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Michael Fullan

BY DENNIS SPARKS

JSD: When I first interviewed you 10 years ago for an NSDC publication, you said, “We know that the best way for people to learn about new policies and innovations is through interaction with other people.” Some types of interaction are more helpful than others, though, and I’d like to hear your views on the kinds of relationships that are most powerful in promoting innovations in teaching and leadership for the benefit of students.

Fullan: It has become increasingly clear from various sources that we need professional learning communities in which teachers and leaders

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Change agent

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work together and focus on student learning. But they must be infused with high-quality curriculum materials and assessment information about student learning. David Cohen and Heather Hill, for instance, describe three policy levers — assessment, curriculum, and teacher learning. They say if those levers aren’t pulled together, schools can’t get very far. Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert found two types of learning communities. In one of them, teachers work together to innovate to improve their teaching practices. In the second type, teachers interacted around their traditional teaching practices, which simply reinforced those things that weren’t working in the first place.

This research tells us two things. First, we need far more intensive professional learning within a culture of continuous deliberation. Second, it has to be continually tested by external ideas or standards about best practices. Outside curriculum ideas and student assessment information help ensure that the process isn’t too insular.

SPREAD POSITIVE DEVIANCE

JSD: Virtually all schools have some teachers who produce high levels of learning for students. In addition to drawing on outside sources of

knowledge, a powerful way to improve the quality of teaching in schools, it seems to me, is to spread the practices of these “positive deviant teachers” throughout the school.

Fullan: The effective schools research found that classroom-to-classroom differences in effectiveness within schools is greater than school-to-school variation. Professional learning communities internal to a school should reduce the variation across classrooms with more and more teachers gravitating toward the best practices.

Positive deviant teachers can be used within and across schools. They have to get outside their classrooms, though, both within their schools and to link to what’s going on in other schools — to learn from other teachers as well as contribute to them.

CULTURE IS KEY

JSD: In the May 2002 issue of *Educational Leadership*, you wrote an article about leadership for cultural change. Before we turn to what you said, I’d like you to respond to something Roland Barth said in that same issue: “Probably the most important — and the most difficult — job of an

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instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school. ... A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have." Of course, while the principal, teachers, and parents can have a large effect on a school's culture, Barth is writing about the power of a school's culture to shape professional learning and student achievement.

Fullan: Barth's observation is right on. The question for me,

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though, is how we get high-quality cultures in schools on a large scale. The two themes we've been interested in since 1990 have been large-scale reform and sustainability.

For the past four years, we have been working in England evaluating that country's literacy and numeracy strategies. Test scores in these areas have significantly increased from 1996 to 2002. While we've acknowledged their success, we've said that this is just a baby step in terms of deeper changes that are necessary. These deeper changes involve closing the achievement gap between high and low performers, developing students' thinking and problem-solving skills, attending to students' social and emotional development, and fundamentally changing the culture of schools.

English policy makers have devised an interesting formulation. Imagine a four-part table. One dimension contrasts teachers who are knowledge-poor with those who are knowledge-rich, which can be termed uninformed or informed. The other dimension contrasts prescription and professional judgment as sources of

action. When you cross these dimensions you get a very revealing look at the last four decades of reform.

In the 1970s, "uninformed professional judgment" guided teaching. In the 1980s, "uninformed prescriptions" provided through the accountability movement were a driving force. In the 1990s, England had what it called "informed prescription" because the prescription was based on sound knowledge and curriculum.

"Informed professional judgment" is now the goal in England. We are talking with English policy makers about the kinds of strategies that are necessary to go from the informed prescriptions that have helped them make progress in literacy and numeracy to informed professional judgment that would actually change the cultures of schools. These policies would reduce the unnecessary workload of teachers, create more contact time among teachers to improve what they are doing, and develop more effective leadership at all levels.

INVEST IN LEADERS

JSD: In your article in that same issue of *Educational Leadership*, you said that "Cultural change principals display palpable energy, enthusiasm, and hope." It's my sense that many principals today feel more resigned than hopeful because they often feel caught between very difficult problems that require resolution and other people's prescriptions for how they should be solved.

Fullan: Investment in leadership development is important. Getting beyond resignation and the passive dependency that has been created by the prescriptions of the past 10 years requires a different kind of socialization for principals. In England, they have created the National College of School Leadership to develop leaders on a much larger scale. In District 2 in New York City, they deliberately built the capacity of principals

MICHAEL FULLAN

POSITION: Michael Fullan is dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. He also is a researcher, consultant, trainer, and policy adviser on a wide range of educational change projects with school systems, teachers federations, research and development institutes, and government agencies in Canada and internationally. He has published widely on the topic of educational change.

EDUCATION: Fullan has bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in sociology from the University of Toronto.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: He has served as policy implementation adviser to the Minister of Education and Training (Ontario) on the Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, was dean of the faculty of education at the University of Toronto, and assistant academic director and professor of sociology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). He has also served as chairperson and professor in the OISE Department of Sociology.

BOOKS: His most recent books are *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), for which he received the National Staff Development Council's Book of the Year Award for 2002, and *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 3rd Edition (Teachers College Press, 2001). He has also published *Change Forces: The Sequel* (Falmer Press, 1999), *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* (Falmer Press, 1993), and the *What's Worth Fighting For* series (Teachers College Press).

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: An innovator and leader in teacher education, Fullan has developed a number of partnerships designed to bring about major school improvement and educational reform. He is currently leading the evaluation team conducting a four-year assessment of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England. He is also conducting with colleagues training, research and evaluation of literacy initiatives in several school districts, including the Toronto School District Board, York Region, Peel and Edmonton Catholic School District.

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through various processes such as intervisitations during which principals developed deeper understanding not only of their own schools, but other schools as well.

IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS

JSD: In your article, you also wrote, “The single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.” I’m curious about what you’ve learned about affecting the quality of relationships in schools among teachers and between teachers and principals.

Fullan: Through our districtwide training of school teams, we’ve learned that structural barriers make it difficult for people to have time to get together and that cultural barriers cause teachers to resist interacting with each other in new ways.

To address these problems, we offer seven or eight days of training a year for teams that include the principal and two teacher leaders. We provide evidence of the connection between well-executed professional learning communities and student learning. We also provide skills in areas such as dealing with resistance. We teach about assessment, and teachers look at student work. As a result, student learning improves and teachers become ambassadors to teachers in other schools.

LIMIT EXTERNAL SOLUTIONS

JSD: In your *Educational Leadership* article, you wrote, “Creating and sharing knowledge is central to effective leadership,” and “Principals not attuned to leading in a culture of change make the mistake of seeking external innovations and taking on too many projects.” And in the third edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Teachers College Press, 2001), you observed,

“Ultimately, no amount of outside intervention can produce the motivation and specificity of best solutions for every setting.” Many teachers and principals don’t see their work as knowledge generation and dissemination and often, for a number of reasons, feel very dependent on external innovations and experts. Yet you are saying that it may be a mistake to seek external innovation.

Fullan: People in schools should not take shortcuts in their search for clarity and solutions. They need to engage with all kinds of ideas to improve what they are doing, but not adopt external programs that foster dependency. I want schools to constantly sift and integrate the best ideas from the field, not adopt external programs.

Whole-school reform models make the mistake of thinking that a comprehensive external reform model will solve the coherence problem within schools. It doesn’t work because it feeds into the dependency of teachers and principals. In other words, when schools or districts adopt external models, which in itself is not always a bad thing, they fail to focus on changing the culture of the school, and consequently the models fail to become embedded.

In my view, teaching is an intellectual and scientific profession, as well as a moral profession. That means that schools have to constantly process knowledge about what works and that teachers have to see themselves as scientists who continuously develop their intellectual and investigative effectiveness.

When I look at cases of successful businesses, I see explicit discussion about knowledge development and knowledge sharing. Collaboration as an end in itself was not the goal; what these businesses cared about was whether people in the organization added knowledge and contributed to other people’s knowledge development.

The cognitive sciences teach us that if information is to become knowledge, a social process is required. This makes great pedagogical sense. Information stays as information until people work through it together in solving problems and achieving goals. This is why assessment literacy, when teachers collectively focus on student performance and develop action plans to improve it, is so powerful. Changing the culture is even more important because it establishes norms of continuous interaction. So, information becomes knowledge through a social process, and knowledge becomes wisdom through sustained interaction.

BUILD TEACHER DEPTH

JSD: What have the cognitive sciences taught us about helping educators develop deep understanding of innovations as opposed to skimming their surface features?

Fullan: If you don’t have a strategy conducive to teacher understanding, you can’t get to student understanding. Part of the problem is that the culture of schools is amenable to superficial rather than deep solutions. As David Cohen, Richard Elmore, and others have argued, teachers need daily, in-depth opportunities to build up the knowledge and capacity to carry out the deeper reforms envisaged in the best curriculum frameworks. This requires a radical change in the norms and working conditions of teachers and administrators and, in fact, the teaching profession as a whole.

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ASSUMPTIONS SHAPE PRACTICE

JSD: You’ve written about the relationship between educators’ beliefs and their practices. In *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, you wrote, “The assumptions we make about change are powerful and fre-

quently subconscious sources of action.” The same might be said about educators’ assumptions about learning, teaching, and leadership.

Fullan: Leaders who are effective operate from powerful conceptions, not from a set of techniques. The key, then, is to build up leaders’ conceptions of what it means to be a leader. I’ve identified five conceptions — moral purpose, relationship building, knowledge generation, understanding the change process, and coherence building. These conceptions can be fostered, but they must be fostered through a socialization process that develops leaders as reflective practitioners. If leaders are taught techniques without conceptions, the techniques will fail. Techniques are tools that must serve a set of conceptual understandings. When conceptions and techniques go hand-in-hand, we create breakthroughs.

LEADERS MUST RECULTURE

JSD: You’ve written, “Educational change is technically simple and socially complex,” and “Never a

checklist, always complexity. There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation; it involves the hard, day-to-day work of reculturing.”

Fullan: We’re talking about a change in the culture of schools and a change in the culture of teaching. We know that when we think about change we have to get ownership, participation, and a sense of meaning on the part of the vast majority of teachers. You can’t get ownership through technical means; you have to get it through interaction, through developing people, through attention to what students are learning.

Reculturing is the main work of leadership, and it requires an underlying conceptualization of the key elements that feed it. One of the conceptualizations I mentioned a moment ago is moral purpose. Sustainability is based on changes in

the social and moral environment. Moral purpose is more than passionate teachers trying to make a difference in their classrooms. It’s also the context of the school and district in which they work. That means principals have to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they are about their own schools.

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The strategies that have provided some initial success in areas such as literacy and numeracy are not the strategies, though, that will take us to a deeper transformation that will enact the cognitive science agenda of problem solving and thinking skills, reculture schools, and close the gap between high- and low-performing students.

To achieve these ends, we must tap the energy that comes from moral purpose. We are now just at the very early stages of a qualitative transformation that is a revolution in the teaching profession. ■