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## **The Implementation of Visible Learning Practices among Refugee Learners in North-West Texas**

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*The resettlement of refugees has enriched the diversity of many communities throughout the United States. However, the transition associated with refugee resettlement has significant effects on both refugees and the communities in which they have been resettled. Due to the extreme diversity represented among refugees who have been resettled, public school systems and education professionals must identify best practices that meet the rigor of state accountability requirements and foster educational equity among all students. The purpose of this article is to describe how one large elementary public school campus located in North-West Texas has addressed these challenges through an ongoing cycle of implementation of Visible Learning practices. The article also delineates the most influential Visible Learning practices, as well as implications for educational leadership programs and practitioners.*

**KEYWORDS:** Visible Learning practices, refugees, academic achievement, campus improvement

Refugee resettlement involves the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to a third country because conflict, persecution, or war prevents their safe return to their home country (The U.N. Refugee Agency, 2016). During the past 40 years, the United States has enjoyed a rich history of receiving refugees and resettled over 3 million refugees (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Refugees who have been resettled in the United States vary greatly in their national origin, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, education level, and linguistic background (Capps et al., 2015), which adds to the rich, diverse fabric of the United States.

Throughout the United States, the largest numbers of refugees have been resettled in Texas (Zong & Batalova, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2016), almost 7,500 refugees from 40 countries were resettled in Texas during Fiscal Year 2015 (see Table 1). Throughout Texas, the cities that have resettled the largest number of

refugees are: Abilene, Amarillo, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). Of these cities, Amarillo has taken in the largest number of refugees per capita to date (Michels, 2016).

**Table 1**  
*Number of Refugees Resettled in Texas during FY 2015 by Country of Origin*

Country	<i>n</i>	Country	<i>n</i>	Country	<i>n</i>
Burma	2,724	Rwanda	14	Congo	1
Iraq	1,825	Indonesia	10	India	1
Dem. Rep. Congo	772	Pakistan	10	Liberia	1
Somalia	571	Rep. of South Sudan	10	Netherlands	1
Bhutan	397	Central African Rep.	8	Nigeria	1
Iran	312	Columbia	8	Palestine	1
Syria	185	Jordan	6	Philippines	1
Eritrea	169	Sri Lanka	4	Russia	1
Cuba	119	Thailand	4	Senegal	1
Burundi	117	Yemen	3	South Africa	1
Sudan	84	Chad	2	Togo	1
Afghanistan	58	Vietnam	2	Ukraine	1
Ethiopia	25	Belarus	1		
Nepal	25	Cameroon	1	<b>Total</b>	<b>7,479</b>

Although resettlement provides refugees with safe haven, the transition associated with refugee resettlement has significant effects on both refugees and the communities in which they have been resettled. In addition to healthcare, employment, legal matters, and other social services, refugees who are resettled may experience a mixture of emotions associated with trauma experienced while living in their home country (Chan, Young, & Sharif, 2016; Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011). Within their new communities, resettled refugees may also endure feelings of loss and displacement (Nickerson et al., 2015), discrimination (Hadley & Patil, 2009), exclusion (Caxaj & Berman, 2010), and persecution (Kirkman, 2016) among community members. These challenges associated with resettlement often prevent refugees from settling and thriving in their new home (Ives, 2007). In order to promote the well-being of resettled refugees, communities must have strong networks of resources and support in place (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015; Shannon, Wieling, Simmelink-McCleary, & Becher, 2015) that “foster refugees’ resilience and allow for their basic adaptive psychological systems to recover” (Esses, Hamilton, & Gaucher, 2017, p. 111). In this manuscript, education professionals in a North-West Texas public school share how they have promoted refugees’ academic success by implementing Visible Learning practices.

### **Refugee Resettlement and Public Schools**

The resettlement of refugees also has a significant impact on public schools within a community, especially among communities that have active resettlement efforts. The formal education and native language literacy levels among refugees varies significantly, which often

complicates the grade placement of learners who may have no or limited prior educational experiences (Lerner, 2012). Additionally, most refugee children are not proficient in English and qualify for English as a Second Language (ESL) services. However, the wide range of languages presents many challenges for ESL teachers as they strive to meet the unique individual needs of all learners with limited school resources (Capps et al., 2015).

The transition associated with refugee resettlement also has a substantial social-emotional impact among refugee children in educational settings (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2016). School services provided to refugee children vary. Some refugee children may struggle with their sense of school belonging, attachment to the school, the development of relationships, and involvement in school activities. With this in mind, it is important that educators are mindful and sensitive to the specific issues that refugee children may be coping with, such as stresses associated with resettlement, poverty, trauma, and other factors that stem from their lived experiences (Hos, 2016).

As resettlement efforts persist in the United States, it is imperative that school systems and education professionals identify best practices that meet the needs of refugee children and foster educational equity among diverse student populations. The education professionals at a North-West Texas public school implemented Visible Learning practices in their efforts to improve their refugee learners' academic achievement. The theoretical framework for this campus's cycle of implementation was anchored in concepts and perspectives related to situated learning and communities of practice. As described by Lave (1991), situated learning takes place within a natural context and encompasses social interactions among learners that establish "communities of practice" that represent specific beliefs and desired behaviors (p. 81). As learners engage within a community of practice, they become more connected to the community and invested in the process of learning. With this theoretical framework in mind, these education professionals situated their efforts with implementing Visible Learning practices at their school campus, geared their school improvement efforts to emphasize "the quality and impact of teaching in the school," and established "appropriate trust and a safe climate in which teachers can seek and discuss this evidence of impact" (Hattie, 2012, p. 175).

### **Eastridge Elementary School: An Overview**

Eastridge Elementary is a large elementary public school campus located in North-West Texas. This diverse campus currently serves almost 800 students who range in age from 3-years-old up through the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The families at Eastridge Elementary include refugees from Thailand, Burma, Somalia, Kenya, Vietnam, Laos, and Mexico who resettled in the Amarillo area. During the 2016-2017 academic year, over three-fourths (76%) of the student population met the criteria to be coded as English language learners (ELLs) and receive ESL services. Among these ELLs, 26 different native languages are represented.

Active resettlement efforts continue to bring new refugee families to the Amarillo area. As a result, Eastridge Elementary welcomes new, diverse students each week. Although this campus serves a unique student population, it is evaluated by the same state accountability standards required of all elementary campuses accredited by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Meeting the rigor of these requirements has been a significant challenge for the refugee children at Eastridge Elementary. Therefore, campus administrators have continually sought research-based instructional models to address the learning and social needs of their students.

## The Journey Implementing Visible Learning Practices

Eastridge Elementary began its journey with Visible Learning practices four years ago. The campus principal and two curriculum specialists were introduced to the work of John Hattie and Visible Learning while attending a professional development conference held during the summer of 2013. During this conference, the principal and curriculum specialists knew immediately that this approach to teaching and learning had the potential to make a significant impact on their students. According to Hattie (2012):

Visible teaching and learning occurs when learning is the explicit and transparent goal, when it is appropriately challenging, and when the teacher and the student both (in their various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained. Visible teaching and learning occurs when there is deliberate practice aimed at attaining mastery of the goal, when there is feedback given and sought, and when there are active, passionate, and engaging people (teacher, students, peers) participating in the act of learning. It is teachers seeing learning through the eyes of students and students seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning. (pp. 17-18)

After attending this conference, the principal and curriculum specialists began an annual cycle of implementation with Visible Learning practices at Eastridge Elementary (see Table 2). During the first year of implementation, the principal and curriculum specialists sought to create shared understandings about Visible Learning practices among all staff members. With this in mind, they designed weekly staff development sessions that shared concepts of Visible Learning practices. This was an important preliminary step because a “well-articulated knowledge base is a prerequisite for developing expertise in a systematic way” (Marzano, 2011, p. 4). During these weekly sessions, the entire staff also established a common language about Visible Learning practices. These efforts were of equal importance because they provided staff members with a framework for a way to talk about Visible Learning practices.

Table 2

### *Annual Cycle of Implementation with Visible Learning Practices at Eastridge Elementary*

<b>2013-2014 School Year</b>	<b>2014-2015 School Year</b>	<b>2015-2016 School Year</b>	<b>2016-2017 School Year</b>
<p><u>Summer 2013 Training</u> Visible Learning Conference attended by curriculum specialists &amp; principal</p>	<p><u>Summer 2014 Training</u> Visible Learning Conference attended by curriculum specialists, principal, &amp; administrative team</p>	<p><u>Summer 2015 Training</u> Visible Learning Conference attended by curriculum specialists, principal, administrative team, &amp; teachers</p>	<p><u>Summer 2016 Training</u> Visible Learning Conference attended by curriculum specialists, principal, administrative team, &amp; teachers</p>
<p><u>Implemented Elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts of Visible Learning practices</li> <li>• Campus-wide common language</li> </ul>	<p><u>Implemented Elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning intention &amp; success criteria</li> <li>• Progression walls and notebooks</li> </ul>	<p><u>Implemented Elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning process &amp; dispositions</li> <li>• Individual reflection</li> </ul>	<p><u>Implemented Elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team reflection</li> </ul>

Prior to the second year of Visible Learning implementation, all members of the campus administrative team joined the principal and curriculum specialists at the Visible Learning summer conference. The framework of this conference was designed to foster paradigm shifts regarding feedback. Accordingly, the focus of the second year's weekly staff development sessions was ways in which teachers could effectively incorporate learning intention and success criteria into their instruction. Staff development sessions also addressed how teachers could use progression walls and notebooks with students to communicate their learning progress.

Towards the end of the second year of Visible Learning implementation, campus administrators identified a small group of teachers who were effective models of Visible Learning practices. The invited teachers attended the Visible Learning summer conference to learn alongside the campus administrative team and curriculum specialists. During the third year of Visible Learning implementation, the teacher leaders led the weekly staff development sessions, which focused on the learning process, learner dispositions, and individual reflections of teaching.

Similar to the preceding year, campus administrators recognized another small group of teacher leaders at the end of the third year of Visible Learning implementation. These teacher leaders were invited to attend the Visible Learning summer conference with the principal, curriculum specialists, and campus administrative team. During the fourth year of Visible Learning implementation, these teacher leaders led the weekly staff development sessions, which focused on grade-level team reflections on teaching.

### **The Most Influential Aspects of Visible Learning at Eastridge Elementary**

Prior to beginning the journey to implement Visible Learning, campus administrators and teachers at Eastridge Elementary had participated in four years of staff development that established their capacity to function as a professional learning community. As a professional learning community, the staff at Eastridge Elementary was able to advance the necessary leadership and efficacy to implement Visible Learning practices as a collective team. As a result, campus administrators observed that the campus culture shifted from a culture where staff previously felt overwhelmed with the challenges associated with an extremely diverse student population to a culture where staff are committed and empowered to promote success among all learners.

The campus culture shift has been extremely significant because Eastridge Elementary continues to serve an increasing number of refugee students each year who are coded as ELLs and receive ESL services. As shown in Table 3, data related to student performance on annual state standardized assessments reveal modest increases in student performance among ELLs (TEA, 2016). With this in mind, campus administrators recently reflected on the first four years of Visible Learning implementation and identified four aspects of Visible Learning practices that have been the most impact on student performance: conceptualizing the learning process, implementing approaches to feedback, creating assessment-capable learners, and establishing learner dispositions.

Table 3

*State Standardized Assessment Results among ELLs*

School Year	Total Students <i>N</i>	ELL Students <i>n</i>	ELL Pass Rate
2013-2014	786	535 (68.1%)	432 (55%)
2014-2015	789	585 (74.1%)	434 (55%)
2015-2016	783	592 (75.6%)	486 (62%)

**Conceptualizing the Learning Process**

The learning process is a course of actions that a learner goes through when they learn new information (Hattie, 2012). As such, the learning process is driven by the learning intention (i.e., the objective) and success criteria (i.e., what mastery of the objective looks like). During the second year of Visible Learning implementation, campus administrators adapted Nottingham’s (2016) visual of ‘the Pit’ to help teachers and students visualize the learning process and understand that learning will be a struggle at times (see Figure 1).

With every lesson, teachers make learning intentions and related success criteria clear for students by using student-friendly language. When students encounter a learning struggle, teachers demonstrate how students may use specific learner dispositions to overcome their struggle. Additionally, teachers utilize various types of feedback regularly throughout instruction to scaffold students’ understandings and foster their success with learning.

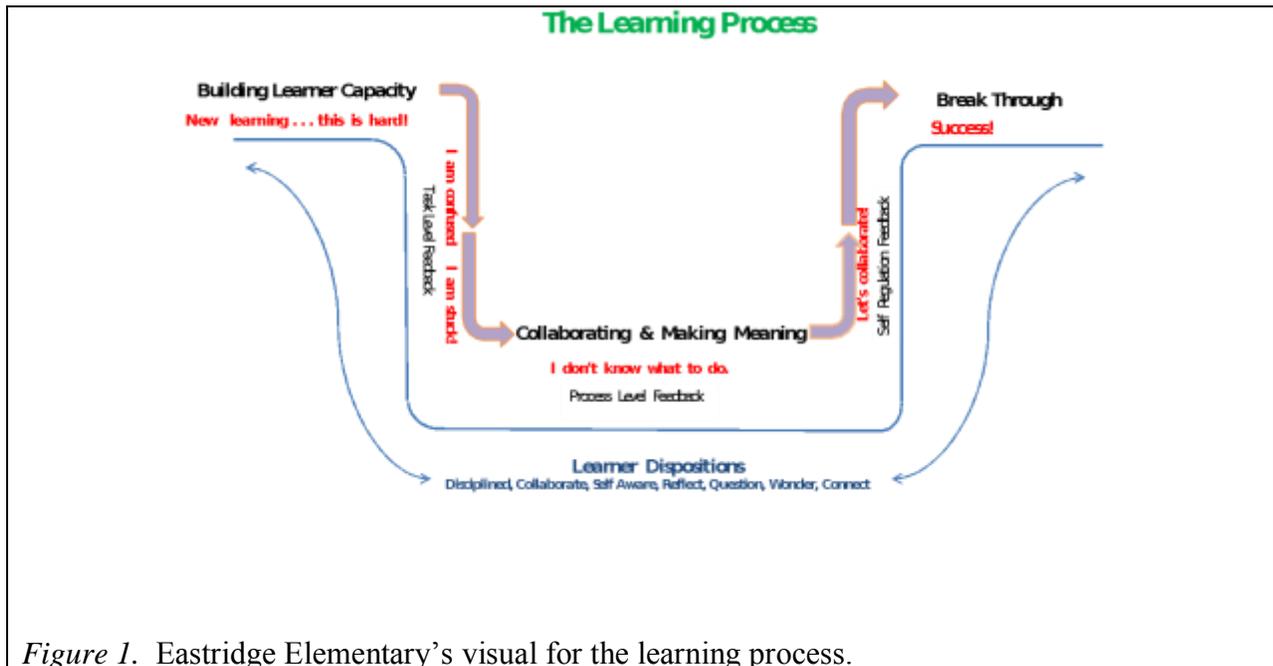


Figure 1. Eastridge Elementary’s visual for the learning process.

## **Implementing Approaches to Feedback**

Feedback is an integral part of the learning process. The goal of feedback is for teachers to provide students with responses that are “just in time”, “just for me”, “just for where I am in my learning process”, and “just what I need to help me move forward” (Hattie, 2012, p. 137). Throughout the second year of implementation, teachers videotaped their lessons, viewed the footage, and completed individual reflections on the type of feedback that they were giving to students. After completing reflections, teachers also participated in a closed-campus blog and engaged in brief conversations with campus administrators about their understandings with feedback. As a result of these efforts, campus administrators and teachers advanced their own understandings related to feedback and cultivated effective ways to provide feedback to students. Correspondingly, these practices have created a climate of learning at Eastridge Elementary where students are no longer afraid of making mistakes. Rather, students seek feedback actively within their classrooms and continually demonstrate enhanced levels of ownership and self-regulation with their learning.

## **Creating Assessment-Capable Learners**

Creating assessment-capable learners is a primary goal of Visible Learning practices (Hattie, 2012). Students who are assessment-capable learners are able to answer the following questions: Where am I? What is my goal? How am I going to get there? Campus administrators and teachers facilitated the formation of assessment-capable learners during the second year of Visible Learning implementation. During this year, campus administrators and teachers encouraged students to become active participants in the learning process and monitor their own progress through the establishment of progression walls and notebooks.

With progression walls and notebooks, students are able to track their own progress towards established learning goals (see Figure 2). Progression walls and notebooks also provide a mechanism through which teachers and students engage in data-based conversations. During these conversations, teachers and students use formative and summative data to determine students’ current progress towards specific learning goals. When areas needing improvement have been identified, teachers and students work together and create a specific plan of action to scaffold students’ success towards achieving mastery with related learning goals.

Progression walls and notebooks have established a robust monitoring procedure at Eastridge Elementary. At any given time, all campus staff members and students know exactly where each learner is with their learning. Thus, every person at the campus is invested with the development of assessment-capable learners. Students are also equally invested in the learning of their peers and frequently celebrate each other’s successes.

### Progression Walls



### Progression Notebooks

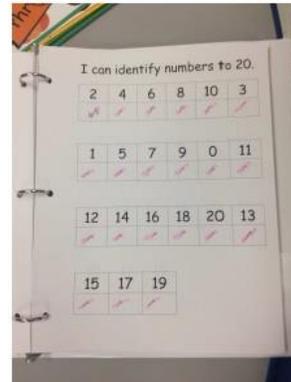
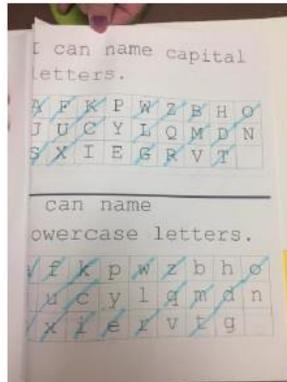


Figure 2. Eastridge Elementary's students are able to track their own progress with their learning using progression walls and notebooks.

### **Establishing Learner Dispositions**

According to Hattie (2009), learner dispositions are the qualities of a good learner, and students should be encouraged to exhibit these behaviors daily. With the goal of transferring the responsibility of learning to students, campus administrators worked with teachers to identify and establish learner dispositions during staff development sessions held during the third year of implementation. Campus administrators and teachers participated in collaborative discussions

during a series of staff development sessions to identify words that embodied vital learner dispositions expected of all students. Eventually, campus administrators and teachers agreed upon the following seven words: Connect, Reflect, Question, Wonder, Self-Aware, Disciplined, and Collaborate (see Figure 3). These words later became part of the campus daily pledge.

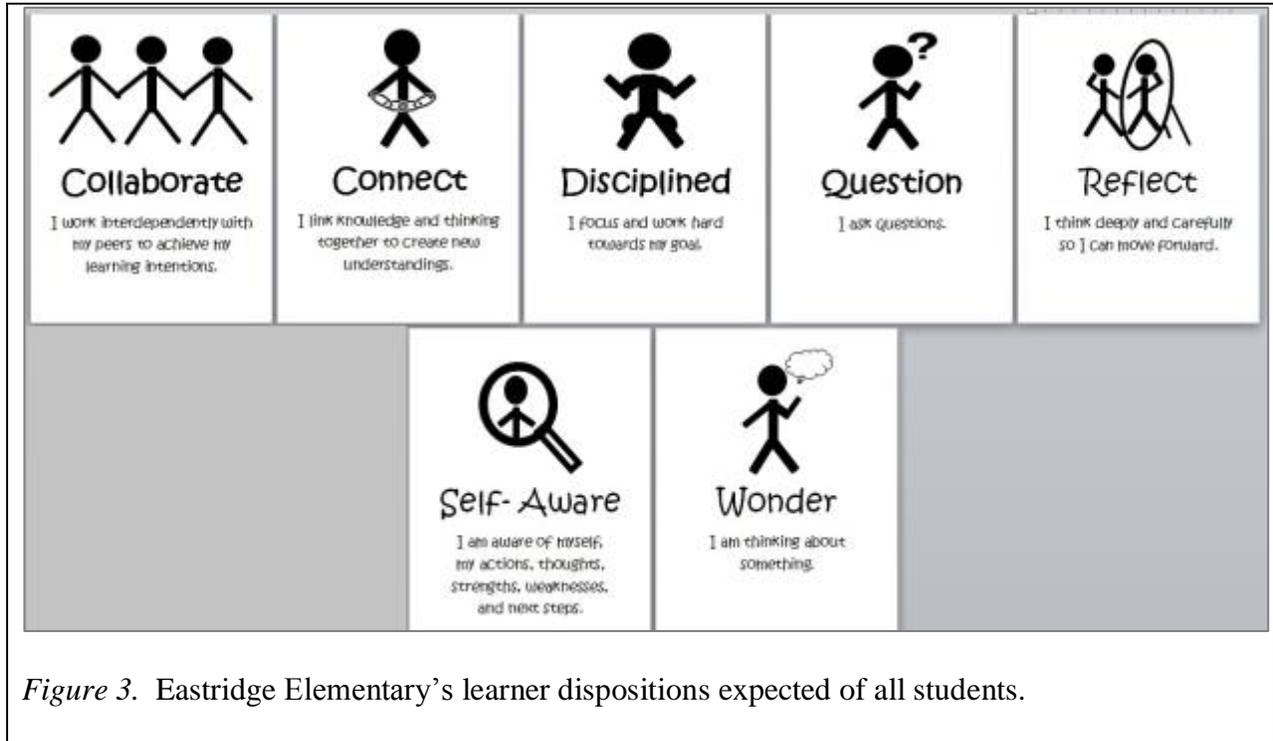


Figure 3. Eastridge Elementary's learner dispositions expected of all students.

Every day, campus administrators and teachers strive to foster students' understandings with each of these learner dispositions. When students exhibit specific learner dispositions through their actions and behaviors, campus administrators and teachers reinforce them through verbal encouragement. In addition, once students are able to articulate and explain how each of the learner dispositions helps them while learning, they are rewarded with a learner disposition t-shirt (see Figure 4). All campus staff members and students wear their learner disposition t-shirts proudly every Thursday, which fosters a student-centered campus culture.



Figure 4. Students earn a learner disposition t-shirt when they are able to articulate and explain how each of the seven learner dispositions helps them with their learning.

### **Implications for Educational Leadership Programs and Practitioners**

The journey with implementing Visible Learning practices at Eastridge Elementary has enabled campus administrators and teachers to meet the unique needs of all students and create an environment of educational equity. Throughout this journey, campus administrators continually monitor the campus's progress towards becoming a Visible Learning school and make any necessary adjustments. During the second year of implementation, campus administrators realized that they needed to continue developing fundamental understandings with Visible Learning practices during staff development sessions. In order to address this need, campus administrators reframed weekly staff development sessions to cultivate fundamental understandings about Visible Learning practices and feedback simultaneously. This adjustment reflected the importance of educational leaders operating as campus learning leaders (Fullan, 2014). School improvement efforts are sustained by campus learning leaders who develop the professional capital among teachers through ongoing professional learning experiences.

Another adjustment that campus administrators made was related to the individual reflections that teachers completed during the third year of implementation. In addition to their customary teaching responsibilities, teachers at Eastridge Elementary participated in weekly grade-level team meetings that consisted of planning interventions for specific students, unpacking state standards, composing lesson plans, and creating unique assessments to measure students' progress. Teachers also attended the campus's weekly staff development sessions and incorporated aspects related to Visible Learning practices into their daily instruction. It was during this year of implementation that campus administrators realized that their teachers were feeling extremely overwhelmed with all of their responsibilities. In order to keep the momentum of implementing Visible Learning practices and alleviate rising stress levels, campus

administrators modified the individual reflective process to be a team reflective process among each grade level and postponed its inclusion to the following year of implementation. This adjustment pointed to the importance of educational leaders cultivating a culture of trust at their campus (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Fostering high levels of trust creates a culture where “communication flows freely, problems can be disclosed, diagnosed, and corrected before they are compounded” (p. 30).

The implications described thus far are appropriate for educational leaders of any school. However, there are also implications specific for educational leaders in schools with high numbers of refugee students. Within these school contexts, educational leaders must remain considerate of the potential social-emotional impact that resettlement may have on refugee children (Due et al., 2016; Hos, 2016). Thus, fostering an inclusive school climate that addresses both learning and social needs among all students is of utmost importance (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The implementation of Visible Learning practices at Eastridge Elementary meets the learning needs and social needs of their students. For example, the use of progression walls and notebooks ensures that the curriculum “is accessible to all students” and responds to “their intellectual needs” (p. 53-54). Also, reinforcing the seven learner dispositions expected of all students, along with establishing a designated day that all campus staff and students wear their learner disposition t-shirts, promotes “social connectedness and a feeling of belonging for all students” (p. 54).

Educational leaders in schools with high numbers of refugee students must also tailor their practices to meet the unique characteristics of their school (Lerner, 2012). Lerner emphasized:

We can no longer merely report on how these children perform on standardized tests, but must rather turn our attention to the reason for prevalent outcomes (which we already know are unsatisfactory). Why are these children performing poorly? What is going wrong? What are the factors that cause these children to struggle or meet with success in their school community, classroom community, and larger community? This needs to be examined and deconstructed carefully, from a crosscultural perspective. (p. 14)

Throughout their journey with implementing Visible Learning practices, campus administrators at Eastridge Elementary have consulted and relied upon multiple data sources beyond annual state standardized assessments, such as summative assessments, formative assessments, and anecdotal observations, with which to examine and understand the needs of their students.

Eastridge Elementary’s journey with implementing Visible Learning practices also holds several implications for educational leadership programs. As public schools continue to serve extremely diverse student populations, educational leadership programs must prepare practitioners who are capable of cultivating school environments that implement evidence-based practices to challenge and motivate students. Educational leaders must be skilled practitioners capable of fostering a campus-wide commitment to high-quality instruction for all learners provided by effective teachers (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005). The practices described in this manuscript serve as an authentic example of how educational leaders transformed a campus to address the learning and social needs of their students through the annual cycle of implementation for Visible Learning practices.

Educational leadership programs must also prepare practitioners who seek to transform their school campuses into learning organizations (Senge, 2006). Educational leaders establish a learning organization by attending to systems thinking, persona mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. Additionally, high performing learning organizations

continually enhance their capacity to achieve desired results both individually and collectively. Beginning with their first year of Visible Learning implementation, educational leaders established Eastridge Elementary as a learning organization by designing and holding weekly staff development sessions. Through these sessions, campus administrators have been successful with casting a shared vision, continually reflecting on their progress, and maintaining momentum to achieve immediate and long-range goals.

Finally, educational leadership programs must ensure that practitioners are skilled with facilitating collective leadership at their school campuses (Leithwood & Lewis, 2012). Collective leadership distributes aspects related to leadership among a number of organizational stakeholders. Campus administrators at Eastridge Elementary have demonstrated collective leadership by retaining the primary responsibilities associated with campus leadership and sharing ancillary aspects of leadership with their staff. While implementing Visible Learning practices, campus administrators have invited a variety of staff members to attend the summer conferences. Moreover, a number of staff members have coordinated and led the weekly staff development sessions. By employing collective leadership practices, campus administrators at Eastridge Elementary have empowered their staff, which has enhanced teacher effectiveness and student performance.

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