

Foreword

This book gives depth and substance to the *practice* of the principalship. In this sense, it challenges at least two of the most deeply rooted cultural norms around school leadership in the American context. The first of these norms is the idea that leadership grows out of the particular attributes and talents of the individual leader rather than out of learned behavior or practice. The second of these norms is that all leadership is contextual and contingent—that successful leaders in one context are often not likely to be successful in another because their particular “style” of leadership may not be compatible with the new setting. These norms are both deeply rooted in the culture of leadership in American schools and deeply destructive to the creation of a professional culture in schools. If all that is successful about leadership can be explained by the attributes of the individual and their consistency or inconsistency with context, then nothing of any consequence is teachable or trainable, and therefore, there is no such thing as professional knowledge in the sector. Juxtaposed to this view, the authors of this book argue that there is a practice of leadership, or maybe multiple practices of leadership, of which theirs is one and that they can be taught and learned, and indeed, that the practice of leadership itself entails teaching others how to master the complexities of practice in a disciplined and purposeful way. The authors walk us through a process based on a set of fairly widely established practices that revolve around inquiry that connect the major elements of leadership practice to the improvement of instructional practice.

Historians of education have observed that every generation of American educational leaders, from the end of the 19th century onward, promises that *it* will be the generation to transform the practice of leadership into the practice of instructional improvement, and so far, every succeeding generation has failed at that fundamental task. The leadership of instructional practice has been consistently and systematically displaced, generation after generation, by the bureaucratic demands of “running” schools and by the “real-world” demands of school bureaucracy. This phenomenon

has given rise to the wry observation that “educational leadership is to leadership as military music is to music.” How is it possible that an aspiration so straightforward and so apparent can consistently be subverted by one generation after another? The answer, I think, lies in the basic observation that education is a profession without a practice or, more accurately, an occupation aspiring to be a profession that has not yet discovered its practice. We do not, as a field, define a set of practices that everyone who enters the sector has to master as a condition of being able to practice, nor do we insist that people who practice in the field continue to learn their practice at ever-increasing levels of competence and expertise over time. This is one of the costs of defining teaching and leadership practices as idiosyncratic attributes of the individual rather than as predictable patterns of behavior that must be learned and developed as a condition of working in the sector.

This book is one of a number of new books on leadership that takes its point of departure from the assumption that there are practices that can be learned, that they can be connected to the core work of schools, and that competence in these practices should be expected of anyone who pretends to the role of “leader” in the sector. The book makes no concessions to the complexity of the work. The first chapter describes the working environment of the principal with uncompromising detail. But rather than taking the traditional route of saying that the work requires extraordinary people with extraordinary talents or, as so often happens in books about educational leadership, arguing that the work is impossible, the book then proceeds, in succeeding chapters, to demonstrate that complex problems require clear, unflinching practices. In this sense, it is a refreshing alternative to the long laundry lists of attributes of successful leaders that pass for guidance to principals in the more traditional literature. The problem with attribute-based leadership theories is that *no one* ever has all the “laundry list” attributes in quite the right combination or quantity and most people don’t know how to acquire them if they don’t have them. This book argues that educational leadership is—hold onto your hats—about learning, both in the sense of enabling and supporting the learning of teachers and students in classrooms, and in the sense of managing one’s own learning as a leader, through collective inquiry with others. Yes, the world of schools is complex. Yes, the work of educational leaders is often difficult, indeterminate, and lonely. But saying that these are the initial conditions of the work only sets the problem. The problem requires a *practice* that breaks the traditional constraints on the learning of adults and children in schools.

Those of us who find ourselves routinely in classrooms and schools know that the culture that constrains learning in schools is more robust

Theory of Action

Purposeful change starts with an expression of intended outcomes and expectations: What is our goal? What are our objectives? Explicitly recognizing where we want to go is naturally followed by a consideration of why we are not yet there; thus, we revisit our problem of practice. Finally, we propose actions to get there. Such dialogue produces a theory of action, a causal or axiomatic (if, then) statement. For example, if we want first graders to read at grade level, they need decoding skills and phonemic awareness. The problem is that our general education teachers do not systematically teach these skills. In fact, some do not even have the knowledge and expertise to teach specific reading skills. This statement leads to other embedded theory-of-action statements, such as, if our students are to use decoding skills and phonemic awareness, then teachers must be trained in these areas and use appropriate strategies.

Therefore, the theory of action states both the desired outcome and the proposed actions aimed at achieving the stated outcomes. Put simply, it states what the community of practice is going to do to get where it wants to go. A theory of action is specific and focused; it presents both the means and the end. The desired outcome or the ultimate goal is agreed upon prior to the specific means to achieve these ends. Still, a theory of action is not overly simplified or general. As March and Simon (1958) warn, a “rationale theory of action calls for simplified models that capture the main features of a problem without capturing all its complexities” (p. 169). Rather, the theory of action puts forward a specific outcome goal, related to the problem of practice that is expected to result from the specific proposed action(s) necessary to reach that goal.



Concern about assessing students is not new to schooling. From early IQ testing to simple classroom testing to standardized state and national testing, assessments have exhibited different forms and functions. Currently, high-stakes accountability uses state-level test scores to determine student, teacher, and school success. This emphasis on standardized scores has placed assessment in the political spotlight and in the minds of every school educator.

Traditionally, assessments have been the weak leg in the tripod of curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the school level. Moreover, the identification of “assessments” as a problem of practice cannot be considered in isolation. The issue of assessment needs to be interpreted in the local context, embedded in curriculum, and must inform instruction.

Consequently, to understand and fully identify the problem of practice, Lee recognized the perspectives of the various constituency groups that needed to be heard and considered:

- *Community*: Generally speaking, community members pay attention to property values. An important variable to property value has been local schools. Rankings of local schools have focused on standardized test scores, chiefly college entrance assessments such as the ACT and SAT. However, since the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) stipulations of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, individual schools are “graded.” These scores are publicized in the local media as well as real estate publications. Since many businesses and families who live in the Marshall catchment care about property values, they also care about the test scores.
- *State and national government*: NCLB of 2002 required that all states administer a state-level common assessment. These assessments are used to determine AYP for local schools. While the function of these assessments is clear, the form of the assessments varies from state to state. Like most states, the one in which Marshall is located refined an existing state assessment aligned to the state-approved curriculum. To some extent, Marshall is lucky because it is not in one of the states that uses national assessment instruments such as the SAT and ACT that are based on national curricular standards. The state is considering joining the more than 10 states that have been granted permission to use “student growth” assessments that calculate student growth from year to year. In all cases, these assessments are a summative measure that is given at the end of the year. Recently, the state’s education department accountability office asked schools and districts to identify additional assessments that are used to monitor achievement between annual state assess-

In Piagetian terms, they accommodated their schema, not merely assimilated short-term adherence to ideas (see Piaget, 1985). They moved from a stable state through disequilibrium toward a new stability—until the process began again. The school community members were learners all. The cycle leveraged teachers’ “hearts, minds, and practices” (Elmore, 2003a, p. 204). Thinking changed; practices changed; results changed.

At the beginning of this book, we debunked the myth of the great principal while maintaining that positive change requires leadership of an inquiry-minded, action-oriented principal. We offered the collaborative inquiry-action cycle as a tool for learning and change. The cycle serves as a framework to shape and guide an inclusive and ongoing process that can become the school culture, *the way we do things here* (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Engaging in the cycle is more about changing norms, habits, skills, and beliefs than about changing formal structures. It is about organizational learning, and at the heart of organizational learning is the ability to enter into a professional community, to develop modes of inquiry, and to take risks. The learning process works because the cycle:

- Is collaborative
- Is iterative with ebb and flow across the steps
- Focuses on the core technology of teaching and learning
- Is based on concrete practices
- Harnesses community support and resources
- Recognizes teachers as leaders

Of course, challenges exist to impede initiation of the cycle as well as maintaining and sustaining its ongoing practice. Multiple challenges lie in the contextual variable of each setting. Others lie in human resistance to change.

WHAT IT TAKES

Collaboration is the linchpin of the cycle. To accomplish improvement, principals do not inquire and act alone. They invite; they include; they create opportunities for engagement. They are willing to relinquish control to gain participation and ownership on the part of the community. This local network may include any of the following groups: teachers; other school personnel; parents; people from community government, agencies, and business; local foundations; and entrepreneurs. Collaboration means teamwork, partnerships, alliances; it also means negotiation, conciliation, compromises, and other forms of give and take. Most important, effective collaboration requires dialogue that produces new ways of thinking.