Difficult Conversations by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

Think you might want to read this book?
Have you seen progress at your school delayed because of conflict? Are there tension points that never seem to go away? Stone, Patton, and Sheen use Difficult Conversations as a guide to confronting and resolving all of that. The three types of conversations (What happened, Feelings, and Identity), combine with the idea of learning conversations to form the framework for working through… well, difficult conversations. After reading this book you will probably be convinced that they are important enough to do them intentionally.

What would Socrates ask?
- What if we had an emotions check-in before each meeting?
- What if all potentially difficult conversations started with an "I feel…." statement from each side?
- What about your identity is at risk when you have difficult conversations?
- Does the intensity of your feelings about a topic correlate to the threat it is to your identity?
- What if we all committed to abandoning blame and assuming good intentions?
- How do you know when an issue is important enough that we need to have a difficult conversation?

Concepts
- Learning conversation- where each side learns and therefore has a more constructive approach.
- Begin difficult conversations with "I feel…." statements. That keeps emotions at the forefront and on the table for everyone to see.
- Three concepts that are true in difficult conversations:
  - You will make mistakes
  - Your intentions are complex
  - You have contributed to the problem
- Three strategies that work in structuring a difficult conversation:
  - Learning each other's stories
  - Expressing views and feelings
  - Problem-solving together
- Three strategies that work in the middle of a difficult conversation:
  - Inquiry
  - Paraphrasing
  - Acknowledgment
- Three strategies that work when you share in a difficult conversation:

- ○ Don't present your conclusions as truth
- ○ Share where your concerns come from
- ○ Avoid "always" and "never"

Quotes from the author
- "At heart, the problem isn't in your actions, it's in your thinking. So long as you focus only on what to do differently in difficult conversations, you will fail to break new ground."
- "The point is this: difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are not about what is true, they are about what is important."
- "Instead of wanting to persuade and get your way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward."
- "Some of us pay more attention to feelings and relationships. Others to status and power, or to facts and logic. Some of us are artists, others are scientists, others pragmatists. Some of us want to prove we're right; others want to avoid conflict or smooth it over. Some of us tend to see ourselves as victims, others as heroes, observers, or survivors. The information we attend to varies accordingly."
- "Often we go through an entire conversation- or indeed an entire relationship- without ever realizing that each of us is paying attention to different things, that way views are based on different information."
- "There's only one way to come to understand the other person's story and that's by being curious. Instead of asking yourself, 'How can they think that?!', ask yourself, 'I wonder what information they have that I don't.'"
- "When we're the ones acting, we know that much of the time we don't intend to annoy, offend, or upstage others. We are wrapped up in our own worries, and are often unaware that we're having any negative impact on others. When we're the ones acted upon, however, our story too easily slides into one about bad intentions and bad character."
- "Interestingly, when people take on the job of thinking hard about their own intentions, it sends a profoundly positive message to the other person about the importance of the relationship. After all, you'd only do that kind of hard work for somebody who matters to you."
- "At heart, blame is about judging and contribution is about understanding."
- "As a rule, when things go wrong in human relationships, everyone has contributed in some important way."
- "You may learn that what you really seek is understanding and acknowledgement. What you want the other person to say isn't 'It was my fault,' but rather 'I understand that I hurt you and I'm sorry.' The first statement is about judgment, the second about understanding."
- "The two hardest (and most important) communication tasks in difficult conversations are expressing feelings and listening."

- Feelings we are uncomfortable with disguise themselves as emotions we are better able to handle; bundles of contradictory feelings masquerade as a single emotion; and most important, feelings transform themselves into judgments, accusations, and attributions."
- "The biggest factor that contributes to a vulnerable identity is 'all-or-nothing' thinking: 'I'm either competent or incompetent, good or evil, worthy of love or not.'"
- "As for everyone, what is true about you is going to be a mix of good and bad behavior, noble and less noble intentions, and wise and unwise choices you've made along the way."
- "Instead of trying to control the other person's reaction, prepare for it. Take time in advance to imagine the conversation."
- "You can't have every difficult conversation you come across. Life is too short, the list is too long."
- "In many situations our purpose in initiating a conversation is to get the other person to change. There's nothing wrong with hoping for change. The urge to change others is universal…. The problem is, we can't make these things happen. We can't change someone else's mind or force them to change their behavior."

Gateways to further learning
- [7 Tips for Difficult Conversations](#)

Referenced books with the potential to impact leading and learning in education

Author(s) Last Name	Title
Goleman	*Working with Emotional Intelligence*

The applicability of this book to education is ….

Abstract ✗ Obvious