

Discussion Paper: Contextual Literacy and Agency: School Leaders

Agency is defined in the BCPVPA framework as “The ability and empowerment to act with purpose in response to contextual understanding, making informed decisions that reflect professional judgment, moral courage, and a commitment to student success.” In this competency, agency is paired with contextual literacy, emphasizing that school leaders are not only analyzers of context but also actors within it, with the professional will and skill to influence outcomes.

Contextual Literacy and Agency is a critical leadership competency for school principals. It emphasizes the ability to navigate and influence the diverse professional and cultural contexts in which school leadership operates, while exercising agency to actively shape and improve those contexts. Principals must understand how internal and external systems operate, how they intersect, and how change happens across multiple layers of school, district, community, and policy environments.

For school leaders, contextual literacy and agency is both a mindset and a skillset. It requires fluency in the languages and practices of pedagogy, governance, labour relations, finance, Indigenous protocols, and community partnerships. Principals must connect seemingly disconnected systems, communicate effectively across professional, cultural, and political boundaries, and act decisively in service of the school’s mission. They must forecast and respond to change—locally, provincially, nationally, and globally—while remaining grounded in the unique needs and identities of their school communities.

This competency is rooted in respect for place and history, honours Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and demands communication practices that build authentic, reciprocal relationships. In practice, contextual literacy and agency is about understanding the broader educational, political, and social ecosystem while maintaining deep attentiveness to local realities, relationships, and opportunities for action.

Considerations for Principals

Self -This includes demonstrating agency by taking decisive, values-driven action based on contextual insights, showing moral courage, and being prepared to act when opportunities or challenges emerge.

- Cultivate deep understanding of internal school systems and how they connect to district structures (e.g., staffing, budgeting, scheduling, student support services).
- Build authentic relationships with students, staff, and parent advisory councils.
- Learn and use contextually appropriate language and frameworks relevant to diverse stakeholders.

- Apply theories of change suited to school-level improvement and community building.
- Exercise agency by identifying areas for proactive leadership and initiating positive change.
- Act effectively in professional and cultural contexts, and operate between those contexts to achieve school objectives.
- Recognize commitments to decolonization and Indigenization in decision-making and school culture.

Community - Leaders nurture agency within their school communities by creating conditions where staff, students, and families are empowered to act in alignment with shared values and contextual understanding.

- Build strong relationships with local Indigenous nations, community organizations, and external partners.
- Engage with district departments, professional bodies, and community groups to foster just, reciprocal relationships.
- Centre the school as a hub of community action and resilience.
- Advocate for the school in district and public forums, aligning school goals with broader community and district contexts.
- Anticipate and plan for changes in policy, demographics, and societal expectations that affect the community.
- Enact programs of change through consensus building and collaboration with internal and external stakeholders.
- Honour Indigenous language, protocol, and worldview in all community engagement.

Reflective Questions for Principals

In what ways do you currently exercise agency in your leadership, and how can you strengthen your capacity to act with moral courage and contextual understanding?

1. How well do we understand the internal systems that drive our school? Where are we strong, and where do we need greater clarity?
2. What external systems (district, government, union, community, economic) most influence our work—and how are we engaging with them?
3. How do we foster reciprocal, trust-based relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members?
4. How do we honour Indigenous language, protocol, and worldview in our school culture and community engagement?
5. How are we building a school environment where we not only respond to change, but actively influence it in service of equity and student success?
6. How do you translate these aspirational statements to a practical professional growth plan goal?