Educators need to look closely at the organizational and instructional practices that affect the learning of students and adults in schools.

It is 8:30 a.m., and I am sitting with a K–8 school's leadership team—the principal and 10 teachers—in the principal's small, cluttered office. I enjoy visiting such teams, and lately I find myself doing so with increasing frequency. Today, I have been invited to participate in a discussion of how staff members can work together to increase their students' quality of instruction. I am impressed, as I usually am under these circumstances, with the earnestness of the group's members about these issues. I am also increasingly concerned about their lack of knowledge and awareness of how their school organizes its instructional practice.

Several issues related to organizing instructional practice emerge during our discussion.

- The special services coordinator speaks about the difficulties involved in managing pull-out programs to serve students with special needs, especially scheduling the students' time out of class and making sure that the part-time tutors and remediation specialists are there when the students are. It is clear, however, that the team members have not thought about the rationale for the pull-out program or the implications of using the pull-out model when they are planning to increase the intensity of instruction in the regular program.

- During our discussion, the team mentions that during an instruction week of 40 periods of 45 minutes each, the school has about 13 periods set aside for teachers' noninstruction time. Compared with what I have seen in other schools, this schedule seems particularly generous. Unfortunately, the teachers use only one or two of those 13 periods to work together on common instructional tasks. The ratio of only 2 or 3 out of 13 hours for such work is disturbing. What is the rest of the noninstructional time used for? "Well, you know, we have to walk the students to gym class, and sometimes when we get back, a lot of the time is gone." But why do teachers walk students to gym class? They can't say.

There are other situations that the leadership team has failed to question.

- Prowling the halls of the school before the meeting, I had noticed great differences in the number of books available in primary classrooms—some have many books, some have few. The team explains that the school has a balanced literacy approach, but the number of books available in each room is each teacher's choice. Why should this be so?

- A significant proportion of students in grades 5–8 are having difficulty responding to writing prompts that require them to read and analyze a variety of texts. Is this a schoolwide problem? The teachers of the lower grades have never spoken with the upper school's teachers about this issue. "This is really something we should work on," observes the head of the school.

In another K–8 school, I am talking with the principal in her office. The school—highly regarded in the community and generously funded by any standard—has only about 300 students. She remarks that she works well with her assistant principal. But why does a well-funded school of 300 students have an assistant principal? Wouldn't it be better to spend the amount of that salary on professional development for teachers instead? "That's not an option in this district," she explains. Does the presence of an assistant principal allow her to spend more time in classrooms? "Not really."
The Unexamined Wallpaper

These and many other discussions with administrators and teachers have a common theme: People who work in schools do not pay attention to the connection between how they organize and manage themselves and how they take care of their own and their students' learning. The structure and resources of the organization are like wallpaper—after living with the same wallpaper for a certain number of years, people cease to see it.

In the present political and social environment of schooling, this lack of attention is dangerous and irresponsible. Schools are under pressure for increased accountability for student learning, and too many educators cannot account for the basic elements of their organization and how these elements affect the learning that teachers and students engage in. Further, most educators would argue that they need more resources to do the work they are being asked to do under these new accountability systems. But why give more resources to an organization whose leaders cannot explain how they are using the resources that they already have?

Chopped Bits of Work

How the work of learning gets organized and implemented is as important as the issue of resources. Clearly, successful learning for adults and students in schools is a cumulative process over time. We expect, or should expect, adults and students to demonstrate higher and higher levels of expertise and responsibility for their own learning the longer they are in the organization called school.

Yet, as the examples illustrate, the design of the organization often embodies a model of learning that is anything but cumulative. The organization chops knowledge into discrete bits—classrooms, grade-levels, pull-out programs, and subjects—and then organizes the work of adults and students around those bits without paying attention to what is going on in other bits. So, not surprisingly, the experience of adults and students as learners in schools is anything but cumulative and continuous.

Nor is there anything about the form of the organization that encourages people to exercise more responsibility for their own learning as their experience increases. The work of people is organized around their own bit, and the bits don't connect in any meaningful way. Students are rewarded for mastering whatever the adults are trying to teach them at any given time, not for developing expertise around their own learning. Teachers are rewarded for delivering content, not for increasing their own knowledge and skill around how to reach more students at higher levels of understanding.

Cargo-Cult Reform

Nonetheless, most educators in the schools I visit these days believe that they are engaged in enlightened reform. They have grade-level teams and common preparation periods, use some form of external guidance or standards to make curriculum decisions, and adopt models designed to increase their knowledge of good practice. But these measures have had little or no effect on the schools' ability to do the important work of student and adult learning.

These practices don't succeed because the people in the organization don't know why they are doing them. That is, the solutions that schools are adopting have no rationale or connection to the actual learning of adults or students, no effect on organizing work for learning, and no impact on how the school uses resources to support learning. Instead, the reforms are largely symbolic activities engaged in to demonstrate visible concern for student performance.

I call this kind of activity cargo-cult reform. These reforms are like the crude, makeshift, life-sized airplane models that New Guinea tribesmen used to build out of tree limbs and cardboard on mountaintops to attract the cargo that real airplanes were delivering to nearby airports. The models that they created were useful as ritual objects, but otherwise without much utility.

Distributed Leadership

The thoughtful work of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (forthcoming) on what they have defined as distributed leadership can help educators become more aware of the connection between instructional practices and their own and their students' learning. The idea behind distributed leadership is that the
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complex nature of instructional practice requires people to operate in networks of shared and complementary expertise rather than in hierarchies that have a clearly defined division of labor (Elmore, 2000). Under distributed leadership, knowledge and practice get stretched across roles rather than being inherent in one role or another.

Instructional practice and the improvement of instructional practice are complex and require high levels of knowledge and skills across a number of important domains. The subject matter, how learners master the content, the attitudes that learners bring to the subject, the pedagogy for connecting content to how students learn, and the demographic and social context of schools all affect the range of pedagogical strategies that teachers use (Elmore, 2002).

To be successful at this complex work, schools need to have structures that develop the knowledge and skills of individuals and that stretch this expertise among people occupying the same role (such as teachers) and different roles (such as teachers and administrators). In these situations, learning grows out of concrete tasks that require shared expertise and allow people to develop their own skills and contribute to the development of others’ knowledge and skills.

One concrete task, for example, is figuring out how to help the students in grades 5–8 who are unable to respond to writing prompts that require analysis and interpretation. The school's leadership team should engage all teachers in ascertaining the kind of student work that produces higher-level responses in the upper grades and how instruction that develops these skills can take place in all classrooms for all students. This collaboration requires looking at samples of student work; discussing, perhaps also observing, the teaching practice that results in the work; and then introducing specific instructional practices that foster continual attention to analytic and interpretive writing across grade levels.

In this context, leaders emerge and assume different responsibilities on the basis of their knowledge and competence. Some teachers are more skilled at moving students to a higher level of analysis and interpretation in their writing, and their practice should be a source of knowledge and skill to others. Coherence emerges from the practice of learning with a shared purpose.

Leadership Is About Learning

The schools that I have observed usually share a strong motivation to learn new teaching practices and a sense of urgency about improving learning for students and teachers. What they lack is a sense of individual and collective agency, or control, over the organizational conditions that affect the learning of students and adults in their schools.

That is, people in these schools believe that they can have little or no effect on the organizational conditions in which they work. Without a sense of control over their own learning, they are oblivious to the ways in which these conditions make it difficult or impossible to do the work that they are expected to do. It should not surprise us that students, who are also workers in these organizations, emerge from schools with a low sense of control over their own learning. If the adults aren't modeling the learning process, how can the students know how to take control of their learning?

That a school could design a schedule with ample time for collaboration and then allow the schedule to be used in a way that undermines this opportunity suggests that people in the organization have no shared concept of their task, no model of how their knowledge and skill bear on that task, and no sense of agency about making the organization's structures and processes support their work.

Leaders, then, engage people in shaping the content and conditions of their own learning in organizationally coherent ways. Distributed leadership is crucial for improving an organization's performance because it requires a deep understanding of the cognitive and affective skills needed to do the work and of the ways in which the school's organization enables or undermines learning.

Effective leaders make their own questioning—hence their own ignorance—visible to those they work with. They ask hard questions about why and how things work or don't work, and they lead the kind of inquiry that can result in agreement on the organization's work and its purposes. Effective leaders model for others what it means to exercise control over the conditions of one's own learning and to make that learning powerful in the lives of others.
References


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