

Self-Assessment as a Catalyst for Educational Leadership Development: A Reflective Case Study

Jeff C. Suttles, National University, La Jolla, United States

Abstract

This study explores how self-assessment and reflective practice can serve as catalysts for educational leadership development, particularly within urban education contexts that integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) and arts-based wellness programming. Employing a reflective case study approach, the analysis utilizes three leadership assessment tools—Maxwell Leadership, Leadership Circle Profile, and Leadership DNA—to evaluate the leadership profile of one educational leader. Autoethnographic reflection was applied to identify strengths, growth areas, and implications for practice, linking assessment outcomes to real-world leadership experiences in programs serving underserved urban students. Findings reveal three core insights: strong collaboration and reliability, growth needs in authenticity and developing others, and the central role of communication for leadership success. These results align with authentic and human-centric leadership theory and underscore the value of experiential learning. The study demonstrates how individual self-assessment can illuminate broader leadership principles while offering practical strategies for educators and aspiring leaders to enhance communication, authenticity, and mentoring within diverse and creative learning environments.

Keywords: *educational leadership, self-assessment, reflective practice, authentic leadership, human-centric leadership, leadership communication, experiential learning, collaboration, authenticity, mentoring, urban education, SEL, arts-based wellness*

Researcher Bio: Jeff C. Suttles, M.S. Ed., is a Ph.D. Candidate whose scholarship examines social-emotional learning, arts-based education, wellness, and community-centered approaches to urban education. As a researcher and program innovator at Lucky Lab’z LLC, he designs programs that integrate music, creativity, and equity-focused learning experiences for underserved communities.

Introduction

Contemporary educational leadership faces unprecedented challenges, particularly in urban communities where systemic inequities continue to shape student experiences. Leaders must navigate resource gaps, cultural diversity, and heightened social-emotional needs while fostering inclusive environments that promote academic and personal growth. These realities underscore the importance of leadership approaches grounded in reflection, authenticity, and adaptability—qualities that enable leaders to respond to complex organizational and community dynamics (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kolb, 2014).

This case study emerges from the work of Lucky Lab’z LLC, an educational and entertainment entity dedicated to serving urban youth through programs that integrate music, wellness, and social-emotional learning (SEL). Lucky Lab’z operates with a mission rooted in empathy and equity, addressing barriers that limit access to quality educational opportunities. Many young people in these communities face challenges such as poverty, under-resourced schools, and limited exposure to creative outlets—factors that often constrain their academic and personal development. By leveraging arts-based initiatives and SEL frameworks, Lucky Lab’z provides students with spaces for expression, collaboration, and resilience-building.

Against this backdrop, the study examines how self-assessment and reflective practice can serve as catalysts for leadership growth. In contexts where leaders must balance instructional priorities with community engagement, structured reflection offers a pathway for aligning leadership behaviors with values of equity, creativity, and human-centric practice. This research contributes to ongoing conversations about leadership development in urban education by demonstrating how self-assessment tools, combined with experiential learning, can empower leaders to navigate complexity and foster transformative change.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Literature Review

Reflection and Experiential Learning

Reflection is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective leadership development because it enables leaders to critically examine their experiences and adapt their practices (Hamilton, 2019; Heinrich & Green, 2020; Schön, 1983). Grounded in experiential learning theory, leadership development is framed as a cyclical process of experience, reflection, and application, allowing leaders to transform insights into actionable strategies (Kolb, 2014; Strawn et al., 2017). Through this iterative process, reflective practice not only strengthens professional competence but also fosters personal growth, particularly when leaders engage with structured feedback tools that deepen self-awareness and inform authentic leadership behaviors (Brewer & Devnew, 2022).

Scholars argue that reflection serves as a bridge between theory and practice, enabling leaders to interpret complex organizational dynamics and respond with intentionality (Branson & Gross, 2021; Argyris & Schön, 1978). In educational contexts, reflective leadership is linked to improved decision-making, relational trust, and culturally responsive practices (Klar & Huggins, 2020; Shields, 2020). Moreover, structured self-assessment tools such as 360-degree feedback and leadership profiles provide a systematic approach to reflection, helping leaders identify blind spots and align behaviors with core values (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; London & Smither, 1995). These tools complement experiential learning by offering data-driven insights that enhance authenticity and adaptability—two qualities essential for navigating diverse and evolving educational environments (Day et al., 2014).

Recent research extends this conversation by emphasizing the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) and arts-based approaches in leadership development. SEL frameworks highlight

competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and relationship skills, which parallel the qualities cultivated through reflective practice (CASEL, n.d.; Jones et al., 2017). Arts-based leadership initiatives—such as music and creative wellness programs—offer experiential contexts where leaders practice collaboration, communication, and adaptability in dynamic, relational settings (Peppler et al., 2022; Eisner, 2002). These approaches not only enrich leadership capacity but also advance equity by creating culturally responsive spaces for student engagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Integrating self-assessment with SEL and arts-based strategies positions reflection as a multidimensional process that strengthens both leadership effectiveness and organizational culture. Ultimately, reflection is not a passive exercise but an active, transformative process that equips leaders to integrate personal growth with organizational effectiveness, reinforcing its role as a foundational element of leadership development (Mezirow, 1997).

Authentic and Human-Centric Leadership

Authentic leadership theory emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and balanced decision-making (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Leaders who integrate these qualities foster trust, ethical decision-making, and effective organizational outcomes. Complementing this, human-centric leadership prioritizes the well-being and development of team members, aligning leadership effectiveness with empathy, mentoring, and relational intelligence (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2023).

In urban education contexts, where leaders face systemic inequities and diverse student needs, authentic and human-centric approaches are particularly salient (Ladson-Billings, 2021). These frameworks encourage leaders to move beyond transactional models toward relational and transformative practices that center equity and inclusion. Authentic leadership enables leaders to model vulnerability and integrity, which is critical for building trust among staff, students, and

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

families in communities historically marginalized by educational systems. Similarly, human-centric leadership emphasizes creating psychologically safe environments where educators and students feel valued and supported, fostering collaboration and innovation.

The realities of inner-city education in 2025 amplify these needs. Many students navigate poverty, housing instability, and exposure to community violence, all of which impact their ability to engage fully in learning. Schools often operate with limited resources, outdated facilities, and insufficient access to mental health supports. Leaders must therefore adopt approaches that not only address academic achievement but also respond to the social-emotional and cultural dimensions of student life. Programs like Lucky Lab’s LLC exemplify this commitment by integrating music, wellness, and SEL to create spaces of belonging and resilience. By prioritizing empathy, creativity, and collaboration, educational leaders can transform schools into inclusive environments that empower all learners to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally while advancing systemic equity.

Social-Emotional Learning and Arts-Based Leadership

The integration of SEL and arts-based approaches enhances both leadership and student outcomes by fostering environments that prioritize emotional well-being, creativity, and holistic development (Peppler et al., 2022). SEL frameworks emphasize competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—skills that are equally critical for effective leadership (CASEL, n.d.). When leaders model these competencies, they create organizational cultures that value empathy, collaboration, and resilience, which are essential for navigating the complexities of urban education.

Arts-based leadership extends these benefits by embedding creativity and expressive practices into leadership development. Programs that incorporate music, visual arts, and movement

provide leaders with experiential opportunities to practice adaptability and relational engagement in dynamic settings. These contexts demand real-time problem-solving, active listening, and collaborative decision-making, reinforcing authentic leadership qualities such as transparency and trust-building. Moreover, arts-integrated SEL initiatives have been shown to improve student engagement, reduce behavioral challenges, and strengthen classroom climate, creating reciprocal benefits for both leaders and learners (Peppler et al., 2022).

In underserved urban communities, arts-based SEL programs also serve as equity-driven interventions, offering culturally relevant avenues for expression and healing. Leaders who champion these approaches not only enhance academic outcomes but also promote social-emotional growth and community connectedness. By integrating SEL principles with creative practices, educational leaders can cultivate inclusive environments that empower students and educators to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Leadership Rooted in Creative Pathways to Equity and Inclusion

True leadership in urban education is not confined to administrative tasks—it is a living, breathing practice that honors culture, creativity, and community. Urban schools often serve students whose identities are deeply tied to traditions such as hip-hop, urban dance, and street art—forms that embody resilience, storytelling, and innovation. When these cultural expressions are woven into Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and leadership practices, they validate students' lived experiences and create spaces of belonging and empowerment.

Leadership programs that incorporate cyphers, collaborative murals, or rhythm-based activities transform classrooms into arenas of authentic dialogue and problem-solving. These culturally responsive strategies do more than teach SEL competencies—they build trust, dismantle

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

systemic inequities, and affirm the voices of youth who are too often marginalized. In this way, leadership becomes an act of justice and creativity.

Academic communities thrive when leaders embrace these approaches as tools for empowerment rather than enrichment. By leveraging the arts as a bridge to SEL, schools can replace punitive discipline with restorative practices, reduce behavioral challenges, and nurture emotional literacy. In neighborhoods where resources are scarce, arts-based SEL becomes a beacon of hope, enabling students to see themselves as creators, innovators, and leaders. When leadership moves to the rhythm of the community, education becomes a sanctuary of possibility—where equity, creativity, and holistic development converge.

Communication as a Core Leadership Competency

Decades of research underscore communication as a pivotal leadership competency, shaping organizational culture and influencing outcomes across sectors (What Can 50 Years..., 2023). Effective leaders do more than transmit information—they engage in dialogue that builds trust, fosters collaboration, and creates shared meaning. This involves tailoring messages to diverse audiences, practicing active listening, and using feedback loops to ensure clarity and alignment (Hackman & Johnson, 2019). Communication is therefore both strategic and relational, serving as the foundation for authentic leadership and organizational success.

In urban education contexts, communication assumes heightened importance due to the complexity of stakeholder relationships and the urgency of equity-driven initiatives. Leaders must navigate interactions with students, families, educators, and community partners, often across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Transparent and empathetic communication can mitigate misunderstandings, strengthen relational trust, and promote inclusive decision-making. Similarly, in entrepreneurial educational settings—such as arts-based wellness programs—

leaders rely on communication to articulate vision, inspire creativity, and coordinate collaborative efforts. These environments demand adaptability and emotional intelligence, as leaders must respond to dynamic challenges while maintaining psychological safety and shared purpose.

Ultimately, communication is not merely operational; it is transformative. Leaders who prioritize dialogue and relational engagement create conditions for innovation, resilience, and collective efficacy. By embedding communication practices into leadership development, educational organizations can cultivate leaders equipped to foster trust and drive systemic change (*What Can 50 Years of Leadership Communication Research Tell Us?*, 2023; Hackman & Johnson, 2019).

Methodology

This study employed a reflective case study using an autoethnographic lens to explore leadership development through structured self-assessment and reflection (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography was selected because it allows the researcher to critically analyze personal experiences within a broader theoretical and professional context, offering rich insights into leadership identity formation (Adams et al., 2015). This approach aligns with qualitative traditions that prioritize meaning-making and positionality, particularly in educational leadership research where context and lived experience shape practice.

The analysis drew on results from three leadership tools:

1. **Maxwell Leadership Assessment Tool** – Evaluated leadership levels across production, permission, and position (Maxwell, 2018).
2. **Leadership Circle Profile** – Measured creative versus reactive dimensions, comparing self-perceptions with evaluator percentiles (Anderson & Adams, 2016).

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

3. **Leadership DNA Benchmarking Report** – Assessed 12 categories of leadership effectiveness, including strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and team development (Leadership DNA, 2023).

To operationalize reflection, the author employed guiding questions adapted from leadership development literature (Hamilton, 2019), such as: *What patterns emerge across assessments? How do these patterns align with authentic leadership principles?* Responses were coded thematically to identify strengths, growth areas, and implications for practice. Reflection occurred over six weeks, with weekly sessions dedicated to reviewing assessment data and journaling insights. Journals were analyzed for recurring themes and linked to real-world leadership experiences from working in the New York City Department of Education and managing Lucky Lab’z LLC—a music and wellness program serving urban youth. This integration of assessment data with practice-based vignettes strengthened ecological validity and demonstrated how leadership behaviors manifest in dynamic, arts-based educational settings.

To enhance credibility, peer feedback was sought from two colleagues in educational leadership, who reviewed interpretations and validated emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation across multiple tools, reflective journaling, and peer review reinforced trustworthiness. This design aligns with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) and authentic leadership frameworks (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), positioning self-assessment as a catalyst for leadership growth.

Findings

Strengths in Collaboration and Reliability

Across all tools, the leader demonstrated consistently high scores in loyalty, role modeling, and teamwork. These strengths align closely with authentic leadership principles emphasizing

relational transparency and collaborative engagement (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Such qualities are critical in urban education contexts where trust and shared responsibility underpin program success. Collaborative leadership fosters psychological safety, enabling students and staff to take risks and engage creatively (Edmondson, 2019).

Expanded Vignette: During a collaborative songwriting workshop, the leader facilitated group composition projects where each participant contributed ideas. By modeling active listening and equitable participation, the leader created a psychologically safe environment that encouraged creativity and mutual respect. This approach not only strengthened students' confidence in their artistic voice but also reinforced the leader's reliability in sustaining engagement and fostering inclusive collaboration. Additionally, the leader's ability to maintain consistency across sessions demonstrated reliability—a trait that research identifies as essential for building trust in high-stakes educational environments (Hackman & Johnson, 2019).

Growth Areas in Authenticity and Developing People

The Leadership Circle Profile revealed challenges in courageous authenticity and interpersonal intelligence, while Leadership DNA highlighted lower scores in developing others and leading organizational change. These findings suggest a need for intentional strategies to enhance mentoring and feedback practices. Authentic leadership theory emphasizes the importance of vulnerability and courage in fostering growth (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Expanded Vignette: In one-on-one coaching sessions with students, the leader recognized hesitancy to provide candid feedback as a barrier to growth. To address this, a structured mentoring framework was introduced, incorporating reflective questioning and goal-setting activities. This shift promoted transparency and empowered students to take ownership of their development, illustrating how authentic leadership evolves through deliberate practice. Over time, the leader

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

began integrating feedback protocols informed by human-centric leadership principles, which prioritize empathy and relational intelligence (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2023). These adjustments not only improved student outcomes but also strengthened the leader's confidence in navigating difficult conversations.

Centrality of Communication

Communication emerged as both a strength and an area for refinement. Effective communication proved pivotal in shaping engagement, trust, and learning outcomes. Leadership literature consistently identifies communication as a core competency that influences organizational climate and stakeholder alignment (What Can 50 Years..., 2023).

Expanded Vignette: Launching a new afterschool wellness session required coordinating student wellness, collaborative administrative practices, and parent engagement. The leader employed iterative communication strategies—weekly check-ins, transparent expectations, and feedback loops—to align stakeholders and maintain trust. This example underscores that leadership communication is not merely transactional but adaptive and relational, serving as a cornerstone for program success. Furthermore, the leader leveraged multiple modalities—email updates, in-person meetings, and creative showcases—to ensure inclusivity and clarity, reflecting best practices in educational leadership communication (Hackman & Johnson, 2019).

Discussion

The findings resonate strongly with leadership literature while reflecting the practical realities of urban education and arts-based programs. Each theme—communication, authenticity, and developing people—underscores the interplay between theory and practice in leadership development. Experiences in the songwriting and wellness program reinforce research identifying communication as central to leadership effectiveness (What Can 50 Years..., 2023). In urban

contexts, communication extends beyond operational needs and becomes relational and developmental, shaping trust and engagement among diverse stakeholders. Strategies such as iterative check-ins and transparent dialogue align with Hackman and Johnson's (2019) emphasis on communication as a driver of organizational cohesion and adaptive leadership.

Additionally, mentoring sessions revealed the tension between providing candid feedback and maintaining supportive relationships, reflecting authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This tension highlights the importance of situational awareness and courage, enabling leaders to balance vulnerability with accountability while fostering trust in culturally diverse settings.

Finally, the intentional mentoring approach demonstrates human-centered leadership principles (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2023), as investing in students' social-emotional and artistic growth reflects a relational, equitable, and community-focused model of leadership. This aligns with transformative leadership research that emphasizes empowerment and holistic development (Shields, 2020).

Implications for Practice

For educators and aspiring leaders, this case study illustrates actionable strategies:

1. **Incorporate Self-Assessment Regularly:** Reflective tools provide structured insight for aligning personal growth with organizational impact (Hamilton, 2019).
2. **Prioritize Communication Skills:** Iterative check-ins, transparent dialogue, and feedback loops support trust and engagement (What Can 50 Years..., 2023).
3. **Balance Authenticity with Awareness:** Providing candid yet supportive guidance in mentoring demonstrates ethical, relationally intelligent practice (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

4. **Focus on Developing People:** Structured coaching and goal-setting magnify leadership effectiveness, especially in urban and creative programs (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2023).
5. **Leverage Arts-Based and SEL Initiatives:** Music and wellness projects offer platforms for modeling collaboration, empathy, and creative problem-solving (Peppler et al., 2022).

Vignette Integration: For example, during a group drumming project, students with varying skill levels learned to communicate rhythmically, negotiate roles, and resolve conflicts. Leadership reflection on this activity highlighted the intersection of SEL, artistic expression, and human-centered leadership principles.

Future Directions

Future research should explore how self-assessment frameworks can be scaled across leadership preparation programs and professional development initiatives. Comparative studies could examine the impact of integrating arts-based SEL strategies into leadership training versus traditional models. Additionally, longitudinal research tracking leaders who employ reflective self-assessment could provide insights into sustained growth and organizational outcomes. These directions would advance understanding of how reflective practice and creative engagement shape leadership effectiveness in diverse educational contexts.

Conclusion

Self-assessment is more than a reflective exercise; it is a catalyst for meaningful leadership growth. By critically engaging with leadership assessment tools and integrating insights from real-world experiences, leaders can chart developmental pathways emphasizing communication, authenticity, and human-centric practices. This process fosters continuous learning by encouraging leaders to identify blind spots and adapt strategies to meet evolving organizational needs. Moreover, self-assessment promotes accountability and resilience, equipping leaders to navigate

complex challenges with clarity and confidence. When combined with structured reflection and peer feedback, it becomes a powerful mechanism for cultivating transformative leadership behaviors.

The significance of this approach extends beyond individual growth. In educational contexts—particularly urban and arts-based programs—leaders face unique challenges that demand adaptability, cultural responsiveness, and relational intelligence. Self-assessment provides a structured framework for addressing these demands by linking personal insight to organizational impact. Through iterative reflection, leaders can strengthen trust, foster collaboration, and model ethical practices that resonate with diverse stakeholders. These qualities are essential for creating inclusive learning environments where students thrive academically and emotionally.

Looking forward, embedding self-assessment into leadership preparation programs and professional development initiatives could transform how educational leaders are trained. Future research should explore scalable models for integrating reflective tools with experiential learning opportunities, such as arts-based SEL programs. By positioning self-assessment as a cornerstone of leadership development, educators and policymakers can cultivate leaders who are not only effective managers but also empathetic, authentic change agents committed to equity and innovation.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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SUTTLES

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