
The Fires of Change

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The Fires of Change

I recently had time off - what a treat!!!! I decided to hike Peter's Canyon, a nature preserve by our home in Orange County, California. It has always been a vibrant, scenic, hike like the first two pictures below. People hike, walk, mountain bike and jog in this picturesque sanctuary. On October 17th, 2017, all that changed without warning - Orange County was hit by a firestorm! I was in the midwest when my wife called and said she was being evacuated.



Before and During the Fire

Overnight, the landscaped drastically morphed from a beautiful nature preserve to a gothic tragedy. All was lost?

Flash forward to my walk in early June. Everything is roped off. The landscape is unfamiliar. Everything has changed - or has it? I was hiking through this beloved area, grieving about the outcome of mother nature. Then my eye was drawn to what was really happening - a tiny spec of green emerging from the charred ground - NEW LIFE!!!! In all this devastation, new life was being born.

As I wandered through this unfamiliar moonscape, my body and mind wandered to the very field I work in - education. I began to grow a new thought - does education need fires? Is fire the ultimate change agent? What really happens when a fire sweeps through nature?

There are 5 stages that a fire exposes from death to new life:

- 1) Controlled Burn
- 2) Everything is Gone
- 3) Struggle to Survive
- 4) New Fragile Life
- 5) Room for New Growth

1: Controlled Burns

FIRE!

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, “The historic suppression of fire has resulted in a lack of periodic, natural fire in our forest. The absence of these low-intensity fires has increased the risk of large fire events and has negatively impacted the health of our forests” It has been this mindset that many believe has caused our major devastating fires, such as in Peter’s Canyon. Controlled burns are needed to help reduce these major forest fires that happen every year.

EDUCATION

Do we need controlled burns in education? When I think about Language Arts, there are many components such as reading, writing, word work, grammar, and spelling. Reading and writing can also be divided into fiction and nonfiction. Every seven years, we light a fire to ALL of these areas at once. That has proven devastating to teachers and students alike. What about just starting with ONE of those areas and lighting a controlled burn? Would this result in change become more manageable, better planned, and most of all provide a deeper implementation? For example, could we focus on writing workshop for an entire year and get good at it before trying another controlled burn?

SUPPORT

In order for controlled fires to be beneficial, district and school supports must be in place. First and foremost, the area ‘under recovery’ must be off limits to teacher evaluation. It is imperative that principals walk through classrooms to ensure implementation and support for teachers, but none of this should be attached to the teacher evaluation (unless the teacher requests it). This creates safety for the teacher AND promotes risk-taking.

Professional development should focus on this throughout the year. How can we ask teachers to change by simply buying a new ‘program’ off the shelf WITHOUT changing instructional practices? Professional development MUST include in-class demonstrations so teachers can observe it with their own students.

Coaching needs to support the implementation. It is vital that coaches be willing to teach, co-teach, and observe with positive feedback and a single next step. Coaching cannot be a one time drop in. For best results, have coaches work in the same classroom for two

weeks so that they can support the teacher shift in planning, thinking, delivery of instruction, and assessment of student results. Both the principal and coach should work together to help strengthen understandings AND advise the consultant of areas that need to be reviewed / clarified / remodeled in the ongoing professional development.

Can we start making PLCs work? In most school districts, teachers report that these times are not paying off. PLCs can focus on grade level planning, practice of instruction, review of student-generated products, and shoring up instructional strategies that are being implemented.

2: Everything is Gone

FIRE!

The fire came charging through the canyon because of high winds in the area. Nothing was safe and everything in its way was consumed. Firefighters put their lives in peril, literally living in people's backyards to hold off the fire. It was a nightmare that had happened twenty years previously, but never to this extent. During the night, the winds changed directions and the fire retreated with the same fury it had entered. All that remained was a smoldering, hazy smell in the air. Where once there was beauty, there was now only ash and blackness. Trees stood like skeletons that had been devoured of all their flesh. What good could come of this?



EDUCATION

As I reflect upon my years in education, my instructional practices started becoming cluttered with my “bag of tricks” that I had acquired over the years. Lots and LOTS of ideas. Often, these ideas didn’t even support one way of teaching or each other. To be honest, many of these ‘ideas’ were just busy work, random activities, and things I enjoyed. My teaching landscape had become overgrown! When I heard new ideas, I put them in my bag of tricks. My bag was bursting! As I heard something new, I would try to incorporate it into what I was already doing, often causing limited success. It was time for a fire! Why didn’t I just burn that bag (or parts of it that weren’t working - call it a controlled burn). IT IS SCARY to do this and requires huge risk-taking and support. It also requires a lot of teacher confidence.

During professional development, I often hear teachers talk about how wonderful this is and how they can add it to what they already know. While connecting prior knowledge is vital, often times it creates cluttered instruction. This leads to the phrase, “I don’t have time to do it all.” IF a curriculum is well planned AND has research behind it, fidelity is hyper important during the first year of implementation.

SUPPORT

It is of vast importance that the leadership of your school and district “declare controlled burn” a safe zone. In order to let go, a safety net is needed. This is where the professional development plan, new curriculum, and coaching supports need to be clearly articulated. If possible, begin the professional development BEFORE school year begins. In addition, a set-aside time for the curriculum needs to be clearly scheduled. For example, when I provide professional development for writing workshop, I require that there is a 45 minute, uninterrupted time put into the schedule. Remember - focus shouldn’t have a plural. If you focus on too many things, nothing will be accomplished.

3: Struggle to Survive

FIRE!

After the fire, the landscape looks devastated and unfixable. Everything is gone. It appears that nothing survives - all hope is gone. The land is barren, scorched, and undesirable.

EDUCATION!

After the fire in education, there is a sense of loss, insecurity, fear, panic, and uncertainty. Teachers will have MANY questions. Often these are mistaken for resistance instead of earnest cry for help, clarity, or understanding.

When there is a controlled burn, it is important to note that some plants are completely destroyed while others appear dead, but are really dormant, awaiting to regrow when



the conditions are right. So in education, a controlled burn will destroy some strategies, while others will go dormant, waiting to regrow and maybe even change when the conditions are right. It is hard to refrain from using these as fall back help when learning something new. Let the strategies remain dormant. It is hard to truly understand a new curriculum/instruction when we hybrid it with other things that may not match or support the learning.

SUPPORT

It is hypercritical that supports be in place during this stage. Principal walkthroughs with encouraging notes are of primary importance. This is not the time for principals to be critical. Often these walkthroughs lead to the identification of struggling teachers who may need extra support.

Coaching should be in place, helping teachers plan, implement instruction, and assess the teaching and learning. PLCs should be used to provide previews of upcoming weeks so that teachers feel connected to a true learning community. If additional materials are needed, the coach and support staff should help teachers obtain them.

An anonymous 'teacher hotline' should be set up. Perhaps a box in the teacher lounge where teachers can write their true concerns. Along with concerns, teachers should offer a possible solution. These concerns should be brainstormed by the leadership team as well as in staff meetings. The more support offered during this time, the more chances there are for success.

Finally, principals should lead in a celebration of observations or products that she/he sees during walkthroughs. BE CAREFUL to highlight all teachers and not over-highlight

one teacher. This could lead to poor staff morale and/or teachers' sniping at each other. A way around this could be to highlight grade levels.

4: New Fragile Life

FIRE!

Throughout Peter's Canyon, everything is roped off with signs that read, "Habitat Recovery." Paths have been roped off to allow hikers, joggers, and mountain bikers to enjoy the area, but you must stay on the designated paths. This enables the fragile landscape to recover without people interfering with the process. If the public was allowed to trample the new landscape, nothing would survive.

EDUCATION

As teachers take risks and put themselves on the line, they should be protected from all outside forces. Try and maintain a protective fence around teachers as they try out their new learning. If a parent walkthrough is being conducted, make sure you only walk into classrooms where the teacher is highly competent and willing to be viewed.

SUPPORT

The principal should run point with the parents on the new curriculum with parent nights, PTA info-grams, and school newsletters to share successes. When parents are upset about the curriculum, the administration should be involved in the meeting, perhaps with other leadership staff, to address the parent concern.

5: Room for New Growth

FIRE!

Because the undergrowth can create no room for growth, a fire removes it and allows new growth and health for the environment. As I walk through Peter's Canyon, I notice lots of new vegetation appearing. Flowers are in full bloom, new grasses are sprouting, and some of the trees seem to be coming back to life. The fire has created room for growth. More importantly, it has created a healthier habitat. Wildlife has returned. Even though it looks different, the room for new growth has created a new landscape.

EDUCATION

As a teacher, there are times I need to stop relying on what I have always done and be ready for new growth. Students are learning every day, why shouldn't I be a learner as well? With all the pressure on this profession, it's hard to let go and learn, especially if what we have adopted is not tried and true (aka research sound). After I understand what the new curriculum/instruction looks, sounds, and feels like, I can look at what fits (making sure it is supportive of the pedagogy that is embedded in the new curriculum) in order to know how I can enhance the instruction.

SUPPORT

The implementation dip (Fullan) is a part of learning. Principals/Districts can see a drop in test scores on the first year. It seems we often abandon things in education that have not had time to work. As you look at the assessments, identify the specific weak areas for the following year. What needs to be shored up (it may be how the test is presented, formatted, or how a test item is written)? These are the areas to pay attention to in PLCs the following year. This is when we review strategies that have proven results and bring them back into the second year. A review of gradual release may need to occur and ensure there wasn't a misstep because the pacing was moved through too quickly. In addition, assuming the curriculum is aligned, the first year is difficult for students because they do not have the background they need for the increased rigor. This is often self-corrected in the second year because the background knowledge is present to build upon.

Questions to Ponder

- Does your school/district have a philosophy about instruction it uses to adopt new curriculum (for example gradual release, deep think alouds, student engagement during instruction, manageable assessments to measure understanding)?
- Does the new curriculum match your school-wide beliefs?
- Does the curriculum come with ongoing in-depth professional development to support teacher understanding through workshops and in-classroom demonstrations by a consultant of various lessons?
- Do teachers have time in PLCs to hash out the new curriculum?

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- There is a difference between a controlled burn and a wildfire.....Are there too many changes happening in one year that make this curriculum seem like a wildfire, not a controlled burn? Remember, focus shouldn't have a plural.

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