

Foreword

Moving Forward Together

Teaching is in trouble. And if teaching is in trouble, so is learning. Fulfilled learners don't come out of a system of frustrated and unfulfilled teachers. The proliferation of harmful working conditions and corrosive school cultures around American teachers is not a matter of assertion or opinion. As this important book repeatedly shows with large-scale and up-close evidence from the top researchers in the field, it is underpinned by hard evidence. The disturbing pattern of unstable, unsatisfying, and ineffective work cultures in American schools, particularly those that are supposed to serve children in poverty, can no longer be ignored or denied.

But things don't have to be this way. *Teaching in Context* takes a positive and hopeful approach in pointing to malleable factors and deliberate interventions that have improved working conditions and professional cultures for teachers. As a consequence, significant gains have been made for some of the poorest children in many US contexts. It is now time, with all that we know, to get these kinds of results on a nationwide scale. First, though, let's be clear about the problem.

Teachers in the United States have been suffering for too long from the fundamental problems that three of the founding thinkers of social thought depicted as the basic afflictions of the whole of society a century and more ago. In the 1920s, the German sociologist Max Weber diagnosed the greatest problem in society as being one of excessive *bureaucracy*. Bureaucracy, he said, began fifteen hundred years ago in China as a system of promotion and upward mobility based on civil service examinations and merit rather than aristocratic

preference and patronage. But this impartial system of assignment and achievement turned into an “iron cage” of bureaucracy that stifled the human spirit and cast people into a state of disenchantment where the magic of life had been lost. His conservative French counterpart, Emile Durkheim, blamed society’s ills on something he called *anomie*, or normlessness, when the basic principles of social regulation have collapsed, when agreed on and understood standards and codes of human conduct have disappeared. In an anomic society, everyone is morally on their own, with no limits to their actions.

The most infamous member of this classic trio of social thinkers, Karl Marx, along with his associate Friedrich Engels, pointed to a third problem. They argued that as a result of the exploitation of labor, the pervasive condition of capitalist societies was one of alienated labor, or *alienation*. Alienation, they said, occurred when people no longer created meaning and fulfilled themselves intrinsically through their work, having become estranged from themselves and their work because they were producing extrinsic results for others. In much more recent times, many writers who would not regard themselves at all as Marxists have found that alienation or disengagement remains all too common in modern working life. Indeed, Gallup polls find that high proportions of US workers are disengaged from their work.

Marx and Engels wanted a social revolution. By contrast, inspired by his travels across nineteenth-century America, the French social thinker Alexis de Tocqueville advocated for something else. The answer, he felt, was in “the arts” of democracy—in the capacity to argue, negotiate, and compromise—that were at the heart of the country’s strong communities and public life. As educators in the state of Vermont recently put it to me, this was the Vermont way—to roll up one’s sleeves and argue things out together.

Too many US teachers today are suffering from the triple jeopardy of bureaucracy, alienation, and anomie. And far too many ed-

ucational reform efforts in the United States and elsewhere have actively contributed to these ills, with no overall benefit for young people's learning and development.

- *Bureaucracy* has burgeoned through the proliferation of standardized testing and the imposition of prescribed instruction on which more and more teachers' performance ratings have come to be based as a consequence of federal, "big government" policy.
- *Alienation* is everywhere, as disengaged and dissatisfied teachers leave the unsupportive and managerially toxic system with increasing frequency, so that the modal number (most commonly occurring number) of years in teaching in America has plummeted from well into double figures right down to one!
- The *anomie* of competitive individualism is everywhere. Individual teacher evaluation and the charter school movement have often pitted teachers and schools against one another in the same communities and sometimes even in the same buildings.

What has been the result of all this reform? In deadpan yet deadening prose, the US government's own evaluation of Race to the Top concludes that "it is not clear whether the RTTT grants improved student outcomes"!

So it is clearly time for another way, and this book shows how more than a few teachers, schools, and even states have already found one. As Esther Quintero points out in her informative interpretation of the findings reported in this book, ever since the early 1990s, there has been a consistent evidence base that teachers who work together collaboratively in a supportive environment where everyone expects that all students can succeed get better results, student for student, than do teachers who work in schools where they are mainly left to teach and plan on their own. The research findings reported in this book confirm these results and begin to give them more precision.

What *Teaching in Context* shows is not just that it is better to collaborate than not collaborate, but the contributions reveal that there are different ways of collaborating, not just one specific structure or program. Yet, not all these forms of collaboration are equally effective. Collaboration is not just correlated with greater student success, but some studies over time and as a result of specific interventions demonstrate that the relationship is a causal one. Deliberately designed processes such as inquiring into student learning or figuring out what interventions to make or supports to provide for particular students can be highly effective. Others that involve much talking and little doing may have little immediate benefit at all. Yet time has to be invested in building relationships and shared beliefs in and commitment to everyone's success, otherwise the deliberately designed processes can degenerate into the stilted routines of contrived collegiality. It is folly to think there is a magic method that can be hastily imposed on everyone to yield instant returns.

There also needs to be time and persistence to build cultures of mutual trust and support. Formal and informal, short-term and long-term, direct and indirect—it is how all the different forms of collaboration are joined into a single compelling narrative of improvement that matters in the end.

The Every Student Succeeds Act makes ample provision for evidence-based approaches in order to justify funding through different programs. There are few reforms more evidentially compelling than building up the social capital of the teaching force and providing the resources and support to do that, while taking away the distractions of relentless individual teacher evaluation. Too many reforms in the past decade and more have been driven by the interests of making capital gains from our children through the profits returned to charter school owners and the sales that are made from testing and technology products. We need to make an investment in a new kind of capital now in education—what Michael Fullan and

I call the *professional capital* of our teachers—and this includes social capital. How teachers are expected to work together is a defining condition of the job, and how well they are able to work together is a result of supportive working conditions, provisions of sufficient time, and the protections afforded by stable and effective leadership.

Albert Shanker, who gave his name to the institute from which this book springs, had a vision of teacher unions and the teaching profession that involved them promoting positive change as well as protecting teachers against reforms that were harmful to them and their students. This fine book and its vision of what can be achieved when teachers are expected, encouraged, and enabled to work together, is a fitting tribute to his memory.

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