
The Social Side of Education Reform

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Over a decade ago, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider identified a major obstacle to achieving sustained, systemwide school improvement in the United States: most reform efforts overlook the fact that “teachers must engage not only particular subjects and ideas about how to teach them, but also students, their parents, and professional colleagues.” They noted that “important consequences play out in these daily social exchanges.”¹

The present volume is about the nature and impact of these social exchanges, with a specific focus on teachers’ relationships with their peers and, to a lesser extent, with leaders and parents.² It shows how these exchanges influence important teacher and student outcomes (e.g., teacher retention and effectiveness, student achievement) as well as organizational aspects like school safety and school climate. Specifically, the chapters in this volume make the case that school contexts characterized by strong and stable relationships among adults are more conducive to the learning and improvement of adults *and* students and the system as a whole.

Teaching in Context brings together scholars from diverse fields. In surveying not only their own but others’ research, these contributors show that teachers become better faster when they work in organizations that support them professionally—in schools and districts

that purposefully strengthen the interpersonal and collective dimension of teachers' work through structures that allow them to work together, learn from each other, and coordinate their instruction for the benefit of all students.

This volume comes out of the realization that, while the research base for these ideas is ample, growing, and robust, the message has not reached the world of policy. It is possible that this body of knowledge, which goes back to the 1970s and 1980s, has not been disseminated as broadly as other scholarly work and that policy makers are simply not aware of this research, a situation this book looks to remedy.³ Or it may be that some in policy circles perceive the idea that relationships matter to be too “touchy feely,” a notion researchers in this volume challenge. Strong and trusting relationships—whether among teachers or between teachers and supervisors or teachers and students—are forged under conditions that have very little to do with being “buddies” and everything to do with clarity around goals and expectations, structures that facilitate focused conversations, and supports designed to improve. Another misperception is that interpersonal aspects of the profession are unmeasurable. Addressing this, the contributors capture the quality, frequency, and nature of teachers' professional relationships in a variety of sophisticated ways, such as by constructing measures derived from practitioners' answers to working conditions surveys, collecting social network data, conducting in-depth interviews, designing and validating ad hoc teacher and administrator surveys, or using time-use and other daily instruments. A final reason for why the social side of education reform has not been duly recognized by policy makers is that they may not perceive these findings to be actionable. And while there is some merit to that argument, John Papay and Matthew Kraft note that “although the collective and interpersonal nature of school contexts makes quick policy fixes unlikely to succeed, research suggests several concrete ways in which educators and policy makers can take on this challenge.”

A shift in education policy is sorely needed. Policy does not sufficiently attend to, let alone leverage, the interpersonal aspects of teachers' work. Instead, the focus remains on technical and individual-level solutions. For example, policies aimed at improving teaching focus on identifying the most talented individuals (and dismissing those who are less able) and on increasing their individual abilities (through pay-for-performance, overhauling teacher preparation, etc.) In the meantime, most practitioners are largely missed by these remedies. Too many educators continue to work in isolation, focusing on their own students, interacting only intermittently and often minimally with colleagues and supervisors, and stagnating in (or about to leave) schools that were never set up to support them or promote their professional growth.

This inefficient approach to improvement is predicated on the idea of making the system better by increasing the quality of instruction one teacher at a time. A shift to targeting the organizational context could benefit teachers collectively and result in more sustained and sustainable improvement. For example, reforms centered on connecting educators and facilitating their learning from each other create a value that exceeds the sum of their individual talents, thereby transforming schools into *learning organizations*.

I do not take issue with existing policy instruments per se but, rather, with the way they are used. For instance, would performance incentives produce better results if administered at the school or team (not the individual) level? Would conventional professional development be more useful if it focused on the acquisition of relational skills such as giving and receiving feedback, facilitating team meetings, and so on? The evidence presented in this volume may call for a redirection of some existing instruments, but, more than anything, it calls for new approaches that finally put to use the knowledge we've gained over the years about how teachers get better at teaching. The chapters comprising *Teaching in Context* offer many

practical suggestions and ideas for getting started on this policy redesign process.

Some of the studies in this volume use performance on standardized tests as a way to gauge student learning and teacher effectiveness. While evidence shows that test scores are not the only way to measure success (of students or of adults), however partially or imperfectly, they do capture what students know about particular subjects. In addition, test scores are an outcome that policy makers pay attention to. But this volume focuses on the social *processes* that contribute to these outcomes, for, as Susan Rosenholtz has argued, “if we look only at the outputs of schools and not at the structures and processes influencing them, we will never learn why organizations such as schools work, and how positive outcomes are brought about.” The most important questions in the area of school effectiveness “are not methodological but conceptual—not *how* to measure effectiveness but *what* to measure.”⁴

The answer that the contributors to this volume unanimously and resoundingly offer is that we need to pay attention to whether and how teachers’ capacities are supported or constrained by their social-organizational context and the broader systems and communities where schools are situated. *Teaching in Context* hopes to shift and lift a policy conversation that has become overly centered on drivers that are demonstrably insufficient for improvement.

SURVEYING THE VOLUME

The chapters in this book deliver a consistent story. This isn’t because the contributors are all part of the same research groups, or because they look at the same data sources, or because they share a similar methodological or disciplinary backgrounds. Some authors have worked with each other, but most have not. They draw on a multiplicity of data sources from contexts across the United States, and

they use a wide variety of research methods and represent disciplines from across the social sciences spectrum. The *Teaching in Context* story is consistent because of the degree to which the contributors' findings agree.

Interpersonal Features of School Context/Organization

In Chapter 1, "Developing Workplaces Where Teachers Stay, Improve, and Succeed," John Papay and Matthew Kraft highlight the critical role that teachers' workplace context plays in their career decisions, professional development, and instructional effectiveness through a discussion of a series of recent studies on the interpersonal features of the work environment. This chapter challenges several common assumptions about teachers' preferences and how/when they grow professionally. First is the idea that teachers prefer to work in schools serving affluent students and avoid (or leave) schools serving poor and minority students. In Papay and Kraft's studies, teachers' working conditions "were much stronger predictors of teachers' career plans than were the demographic characteristics of students in these schools." Moreover, students in schools rated as most supportive by their teachers experienced larger test score gains than students in schools deemed to be less supportive by their teachers. A second assumption is that teacher ability is more or less fixed (teachers "plateau" after the first few years in the profession) and portable, or independent of teachers' work contexts. Papay and Kraft show that educators working in schools with strong professional environments continue to learn throughout their career and get better at much faster rates than colleagues working in schools characterized by a weaker professional environment.

But what do schools with strong professional contexts actually look like? Chapter 2, "Reaping Rewards for Students," examines a sample of schools that were able to support and develop their teachers and, as a result, experienced success with students. Authors Susan

Moore Johnson, Stephanie Reinhorn, and Nicole Simon synthesize findings from a series of studies that examine data from a comparative case study conducted in a large, urban district in Massachusetts. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 172 teachers and administrators from six schools that ranked high in the state's accountability system (despite serving high proportions of disadvantaged students) and operated under different policies and systems (e.g., public, charter, turnaround). Despite their differences, all schools had broad autonomy and "were remarkably similar in how they organized practices that affected teachers." The big takeaway from Chapter 2 is that successful schools must have intentional and interdependent procedures for selecting, supporting, and developing their teachers. As the authors explain, hiring tends to be last minute and rushed in most US schools. By contrast, schools in their study had information-rich hiring mechanisms which ensured that prospective teachers were well matched with their future colleagues and students. Evaluation in these schools was a real vehicle for improvement; teachers were observed often and received frequent, detailed feedback. Finally, teachers did not work in isolation but in well-organized, high-functioning teams. Importantly, school principals with the right skills and dispositions were critical in orchestrating these various personnel practices.

Human and *social capital* are terms that don't always resonate with practitioners or even policy makers; they can seem too abstract, divorced from what goes on in actual schools and even from one another. However, as Chapter 2 aptly illustrates, human and social capital are closely related and ever present in the daily operations of schools. Take hiring. The schools described by Johnson, Reinhorn, and Simon didn't just seek top talent; they sought out the *right* talent for their schools, searching for teachers who would identify with the school's mission and, crucially, work well with the existing faculty. As the authors explain, "Success for teams depended in part

on effective hiring and evaluation, which assured teachers that their peers would be strong partners.” But also, teams were instrumental for new hires: “No school reported deliberately creating teams to support new teachers’ induction, although they served that purpose.” In short, these schools recruited human capital that would continue to grow their social capital and, simultaneously, used their existing social capital to cultivate their newly acquired talent.

In Chapter 3, “Better Collaboration, Better Teaching,” Matthew Ronfeldt zeroes in on one aspect of teachers’ organizational context: collaboration in instructional teams. Ronfeldt provides a succinct but throughout review of the collaboration scholarship and then summarizes the results of two of his recent large-scale studies, explaining how they strengthen the case that teacher collaboration leads to better teaching. His first study, which examines collaboration in instructional teams across the large, urban Miami–Dade County school district, found that collaboration quality matters to teacher effectiveness and that that teachers improve faster in schools with better collaboration quality. Ronfeldt’s second study found that teachers who learn to teach in schools with stronger collaboration are more effective once they complete their certification than are fellow teachers who learn to teach in schools with inferior collaborative cultures.

Chapter 3 provides an excellent overview of how the teacher collaboration research has advanced as a field, how scholars have become more certain that collaboration isn’t just associated with instructional improvement but that it is responsible for it. As Ronfeldt explains, “It is unusual to find a body of evidence from a group of well-designed studies that all seem to point to the same general conclusion.”

Relationships and the Systems Where Teachers Work

Effective teamwork, collaboration, and, more broadly, high-quality collegial interactions characterize schools that have strong social

capital. In Chapter 4, “The Social Side of Capability,” James P. Spillane, Megan Hopkins, Tracy M. Sweet, and Matthew Shirrell provide a broad overview of the concept of social capital and synthesize what they have learned through a series of recent investigations about the factors that influence the formation of social ties among staff within and across schools.

Chapter 4 leads with two important ideas. First, social relations don’t just happen by chance. Nurturing social capital requires intentional, coordinated, and systemic strategies to ensure that high-quality professional interactions take place. Second, we know from decades of sociological research that individuals tend to associate with those who are like them. In this particular context, however, Spillane and colleagues found that social relations among educators are more strongly shaped by aspects of the infrastructure (e.g., roles and job titles, organizational routines, scheduling, spatial arrangements) than by individual characteristics (e.g., race, gender). This is good news, because only these aspects can be adjusted to promote social interactions and organizational learning. The authors contend that “system and school leaders can influence who talks to whom about instruction” by making strategic staff decisions that elevate the influence of more expert teachers. The end goal of such “engineering” is to maximize (at both the school and system levels) exposure to expert teachers, knowledge diffusion, and coordination throughout the school organization and district.

According to Carrie Leana and Frits Pil in Chapter 5, despite extensive evidence that social capital is a core component of school success, it remains “an untapped resource for educational improvement.” The authors report on their research on organizational performance across a wide range of contexts (auto plants, nursing homes), including public schools. Time and again they found that interpersonal aspects of the work are critical to the success of any type of organization. They undertook extensive large-scale studies in several urban

districts across the United States, including Pittsburgh, Nashville, Providence, and New York City. In one of their studies they collected data from teachers, principals, students, and parents and used them to quantify the quality of communication, the degree of trust present in schools, and the extent to which staff had a shared vision—three core components of social capital. Leana and Pil found that student performance increased dramatically in schools which had high levels of social capital. In a later study, Leana and Pil followed more than 1,000 teachers in 239 grade teams, and linked teacher reports of their professional conversations about math to the growth in math achievement scores of their 24,187 students. When math-centered conversations were more frequent in grade-level teams, student performance improved significantly.

As Chapters 1–5 suggest, leaders are key orchestrators of organizational and system change. But what happens when leaders are in perpetual flux? In Chapter 6, “The Social Cost of Leadership Churn,” Alan J. Daly, Kara S. Finnigan, and Yi-Hwa Liou review what little research exists on leadership churn, including their new study of 257 central office and site leaders of a large urban district. While previous studies have primarily focused on leadership departures at the top level, Daly, Finnigan, and Liou focus on leaders at the system *and* school levels, examining their movement in and out of the district for a period of three years. They found that leaders who were most central in the district’s expertise network, as well as those who more often acted as brokers, were also more likely to leave the district during the period of the study. Excessive levels of churn can make systems vulnerable, disrupting social relations that are critical for improvement. In short, to ensure change, we need stable relationships.

In Chapter 7, “How the Organization of Schools and Local Communities Shape Educational Improvement,” Elaine Allensworth looks beyond the benefits of high-quality relationships among staff

within and across schools to the larger community in which schools are situated: “relationships among members of a school community—teachers, leaders, students, and families—whether strong or weak, good or bad, influence the likelihood that students will learn, teaching will improve, and school leaders will reach their goals.”

She synthesizes some of the influential research conducted by the Chicago Consortium for School Research, which in the mid-1990s set out to investigate why some Chicago schools improved dramatically after decentralization while others stayed the same or got worse. A team composed of researchers and practitioners developed a list of five elements that seemed crucial for schools to improve. Importantly, the team found that strong relationships are the common thread holding together the five components. This framework was refined by the Consortium through an extensive study that culminated in the book *Organizing Schools for Improvement*. This work firmly establishes that schools strong in these five components are highly likely to improve, while those that are not stagnate or get worse.

Chapter 7 zeroes in on the importance of parent-community ties. In their investigations, Allensworth and her research colleagues found that teacher-parent collaboration was a strong predictor of a safer and more orderly climate, of increased feelings of efficacy among teachers, and of teacher retention. While neighborhoods influenced school climate, much of what accounted for the large differences in safety among schools had everything to do with the ways in which parents, teachers, and students collaborated with one another in those schools.

Moving Ideas into Action

Pulling together the volume’s themes, Joshua P. Starr makes the case in Chapter 8, “Organizing Adult Learning for Adaptive Change Management,” that *adult*, not student, learning is the biggest challenge facing American public education today. In the United States,

professional learning isn't typically viewed as the vehicle for student learning. Thus, schools and school systems are not really organized around this goal and for this purpose. In fact, Starr notes, suggesting a focus on adults is often received with skepticism at best. Nonetheless, he believes that the primary responsibility of leaders seeking to improve student achievement is to organize systems for adults to learn from one another.

Starr reflects on various key pillars sustaining adult learning, including the importance of attending to measures beyond student achievement, such as employee engagement and turnover, which can provide sense of the quality of a school's learning environment and culture; training and supporting school leaders in incorporating these metrics in how they manage and support their staff; and scaling-up collaborative structures by thinking carefully about scheduling, resources, getting stakeholders onboard, and so on. In short, little learning is likely to occur within schools characterized by distrust and isolation; thus, leaders should be responsible (and accountable) for monitoring these aspects and using these metrics for improvement.

Reforms often falter at the implementation stage because they overlook the fact that social dynamics influence the speed, depth and success with which any new idea is implemented.⁵ And the conventional approach to connecting research with practice has not made things any better. Traditionally, this relationship has been very one-sided, with the expectation being that educators unquestioningly embrace and put into action the knowledge generated by academics. In Chapter 9, "Research-Practice Partnerships and ESSA," William Penuel and Caitlin Farrell make the case for a more productive way of relating research, policy, and practice—a timely issue given the continued commitment to the use of research in policy reflected by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Penuel and Farrell focus on research practice partnerships (RPPs), collaborations between researchers and practitioners where they jointly set the

agenda and work together in authentic, long-term partnerships. According to the authors, RPPs are an excellent vehicle for ensuring productive evidence use because they address two common problems associated with the research *into* practice mind-set: the perception among practitioners that most research doesn't really respond to their pressing needs and, related, the fact that many reforms do not consider the local context in which they will be implemented. In short, RPPs create more opportunities for conversations among researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders, thereby ensuring that research is relevant to its intended beneficiaries and that proper attention is paid to the social and contextual dimensions of evidence use, policy implementation, and change. Finally, Penuel and Farrell offer a timely analysis of the various roles RPPs are positioned to play to help realize ESSA's vision of evidence-based policy making.

While Chapters 8 and 9 focus primarily on the practical side of putting the volume's ideas into action, all the chapters offer evidence-based suggestions for policy and practice. In the Conclusion I offer a synthesis of these recommendations, providing a roadmap of how to move ahead systematically in realizing the level of attention social-relational aspects deserve in the improvement of teaching and learning.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the United States, debates over teacher preparation, certification, and evaluation demonstrate a relentless focus on improving teaching by augmenting the skills and qualifications of individual teachers. While these proposals seek to influence the teacher workforce as a whole, they fail to focus on the school organization or system—that is, on the work processes characterizing schools, roles people enact, social interactions, organizational norms and beliefs, and, importantly, how all of it comes together. Current policy proposals can

be said to focus on “schools not as professional organizations, but as organizations of professional individuals.”⁶ These are two very different things, just like “consulting a series of specialized physicians separately constitutes a very different experience for that patient than consulting a team of coordinated physicians working together.”⁷

Nothing in this volume suggests that teachers’ individual human capital isn’t important to educational progress, or that if we improve the contexts of teachers’ work major structural problems such as poverty and inequality will cease to matter. However, the contributors argue and demonstrate that when schools and school systems prioritize strengthening the interpersonal aspects of teaching and learning, even schools serving low-income students can attract, retain, and develop skillful, stable faculties and achieve good academic results. We cannot ignore this evidence any longer. There seems to be increasing interest in these ideas, but it also tends to be thin, and conversations quickly pivot to “well, *both* context and individual matter.” Of course, this is right. But what this statement obscures is that one side has received more attention than the other; it is now time for a balanced approach. Moreover, scholarship in the context matters camp incorporates the human capital perspective (Chapters 2 and 5 are perfect illustrations). The same cannot be said about the human capital perspective, which often disregards the social-organizational dimension.

As Spillane and colleagues explain, “Social capital can help expand our understanding of human capital, in particular the development of human capital in organizations and systems. Moreover, we suspect that scholarship at the intersection of social capital and human capital will generate new insights into capability for instruction and instructional improvement in schools and school systems.”

So instead of holding on to the familiar or throwing up our hands claiming that if everything matters, then anything goes in policy, let’s rise to this challenge and continue to produce scholarship

and policy proposals at this intersection. Let's lift our gaze above frameworks and solutions focused on assessing and augmenting the qualities *of* individuals and embrace an equal focus on attending to and growing the value that can be created *among* them. This will not only benefit educators and the teaching profession but also America's students.