AN OPEN LETTER TO A SECOND-YEAR PRINCIPAL: SEE BEYOND WHAT IS TO WHAT CAN BE

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Abstract
This article presents specific ideas for making a school better. The author speaks to a second-year middle school principal who is concerned about school reform issues. Through a letter, the author informs the principal of general perceptions about the school held by her faculty, and invites the principal to consider questions important to the success of school change. The author also suggests literature that will help the principal to advance her understanding about school change and the professional development of teachers.

Dear Ms. Carpenter,

School improvement: What is it? How do we go about it? A great deal has been written about school improvement. It emerges from the confluence of the following elements: increase in student achievement, improvement of teaching practice, restructuring curriculum, and the working conditions (time, space, resources, support, communication) of the organization, as well as the involvement of parents and citizens in responsible school and community partnerships (Oakes & Lipton, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). The common factor underlying these elements is a school culture that either contributes to its development and success or undermines it (Sizer, 1999). Seymour B. Sarason’s (1996) *Revisiting the Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* encourages insight into the culture of your school and the identification of critical factors that must be in place in order to create and sustain change (Schlechty, 1988).

Essentially, the culture of the school is the foundation for school improvement that includes a structure, process, and common values and norms to guide faculty and students toward successful teaching and learning. Therefore, their thought processes, beliefs, and responses to solving problems in their environment create the culture. One finding from successful school reform shows that when certain norms of school culture are strong, widespread, and continuous, improvements have a greater likelihood of success (Fullan, 1982; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).
During the three days I spent at your school, I met informally with small groups of teachers to learn how they perceived the school’s mission. I used informal and semi-structured interviews and a survey to gather more specific data. As a result of my interview with you, Ms. Carpenter, I was able to learn what you thought was going on at your school, what you wanted to improve during your second year, and why. I used this data as a baseline from which I could compare and contrast the faculty data. Gathering objective data is necessary to guide decision making for school improvement. What follows is a narrative of my findings. I have organized the findings in four parts: (a) educative ends, (b) collaborative decision making, (c) curriculum conversations, and (d) pedagogical inquiry.

**Educative Ends**

While some teachers believe the school’s main purpose is to “drill the basics and teach to the required standards of learning,” others think the school’s aim is to provide a “caring, safe, and supportive environment” for students. Still others believe the mission is to “help kids get along with one another and to survive adolescence,” while their colleagues say the goal is to “make sure the kids develop self-discipline and are prepared for competing in a technological world.” Although I did not speak with every teacher at the school, the information which was gathered on teacher perceptions of educative aims points out a lack of a shared sense of purpose among the faculty.

Articulating concise educative ends is essential to success (Purkey & Smith, 1983). What do you want the teachers and students to aspire to? What do you want the school to stand for? Your vision should embody core values and purposes: Does it express an outcome for students? Does it permeate the entire school? Does it drive the decisions of teachers in the school? Is it the basis for decisions, the last thing you would give up? Does it show up in the beliefs and actions of those within the school? Several informative books discuss educative aims (Feinberg, 1998; Goodlad & McMannon, 1997; Hirsch, Jr., 1996; Macedo, 1994; Perkinson, 1993).

Vision, mission, aims, goals. Whichever term you use, it is the intentions which establish direction and define a school’s priorities (Purkey & Smith, 1983). It also provides a basis for evaluating actions taken. Intentions legitimize a school’s focus, and influence opportunities people within the school have for growth and development. One of the major findings from successful school reform is that the culture of any particular school will be greatly influenced by the degree to which it functions as a coherent whole, with methods that are consistent throughout the school and are supported by all members (Purkey & Smith, 1985; 1983). Before introducing the next norm, I want to tell a story that emphasizes the importance of having a sense of purpose.

Three stone cutters sat in a large courtyard, each cutting stones with a chisel. A stranger wandered up and asked the workers what they were doing. The first person responded curtly, “Can’t you see; I’m cutting stones.” The stranger then approached the second stone cutter. He again asked, “What are you doing?” This individual replied warmly, “I’m doing my job so that my family can live.” Moving on, the stranger queried the last stone cutter. In a very matter-of-fact fashion, he answered, “I am building a school. Each stone I cut goes into a place of education that will last far beyond my life.”

Each individual attended to the same task, but their perceptions and articulation about their work were quite different. As a leader, it is critical for you also to contemplate frequently what is being constructed, how, and why.
Collaborative Decision Making

Norms of collaboration don’t simply appear. Successful principals structure them by offering continual invitations for substantive decision making and faculty interaction (Greenfield, 1987; Manasse, 1985). Patterns of collaboration may evolve directly from teacher decision making in at least four ways: (a) making technical decisions affecting one’s practice, (b) finding meaning and usefulness in others’ work or skills, (c) extending helping behaviors, and (d) engaging in the mutual exchange of ideas (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988; Little, 1987). Practical teacher collaboration is discussed in *Teachers, Their World, and Their Work: Implications for School Improvement* (Conley & Muncey, 1999; Lieberman, 1986; Lieberman & Miller, 1992). The nature of dialogue in pedagogy is described in *Dialogue in Teaching* (Burbules, 1993). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) can inform you about shared decision making. *A Storefront School: A Grassroots Approach to Educational Reform* (Funk & Brown, 1996) presents practical suggestions for utilizing a community-planning coalition to effect school change.

Following are some data relevant to the issue of collaboration, which I collected from informal conversations and teacher interviews. Teachers report few interactions with one another, except for occasional birthday or holiday social events; experienced teachers report not knowing the new teachers; teachers report little interest in professional development; and faculty meetings are perceived as a waste of time because they are devoted to reading and interpreting official statements from the district’s central office. This may explain, in part, why they consider you to be uncertain how to work with them, as we discussed earlier.

The reported scarcity of well-defined interaction is an area for concern because they are unlikely to recognize needed changes beyond their own classrooms. Teachers need time to collaborate with each other to reflect and examine their practice, problem-pose and problem-solve, generate ideas, and investigate curriculum and management issues (Ben-Peretz, 1990; Doyle & Carter, 1987). The article *A Contract for the High School Classroom* (Zmuda & Tomaino, 1999) describes how teachers collaborated in revamping curriculum to be performance-based to advance student control of their learning.

In the interviews at your school, teachers revealed that their feelings of isolation and helplessness were a consequence of having very little partnership in curriculum and instruction decisions. Your school improvement plan should provide for the emergence of a social component for group involvement in the cooperative building of professional knowledge (Schlechty, 1985). Through collaborative efforts, teachers will enable each other to assume ownership and a sense of power to make responsible decisions for change within and outside their classrooms (Ben-Peretz, 1990). Such regular collegial interaction has a positive effect on learning conditions and outcomes (Little, 1987; Stallings, Needels, & Sparks, 1987). In other words, change is needed at your school to promote critical interaction among teachers which will build professional autonomy and respect. *Voice to Voice: Developing In-service Teachers’ Personal, Collaborative, and Public Voices* (Thurber & Zimmerman, 1997) describes two innovative professional development programs for combating teachers’ feeling of isolation and lack of authority in making decisions.

How can you increase the involvement of teachers in school decisions? What does it mean to make leadership the responsibility of those teachers who want it? What kind of changes are necessary for increasing interactions (e.g., restructuring planning time) among teachers on a regular basis?

I recommend reading stories which discuss the trials and tribulations involved in school reform. For example, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Meier, 1995) presents candid information about the successful restructuring of a small urban school. In many ways, your school is similar to the one first described. This is a good source to share with your faculty, so they will have a common framework to
begin eliciting the situation-specific issues that matter to them. **Nothing Is Impossible: Leadership Lessons from Inside and Outside the Classroom** (Monroe, 1997) also contains sound practical advice on how to create a better school, however overwhelming the obstacles may seem.

A collegial process involving dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation (DDAE) is a strategy that facilitates collaboration (Griffin, 1988). For example, the teacher concerns at your school could each be taken through the DDAE process. Like all teachers, your faculty reported they are pressed for time, expected by the administration to do too much paperwork, and frustrated by the absence of parent participation in children’s learning. They are also troubled by students’ lack of compassion and confused about how to respond to the central office mandates that students’ test scores be raised and that instruction be aligned with the new standards of learning. Initiating discussions on these concerns is one way to unite teachers and promote collegial interaction. **Curriculum As Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning** (Applebee, 1996) emphasizes the importance of teachers focusing on knowledge in use rather than knowledge out of context. If, as a team, teachers can identify problems relevant to them, generate ideas for solutions and consequences, make decisions, create a systematic plan of action and enact it, they can advance their professional knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). However, before they begin this process, they must have the authority to make decisions that will extend beyond their classrooms. Authority must accompany responsibility. **Teacher As Authority: A Model for Curriculum and Pedagogy** (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1996) presents a thoughtful analysis of teacher authority.

Teachers need to engage in activities which allow them to assume more ownership and responsibility for making changes. Think about how you can create structural changes to provide conditions that will support the dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation process (e.g., time during the school day). In what ways can you create opportunities to advance the authority of teachers? Keep an open mind; don’t limit your possibilities.

**Curriculum Conversations**

Another aspect of school improvement is to engage faculty in discussions of their teaching practices and to explore ongoing ways to strengthen it. In your school, teachers’ views of teaching, learning, and curriculum reveal little awareness of research or theory but seem rooted in recollections of individual (personal) schooling experiences. Overall, the teachers at your school believe they are doing all they can to help students achieve, despite the high incidence of unacceptable student behavior and primarily text-bound school instruction. **Beyond the Textbook: A Matter of Instructional Repertoire** (Joyce & Calhoun, 1996) emphasizes what Horace Mann suggested in the 1830s: “Teachers who are well-prepared in subject and method and backed up by good libraries don’t need textbooks or other forms of pre-packaged curriculums.” (Joyce & Calhoun, 1996, p. 166).

Curriculum and instructional strategies appear to be areas for improvement. I recommend you begin with teachers who have requested change. Bring them together for curriculum conversations. They might begin with curriculum design issues (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), mapping activities (Jacobs, 1997), or aligning standards of learning to the curriculum (Marzano & Kendall, 1996; Tucker, Codding, 1998). Teachers could consider possibilities for collaborating on projects that will integrate the different disciplines (Beane, 1997; Gross, 1997) or examine O. L. Davis’ (1997) article **The Personal Nature of Curricular Integration** to discuss ideas for helping students to integrate key concepts while the curriculum is experienced; they could examine ideas about concept-based curriculum and instruction (Erickson, 1998). With the new technology arriving at your school for the students in the Title 1 program, teachers might wish to discuss issues surrounding the integration of technology into
the teaching and learning process (Bailey, 1997; Healey, 1998; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997; Schwarz, 1997; Schwartz & Beichner, 1999; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999; Talbott, 1997). In terms of instructional renewal, it is always a good idea for teachers to get together to talk about learning and pedagogy. There are a variety of thoughtful books on this topic (Adams & Hamm, 1994; Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Burbules & Hansen, 1997; Erickson, 1995; Noddings, 1992; Schaubale & Glaser, 1996; Van Manen, 1991). There are also many helpful articles. For example, *The Key Missing Piece in School Restructuring: Quality of Student Learning* (Paul, 1996) calls attention to how teachers are more likely to cultivate their students’ intellectual development if they employ a process of systematic, analytic questioning to help stimulate and discipline student thinking.

**Pedagogical Inquiry**

One way to help your teachers connect theory to practice is to guide them in a process known as practical argument engagement (Vásquez-Levy, 1993; 1998). Teachers work together to examine their deliberations and actions in the classroom and use evidence to support their reasoning and practice (Schubert, 1990; Schwab, 1969). Practical argument engagement could thus become a major professional development approach in your school.

A different method to professional development is oriented toward constructing shared knowledge about curriculum and instruction and involves critical action research to provide a vehicle for uncovering and analyzing meanings in classrooms. Critical action research permits teachers to study what they do in the classroom. They involve themselves in collecting and interpreting data that justify meanings not readily apparent when their teaching practice is observed in isolation. In other words, to study their teaching is to uncover the systemic order which connects knowledge, power, events, and meaning in the act of teaching and learning.

Critical action research is grounded in a critical social theory concerned with egalitarianism and justice. Language and actions are the key units of analysis and are examined to understand multiple forms of difference, multiple interpretations, and multiple ways of knowing or constructing knowledge. Critical action research then utilizes text and content analysis as a method of uncovering what may not be readily seen. The concept of developing richness through dialogue, interpretations, hypothesis generation and proving, can apply to the research methods in action. This process requires recursion, which is the process of reflecting on one’s work to explore, discuss, and inquire into ourselves as teachers who are researching underlying meanings and their consequences for students.

The main reason for bringing critical action research to your attention is the data that emerged from the teacher interviews concerning the school’s curriculum, what counts as legitimate subject matter, and power and knowledge relations. If your faculty would unite with students and community members in an attempt to ask serious questions about what is taught, how it is taught, and what should constitute the goals of their school, not only will critical self-reflection be advanced, but group decision making will also become a reality (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1985; Kincheloe, 1993). For example, when teachers join with student and community members in a project designed to discover places in the community where students could exercise a combination of vocational skills; critical thinking skills; feelings of personal empowerment; and the cultivation of reasoned deliberation, judicious skepticism, and compassion; a democratic dialogue and learning experience is generated. One of the key elements of critical action research is that it not only unwraps the ordinary but it also involves change and reform which seek to end inequalities and injustices. By this simple example of critical action research, democratic principles would be strengthened and imaginations would be extended by the analytical dialogue it would effect. Teachers, students, and community members would all have to think about their roles in selecting ideas, while at the
same time participating in dialogue about the aims of schooling and the nature of thinking. Teachers experienced in this process could elicit effective self-assessments from adult workers to cultivate among students. The connections to democracy and the cognitive advances which could be created by this simple example of action research highlight the importance of its form. Keep in mind that educational reform of a critical democratic nature will work only when advanced and conceptually understood by teachers themselves (Apple & Beane, 1995; Beane, 1997; Floden & Klinzing, 1990; Thompson, 1996).

Here is another idea for advancing teachers’ professional development. A team of researchers modified a process known as Interactive Research and Development. Lieberman (1986) and her colleagues designed it to be a more useful model of action research for schools to implement. This approach is structured in the following way. First, a collaborative research team identifies a problem they would like to research. (Group problem-finding is an excellent way of gaining quick access to the group’s consciousness about what occurs in the school.) Next, collaborative decisions are made about the specific research questions, questions of inquiry, and the design of the study (how they will go about the inquiry). Then they carry out their research plan of action. Finally, they use the research findings to design interventions to be implemented in their school. This research to practice approach, like everything else, has strengths and weaknesses. Overall, this process can involve teachers in reflection about teaching, unite teachers, and promote collegial interaction. It also makes the connection between doing research and implementing research findings. Action research provides opportunities for teachers to assume new roles, experiment, gain a sense of control over their work, and affirm the practical conceptions and professional concerns of teachers. At your school, an action research team could be established to address the concerns the veteran teachers raised. They reported being “frustrated” with the changes from a predominantly white, middle-class student population to an increasingly lower socioeconomic status population of minorities. Advance the professional and pedagogical knowledge-base of your teachers in order to help them provide youth, regardless of cultural background, with the conceptual tools required to make a reasonable life in today’s world. Take a few minutes to jot down the names of teachers in your school who have an investigative spirit and work well with others. Based on observations of teacher interactions and teacher comments, there appear to be three informally influential teachers who are perceived by colleagues as exemplars of good teaching. (I highlighted their names on the enclosed faculty roster.) Would these people be interested in participating in an action research project that focuses on specific curriculum issues that they would like to examine? The findings could influence students and teachers throughout your school and help to sustain your improvement efforts.

Thirteen years ago, educational researcher Lee S. Shulman (1987) outlined categories of the knowledge base which underscore teaching practice. For the purpose of conceptualizing just how much information good teachers draw from to make complex judgments on behalf of students, consider his list: subject-matter knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge, with special reference to broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization; curriculum knowledge, with a particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers; pedagogical content knowledge, that special combination of content and pedagogy coupled with their own special form of professional understanding; knowledge of learners and their characteristics; knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures; and knowledge of educational ends, purposes, values, and their philosophical and historical grounds.

As you can see, there is a great deal of knowledge teachers can make use of to enable them to link to the intellectual and cultural understandings and dispositions that individual children bring with them to the classroom (Berliner, 1998).

Something worth noting: your school does not have partnerships with other education-oriented organizations. School-university projects are one way to enhance your school-
community. Take some time to generate ideas which could connect your school to the university, neighboring businesses, and/or community agencies. Don’t limit your options. What may seem questionable or unfamiliar at the beginning can be an important part of expanding opportunities to learn and develop.

Ms. Carpenter, I have presented you with a great deal of information and ideas for you to consider. I don’t want to leave you feeling overwhelmed, so I’ll conclude by saying that change takes time (Cuban, 1998). It requires a clear vision of what is possible coupled with a driving passion to guide, support, and mobilize others toward purposeful actions (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Evans, 1996; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

The final point I wish to make is that for a school to be better, its process of change must be grounded in the following features:

- The focus of change must be on context-specific situations.
- Change efforts must be knowledge-based.
- There must be collective participation and collaboration.
- School persons must be engaged in ongoing development.
- There must be continuity in the development over time.
- There needs to be a developmental orientation toward teacher growth and organizational change.
- There must be time built in for reflection and analysis of change.

Ms. Carpenter, I hope this document was a stimulus for thought, and perhaps the ideas or book and article suggestions can be useful to you as you proceed with school change efforts. Remember to: “SEE BEYOND WHAT IS TO WHAT CAN BE.”

References


Hirsch, Jr., E.D.  (1996).  *The schools we need and why we don’t have them*.  New York: Double-day.


