

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Leading Learning From Self: An IFS-Inspired Approach to Nurture Capacity in Schools From the Inside Out

Joanna Curry-Sartori and Jody Nelson, LMFT, USA

What Do Our Schools *Really* Need?

Many of our educational communities, intended as safe havens for our children's learning, growth and self-discovery, have become centers of fear, competition and conflict. Schools are reflecting and absorbing our collective stress. National polarization and global crises have placed extreme strains on our educational community and our students show it with increasing signs of dis-engagement, dis-regulation, and diagnosable mental health concerns. Dedicated educators, having gone above and beyond, trying everything in their toolbox, are overwhelmed, exhausted and discouraged. They wonder if they can continue in what was once their life passion and calling. Despite a continuous attempt to solve these problems with new programs and initiatives, our social and emotional health, which is essential for learning and teaching, is suffering. Consequently, the very possibility for schools to realize their core mission is in jeopardy.

Everything we do in schools—our approach to learning, choices,

assumptions, reactions, attitudes, and beliefs—arises from our underlying operating paradigm. From within our current paradigms, we keep trying to figure out what to do differently—more testing, more lessons, more curriculum. Perhaps we need a solution that isn't about more *to do*, but essentially, a new way *to see* each other and *to be* together. We need a simple but profound way to access our core capacity to be calm, compassionate and courageous *together*, as we navigate through the myriad stressors we face daily. We need a fresh understanding of how we engage in our everyday interactions—the relationships in which we actually nurture and experience social and emotional well-being.

IFS Offers a Unique Possibility

We propose a unique framework that can essentially transform our individual and collective experience of well-being in schools. Inspired by IFS (Internal Family Systems), a profound psychological framework and philosophy for living, this integrative model for whole school

wellbeing is trauma-informed, attachment-enhancing, mindfulness-based and collectively restorative. Systemic by design, IFS can inspire and guide all community members in successfully navigating the breadth of situations and challenges we confront in our school communities. While IFS initially developed as a psychotherapeutic model, it also provides a revolutionary framework to understand the human psyche. Thus, it is transforming many professional domains, including coaching, healthcare, business, veterans, prisons, and, importantly to us, schools.

How does IFS offer such a holistic approach and impact? The IFS model, developed over the last 30-plus years by Richard Schwartz, PhD, guides us to recognize that we all possess an innate state of being when we perceive we are safe and we feel “ourselves”—our physiology is regulated, our nervous system is integrated, and we can function optimally. Schwartz refers to this as being in “Self” and identifies eight qualities that often signal when we are more settled in this space—we are more calm, clear, creative, compassionate, curious, connected, courageous and confident. To learn to access and lead from Self is Self-Leadership, the goal of this model for schools. To activate from Self is foundational to engaging successfully in essential educational activities: learning, teaching, exploring, problem-solving, collaborating and contributing.

IFS also provides a radical understanding of what is happening when we (and others) are not our best selves, the parts of us that take over when we feel hijacked, triggered, or “off our game.” IFS suggests we recognize these reactions as “parts” of us, parts that have developed uniquely through our life experience as our protective “go to” strategies to get our needs met. When understood and acknowledged for their positive intent, our parts can remarkably work with us as a harmonious and productive inner team. Awareness of our core Self and our parts transforms our capacity to self-regulate, hold self-compassion, engage at full capacity and contribute for the good of all (rather than from a more self-protective and tribal-based mindset). Isn’t this exactly what we need in our schools right now?

Understanding Self and parts takes us “behind the scenes” and provides the road map for the “why” we do what we do, and the “how” we can show up together as our best selves. Rather than a set of tools and prescribed exercises, the IFS approach provides a fresh perspective and practice to guide our moment-to-moment interactions. When applied in the school setting, educators are empowered collectively to realize an optimal way of operating that nurtures calm classrooms, confident learners and collaborative communities. Because IFS offers a framework for self-discovery, this model is inherently non-pathologizing, restorative, culturally responsive and

flexible to the unique needs of each student, community, culture and context. How is this possible? With access to our core Self and awareness of our own unique parts, we are each empowered to be the expert on our own experience and to see each other as whole and capable. This has the potential to transform what we call forth in each other and how we collaborate to work through challenges and differences. In this, we can focus on what will serve the greater good and create an optimal learning space in which students thrive.

We have actively developed, piloted and refined the application of IFS for educators, students and whole school settings in a number of school communities over the last five years. The Foundation for Self-Leadership, the non-profit arm of the IFS community, has generously supported and funded this effort. Let's turn now to learn about the first of two grant-funded efforts to bring IFS to schools.

**Application in Our Communities:
Twin Cities, MN**

Change Inc. is a community-based non-profit in the Twin Cities with three main services areas. GAP School is a state approved alternative school and contracted site of the St. Paul Public Schools serving young people ages 16-24. The Community and School Collaborative is the mental health arm of the agency, providing school-based mental health services in 30 schools in the Twin

Cities as well as community-based mental health services. The Change Institute provides training, supervision and consultation in the areas of education, mental health, employment and training and community development.

Nearly two decades ago, Jody Nelson, Executive Director, began training in the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model. She found it personally transformative and a very effective framework to focus her work in clinical supervision. In her leadership role, she facilitated several of Change Inc. staff members' orientation and training in the IFS model. Many of the school-based mental health practitioners and professionals became trained in IFS and routinely use the model in their therapeutic practice.

The question then arose, how do we bring this to our schools and teachers? Before the pandemic, in the Twin Cities, teachers often described their experience as a teacher as one of failing every day. One teacher, who perhaps reflects many, once shared that they cried at the end of summer when it was time to return to school. Poverty and systemic racism have created some of the most inequitable educational achievement gaps in the country. Jody and her team recognized that the schools could profoundly benefit from the gifts of IFS.

In 2018-19, The Foundation for Self Leadership funded Change Inc. in a project to train middle school

teachers in IFS and to evaluate the efficacy of the model for teachers. Sixteen teachers from two middle schools in Minneapolis were chosen for the 10-month project, meeting once a month for 4 hours, with some journaling between sessions. During this school year, the Parkland school shooting in Florida occurred. Teachers described their reaction as being “numb.” Facilitators were able to use the IFS model of working with protective parts to help them to unpack their feelings and to encourage them to be present with themselves and with their students. At the end of the year, the evaluation of the project demonstrated that teachers significantly rated themselves as having grown in their ability to be in “Self” with their students and in their classrooms. Following this training, the eight Cs of Self-Leadership were embraced by this cohort as the standard by which they wanted their students to evaluate them and their ability to create a classroom climate that was safe and secure.

In 2019-20, a comprehensive high school in St. Paul contracted Change Inc. to address the adult relationships in the school, which were evaluated as not satisfying, productive or positive. Many coalitions, sub-groups, and a competitive culture existed. To address this, the school committed four all-staff meetings during the year which resulted in awareness of Self and parts. Additionally, facilitators offered weekly email prompts and

small group sessions to those interested in doing deeper work. This work came to a halt in March 2020 when schools shut down due to the pandemic. Still, indicators suggested that teachers and other school staff were quickly embracing the IFS model and utilizing processes for more self-understanding and self-regulation. Adult relationships improved.

In May 2020, George Floyd’s murder in the custody of Minneapolis police officers created social justice upheaval nationally but landed particularly hard on the Twin Cities and, thus, the schools. Epic crises including the pandemic, social justice issues, environmental concerns, negative and polarizing political discourse, community violence and economic hardship have created stressors for adults who care about kids. Change Inc. is currently planning an IFS-informed Care for the Caregivers project for 2022-23, in order to resource caring adults—parents, grandparents, guardians, teachers, mental health practitioners. Mental health is at a crisis level and IFS—because it is accessible, common sense, easily practiced, non-pathologizing—holds great promise in addressing community trauma.

Application in Connecticut and Development of a Comprehensive Approach

In 2018, building on Jody’s pioneering efforts, Joanna Curry-Sartori led a team of educators and

mental health providers in Connecticut to develop partnerships with schools, which would introduce, implement and integrate IFS-inspired practices for whole school well-being. The Foundation for Self-Leadership again provided grant support for this effort. To realize this initiative, Joanna established the Self-Leadership Collaborative to serve as a lead organization introducing IFS as a holistic school model. Joanna assembled a global team of partner educators from around the world implementing IFS in schools in their respective roles. They serve as a think tank to identify best practices and nurture a globally relevant model. The Self-Leadership Collaborative piloted this approach in select Connecticut school districts, offering to whole school staff introductory professional development and an in-depth workshop series and coaching to dedicated cohorts to serve as in-house ambassadors. In order to bring benefits to the scope of activity within the school system, Joanna and her team developed a process to cultivate Self-Leadership through five levels of study and practice, that starts with us, the adults, and ripples out to our communities: 1) Personal well-being, 2) Healthy one-on-one interactions, 3) A positive and productive learning environment, 4) Effective intervention, 5) Systemic school culture growth.

Educators who have experienced the Self-Leadership Collaborative framework report that it provides an

overarching umbrella: an all-encompassing logic for their many social and emotional initiatives, a practical process to guide effective daily interactions, and clarity on how adults can nurture their own well-being. Educators describe the uniqueness of this model in centering adult well-being as foundational for school health. They also reflect how the practices to nurture Self-Leadership have transformed student engagement, as well as the capacity of teachers, administrators and staff, to respond productively and compassionately.

According to Kirsten Sanderson, a retired elementary teacher and curriculum specialist from Connecticut:

I think that Self-Leadership is unique in its combination of support for both adults and students. While other SEL initiatives focus on “what to do,” the Self-Leadership Collaborative approach says that we first need to learn “how to be.” It is a model that supports growth through collaboration and peer support. Because of this, Self-Leadership offered us a holistic model, and became the “north star” we were looking for in our school.

In 2020 to 2021, Dr. Jayne Smith of Mental Health Connect, evaluated the program through teacher self-

reporting data to identify the impact on the mental health and well-being of the school staff. Dr. Smith's report demonstrates statistically significant results. School staff that attended four or more SLC School Program activities were statistically more likely to agree that: They were better able to respond to student needs; students were more prepared to learn; their class communities were safer for students to express feelings; they practiced SLC tools on their own and with students.

These promising findings suggest that school staff shifted toward functioning with greater Self-leadership by using SLC insights, and students were impacted in ways that support learning. Here are comments from a few of the teachers who engaged with the SLC program.

Self-Leadership has been transformative in my pursuit of growth in education. It has started a lifelong journey of finding space in myself to truly be present for my students, colleagues, and community. It unlocks the spirit of human connection and should be where conversations about education begin.

Steve Fitzgerald, Coordinator of Student Affairs, Middle School, Connecticut

As educators we are doers, and we want solutions/ actions that will help us and ultimately our

students. We must first learn ourselves so that we can teach others. Once we have shifted our actions and way of being, our students feel it. We can then operate together from a more optimal state of being, from Self-Leadership, which ultimately allows us to truly be present and do our very best. With commitment, resources, and intention, a culture can grow that benefits all members of the community.

Kathryn Serino, Former Public School Superintendent, Connecticut

Based on the fruits of this phase of piloting and implementation, Joanna has written a book that is in the process of being published. In addition, the Self-Leadership Collaborative (www.self_leadership_collaborative.com) offers online training and workshops for educators on a global scale.

Conclusion

As educators focused on current and future generations, we can serve as trailblazers for this essential shift in our approach to education. Whether a classroom teacher, an administrator, a school social worker or a parent, we all play a vital role in the lives of students. This approach empowers us individually, increases clarity to guide young people through the storm, and expands our capacity to inspire our

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communities and offers cause for real hope.

Let's conclude with the words of one of the SLC participants, social worker, Erica Hermann, LCSW, LAC:

After more than a decade of working in schools, and enthusiastically practicing many of the cutting edge social-emotional modalities, I truly believe that the SLC approach holds within it everything that we need to equip our students, staff, and school cultures with true

social- emotional health, growth and vitality. Working in education is exciting because of the great impact we can have on our future generation; to imagine a world in which our children carry forth Self-leadership into their lives, thus impacting everyone around them, is nothing short of thrilling, and fills me with enormous hope.

Author Details

Joanna Curry-Sartori, LMFT is Executive Director of the Self-Leadership Collaborative, which leads the global movement to adapt and integrate the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model to nurture well-being for educators and school systems. She has designed a comprehensive whole school model, leads online workshops for educators worldwide and has written a book detailing her innovative approach to be published soon. Email: Openspacejcs@gmail.com

Jody Nelson, Ed.D., LMFT is the Executive Director of Change Inc., a community-based social service agency with three main service areas: 2) GAP School, an alternative high school serving “opportunity youth” ages 16-24 leading to a high school diploma and an industry-recognized certificate in construction, health or IT – the student population includes a large percentage of immigrants and refugees, and 2) the Community School Collaborative – providing school-based mental health services and mentoring services in 25 schools in the Twin Cities, an out-patient community mental health clinic in NE Mpls. and in-home family support services in Hennepin County, and 3) the Change Institute providing training, supervision and consultation to support workforce development, specifically for BIPOC practitioners, along the mental health careers pathway.



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