

Learning is the Work

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It may seem strange to say that professional development—educators going to workshops and conferences, and taking courses—bears little relationship to classroom and school improvement. Similarly teachers toiling away as individuals do not add up to school or system success. What really counts is what happens ‘in between workshops’ or what I call *learning is the work* (Fullan, 2008).

Learning on the job, day after day, is the work. My colleague Richard Elmore (2004) nailed the problem of superficial school reform when he notes that “improvement is more a function of learning to do the right thing in the setting in which you work” (p.73). He elaborates: “The problem [is that] there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice...observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in schools confronting similar problems of practice” (p. 127).

Fortunately there is new work underway that is building new collaborative cultures within and across schools in order to build the individual and especially collective capacity to improve instruction linked to student needs and achievement. This work is driven by the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all students, and doing so for the whole system—not just for some schools, but for all students; not just for some districts but all districts; and not just a one level but at all levels. We call this ‘whole system reform’ (Fullan, 2010).

The research has been clear and consistent for over 30 years—collaborative cultures in which teachers focus on improving their teaching practice, learn from each other, and are well led and supported by school principals result in better learning for students. The difference in the past few years is that we are moving from research to improved practice. In this article I will examine the nature of this work, what results it gets, and what the implications are for the future

The Nature of Collaborative Work

Starting within the classroom the basic building block is instructional practice linked to student achievement. I am going to call this the instruction-achievement nexus. This work has to be clear, specific and precise so that it can be understood and well implemented. We have done this for example with literacy and numeracy in Ontario. Instruction and assessment operate as a two-way street, one informing the other. Personalization, i.e., individual needs of students becomes the focus. So the first element is focus.

Second, for teachers to improve their practice they learn best from other teachers provided that these teachers are also working on improvement. These exchanges are thus purposeful, and based on evidence.

Third for this system to develop it must be led. Supportive leaders become an essential component including for example literacy or other instructional coaches, and principals as instructional leaders. Again this work is precise and always under development. To take one example, we and others have found that the greatest impact a principal can have on student learning is the degree to which the principal participates as a learner in working with teachers to make improvements.

Fourth, it is not sufficient for schools to work out collaboration on their own. External facilitation is required. And since we are interested in system change we also need schools to learn from each other. Thus we employ strategies where schools are in small clusters (3-8 schools for example).

Fifth and finally there needs to be some vertical support across the levels—schools and communities, districts, province—for this to develop on any scale.

To take another specific version of the same principles in action we can consider ‘professional learning communities’ (PLCs) as developed by Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010). There are three ‘big ideas’ that underpin PLCs:

1. The first and biggest idea is that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure that all students learn as distinct from all students should be taught. This will require the development of shared goals and vision, the alignment of procedures and practices, and specific indicators of progress.
2. The second big idea is that helping all students learn requires a collaborative culture and collective effort. Educators will need to work in interdependent teams to achieve a common goal to which they hold themselves mutually accountable for all students learning.
3. The third big idea is that all schools will be unable to monitor their effectiveness unless they create a results orientation. They use common assessments and make results from those assessments easily accessible and openly shared in order to build individual and team capacity.

Surrounding these big ideas is the need for school cultures to change toward collaboration; for district cultures to change toward school-to-school openness, and greater two-way partnerships between schools and districts; and for governments to change toward partnership with the sector in which capacity building as distinct from compliance (or equally problematic, site-based school autonomy). All of this means that the individual, isolated autonomy of the teacher becomes passé. The cultural transformation then involves the de-privatization of teaching. The new norm is interactive professionalism, which incidentally is the way of all advanced professions.

In sum, the big difference between effective and ineffective schools systems—and all organizations for that matter-- is the 'collective or shared depth of understanding among members about the nature of their work'. You can't get collective depth from a workshop, or from episodic team meetings. You can only get shared depth one-way—make learning the day-to-day work.

Results

In Ontario we have use this fundamental strategy of collective capacity building to improve the whole system. The public school system in Ontario consists of 2 million students, 130,000 teachers, 4000 elementary schools, 900 secondary schools organized in 72 districts (public, catholic and francophone districts, all publicly funded

Prior to 2003 the system was stagnant for at least five years in terms of literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation. There was constant strife between the government and teacher unions. A new government was elected in 2003 with its Premier, Dalton McGuinty declaring himself as the 'education premier'. He appointed me as his Special Advisor and we set out to transform the system using the collective capacity building linked to results as the core strategy.

The details of the strategy and results are discussed in my book All systems go but the short version is that we began to get improvement within two years. Now in our seventh year (with a second term of office in 2007) literacy and numeracy has improved 14% across the 4000 elementary schools; high school graduation rates have increased from 68% to 81%; and the morale of teachers and principals is better. More importantly, the capacity of educators is greater providing the basis for further development.

The results of the Dufours' PLC work in schools and districts are equally impressive. In chapter after chapter reporting on 6 schools (elementary, middle and secondary), and three districts we see teachers collaborating around the three big PLC ideas and getting impressive results for diverse student populations (Dufour et al, 2010).

The cases in our work in Ontario, and in that of the Dufours cover the waterfront: rural, urban and suburban settings; large and small schools; elementary, middle and high schools; single schools and entire districts-- all benefiting through focused

collaboration that increases skills, and commitment at the individual and group levels.

An even more convincing case comes from an intriguing small study by a business professor at the University of Pittsburg, Carrie Leana. She starts with the well-known finding that the patterns of interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators when focused on student learning make a large measurable difference on student achievement and sustained improvement. This she calls 'social capital', which she contrasts with individual capital that is based on "the widespread belief in the power of teacher human capital to transform public education [which] is one of the cornerstones of current reform efforts" (p.12) Leana set out to test the relationship between the power of human and social capital. She and her team followed over 1,000 4th and 5th grade teachers in a representative sample of 130 elementary schools across New York City. The human capital measures included teacher education and qualifications, and experience and ability in the classroom. Social capital was measured in terms of the frequency and focus of conversations with peers that centered on instruction, and that was based on feelings of trust and closeness between teachers. She studied the impact on math achievement over a one-year period.

Leana uncovered several interrelated themes directly related to my argument here. If a teacher's social capital was one standard deviation higher than the average, her students math scores increased by 5.7%. It is of course the case that teachers with high ability outperform teachers with low ability, but that is not the big driver. Leana reports that teachers who were both more able (high human capital), and had stronger ties with their peers (high social capital) had the biggest gains in math achievement. She even found that low-ability teachers perform as well as teachers of average ability "if they have strong social capital" (p. 10, italics in original').

Remember human capital refers to the teacher's cumulative abilities, knowledge, and skills developed through formal education and on-the-job experience. Social

capital is not a characteristic of the individual but instead resides in the relationships among teachers and between teachers and principals. Leana's findings mean that bad working conditions (low social capital) make good teachers less effective, and make poor teachers get even worse. Her findings also mean that the goal is to develop in concert both high human and high social capital. More than that --high social capital is a powerful strategy to leverage human capital.

I could site other examples but the point has been made: focused, purposeful team work, facilitated and well led produces better results. Given the moral imperative of serving all students it would seem non-negotiable that teachers should throw their commitment and energies behind developing collaborative cultures within and across schools. However it is the case that some jurisdictions are not conducive to supporting collaborative cultures. For example, governments that focus on punitive accountability, bureaucratic compliance, low-trust of the teaching profession undercut the likelihood that collaborative cultures will thrive. Nonetheless, my argument is that teachers have a moral obligation to help redefine the profession toward interactive professionalism. Paradoxically they will gain more autonomy and respect for the profession if they become more effective in raising the bar and closing the gap in student learning and achievement.

Implications

To return to whole system reform it has become obvious that the development of a collaborative teaching profession is associated with performance of the leading countries in the world. Whether one takes the recent PISA results (OECD,2010), or the in-depth study of 20 jurisdictions and countries by Mourshed and her McKinsey colleagues the message is the same. Top performing systems invest in the teaching profession, but as the profession evolves they discover that the next breakthrough requires the peer culture of teachers lead the way. As the McKinsey group found, when capacity of teachers is low more direct methods of capacity building are required, but if you are going to get breakthrough results innovation must come

from teachers working in collaboration. Leadership at the school, district and system levels, in other words must help develop such an interactive system.

Finally, it is revealing how accountability plays itself out. It turns out that blatant accountability focusing on tests, standards and the like is not the best way to get results. Rather, successful systems combine strategies of capacity building and transparency of results and practice. In these ways they get deeper de facto accountability. The public is assured by the vertical accountability of transparency, and the system generates greater lateral accountability because peers working with peers in a focused deliberate way provide both support and pressure to improve in measurable ways. When this works gets underway it actually causes greater moral purpose—what we call the ‘moral imperative realized’ (Fullan, 2011). Realization becomes its own further force for continuous improvement. There is no greater motivator than internal accountability to oneself and one’s peers. It makes for a better profession, and it makes for a better system.

References

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