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What Does It Mean to Celebrate?

Reflections on New Tech Network's Spring 2018 Leadership Summit
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Last week New Tech Network (NTN) held its semi-annual Leadership Summit where over 200 teacher, school, and district leaders representing 82 schools, 51 districts, 16 states and Australia convened for three days of leader-centric learning and reflection. The focus of this Summit was *Bright Spots: How Learning from Our Successes Builds a Culture of Continuous Improvement*. [Jen Benkovitz, NTN's Director of School Leadership](#), challenged us to swap our typically problem-centric view of the world for one where we focused on "Bright Spots" as a path towards scaling success in our classrooms, schools and systems. As part of Jen's introduction and framing she had us watch an excerpt of [Dewitt Jones' wonderful TEDx Talk](#) where he reflects on his career as a photographer. While telling stories through a series of beautiful photographs, he implores us to embrace the simple yet profound charge he was given as a photographer for National Geographic - "Celebrate what's right with the world!"

His challenge for us to "change our lens" and *celebrate* surfaced a question for me. What does it mean to celebrate? More specifically, it raised two questions for me as it relates to thinking about the context of schools.

1. *What do you celebrate?*
2. *How do you celebrate?*

How We Typically Celebrate in Schools

Generally speaking, there is no shortage of celebration in schools. We hold school meetings that celebrate accomplishments big and small by students. We hold pep rallies that celebrate athletic endeavors. We hold award ceremonies that celebrate academic accomplishment. There is Homecoming, which celebrates social accomplishment (e.g. *popularity*). On the adult side, the reality is not much different. We commonly acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of our colleagues during staff meetings, school announcements, and sometimes in writing (e.g. school newsletters). We give out forms of recognitions that celebrate a range of contributions via simple, brief "shout outs" all the way up to the Teacher of the Year. Schools also celebrate things like the 100th Day of School, Red Ribbon Week, Teacher



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Appreciation Week and so on. And all of these are marked by the presence of food. In American public education, every celebration is a reason to eat cupcakes.

In short, our general practice around celebration in schools is that we 1) *take a break from learning*, 2) briefly acknowledge some accomplishment by a student or colleague, and 3) eat food (usually high in sugar). After that is over, we quickly return to whatever problem had our attention before the celebration interrupted our daily routine.

The practice described above reveals a frustrating reality about American public schools. Namely, that we typically give considerable energy and attention to ritualizing the social life of schools and are comparably neglectful when it comes to ritualizing the intellectual life of schools (for students and adults). At the risk of sounding like a grumpy old man, I would argue that the pattern of practice described above represents a weak vision of celebration. Not because I don't like cupcakes (I do) but because it divorces the practice of celebration from the practice of learning and reflection. The forms of celebration described do not furnish us with any additional understanding of or insight into the accomplishments being celebrated, be they social or intellectual in nature. Consequently, we are ill equipped to reproduce similar successes going forward because we have very little explicit understanding of what produced those successes in the first place.

What do you celebrate?

I think we can work our way towards a more robust vision of celebration in schools that centers on the practice of identifying and understanding “Bright Spots” in our work. So what is a bright spot? At first glance this seems like a question with an obvious answer. A bright spot is a success that we want to celebrate, maybe even evangelize. However, there is a more nuanced understanding required of us if we are to become proficient in identifying bright spots.

In their bestseller, [Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard](#), authors Chip and Dan Heath devote an entire chapter to teaching us how to “Find the Bright Spots.” They offer two examples of “Bright Spots” or “flashes of success.” First, they describe a case study about a subset of Vietnamese mothers living in poverty who were successfully nourishing their children despite the fact that the rest of their village was struggling with under and malnourishment. Second, they tell the story of “Bobby”, a student who openly professes that “school stinks”, whose school days are characterized by bad behavior and poor grades, and whose home life is characterized by the trauma of repeatedly being moved in and out of different foster care



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arrangements. Yet, there is one class where Bobby was being successful despite his struggles in every other aspect of school.

In both cases, the story revolves around analyzing a micro-success (A few Vietnamese mothers raising healthy children in conditions of poverty; Bobby's one successful class) and leveraging our understanding of that bright spot to create macro-success (the eradication of malnutrition in a poor Vietnamese village; the transformation of Bobby into a student succeeding in all of his classes). However, it is important to recognize what makes these cases good examples of bright spots. These Vietnamese mothers and Bobby represent successes in the face of conditions that gave us no reason to think that such a success was possible. In short, their successes were surprising given the broader reality of what was going on. *How is it that a Vietnamese mother living in a rural, poverty stricken village can adequately feed their children? How is that that a student with such a turbulent home life and a long history of failure in school can succeed in this one class?*

If we misunderstand the concept of "Bright Spots" as any success that we want to celebrate then we open up the possibility of committing a critical error in application. For example, what if we looked at the relative health and well-being of middle class American children as our bright spot in trying to solve the problem of child malnutrition in Vietnam. And from there we concluded that these Vietnamese mothers should feed their children more like middle-class American families. You can easily see the absurdity of that solution. Poverty-stricken, vietnamese mothers and middle-class American families are not situated in similar conditions. Thus, at best such an approach represents a solution that is likely to have profoundly negative unintended consequences, and at worst it represents a completely untenable solution.¹ And I suspect that it would be a particularly frustrating and offensive solution for Vietnamese mothers to hear.

Bright Spots are not just any random success. They are a very specific type of success that we have to become skilled at identifying. Bright spots derive their power, in part, because they confront and challenge our assumptions about what is possible. Prosperity in the presence of conditions that give us no reason to think such success was possible - this is the definition of a "Bright Spot."

How do you celebrate?

¹ Bright Spots can be seen as a micro-approach that is akin to the construct of Targeted Universalism in crafting public policy. For a short primer on Targeted Universalism check out this [video](#) from the Haas Institute.



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As described earlier, the primary shortcoming of typical celebrations in schools is that we divorce celebration from learning. Celebration in schools often amounts to small talk over food in honor of some accomplishment. Alternatively we associate work and learning with a focus on our problems - the student who misbehaves, the low attendance rate, the low test scores, *etc.* Moreover, even in this less than ideal form of celebration schools typically spend way more time talking about their problems than they do celebrating bright spots.

To arrive at a better definition of celebration we need to flip this pattern on its head. We must attach a different set of practices to the meaning of celebration. More specifically, celebration needs to represent the systematic and disciplined practice of analyzing our bright spots. We have to set aside time to engage in structured reflection on bright spots through the use of tools² like the [Success Analysis Protocol](#) or other strategies that can help shift our problem-centric view of the world.

As educators we need to work towards a reality in schools - in our PLC meetings, in our staff meetings, in our planning periods, in our conversations with families, in our conversations with students - where we spend at least as much time celebrating successes as we do perseverating on problems. This does not mean that we need to engage in fluffy small talk about student success. It means that we need to get really precise and specific in the way we describe success. And that we work to become increasingly concrete in our articulation of the factors that gave rise to that bright spot. It should be our goal as educators to work towards becoming at least as precise in articulating the reasons for our successes as we are in chronicling the contours of our troubles.

And if it helps you to eat a cupcake while you do this then go for it.

Celebration Redefined

A more powerful vision of celebration is one that enhances our capacity to produce similar successes more consistently going forward. By answering the two questions we asked at the outset, we arrive at a redefined vision and practice of what celebration can mean in schools.

- What do we celebrate?: Intentionally identified “Bright Spots”
- How do we celebrate?: Through the systematic and disciplined analysis of “Bright Spots”

² For a catalogue of different conversation protocols that can guide your efforts visit the [School Reform Initiative](#) website.



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It is important to recognize that the emphasis on bright spots is not a prosaic admonition to be more positive or give out more compliments in your daily life. Properly understood, the concept of “Bright Spots” is a methodology for how to lead change. In particular, it is method for leading change that is most relevant when it may not be possible to start by wholly transforming the conditions of your work. It is, however, an approach that when applied consistently over time can lead to transformation for the conditions that characterize your work and for you as an individual. Or as Dewitt Jones says, “Change your lens, change your perspective. Change your perspective, change your reality.”

Lastly, remember that the definition of a bright spot is an instance of success that exceeds what the conditions suggest are possible. That understanding renders the idea of “Bright Spots” as a methodology that points squarely at equity. Looking for bright spots challenges us to pay particular attention to the successes of those in our community who are situated furthest from opportunity. Bright spots are at their most powerful when we use them to grow the light that is already present in the most challenging aspects of our work. And that will always be worthy of celebration.