

# The Zombification of the Principalship: The Learning Mindset in a System Guided by Achievement

Journal of School Leadership  
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–19  
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DOI: 10.1177/10526846251383340

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## Abstract

School leaders are expected to plan and execute change and growth to address the ongoing social and pedagogical transformation required in schools. The purpose of this article is to initiate a robust conversation and broaden the discourse about instructional leadership. Attention is placed on the challenge that principals face to remain open-minded and focused on learning (as an action) while providing leadership within the context of a dynamic system pieced together from standards and constructs. Policymakers, educational leaders, and leadership training educators might broaden their concept of leadership by viewing the topic through the lens of *zombification*. This conceptual inquiry contemplated whether leaders cultivate the learning (again, as an action) community simply by knowing what to do or whether they must actively facilitate a lively enactment of learning. The article contends that the leader of learning must have specific knowledge, attitudes, and attributes to understand the theoretical considerations properly and translate the act of leading learning into a practical reality. The metaphor of zombification is utilized to describe how a principal might lose sight of learning and instead focus on meeting and achieving standards and system outcomes.

## Keywords

instructional leadership, system, principal, learning

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I stopped for a sandwich and a bowl of soup at my favourite little lunch place downtown. Sitting at the counter facing the street, I watched passersby contend with unexpected falling snow. After the meal, I made my way through the crowd standing in line for vanilla lattes and Luke's vegan quesadillas to the washroom at the back of the place. As I washed my hands, I looked in the mirror to view behind me a wall-sized blackboard that was typically covered with hipster quotes and handwritten graffiti, but today it was newly washed and bore only one. The message, or pair of messages, written in the center and highlighted in white: "If you are not questioning the system, you are the system." On the second "the system," however, orange chalk had been used to revise the statement so that it read "If you are not questioning the system, you are a zombie of the system."

## Purpose

This inquiry seeks to disrupt the existential challenges school-based leaders face as they navigate the pressure to be all things to all people (Biesta & Säfström, 2023; Samier, 2022). It also responds, in part, to Harris and Jones's (2021) call to deepen our understanding of what it means to "lead learning" in schools. This article does not disregard empirical knowledge; rather, it explores how learning can be used as a means of engaging with and making sense of that knowledge. In this context, learning is understood as the process of remaining open in the moment, allowing for discovery and transformation, rather than merely progressing from a state of not knowing to one of knowing. This discussion contributes to a broader effort to support leaders in approaching their roles as learners, shifting leadership practices from being primarily theoretical and system-compliant toward a more interrogative stance in which leaders examine their own openness and actively engage with their thinking processes.

## Introduction to the Problem

Learning brings a sense of life (Wood, 2025), yet school systems are often governed in ways that inhibit learning where principals are trying to support schools to be all things to all people. Learning is an energy burning process (Levy & Baxter, 2023) and to nurture a community of learners requires a certain disposition from the principal to schedule growth minded space and time. If the action of learning is not purposeful, what then happens, especially to the principals accountable for so many competing responsibilities (Sellars & Imig, 2023). The café anecdote above draws attention to the idea that any *system* under which people live influences their viewpoints, behaviour, energy levels, and decision-making in often unrecognized ways (bias). The required agreements and standards that make up a school system direct practice toward generally accepted activities and outcomes. Relatedly, in schools the influence of *hegemony* is evident in biases towards austerity, acceptable behaviour, and known expectations to meet common standards. This focus can numb perceptions towards the local context. In the field of education, good practice leads to the meeting of professional standards and

public expectations for schools within the community (OECD, 2024; Wamba, 2022). The challenge for a principal is to ensure that the goals and expectations of the system do not cause educators to objectify and lose sight of the human side of learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2024). This conceptualization of educational leadership is grounded in the notion that an effective principal balances the process of transformation (i.e., meaningful learning), personally and for others, with the institutional pressure to meet the expectations of the system (Wood, 2023). Simply put, a principal in service of the system can create a mindset that dehumanizes people because of the trust placed on the value of objectives, efficiency, and standards (Langer, 2016; Senge, 2006). Leaders focused on effectiveness and efficiency can create conditions that stifle the learning community, which is the opposite of what principals want for their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). There is, then, a need to consider how principals can ensure that a day in school brings *life*, nurtures the joy of learning, and meets expectations (Brown & Moffett, 1999).

## Metaphors for Leadership

In a well-established scholarly practice (Morgan, 1986), metaphor is used to better know the complex reality of educational leadership (Berryman & Eley, 2019). Metaphor can illuminate understanding but can also provide a guide for thinking while in practice (Örtenblad et al., 2016). Examples of metaphors utilized in my summer educational leadership graduate classes include comparing a leader's work to hike in the mountains or tending to a garden. Metaphor can be utilized to connect the intricate with another thing that is more easily understood (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). In the case of this article the complex process of effective school leadership is compared to the unidimensional becoming and existence of a zombie (you may indeed smile).

In this case the metaphor of zombification has been chosen because it seems easily accessible as a method to think about the principalship. A core moral and professional responsibility for the principal is to lead others in the process of learning (Harris & Jones, 2021), which here is defined as a process that is not only growth aimed but also provides energy and enthusiasm to awaken life. Principals are responsible to lead learning and are generally trained in ways to emphasize learning as a process, but there also exists multiple inhibitors that make the actuality of leading learning a real and difficult challenge. The absence of learning might result in a darker side to being a leader (Harris & Jones, 2018) where the principal exhausts more energy towards system compliance than nurturing growth in the community. The reality of management responsibilities, however, ensures that principals may not always be perceived as working towards the good of people and the organization (Cohen, 2018). Principals act tactically as they schedule, organize, and evaluate their staff, yet doing so without consideration for enlivened learning not only neglects the opportunity to model being a learner, but also can be perceived as treating colleagues like pawns simply in service to fulfilling institutional goals (Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024). Studies on the principalship highlight that when leaders focus blindly on institutional goals they then can be

perceived as uncaring, or shockingly, as bullies pushing an unwavering vision (Neves & Schyns, 2018; Simonet et al., 2018). Leaders efficiently enacting policies, school plans, and division directives can hurt others if they neglect to acknowledge the ever present humanness in an institution (Samier & Milley, 2018). Therefore, to draw attention to the non-human metaphor of zombifying is a salient way to influence humanity focused leadership theorizing and practice.

## Zombification

The HBO series *The Last of Us* (Mazin & Druckmann, 2023–present) depicts zombies as *beings* who become, as the result of a fungal infection, devoid of the joy, love, friendship, and happiness relished by the living. The process of zombification takes hold quickly, altering the victims' intentions so that what was once important to them is forgotten. The result is a deadened existence for the zombies, which seek to continue to exist rather than to thrive.

### *The Principalship and Zombification*

Zombification relates to educational leadership with respect to the effects of the system of education on the leader. Historical norms, policies, procedures, and measures to account for student learning and public resources acculture the principal's practice. I host a focus group of school-based leaders who gather regularly to discuss the nature of learning and leadership (Wood, 2025). A common theme from this group demonstrated that finding the time to focus on learning (their own and others) is both a challenge and a relief. The challenge is one of time when they either learn while attending to daily technical responsibilities or have the willingness to carve out time for learning on a daily basis. This research demonstrated that principals who approach their work with learning at the front of mind feel energized and relieved that their work feels meaningful but this is not easily done in a system where outside the school stakeholders can guide practice.

Recently appointed principals can attest to how their outlook changed when they were first promoted. In helping others to achieve the system's goals, leaders may find that they are acting as agents of the system within the school (Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024). This new perspective can create challenges for leaders who are trying to nurture a community of learners while creating conditions for the school to meet broader expectations successfully. Adding to the challenge is the difficulty for the leader to be a learner as they are expected to also have a certain experience and knowledge set. Zombification, in my tongue-in-cheek conceptualization, casts the principal as the *host* who must fight against the quiet invasion of the system, which emphasizes effectiveness and efficiency (Samier, 2022) over helping learners thrive as people (Brown & Moffett, 1999).

Dewey conceptualised a system of education to be an arrangement of agreed-upon objectives and professional standards to be followed to regulate educational

experiences. Students and staff members learn and work under common conditions that, theoretically, ensure effective and efficient growth and achievement (Deal & Peterson, 2016). However, these normative expectations when approached without consideration of the student or staff member, can lead to discounting the value of individual's needs and the democratic nature of schooling. Current conceptual models of leadership that provide overly prescriptive examples of best practice often involve narrow conceptualisations of effective schooling which when mindlessly initiated can interrupt the process of learning (Niesche et al., 2023). Blind adherence to system expectations can hinder the development of personal meaning, and the continual pressure to meet external demands may cause schools to become obstacles to the well-being of both staff and students (Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024).

The school principal is a key figure in determining the “big picture” of success while making decisions that acknowledge and compensate for deficits (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), appealing to the hopes and expectations of stakeholders outside the school (that is, the system), and can, as a result, lose focus on individual development as required in schools (Lehmann, 2016). Grounding decisions primarily in neoliberal values such as efficiency and effectiveness can result in the objectification of the individuals seeking to learn and grow within the school (Janzen & Heringer, 2023; Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008).

The metaphor of zombification can serve as a protective lens and enrich the efforts of those engaged in school leadership. Theorizing how principals balance transactional tasks within transformational processes offers a context for examining the ideas and dynamics that can hinder a leader of learning which, for the purposes of this study, is understood as animating life and bringing people together (Berryman & Eley, 2019). Langer (2016) contended that contemporary education systems can cause schools to lose sight of individual student development and instead focus on processes that generalize and objectify students. Building on Biesta's (2023) beautiful risk of education attention is drawn to the principal's reality of completing required tasks such as developing assurance plans and responding to achievement results. The beauty of education can seem like a theoretical premise as principals are socialized in such a way that their practice encourages learners and staff to optimize objectives over understanding the needs and democratic values of the people in the school (Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024).

### **Objectification**

When principals objectify teachers, students, or parents, they risk overlooking the central subject that underpins the purpose of education. The subject of a sentence is the person, place, or thing that is performing the action. The subject, therefore, is the main point of focus. In the sentence, *the puppy climbs the hill*, the puppy is the focus. The main action is climbing while the object receiving the action is the hill. Many sentences can be created with a simple subject (such as “puppy”) and object (such as “hill”). A learning-focused environment makes the learner (whether a student, teacher, principal,

or educational support worker) the subject and the curriculum or professional standards the object. In this case, the learner is the focus, and the curriculum is the object receiving the action. When the subject is a student actively learning and the object is the curriculum, the school is aligned with learning as its central focus (Dweck, 2008; Harris & Jones, 2021).

Returning to the example of the puppy, if the sentence is rearranged so that the puppy becomes objectified, for instance, the hill stands mightily as a challenge for the puppy to climb, the hill is now placed as the first focus before the puppy. In the context of a school, curriculum or achievement might become the primary focus before the students or teachers. In this context, objectification may be articulated as “Our results need to get better. We need to get our students above the national PISA score average” or “We need engagement during PD days! My teachers need to buy in to our division’s professional learning project because it is their job.” The pressure on schools to meet system expected outcomes can drive practice within schools and negatively interrupt the work of educators and students (Wilcox et al., 2024). For instance, the inclusion of creative thinking assessments in the most recent PISA assessments will bring about a new focus in schools on the skills needed to improve scores, rather than the dispositions and attitudes needed to improve creative thinking. Objectifying students and educational professionals discounts the reality in contemporary schools where wellness, autonomy, and personal and meaningful connection to curriculum are required conditions for learning (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2019; Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024). Principals do not plan to undergo the process of objectifying others, rather, they seek to enliven their school communities (Cherkowski, 2016), nevertheless, they may be subject to broad influences that promote objectification.

## **The Conundrum of the System: Transactions and Transformations**

School systems have been routinely criticized as an objectifying force with the potential to deprive members of the communities that it serves of the joy of learning (Langer, 2016). Accordingly, educational leaders face the challenge of motivating others to meet standards and goals while empowering the personal and professional transformation of learners and educators. To be sure, educational standards, objectives, and norms are created to direct and support the development of professionals and provide a theoretically equal chance for students to progress and grow. The leaders in a school system account for transactional processes through monitoring and measuring student development and staff adherence to professional practice (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Thomas, 2007). Examples of transactional leadership responsibilities include resource management, achieving curricular outcomes, and managing the adherence of staff members to professional codes and standards. These transactions that leaders manage are monitored as significant indicators of effectiveness by government agencies, school districts and professional associations (Thomas, 2007). This work, however, is complex. In a study of retired principals, Skousen et al. (2024) reported that a

significant challenge during one's career was to implement acceptable standards while mired in the reality of the school day. Leaders who focus on their transactional responsibilities without understanding the processes involved in learning and building a community may be at risk of dehumanizing in the process.

Educational leadership focused also on transformation has received considerable attention as a strategy to bring life to education (Adams et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Collaborative professional learning is at the heart of transformational leadership (Timperley, 2011), and most theories relating to the learning community emphasize factors such as agency, finding personal meaning in shared goals, and inquiring collaboratively. The transformation of individuals and schools can facilitate openness, the arrival of the aha moment, and the development and improvement in collaborative practice (Stoll, 2020).

Effective educational leaders dutifully manage transactional tasks while nurturing an environment that encourages transformation and growth (Bøje et al., 2022). With-it principals recognize that opportunities to engage in the expected processes of schooling can be presented as meaningful to, and transformational for, students and staff members (Bush, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This style of leader balances work by distinguishing opportunities for themselves and others to be open, reflect on practice, and form shared goals for the growth of students and staff members, rather than blindly leading for results (Wood, 2025; Zimmerman & Somers, 2020).

### *Education as Prearranged Standards*

Formal education consists of an assortment of agreed-upon standards of practice nested in embedded ideals, flexibility, and system governance (Manzer, 1994; Morris et al., 2023). The aim of common standards is to homogenize the educational experience for students coming to school with different experiences. The leaders in the system apply these standards to ensure that every teacher and student experiences the same high-quality learning. In my home country of Canada, these standards facilitated the development of a western based system in a vast country that values both homogeneity and regional autonomy (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008). Standardized approaches are reinforced by research and professional bodies and shaped by university-level training programs for teachers. In many ways, the education profession has in place practices to ensure that students meet a prescribed level of development and competence. One of the reasons that focused learning communities in Canada have been successful (OECD, 2024) is that educational leaders hold teachers and students to account for development *and* results. However, this approach creates the opportunity for objectification and barriers to transformation that must be addressed.

### *The Influence of the System*

The dynamics of neo-liberalism and a hegemonic mindset contribute to the risk that a principal will undergo zombification. Principals can bring life to the difficult work, but

the pressure is strong on principals to achieve in the context of a standards-based learning environment responsive to stakeholders beyond the school. The challenge for principals is to mediate the requirements of the system while assisting the transformation of the people who support it and are served by it (Berryman & Eley, 2019). However, consider what can happen when personal transformation is undervalued or during situations when principals do not understand the processes necessary to bring life to learning practices. In studies conducted in Australia (Niesche et al., 2021) it was found that the shift towards a more neoliberal educational perspective left principals feeling weighed down by the system and retreating from the task of promoting compliance. In other words, they were feeling the effects of zombification.

The influence of outside of the school stakeholders creating structures and standards to define optimal learning can result in the objectification of students (Biesta & Säfström, 2023; Langer, 2016). To avoid such an outcome, leaders must be purposeful to focus on achievement *and* personal transformation (Harris & Jones, 2018). The system influences the process of learning in public schools as they are currently configured, with pacing, curriculum, and cultural expectations combining to influence both what people learn and how they learn. The aim of any system of education, in essence, is to influence human behaviour. The risk, however, is that it objectifies those it intends to serve, treating them as entities who need to transition from one state of being to another; from not knowing to knowing. The principal, as the individual responsible for translating the system's goals into practice is at risk of losing focus on the actual human development necessary for schooling to be successful. Ensuring individual achievement and growth requires being thoughtful, aware, and responsible to design appropriate accommodations.

### *The Learning Community*

Communities gathered for the purpose of learning tend to have significant positive impacts on their members (Barth, 2001; Senge, 2006). People thrive when the process of learning offers challenges, creates connections, and invigorates (Kahneman, 2011; Timperley, 2011). Learning tends to leave people proud, engaged, and motivated (Robinson, 2015). Being a leader of learning is a source of joy but necessitates an understanding of both education and people. Knowles (1980) argued that the conditions required for adult learners to thrive include agency, self-determination, and a strong belief in what is being learned (see also Adams et al., 2019). These ideas can be applied to learners of any age, where pedagogical theories also highlight interest, personal meaning, joy, and transformation as key conditions for growth (Aubrey & Riley, 2016; Dweck, 2008). A key challenge for principals is balancing the requirement to meet professional standards efficiently and effectively with the need to foster a learning community grounded in autonomy, trust, and openness. Addressing this challenge begins with developing a strong understanding of oneself as a learner (Adams et al., 2019; Wood, 2023).

Principals focused exclusively on the transactional elements of a school, such as meeting quality standards, grading, analyzing achievement data, and supervising professional conduct, may miss opportunities to nurture transformation. Objectification makes it difficult to nurture a culture in which people heighten their *feeling of life*, which might also contribute to feelings of meaningfulness, wellness, and community (Dufour et al., 2008; Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024). Educational leaders necessarily balance transactions and transformations to ideally support others to find joy as they thrive in the process of teaching and learning (Cherkowski, 2016). Principals who view learning as a way to enrich the school community ease the pressure of pursuing exceptional outcomes by focusing on meaningful growth; strong results often follow (Barth, 2001).

## The Principal as a Leader of Learning

Individuals' specific experiences, biases, and perspectives give them unique interpretations of the world. Educational leadership grounded in the practice of learning deepens empathy for the challenge it is to genuinely be a learner (Wood, 2025). *Being a learner* and reflecting on and making decisions regarding the optimal learning community for students provides the viewpoint necessary to lead learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). A leader must recognize how a learning community can be guided so as to develop learners rather than knowers, which is to say, encouraging staff members and students to be open-rather than closed-minded.

### *The Principal as a Learner: an Antidote to Zombification*

Being open to learn from novel or mundane moments is, then, a key aspect of leading learning. The discipline to believe that there is potential to learn in the moment is a key state of being required. The opposite of this kind of openness is being a “knower” in the sense of believing in the moment that “I’ve seen this before and have nothing to learn here.” Leaders who fall victim to the latter kind of thinking may refuse to engage in the learning process because of the certainty that they “know this stuff already.”

The primary purpose of school leaders is to nurture conditions suitable for learning. The principal plays a fundamental role in maintaining the learning community (Bae, 2018); as the saying goes, if the principal sneezes, the school catches a cold (Whitaker, 2012). Modelling the process of being a learner not only highlights the practice, but also ensures leadership that is tuned towards growth and development. To accomplish this task, principals are grounded in growth, leveraging a deep understanding of their own engaged learning. Relatedly, how principals remain open and nurture learning as a process of the school culture may immunize against the process of zombification.

## Knowing and Learning

When principals question how their leadership can promote openness and attentiveness rather than closed-minded feelings of “I know best already,” they begin to recognize the difference between a knowing mindset and the mindset of a learner (“there is something worthwhile here, even if I don’t yet recognize it”). Schools focused exclusively on achievement and adherence to the system can acculturate both staff members and students so that they value knowing over openness and learning (Langer, 2016). I am not discounting the value of knowing per se but, rather, arguing that leaders who bring learning to life enhance openness and the capacity for learning. Contrary, leaders who value showing and sharing create a sort of *exhibition of knowledge* where learning communities are actualized, not by learning together during the workday, but rather by showcasing projects and expertise.

## Openness

The principal’s duty to lead with openness is crucial to nurturing a community that learns, but being open requires a certain attitude towards the present moment. Openness can be defined as the state in which a person notices new ways of understanding and seeks potential to learn in the novel and mundane realities of life (Langer, 2016). Principals with a learning mindset, then, are aware in *this* moment and are present within their current context (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). A leader’s openness may deliver appropriate responses in certain situations and may also normalize a way of approaching the present moment as a learner (Guajardo, 2020). To be purposefully open to potential requires discipline and energy. Being closed is indeed easier, and in some ways safer. Closed-mindedness relies on the blind trust that past knowledge is all-inclusive and there is no need for new learning (Kahneman, 2011; Langer, 2016). Feeling competent while being closed is a precarious state for an instructional leader, while being open with an attitude that there is something new to learn is what is explored next.

## Two Systems of Thinking

According to Kahneman (2011), there are two systems for thinking. *System 1* allows for rapid decision-making and relies on past knowledge and understanding and requires little energy. Simple addition is an example; no effort is required to calculate  $3 + 4$ . When using this system, principals may feel competent since others appreciate their quick thinking and knowledgeable leadership. However, leaders who rely exclusively on a knowledge mindset risk impeding learning in the school community simply by modeling knowing as a way of doing things (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

Engaging *System 2*, by contrast, requires the expenditure of cognitive and emotional energy. For instance, short-term memory as well as a thinking system are activated when a person is asked to mentally calculate  $17 \times 13$ . If this person is unable to answer

utilizing system one and does not give up, feelings of incompetence and stress may result (Kahneman, 2011). Since engaging system two typically requires an expenditure of energy, feelings of pride and excitement arise when a suitable answer is found: there is an obvious difference in the personal pride and energy involved in solving a simple math equation such as  $3 + 4$  and that involved in multiplying 17 by 13. In general, people tend to hide from or avoid engaging in system two and instead comfortably inhabit system one (Kahneman, 2011). Thus, a major difficulty for a learning community in a normalized state of comfort is generating the tension that is necessary for learning to take place (Dweck, 2008). For the leaders of learning communities, a purposeful and open learning mindset with tolerance for cognitive tension may provide the necessary mindset to consider both the school's transactional and transformational actions.

### *Autopilot and Paying Attention*

Harvard researcher Dr Ellen Langer provided a model to better understand how a person might notice novelty or, conversely, tune it out. Langer (2016) contended, based on 40 years of study, that schools indoctrinate people, encouraging a state as if on autopilot rather than being attentive to their surroundings. Like system one, being on autopilot requires little energy, is informed by experience and past insight, and fosters the attitude that there is nothing to be learned. Autopilot is common, natural, and, perhaps, indicative of feeling safe, so it may be a feature of the human condition to prefer this state of mind that ultimately hampers the process of learning (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Understanding the comfort felt (Levy & Baxter, 2023) in autopilot is essential knowledge for the principal tasked to facilitate a learning community.

Autopilot may be used in decision-making to save energy, avoid the discomfort of not knowing, and leverage knowledge previously gained. However, when faced with emergent or novel learning, system two or heightened attention may be activated. For example, when first learning to drive a car, the autopilot system is deactivated. The driver's learning system is heightened, providing awareness of the surroundings as the burning of energy in system two focuses attention on other drivers and operating the vehicle. Then, after proficiency is achieved, driving requires less of the brain and what was once a difficult task becomes automatic.

Leaders operating exclusively on autopilot may be comfortable but may also be closed from listening, noticing, and responding genuinely to people present within schools. A state of autopilot, which manifests zombification, can be heightened when the values and expectations of the system are treated as if they are "absolute and independent of human creation" (Langer, 2016, p. xv). The inertia of running on autopilot can hinder an educational leader's ability to consider the complexity of situations actively from multiple angles (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Being closed-minded as a state of being is perpetuated by both energy conservation and social factors such as the desire to appear competent (Kahneman, 2011). Allegories such as the tortoise and the hare and phrases such as "embrace failure" draw attention to the need

for people to slow down and give due consideration to the broader context of situations. Competent leaders are expected to have answers at the ready, and this pressure can complicate efforts to identify contextually appropriate solutions to novel and difficult problems. When a leader of learning cannot muster the curiosity to consider the system *and* its people in new ways, then autopilot is difficult to switch off.

Langer (2016) pointed to mindfulness or paying attention as the opposite of being on autopilot. Paying attention in this context is the ability to notice that which is not yet revealed. In the context of educational leaders, paying attention is associated with a learning mentality, being open and present in the moment, and awareness of the potential to learn something new. A principal who is present and makes decisions by learning can be a cornerstone of the community (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), modelling a way to increase openness while nurturing growth mindedness in staff and students (Adams et al., 2019).

## **Being a Learner**

Conversations about balancing work and life are often dominated by time management. Another way to balance work and life is to align primary philosophical frameworks. Being a learner at both work and home aligns professional practice and personal development. Ensuring that one's personal moral perspective is not repressed can ensure a more thoughtful and transparent process to make sense of the world in this moment. Scholars over the past 200 years have explored the construction of knowledge, how people make sense of the world, and inform their decision-making (e.g., Bastien, 2004; Heidegger, 1996). Among their conclusions is that individuals' thoughts and behavior reveal to the world who they are at their core (Arendt, 1958). The rare talented educator may be able to succeed while being mindless, but leading for learning usually requires a disciplined and "mind-full" disposition anchored on the expectation for growth. Paying attention to what is happening in the present requires purpose, energy, practice, and awareness. Therefore, to reconcile and learn from challenging goals, such as meeting the standards in a transformational process, leaders must be aware of others in the present conditions and know how to organize the efforts most likely to result in a satisfactory outcome.

The lens through which principals view the work of a school can, accordingly, have a profound influence on the nature of the communities that they serve (Adams et al., 2019). When they focus their attention on the process of learning, their colleagues and students may follow suit (Elmore, 2005; Senge, 2006). Achieving outcomes is a key task for principals, but discipline is required to do so in a manner that provides affirmation to the school community. Principals do not, of course, simply stand before the world neutrally observing and comprehending but, rather, react to people, topics, and experiences in ways that may or may not be energizing (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Being a learner is energizing, for self and others. Therefore, to lead learning, principals must balance contemplation with the resulting action (or inaction) and determine whether a given situation inspires system two transformation or simply reinforces what is already

known. Understanding that either outcome influences school culture is a key leadership insight.

## Leading Learning

Being a learner-centric leader can both take energy and create energy. As discussed, tension must be present for learning to occur. When dealing with situations that require system two thinking, individuals demonstrate either wakefulness or avoidance (Kahneman, 2011). Avoidance is common because, when they are unsure what to do, people can experience feelings of incompetence (Wood, 2023). When forced by circumstances into a state of focus or tension, learners experience a wave of energy from external stimuli in the form of anxiousness or excitement, so, beneficially, little motivation is needed to engage a response. Problems arise in being a learner when no particular moment captures one's attention and they must disengage their autopilot and search purposefully for learning in the present.

To foster empathy in the learning process, leaders might begin by mindfully attending to moments of *comfort* in their own experiences, as well as encouraging similar reflection among others. These moments, however, may be difficult to recognize or interpret as opportunities for learning. Cultivating practices of openness and awareness has been associated with renewed engagement in routine experiences (Langer, 2016) and may support collective development within educational communities (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). A disposition of openness will help leaders contend with bias and perhaps also result in an available antidote to a system that zombifies its people. To bring life to the learning process, principals must reassure students and staff members that resolving uncertainty is not only tolerated but encouraged since it helps individuals deepen understanding in meaningful ways (Langer, 2016).

## Aligned Practice

A community working together to escape from a state of zombification is healthy. Likewise, creating and maintaining the shared purpose of being open can nurture a growth mindset, draw attention to biases, and bring people together. Articulating a clear mission statement, vision, and/or agreed-upon purpose (Wood, 2022) grounded in the process of learning serves to align communities in practice. Through such alignment, individuals enjoy the autonomy to chart their own paths to achieve objectives fostering an intangible energy that inspires principals, teachers, students, and parents alike (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Guajardo, 2020).

The importance of the leader's role in this process cannot be overstated. When a high-functioning system is grounded in *being a learning* community (DuFour et al., 2008), principals must understand how their efforts can either nurture or inhibit the processes of learning. As has been presented principals risk zombification when they are engaged in the process of managing their organizations, particularly when they lack curiosity and awareness that their actions may unintentionally inhibit the formation and

sustainability of learning mindsets. The most powerful antidote to zombification, I have argued, is for the leader to be a learner. By purposefully *being present* and *open*, leaders become capable of contending with malaise, fatigue, and processes hampered by an “I know this already” attitude can deliver effective education.

## Conclusions

Being zombified describes a life-less state where principals have been consumed by requisite transactional tasks. A state focused not on achieving joy or developing others, but instead on simply being able to declare that goals were met, regardless of how meaningless the process might have been to the people the goals are designed to serve. Presenting this conceptualization of the principalship illuminates elements of actualization, care, and unapologetically - feeling. Seeing others, being in the moment with them to create and co-create meaning, and valuing them, ensures that work becomes meaningful. *This* presentation of the principalship unabashedly introduces living to the responsibilities of the principalship. This work cannot accidentally occur, however. The principal, and those who educate them, need to understand learning, autopilot, and being present in the moment. While I have given it a playful name, the process of zombification is a serious threat to the efficacy of educational leaders, especially during an era in schooling where democracy, wellness, and achievement co-mingle (Berkovich & Ori Eyal, 2021). The education system burdens principals to meet its expectations regarding effectiveness and efficiency. However, fulfilling the system’s purpose while engaging with individuals paves the way for the development of healthy, authentic, and thriving learning communities (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). While my purpose in writing this paper is not to rally opposition to neoliberal sensibilities, I have tried to view educational leadership through a humanizing lens as a means to remind researchers, policymakers, and system administrators that principals succeed or fail depending on their openness and willingness to learn. Learning is complicated and requires the appropriate conditions, and moments that capture the attention can deepen understanding by causing leaders’ autopilot to disengage and alert them to the present moment—thereby inhibiting the process of zombification (Langer, 2016). Accordingly, the following suggestions are offered.

- The training of principals should provide opportunities for them to deepen their understanding of self as a learner.
- Leader training should include practice to purposefully balance leading transactions and transformations.
- Leadership educators should help early service principals translate the importance of being a learner (two systems) into practices that build and nurture learning communities.
- Leadership training programs should unapologetically help students align their life and work through deep and meaningful growth-oriented imperatives.

- Policymakers should ensure that their guidance and procedures include specific processes for engaging learning (as an action).
- Division leaders should scrutinize their assurance and three-year education plans to assess whether the language of learning is used and where learning is treated as a transactional task.
- System and school leaders should determine whether their mission, vision, and purpose include processes that bring learning to the present moment.
- Universities and professional organizations might facilitate leadership focus groups gathered to illuminate learning at the forefront of the minds of principals.

Principals who seek to have a positive impact on the lives of their colleagues and students face a significant challenge in implementing an education system's approach to quality education (Morris et al., 2023). The learning principal works to fulfill the mandate of stakeholders outside the school but does so in a manner that engages the members of the community as learners. This is a difficult task to accomplish, and, in many ways, the system encourages principals to objectify their students and staff members. With this inquiry, I add voice to the chorus calling for the essential work of principals to nurture a genuine learning community (Harris & Jones, 2021; Samier, 2022). Being a learner in a system that rewards knowing more than learning is challenging, indeed, simply being a learner is a challenge. However, this is precisely what is required of principals when they model the process of learning and nurture empathy and openness in their professional *and* personal lives.

Learning at the front of the principal's mind brings life to communities and provides an action-oriented framework for addressing system expectations and goals. This kind of growth-mindedness can also immunize principals against zombification and the unintentional effects of an education system that objectifies people. In a time when the principalship is such a challenge, processes that bring life to the work should be considered and included as both professional standards of practice and leader training programs. Principals should contemplate how, as educational leaders, they can work to enliven learning. By thinking through their practice, they can achieve success within the system while at the same time invigorating themselves, their colleagues, and their students, encouraging growth and joy.

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#### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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