

**When Great Obscures the Not-so-Good: How Feedback on Feedback Led to Curricular and Structural Change at VOICE Charter School**

Franklin Headley, Fellow

[franklinheadley@voicecharterschool.org](mailto:franklinheadley@voicecharterschool.org)

Kellie Tice, Ally

[ktice143@voicecharterschool.org](mailto:ktice143@voicecharterschool.org)

VOICE Charter School

[www.voicecharterschool.org](http://www.voicecharterschool.org)

36-24 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Long Island City, New York 11106

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## ABSTRACT

We initially focused our project on multi-directional feedback after assessing feedback given to teachers and listening to their feedback to supervisors. However, we shifted gears when we heard our teachers' concerns about our performance gap with our third graders, specifically in English Language Arts.

As a result, this year (2018-2019), we made several major changes to help close student performance gaps including a new ELA curriculum, changing our level reading assessments, enhance our implementation of guided reading, and improve our supervisory ratios and structure. As a result of these changes, we received positive feedback on our feedback to teachers and experienced some improvements in third grade performance. Our steps for 2019-2020 include focusing on our English Language Learner students and other factors in our continuous journey to enhance staff performance and close student performance gaps.

## INTRODUCTION

VOICE Charter School was founded in 2008 and is located in Long Island City, Queens, New York, serving grades K-8 with a total population of about 680 students and 115 staff members. The school is split into two campuses, which are about two blocks apart. The Lower Campus, which consists of grades K-2, shares a building with PS Q111. The Lena Horne or Upper Campus is located in a former Catholic school building and houses grades 3-8. Since our founding, we have received two consecutive full five-year charter renewals, which is the maximum number of years a charter school may receive a renewal.

Located in the mecca of diversity—Queens, New York—VOICE's student population is 60% Hispanic; 15% African American; 15% Asian and 10% White. Students with disabilities number 19% and 17% of students are English Language Learners. Our class size averages 28 to 30 students. Additionally, 83% of our students receive either free or reduced lunch.

In Spring 2019, as in previous years, 100% of VOICE students were matched with a high school of choice. Each student on average was offered their 3rd ranked school, and 100% of students with IEP or ELL status were provided an offer that ranked in their top 5 choices. 15% of VOICE students were admitted to an exam school in New York City. In 2018, all of our students took the Algebra Regents exam in eighth grade and 95% passed. Our 2018 8<sup>th</sup> grade State Test scores resulted in VOICE being ranked 12 of 495 NYC schools and 56 of NYC 579 schools in ELA. Also, in 2018, 72% of our 8th graders performed at a Level 4 in Math.

As noted in the school's name, VOICE has a unique focus on music and choral singing, which deeply influences its mission. Our mission is to develop every child into a caring human

being, full of wonder, who can work hard to reach a place where he or she can choose from many great paths that will lead to a life of purpose, happiness, and fulfillment.

At VOICE, we believe in providing a nurturing environment that supports all students in meeting high behavioral and academic expectations. We encourage our students to grow as learners in all areas of their life. We have a rich academic program that consists of many core areas of instruction, including a deep emphasis on music and the arts. Our teachers work hard to develop deep and meaningful relationships with students and their families, collaborating around each individual student's holistic growth. We hope that our school builds the foundation for a fulfilling life for our students in which they are able to choose from many enriching pathways after they graduate to high school, college, and beyond.

At the core of our academic culture is the concept of efficacy -- "Smart is not something you are. It is something you get." Efficacy is the belief that virtually all human beings are born capable of advanced graduate study in any subject area and that it is the responsibility of schools to teach children, so they may choose the field or fields in which they wish to become experts.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

By acting on multi-directional feedback from all school stakeholders, how can we as leaders guide, support, and empower our staff *most* effectively in order improve student outcomes, particularly in ELA?

Originally, we were planning only to address staff members' feelings about feedback for our project topic. However, when we examined the content of their feedback we realized that the ELA curriculum and assessment programs in grades K-5 at VOICE were a significant concern for many of our staff. They felt that curriculum alignment with the state standards was a major driver of the lower performance of the students in grades 3 to 5. As a result, members of our Cahn project team suggested that we add to our project topic addressing the ELA performance gap for our children so we shifted our focus to how we can best act in response to feedback to close the ELA performance gap.

#### METHODS

### Articulating the Problem: Teacher and Student Performance Management

Some of our performance management and feedback systems felt like inconsistent, generic, empty exercises. The development plans looked identical for employees even though the role of each faculty member was unique. There was no sense of individualized, tailored support for staff, which affected teacher morale, and we worried that it may set a poor model for staff to ask the same type of empty exercises of the students under their care. Customized feedback would allow for open yet concise communication between teachers and leaders and could lead to more constructive conversations.

We conducted organizational health surveys with our staff in Spring 2018 to help us understand which areas we needed to improve upon. The results demonstrated that a significant part of the staff did not feel they were getting consistent feedback to improve their performance. In response to the statement, "My supervisor has provided me with regular actionable feedback," only 66% agreed. When we looked at the comments (selected comments are in **Appendix A**), the following issues emerged:

- a. Not getting enough feedback or support.
- b. Only receiving feedback when it is connected to evaluation.
- c. Unclear expectations
- d. Supervisors needing more training on coaching and support.
- e. More and consistent and actionable feedback.

We then followed up with staff individually and in focus groups to learn more. We wanted to follow an action inquiry model and develop a deeper understanding from our initial focus. It was from these conversations and taking a fresh look at our organizational structure that we were able to further refine the problem:

- 1) The supervisor ratios were inconsistent with one admin supervising 6 people and another 32 people.
- 2) When staff members explained what they needed feedback on, many focused on adapting the existing workshop model to the needs of common core. They did not feel the curriculum was providing them with what they needed to get the students to meet the standard, but since we did not ask about curriculum in our organizational survey we only found out how widespread were these feelings regarding the inadequacy of the curriculum when we followed up with teachers after the written survey. In essence we were not asking all of the right questions.
- 3) Some dysfunctions in the supervisory team were also identified, particularly around norming around expectations for staff feedback.

- 4) For feedback to be received and acted upon, there has to be a positive, substantial, and trusting relationship between the employee and the supervisor. It also has to be two-way—employee feedback has to be heard and employees need to see that supervisors are taking action on that feedback.

A clearer, more present, deliberate, and authentic feedback process would hold us as leaders more accountable to our staff. This would make it clearer to staff as well as to leaders what our responsibilities are in providing support and feedback and would help define our responsibilities around the professional and personal development of all of our employees. We believed this change would have a positive effect on both teacher and student performance. In turn, our hope was that more effective feedback would have a positive impact on student ELA performance.

Aside from utilizing surveys, we have also been using other schools as a resource, which has proven to be very beneficial. Specifically, we visited a school in Washington, D.C. to learn more about the Wit and Wisdom curriculum. To best transition our teachers and students to the new curriculum, we have turned to a multitude of other resources as well. We've hired curriculum consultants, obtained materials from these consultants, and have used standards alignment protocols for the new curriculum.

One of the most significant findings from the focus groups was that it was hard to re-conceptualize feedback at VOICE without addressing the teacher-administrator ratios and the challenges in the existing curriculum. Two questions from these groups resonated. What is the point in giving feedback on a curriculum that is not working anymore? How can we improve at giving feedback if there are too many staff members to give feedback?

We had already been considering a curriculum shift, given that there had not been a review of the curriculum in ten years. The administrative team began to explore different curricula. Our main research focused on a close reading of Ed Reports. We then sought support from the teachers and approval from the Board to pilot the curriculum by teaching at least two of the units in grades K-5. The principal did a two-day training in the curriculum so he knew it well enough to answer questions and many teachers worked through sample lessons and texts. We selected Wit & Wisdom as the new curriculum for the following reasons:

- Highest ranked curriculum on Ed Reports
- Strongest alignment to Common Core Standards
- High text quality
- Encourages differentiation
- The publisher, Great Minds, also publishes our more successfully implemented math curriculum, Eureka.

In reviewing the pilot, teachers really appreciated the rigor and quality of the texts in the curriculum. Wit and Wisdom also sets high standards for student discussion. The curriculum

supplements each module's featured texts with relevant articles, videos, and works of visual art. End of module assessment tasks are designed to illustrate student understanding of each standard emphasized in that module. In addition, in contrast to our implementation of the workshop model, Wit and Wisdom offered these features:

- All students read grade-level texts in every module (unit)
- Whole class engagement around text, rather than isolated skills are independently applied by students
- More emphasis on text-based discussion and writing based on textual evidence
- Explicit vocabulary instruction and emphasis on reading for acquiring deeper content knowledge

We then set up a timeline to implement the new curriculum:

- August 2018: W&W Fellow leads 2 days of PD
- November 2018: W&W Fellow leads 1 day of PD
- Winter/Spring 2019: W&W Fellow leads site visits/observations

The shift in ELA curriculum also called for an adjustment to VOICE's reading assessment system. Previously, we used teacher-adapted running records which aligned with reading workshop. With a new curriculum emphasizing deep exploration of a text, the elementary school faculty opted to transition to Fountas and Pinnell ("F&P"). These assessments provide a much clearer picture of students as readers through a thorough analysis of fluency and comprehension.

To address teacher-admin ratio and opportunities for feedback, we hired additional and new school leaders (a Lower Elementary Director, an Upper Elementary Director and an Upper Elementary Academic Dean) with strong literacy backgrounds from outside of our school for the 2018-19 school year. In addition, in grades 3-5, we divided up major coaching responsibilities (For Math and ELA) between the Upper ES School Director and the Upper ES Dean. This allowed school leaders to focus deeply on one subject area, use their individual strengths in coaching teachers, and sustain a high level involvement in each area with each teacher and the grade team. The Directors and Deans co-teach and co-plan math and ELA lessons with teachers. The ratio of administrator to teacher dramatically improved, with no one solely supervising and supporting dozens of teachers, as had been done before.

In addition, we met three times per week for Grade Team Planning and Review meetings and have completed monthly walk-through observations to identify teaching practices to be addressed with staff members. We made sure to meet weekly with individual teachers to provide targeted support and have held weekly coaching meetings. We have also initiated academic development of Classroom Assistants by having them provide small group instruction.

New data collection tools also became a tremendous help in assessing how to improve ELA scores. Regularly scheduled unit assessment analysis sessions and data review meetings were held to promote discussion and action plans about incoming data.

We have closely evaluated the process of gathering data from staff to ensure accurate feedback. Determining how to accomplish this is complex and we were concerned about the different levels of trust that exist in giving feedback. It has been crucial that supervisors give specific feedback, but to achieve this we had to create a safe environment for them to do so. It became imperative to develop more trusting relationships with staff members. More one-on-one check in with teachers with administrators who supervised less people helped with this because it allowed that time to build relationships.

The switch to F&P assessment has been a journey. In particular, communicating the news to parents was difficult because we've had to be cautious in sending them an accurate message. When we made the switch, different assessment outcomes were produced, which caused some parents to question F&P. We then realized we were facing the possibility of undermining the credibility of F&P. Also, the sheer amount of time it took in implementing curriculum and F&P has also proven to be challenging. In particular, many hours were spent by staff in identifying students falling behind and in addressing the RTI program.

The problem was far more complicated than we initially conceptualized but, in the end, we had to focus on what was the impact on student outcomes. We now turn that to the achievement of our students by looking more closely at our student performance results. (**See Appendix B**).

The starkest contrast in this data is the vast difference in performance between the third grade and the eighth grade students on the ELA test, as compared to all schools in NYC. We were already aware of this difference but our perspective had since changed. For several years we had been qualifying these third grade results by reminding everyone that we did not focus on test prep, that it was their first year of testing for third graders (even though it was the first year of testing for all third-grade students in the state), and most obscuring, that it was not about "where you start but where you end up." That statement had been preventing us from getting better and we realized that we had to stop saying it. We incorrectly reasoned that since the 8<sup>th</sup> grade results were strong, we should not be so worried about the third grade results.

## RESULTS

When it came to our initial question about feedback. The results were very simple. In our 2019 organizational health survey, 82% of our staff responded "agree" with the statement "my supervisor has provided me with regular actionable feedback" (up from 66% in 2018). Interestingly, we never got around to implementing many changes to the feedback process. Instead we focused more on the underlying causes of curriculum and assessment misalignment and the supervisor ratio and content knowledge.

We were able to see around a 7% increase in ELA proficiency in our third graders between the second and last interim assessments of this year. Although state test results are not yet out, we have identified another problem: the misalignment of our externally constructed interim assessments. We have found that these assessments are no longer reliable predictors of our students' performance and, as a result, staff morale has been damaged since they have not been able to see the progress they were hoping to make on the state assessment. That can be disheartening to them. We are now contemplating creating our own interim assessments in grades 3-5.

Next year, we also plan to focus on improving reading levels for grades 3-5 ELL students after receiving concerning data this schoolyear. This year, only 4% of third through fifth grade ELL students were reading on grade level (according to F&P), which presents major challenges and more hard work for staff and students for the 2019-2020 schoolyear. This year, we have rearranged class schedules to ensure there is time for guided reading and we have begun to train and re-train teachers. One of the major changes we have planned for next year is the hiring of two ELL coordinators. We are hopeful that this will help ensure more focus on struggling ELL learners and a more robust guided reading program.

Moving forward, in addition, next year we will continue to:

- Gather reading level data
- Ask how the new curriculum has impacted teachers on future surveys
- Observe classroom instruction
- Revisit ELL data at the beginning of the year and see if there has been an impact
- Use data to create helpful teacher and student survey questions
- Continue to implement the new curriculum
- Visit more schools to identify other factors that could help enhance implementation of the curriculum

As leaders, we will:

- Dig deeper into the data from student performance and teacher surveys
- Continue to listen to teachers
- Ask new questions in our surveys and focus groups
- Look for other opportunities to raise student performance
- Focus on norming the feedback provided by all leaders at VOICE and rethink the precious one period per week all of the leaders come together
- Look to what outside expertise we need and bring it to the school

## REFLECTIONS



### Systems Thinking

When we found that there were additional questions from teachers about our plan to respond to feedback, it was at first a little scary because we thought we already had a project – one that was about feedback to staff. Ironically, we were ignoring their feedback to us and we needed to listen. However, these new questions about curriculum and assessment threatened the simplicity of our project. Yet, it was a nagging concern about the way we were responding to change and our commitment to the Cahn Project. We knew we could not miss an opportunity to get at underlying causes so we took action on that feedback. It was only in the fall when Carolyn Riehl continued her work with us on systems thinking that we were able to see that we were following Deming's Cycle of Continuous Improvement (Plan, Do, Study, Act). It was not only OK to make changes but it was also necessary. Using that framework, we were able to see in retrospect that we had planned to respond to feedback; we did put into effect changes around curriculum and assessment; we studied the results of the first interim assessments and determined that guided reading and more work around differentiation was necessary; and then we acted by reorganizing the schedule and providing coaching around guided reading in the classroom. In doing the Cahn project and then understanding the cycle of continuous change, our work will have a lasting impact at VOICE because we have already conceptualized additional changes that will be subject to the same cycle so we can continually refine our efforts at improvement.

### Ways of Knowing

During the summer, I read Ellie Drago-Severson's book, "Leading Adult Learning," as a follow up to our sessions with her. So many thoughts and connections went through my head both during her lecture and facilitation with the Cahn Fellows and in reading the book. I used the reflections to be transparent with staff through a talk and video share of what I describe below:

I have been thinking a lot about moving between the stages both in how that feels and what one can see. Two Joni Mitchell songs kept playing in my head. In "Both Sides Now," the words made me thinking of the ability to see things in three dimensions and the utter humility demanded to be able to see what you don't know as you move from one stage to the next:

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now  
From up and down and still somehow  
It's cloud's illusions I recall  
I really don't know clouds at all*

When we can see the other side of the cloud, what we have seen before seems like an illusion and it doesn't seem like we knew anything about clouds at all because we could not see the other side of them. That's what it can feel like for the rule-based self, for example, to move to the others-focused self. One thing I wonder about the transitions to all the stages (except to self-transformation) is that when the move is complete, there can be a forgetfulness of what it

felt like to be in the previous stage. That might explain to me why a self-authoring individual could have such contempt for rule-follower.

The connection for me with "The Circle Game" (only the Joni Mitchell and Judy Collins versions, as Buffy St. Marie sings it too fast), is that as one progresses through to the stage of self-transformation, one can never leave but also never return to the previous stages. It can feel like a carousel moving through time.

*We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return we can only look behind  
From where we came*

For self-transforming individuals, who have power to look back and go round and round with the deepest empathy, the complexities can be so demanding that they can be sentimental about returning to earlier stages. As Joni sings, they can end up dragging our feet to slow the circle down.

*Take your time, it won't be long now  
Till you drag your feet to slow the circles down*

Deliberate practice such as meditation, yoga, and prayer can potentially take them back to even stages 0 ("Incorporative") and 1 ("Impulsive") (**See Appendix C**) as temporary respite but the benefits and burdens of seeing return.

I have tried to imagine how self-transforming individuals act and what they say, and the first person who came into my head was Woody Harrelson's character, Bill Willoughby in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. He had the power to see with deepest empathy other people and the worlds they inhabited even when he was experiencing such extraordinary pain himself. In his letter to Dixon, he writes,

"Because through love comes calm, and through calm comes thought. And you need thought to detect stuff sometimes, Jason. It's kinda all you need. You don't even need a gun. And you definitely don't need hate. Hate never solved nothing, but calm did. And thought did. Try it. Try it just for a change. No one'll think you're gay. And if they do, arrest 'em for homophobia! Won't they be surprised! Good luck to you, Jason. You're a decent man, and yeah you've had a run of bad luck, but things are gonna change for you. I can feel it."

Willoughby, like the Buddha, seems to beckon a racist and homophobic Dixon towards an enlightenment, a movement from one stage that is painful to live in to another unknown. Because it is a movie, the transformation has to be a sudden epiphany and, in this case, a literal baptism by fire, but I would like to believe that Willoughby had already seen something transforming in Dixon so that he had some hope that his letter would help Dixon.

For me, I think I spent many years as a founder in a self-authoring mode while thinking I was transforming. By making this public to my staff, I want to open even more how leadership decisions are made at the school to a broader base of leaders. I want to be able to be even more curious about the ideas of the leaders on my teams and reframe my leadership around helping them to see the greatness that is in them and help make their creative and thoughtful ideas have an impact on our students.

Kellie, my ally, is key to this. She now has been at the school for a full year. She came in the middle of the continuous improvement cycle (but since it is a cycle, one always enters into the middle. Kellie has really grown this year in pushing my thinking and challenging some of the ways things are done at VOICE from differentiation to structure of staff meetings. I look forward to her having a larger voice at VOICE and helping not only other teachers but also other leaders including myself to grow.

## APPENDIX

**Appendix A:**

*“. . .they are not made at all (i.e. regular individual feedback from our supervisors, training, professional development, direct observation from supervisors. . .”*

*“I had subjective feedback but it’s hard to get data in the assistant teacher position.”*

*“I have definitely used feedback to inform change, but it was in a more unofficial capacity. I think feedback surveys would be beneficial to our department.”*

*“I feel that assistants have been given very little feedback this year. The only formal feedback we have been provided with has been one evaluation.”*

*“I received actual feedback once, and it appeared to be centered around things that I noted about my own performance in my self-eval. I feel like it wasn't complete because there wasn't anyone actually observing me regularly to speak on my performance. There were some minor things at the beginning of the year from two teachers. The rest was general, "good job" type of things. Need more specific feedback.”*

*“While K-2 does not get feedback from students, I do take feedback from my dean and try to implement them. As a teacher, I want to become better at my craft so taking feedback and using data is the best way to for me to implement change.”*

*“I don't feel I've really been given much constructive feedback to use this year.”*

*“The assistants as a team have not received much data with which, we as a whole could make changes from. We have gotten feedback on certain processes and strategies which have been easy to adopt and modify.”*

*“I think working with under-performing staff members and giving ample feedback before firing is brought to the table would help staff feel more comfortable in their roles. In turn, I think this would prevent people from leaving preemptively because they are worried they will be abruptly let go.”*

*“Generally, I think a more positive experience at VOICE for assistants comes from feeling valued from the outset- this means being trained and oriented to the role (no matter when your start date), being consulted on decisions and changes, being given consistent feedback and check-ins from supervisors, and having an adequate number of assistants to ensure that we do not feel taken advantage of or used as floaters/extra bodies instead of consistent, respected authorities in our classrooms.”*

*"[What is needed is a] stronger and more purposeful coaching system that supports teachers in their content area with specific feedback."*

*"Creating a culture where people are more open to taking risks and giving and receiving feedback."*

*"I feel respected and part of the ES team. I have, however, felt that interactions with leadership have at times been limited or inconsistent this year. This can make it challenging to build relationships and receive feedback."*

*"I would love more feedback and more interactions in the coming months :)"*

## **Appendix B:**

ELA Proficiency Rates on the New York State Assessments:

Grade	VOICE 2018	District 2018	City 2018	State 2018	City Rank 2018	VOICE 2017*
3	41%	57%	53%	51%	599 out of 908	28%
4	48%	57%	51%	47%	481 out of 892	55%
5	38%	45%	39%	37%	399 out of 878	32%
6	51%	60%	50%	49%	240 out of 602	39%
7	53%	53%	43%	40%	146 out of 588	52%
8	79%	60%	52%	48%	56 out of 579	77%
ES	42%	53%	48%	45%	n/a	39%
MS	62%	58%	48%	46%	n/a	56%
Overall	50%	55%	48%	45%	n/a	46%

*\*Not directly comparable to 2018 exam*

## Appendix C:

**Table 2.1: Ways of Knowing (pages 40 & 41 in *Leading Adult Learning*)**

Stage→ Kegan's (1982) Terms→ Drago-Severson's Terms→	<i>Stage 0</i> <i>Incorporative</i>	<i>Stage 1</i> <i>Impulsive</i>	<i>Stage 2</i> <i>Imperial</i> <i>Instrumental</i>
<b>Underlying thought structure</b> <i>Subject (S)</i> <i>Object (O)</i>	S: Reflexes (sensing, moving) O: None	S: Impulses, perceptions O: Reflexes (sensing, moving)	S: Needs, interests, wishes O: Impulses, perceptions
<b>Definition of self</b>			Orients to self-interests, purposes, and concrete needs.
<b>Orienting concerns</b>			Depends on rules and the "right". Is concerned with concrete consequences. Decisions are based on what the self will acquire. Others are helpers or obstacles to meeting concrete needs. Person does not yet have the capacity for abstract thinking or generalizing.
<b>Guiding questions for self</b>			"Will I get punished?" "What's in it for me?"

<i>Stage 3</i> <i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Socializing</i>	<i>Stage 4</i> <i>Institutional</i> <i>Self-Authoring</i>	<i>Stage 5</i> <i>Interindividual</i> <i>Self-Transforming</i>
S: The interpersonal, mutuality O: Needs, interests, wishes	S: Authorship, identity, psychic administration, ideology O: The interpersonal, mutuality	S: Interindividuality, interpenetrability of self-systems O: Authorship, identity, psychic admin., ideology
Orients to valued others' (external authorities) expectations, values and opinions.	Orients to self's values (internal authority).	Orients to multiple self-systems; open to learning from other people.
Depends on external authority, acceptance, and affiliation. Self is defined by important others' judgments. Is oriented to inner states. Self feels responsible for others' feelings and holds others responsible for own feelings. Criticism and conflict threaten the self.	Self generates and replies to internal values and standards. Criticism is evaluated according to internal standards. Ultimate concern is with one's own competence and performance. Self can balance contradictory feelings. Conflict is viewed as natural and enhances one's own and others' perspectives to achieve larger organizational goals.	Is committed to self-exploration. Engaging with conflict is an opportunity to let others inform and shape thinking. Conflict is viewed as natural to life and enhances thinking. Is able to understand and manage tremendous complexity. Is substantively less invested in own identity and more open to others' perspectives. Constantly judges and questions how self-system works

<p>“Will you (valued other/authority) still like/value me?” “Will you (valued other/authority) approve of me?” “Will you (valued other/authority) still think I am a good person?”</p>	<p>“Am I maintaining my personal integrity, standards, values?” “Am I competent?” “Am I living, working, loving to the best of my ability?” “Am I achieving my goals &amp; being guided by my ideals?”</p>	<p>“How can other people’s thinking help me to enhance my own?” “How can I seek out opinions from others to help me modify my own ways of understanding?”</p>
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©Drago-Severson, E. (2009). *Leading Adult Learning: Supporting Adult Development in Our Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

