of consciousness, memory, cognitive functioning, and learning. This is particularly salient to building a sense of agency, which leaders do through unlearning and relearning (i.e., changing and building) our storied selves and the limiting thought patterns, internal dialogues, beliefs, and cognitive distortions that these impositions-as-stories-of-self generate and reinforce in thought and behavior over time. The concept of our emotional imagination helps leaders creatively engage in conceptualizing how our experiences were indexed as they were transformed into memory, how our thought patterns shape/d our meaning-making and self-understanding, and how these childhood influences continue to shape our stories of ourselves as leaders (consciously and not). It can help us to imagine beyond the confines of our own indoctrination, to imagine education forward without the shackles of revisionist history, settler colonialism, and White supremacy.

Cultivating awareness of physiological responses to specific stressors, including triggers, builds reflexive capacity, and, over time, healthy self-management skills. We don't tend to accurately read how our own experiences, emotions, and identities play out, how our behaviors, assumptions, biases, and unexamined beliefs stem from unconscious beliefs about ourselves, relationships, and the world. For leaders, understanding our implicit biases, tacit hierarchies, and projective assumptions beyond how we feel things in the moment, has both performance and ethical implications (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Through uncovering our patterns of conflict, self-doubt, and communicative tension, leaders become more intentional, relational, responsive, and transformational. Learning to re-index experiences and re-story self is a powerful tool for more intentional choice-making, for liberation from harmful social constructions and cognitive distortions that corrode healthy communication with self and with others if not identified, explored, challenged, and thoughtfully attended to without defensiveness or performativity. This is a leadership practice to cultivate and share, it is leadership as a practice of liberation.

Leaders experience liberation when we actively engage our emotional imaginations in constructively critical un-learning processes in which we re-view and revise formative life experiences and the beliefs, cognitive distortions, biases, internalized hierarchies, mindsets, and patterns of behavior they shape. It is of tremendous benefit for leaders to learn how to notice, listen to, be curious about (rather than judgmental of), and work through the parts of our self-talk, interpretive schemas, and choices that no longer serve us well because they're byproducts of old storied versions of us. Leaders can rewrite these constraining narratives to build a more spacious consciousness, cultivate a more deeply critical and receptive sensibility that enables us to stand more firmly in our authentic strength, with increased clarity and compassion towards self and everyone around us than we

otherwise could. This ultimately helps leaders uplift and liberate everyone as a mission mode, as a part of creating new healthy learning processes.

This work of cultivating leader presence helps leaders develop liberating learning and inquiry processes. When leaders understand ourselves better, we are more skilled at identifying and attending to the ways that social identities play out in group dynamics and organizational norms, processes, and structures—for and beyond ourselves. This includes imposter syndrome and how it surfaces in groups, the imposition of White fragility and entitled expectations of emotional labor from people of color, and the ways intersectionality plays out in group dynamics given that people have multiple, intersecting social identities.

Through active reflection and dialogic engagement leaders can learn to see the degree to which we inadvertently project our own versions of the world outward and onto the people around us (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Clearing this very old but familiar noise in one's head enables a leader to be more present, and therefore to more accurately interpret, and make decisions about, situations at hand. It's powerful for leaders to come into a clearer understanding of the social constructions, thought patterns and paradigms, and socialization processes that shape how we view ourselves and our leadership. Key here is to learn to more critically interpret what was messaged, implicitly and explicitly, as we were schooled and how these experiences and other people's perspectives of us shape our decision-making and relational style (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This is vital to a leader's ability to build racial literacy and engage in radical compassion and self-care as a part of crisis leadership.

Flux leaders cultivate a critical understanding of how emotions shape thoughts, including as fodder for the formation of limiting thoughts and cognitive distortions that, when identified and challenged, can be consciously reckoned with and processed to resolution. These limiting thoughts, as false beliefs that cause leader, relational, and organizational misattunement, can be reshaped to create more liberating possibilities (personal and organizational reattunement). Leaders can intentionally name and explicitly learn to identify and explore the emotional register of specific experiences through conscious storytelling and re-storying; they can do this reflexively through dialogic engagement—a process for intentional thought partnership, critical dialogue and support that invites relational and perspectival deepening of critical learning and contextualized self-reflection (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Once leaders engage this practice fully and see its powerful impact on our state of mind and the quality of our communication and decision-making, it becomes internalized as a leader mindset.

A radical growth mindset enables leaders to challenge past experiences, storied selves, and false beliefs (e.g., “Dissent is disrespect” or “I don't cry” or “Needing help shows weakness”) formed through messaging and life experience, often through the veil of transference and projection, which is implanted in the human psyche as fact and filter during our developmental years when we have little say in how meaning and memory are laid down. Leaders can then begin to see our own cognitive distortions and thought patterns as well as those of the people around us—people's filters are reused over the course of our lives through continued unconscious projection and transference; this continues ad infinitum unless interrupted and engaged with through a process of conscious reckoning and *undoctrination*. Leaders must undoctrinate ourselves—attend to our own deflections, misunderstandings, cognitive distortions, and unexamined-yet-enacted biases as real-time openings to see ourselves more clearly, to understand where we still have work to do to heal, grow, and to move beyond our indoctrinated beliefs of self, people, and world. Decentralizing (and doing away with) logics that harm is the heart of a flux leadership.

Clinical psychologist David Richo, whose (2019) book *Triggers: How We Can Stop Reacting and Start Healing*, is a leader must-read, offers what I think of as a portable process acronym—SEE: **S**hadow, **E**go, **E**arly Life—as a way to understand the psychological processes and emotional reactions that lead to us being triggered. Leaders can learn to use SEE as an entry point into mindful leadership stress management. In that spirit, here's my distillation of Richo's SEE model:

**Shadow:** Characteristics, desires, proclivities, impulses, and attitudes that we have repressed, disavowed, or denied because they were deemed problematic or threatening are considered our *shadow side*. We don't want to acknowledge or admit to these traits and feelings so they tend to remain hidden from our conscious awareness. When we observe these traits in others, we often react with criticism or anger towards them. Shadowing keeps this away from conscious thought and so these traits remain out of reach for identification, working through, and resolve. Our reaction to a triggering event points to something we haven't yet admitted to or seen in ourselves, something we need to integrate into our self-understanding. Our shadow side creates our lens of projection so we see others as we project them to be.

**Ego:** The ego is inflated when we see ourselves as better than or above others, believe we deserve more or are entitled to better than other people. When we feel disrespected or knocked down a peg or two, this can trigger feelings of indignation or anger in us. Behind these emotions is a fear of being found to be less than who we think we are, of losing our entitlement to honor, recognition, inclusion, or status. Our reaction of indignation or anger shows us the growth work we can do—which is to build a healthy ego by letting go of our inflated ego and toxic entitlements, by understanding that ego steers us away from our most loving and relational parts. Once we break the bondage of self-importance, we open ourselves up to feel deeper humility, self-awareness, compassion, and connection with others.

The ego is the lens of entitlement; we see each other in accord with what we expect or demand of each other.

**Early Life:** Distressing or traumatic early life experiences condition our psychological terrain as adults. Triggers tap into deep unresolved feelings from experiences with our parents or early caregivers, times when we were not attended to, accepted, or affirmed, when our emotional needs weren't acknowledged or appreciated. Many of us, as children, storied ourselves negatively to avoid seeing that those who were supposed to affirm and protect us didn't. These early experiences can create a well of pain that, if tapped into, splashes up into the present. This is because we transfer the feelings and expectations that apply to people in our past onto people in our present unknowingly—it is confusing because it feels like it's actually them in real time. Early life becomes the lens of transference—we unknowingly put old faces onto people in our current life story instead of healing those old wounds so that we can be present.

*SEE* is a key we can use to unlock doors to our own growth and healing. As leaders, we build a sense of personal agency and self-trust when we identify our triggers and position them as a multi-entranced gateway into the conscious work of resolving our unresolved emotions through identifying the hold they have on our thinking, choices, and behavior as leaders. As leaders in this pandemic we must address these underlying issues rather than kicking the issue-can down the road. This is an example of a radical growth mindset—cultivating self-knowledge through leveraging conscious struggles within. Triggers help us by announcing and surfacing that which is hidden and unresolved so that we can work through it (Richo, 2019).

There are many strategies for engaging this kind of reflexive growth practice including naming and speaking to triggers directly (i.e., “name it to tame it”) through journaling while triggered, which can help uncover and chart sources of our strongest emotions, working on our triggers in therapy, seeking out dialogic engagement, engaging in self-care and peer-mentoring groups. This kind of growth is exponentializing when we commit to this as a daily practice. Facing difficult feelings through engaging our emotional imagination with curious and compassionate attention to our negative self-talk and judgment of others is vital to cultivating a daily sense of inner-calm and self-trust, to imagining ourselves in healthier, more authentic, generous, and agentic ways as an outgrowth of uncovering and working directly with our feelings as a generative use of our emotional imaginations.<sup>[2]</sup> And then for helping those around us to learn to do this for themselves in ways that work for them.

While much of this is internal work, dialogic engagement is necessary to unpack our own partial and sometimes distorted interpretations of things since like the fish in water, we do not recognize our own beliefs as subjective and we often cannot see how pervasive they are in our thinking. As American education icon Mr. Rogers offered us many years ago, “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.” This is an important component of self-growth, which involves identifying, naming, sharing our distress so that our struggles others can attune to us and help us to see differently from other viewpoints and socialization experiences other than our own.

Painful emotions are living large in our subconscious—and we let them stay rent free to our own detriment. These emotions surface in our conscious mind when we have a triggered response to a new experience that reverberates old difficult feelings (i.e., being helpless, feeling invisible or unheard). We feel distress—and possibly confusion—in the moment when our reaction is disproportionate to an event (which is a good indication that it’s a trigger moment). We ideally approach these moments as gifts of transcendent possibility. Without the conscious intrusion of painful feelings, they remain dissonant—estranged parts of us stuck in the realm of assumptions, implicit biases, and tacit beliefs that shape how we view, interpret, and experience the world and how we view and treat everyone around us. The powerful growth work is to make the subconscious ever-more conscious in the moment of strong emergent feelings so that we can use them as tools—barometer, compass, failsafe cooling system, chisel—to change our relationship to our own and others’ emotions and build our own bespoke approaches to stress management. This means learning to show up for ourselves, learning to give ourselves the 5As—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—rather than expecting or demanding others to do this for us (Richo, 2019). This is empowering—we are no longer unknowingly controlled by past hurts and unmet needs—we have released them precisely by acknowledging and feeling them (rather than avoiding them). Leaders become more liberated *and liberating* when we engage emotions as helpful messages and opportunities for our own necessary growth work.

Crisis leadership requires an ability to read self in crisis as a text—which necessitates making trigger moments, and the earlier scenes that set up these trigger experiences, figural in conscious ways—with a disciplined and compassionate attention to our earlier life struggles and tacit beliefs. This means we examine the socially constructed beliefs messaged to us in both direct and indirect ways, that we identify the value sets and hierarchies taught to us as stories of us and of others. These stories, phrase by phrase, image by image, subjective value by subjective value (disguised as objective realities), become our storyboard—our vision of self and sense of our identity—a byproduct of the interactions around us, the actions done to or not done for us, and the people with whom we identify and relate, to such a significant-though-unconscious degree that it takes considerable self-reflection to identify, uncover, and constructively address in our thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and behavior patterns (Richo,

Schools are collection sites for people's emotional imaginations—for better and worse (i.e., some are disciplined and liberated through intentional practice and others are still unconscious and constrained, waiting for freedom). Developing these inner-resources foments internal freedom which builds through an ever-widening practice of compassion for self, other people, and the world. This means the ability to harness, rather than be controlled by, one's own emotional imagination—to use it towards self-development, collective equity and healing. Engaging in generative reflection and developing a critical understanding of our socialized beliefs and triggers is generated by storytelling, which can help leaders re-story themselves in liberating ways that are generative to liberatory pedagogy. People's emotional imaginations are at play whether there is awareness of this or not. Flux leadership necessitates becoming critically conscious—"still in the midst of activity and to be vibrantly alive in repose"—ever reflexive and engaged with our emotional imaginations as a form of radical self-care that supports us to enact "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994).

### **Flux Leadership for Liberation**

In these dark times, educational leaders must stand out front with night lanterns to light the way. To do this in a sustainable way, build your real-time capacity to identify and attend to your emotional reactions with intention, to cultivate racial mindfulness and reflexive leadership skills for this new era. To identify, address, and mediate the negative impact this pandemic is having on students, teachers, and families, you must build inner-resources you can call on to help balance the professional, psychological, and emotional dimensions of your intensive work. In this new academic year, educational leaders need a set of inner-resources to rely on as you work to ensure consistent and effective teaching and learning, as you build the organizational capacity necessary to become creative, just, brave spaces of critical learning, collaboration, and renewal. This means liberating ourselves, and those we lead, through engaging pedagogies of hope and love (Freire, 1997; hooks, 2003).

A flux leadership mindset evinces presence, patience, and adaptability at pressured times when less practiced and more reactive modes can be activated. This is liberating for leaders and those you lead because it allows for relational integrity and relational trust, which are vital to people's ability to get through this crisis. Flux leadership helps leaders carry their teams, organizations, and communities through crisis by providing a framework for cultivating a learning ecosystem of supportive accountability in which leaders:

- Take an inquiry stance on practice—show up as a learner not a knowledge dropper, enact a distributed wisdom approach in which wisdom, knowledge, and expertise are shared in ways that elevate everyone and create new hybridized ideas, knowledges, and learning possibilities.
- Disrupt limiting knowledge hierarchies to position every one as an expert and learner who can constructively challenge each other and the organization on issues of equity.
- Resist the "expert-learner" binary which is based in Western hierarchical constructions of knowledge, value, and expertise. Understand and teach that binaries are reductive and essentializing.
- Understand intersectionality, inter- and intra-group variability; challenge normative notions of diversity; resist essentializing and tokenizing BIPOC.
- Work to be ever-more racially literate and racially mindful and to support this in others. Understands that SOCIAL IDENTITY FRAMES ALL WE DO AND SAY. For White readers newly considering this, understand this isn't news to people of color and shows up on you whether you're aware or not so do your work.
- Validate, foreground, and amplify non- and anti-dominant voices, knowledges, value systems, and experiences without virtue signaling or performative allyship. Understand that a distributed wisdom approach benefits and elevates everyone.
- Address microaggressions, deficit language, and imposed White fragility as they arise. Ensure that communication norms are established, clearly messaged, and attended to; create an ethos of relational trust and accountability.
- Work from a critical understanding of mental health issues, imposter syndrome, and trauma with a focus on engaging strong emotion and conflict with calm compassion.
- Use a pedagogy of discomfort (carefully) as an impactful pedagogical tool for teaching and learning about implicit biases, relationships to intersectional systems of oppression, reckoning with uncomfortable truths, understanding White fragility and internalized racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. Model being uncomfortable and vulnerable calmly and with humility.
- Question Western-biased thinking on what knowledge is valued and who is a knower. Understand that people of color and Indigenous communities have not, and still do not, have the same privilege of emotional or physical display as their White counterparts. Emotional range and values outside of a small White box have been systematically devalued in schooling and, moreover, met with punitive measures, deficit orientations, carcerality, and educational derailment for students of color. Educators must work from a critical understanding that BIPOC communities already have deep reverence for learning, storytelling, and relational, SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) is not a set of gifts being given to address collective deficiency, it is a response to the structural and historical violence of our education system that has forced students and communities to eschew their authentic ways of knowing and learning. This informs how educators approach the vital work of SEL in schools.

Schools need structures and processes in place that support identity-related stress navigation skills-building and racial literacy given the inevitable stress and change to come. Crisis literacy, and outgrowth of leader agility, is a leader's ability to critically

(and therefore more accurately) read what's happening across individuals and groups with special attention to people's experiences, grief and trauma, and possible connections and solutions to their immediate concerns. This relies on a leader's ability to read self and scene compassionately in order to effectively gauge and ease stress levels, enact and teach resonant stress management practices, and cultivate grounding presence in difficult moments and situations, which right now is every day. Leaders must help their teachers and students—and the communities they serve as a whole—build racial literacy skills and pathways to communicate how they are doing and what supports they need now and over time in these intersecting and unfolding crises.

Educational leaders are expected to do so much with so little. In this time of radical flux, this is exponentialized as leaders need to manage and compassionately engage affect and trauma overload. This is a set of acute-on-chronic pressures education leaders are facing right now. It's a lot. Given these exigencies and the heavy weight they carry, activist-therapist Araya Baker offers affirmations for hope during COVID-19:

"To be sure, the most disenfranchised, exploited and marginalized Americans have long been aware that U.S. schools offer an incomplete political education that intentionally inculcates poor and working Americans with the self-sabotaging conviction that any form of an economic safety net constitutes a crutch or handout. Yet, for the first time in forever, the majority seems hyperaware of the pressure of survival under capitalism, and the dire need for an approach to addressing societal problems that is humane and preventative, not simply eleventh-hour and reactive.... [M]any of us are fretting over where we go from here, especially with election season nearing. Here are a few affirmations I penned to help myself and others weather this storm, and console ourselves as we navigate our way through uncharted territory ahead.

- Feeling emotionally exhausted as I process the constant flux of this crisis only means I am concerned, compassionate, and humanly vulnerable.
- I rebuke the capitalistic conditioning that drives self-shaming, whenever I prioritize much-needed rest over grind culture and productivity.
- My inability to focus or stay on task is my system's natural response to being overwhelmed, and I only dehumanize myself by pathologizing how I adapt.
- Mitigating my distress with good news, joy, pleasure, and self-care is a healing act of self-preservation, not self-indulgence.
- Small contributions to my community and within my networks are helpful and meaningful, even if I'm not on the frontlines.
- Relapsing into maladaptive coping mechanisms is OK, as long as I consult my own accountability plan, and/or am honest with my accountability buddy.
- COVID-19 recoveries are happening every day, and there is a collective effort beyond my awareness that will see us through.
- I'm allowed to feel simultaneously fortunate/grateful and miserable.
- People can relate to my anxiety, existential dread, fear, grief and hopelessness more than I presume, and if/when I open up to others, I'll be validated.
- Adjusting to change is difficult, but a new, better "normal" is underway, and my role in bringing it to fruition matters immensely" (excerpted from Baker, 2020).

In these painful times, educational leaders are called upon to lead justice-focused change and enact pedagogies of critical hope and love (Freire, 1997; hooks, 2003). This means distributing the transformative leadership load throughout teams and schools with fidelity to equitable change. It also means creating the conditions to enact a radical growth mindset in mission mode in relation to current demands. As Gandhi illuminates, "If you want to change the world, start with yourself." Now is the time for leaders to engage in our deepest growth work—for ourselves, our students and communities. We must do this as an ethical stance, to make schools places of liberatory thinking, practice, policy, and participation. We must heed the wisdom of thought leader Adrienne Maree Brown when she states that, "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." To hold our teachers, students, and school communities tight, educational leaders must do some tough and loving work on ourselves. This is the heart of flux leadership, which helps leaders foster the conditions for liberating and transformational schooling and education. One primary lesson of this time must be that our liberation is bound up in each other; it's time we supplant indoctrination with emotional imagination to demand and build justice and peace together.

#### **Author's Note:**

Deep gratitude for your influence on flux leadership: Katie Pak, Howard Stevenson, Susan Lytle, Mike Nakkula, Chloe Kannan, Nimet Eren, Sherry Coleman, Liza Herzog, Reima Shakeir, M.K. Asante, Jacky Lumarque, Gowri Ishwaran, Jane Shore, Janet Salmons. Alice Goldberg Ryan, for your line-by-line leader critique. Natalie Miller at Harvard Business Publishing Education.

Wagner Marseille and Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership Cohorts 17, 18, 19—as you lead us forward with critical hope, love, and tenacity.

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[1] In his poem, 'I Am Much Too Alone in This World, Yet Not Alone,' Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "I want to unfold. Nowhere I wish to stay crooked, bent; for there I would be dishonest, untrue" (p. 17). We can choose to "unfold" aspects of ourselves that remain hidden, even to us, concealing parts of us and constraining our ability to live in authentic relationship with ourselves and others.

[2] Dan Zadra's words, "Worry is a misuse of the imagination" have guided me for decades.

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