Adults in schools must learn new programs, new strategies, new ways of working together, and even new ways of thinking about who their students are and what it means to be a teacher.

HOW TO BUILD SCHOOLS WHERE

ADULTS LEARN

By Kevin Fahey and Jacy Ippolito

I n the current, very complex, and even conflicted discourse about schools, one thing is clear: Schools need to be about student learning. Schools need to ensure that students are good readers, proficient writers, capable mathematicians, competent scientists, and knowledgeable historians. Students also need to learn to work together, be healthy, be resilient, and care about others. There is a lot of learning to be done.

However, some leaders of this student learning also understand that, in order for students to learn at high levels, the adults in schools must learn new programs, new strategies, new ways of working together, and even new ways of thinking about who their students are and what it means to be a teacher. In other words, there is a lot of adult learning to be done.

Over the past few years, we, along with our colleagues, have been documenting the work of learning leaders who unmistakably understand that schools need to be places where both students and adults learn (Breidenstein, Fahey,

Glickman, & Hensley, 2012; Ippolito, 2013). This simple insight has broad implications for leadership practice.

Leaders of schools where adults learn understand that:
- Educators need a *learning practice* as well as a *teaching practice*;
- Adult learning practice changes over time; and
- How adults' learning practice changes makes a difference in their teaching practice.

WORKING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

To improve teaching practice in classrooms, adults in schools need ways to work and learn together — a *learning practice* — that builds on and challenges their teaching practice and persistently focuses on student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

Doug Lyons describes the learning practice at the Parker School in Reading, Mass., where he is principal: "In order to learn more and improve our practice, we have to dig deeper into what we do, what our kids need, and what we already know. We need to learn from each other" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 29).

Jennifer Flewelling, former principal of the North Bev-

erly Elementary School in Beverly, Mass., describes the learning practice in her school in simple terms: "Any time we are together as faculty is a time for learning" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 77).

These learning leaders subscribe to a common thesis: School improvement is built on adult learning, which changes over time and can be encouraged and supported by savvy school leaders. Moreover, a learning practice, like a teaching practice, develops in complex ways as teachers grow and learn, and is dependent on critical support from colleagues and principals.

UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNING PRACTICE

Educators broadly accept the notion that *how* a child learns changes over time. From childhood to adolescence to adulthood, students become less concrete and more abstract thinkers. They move, for example, from struggling with memorizing a specific letter's sound to writing three-paragraph essays to synthesizing multiple documents and viewpoints in an analytical college essay.

Student learning is developmental, and educators know that effectively supporting that learning should take into account the way a student learns, and the way that learning changes over time. The complex, developmental nature of learning is easily accepted when educators think about students, but this same idea is often overlooked when they consider the learning needed to improve their own practice. Adult learning is also developmental.

A useful lens for helping learning leaders understand the complex nature of adult learning practice in schools is constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1998). Constructive-developmental theory makes two broad claims: Adults continually work to make sense of their experiences (constructive), and the ways that adults make sense of their world can change and grow more complex over time (developmental). One implication of these claims is that in any school, each teacher will have her own learning practice — just as she has her own teaching practice.

For example, a new teacher who is worried about shepherding students to the lunchroom without disturbing other classes, as well as supporting the gifted, special education, minority, and privileged kids in her class, will have a very different learning practice from the established teacher who has a broad teaching and classroom management repertoire but questions how her academic language instruction might be improved to better meet the needs of second-language learners.

The first teacher is desperate for a clear, concrete, right answer to hold on to, while the second teacher might refuse prescriptive answers and prefer an inquiry-based stance toward improving instruction. Both teachers have something to learn, but those things will be learned in different ways.

HOW LEARNING PRACTICE CHANGES

It is hard to imagine that any teacher would ask 3rd graders to learn the quadratic equation. Most students at that grade level have neither the mathematical content knowledge nor the developmental capacity to understand concepts such as variables, equations, and factors. Nor would a kindergarten teacher hand out copies of *Hamlet* to students who learn primarily by sounding out words and mimicking the teacher.

Good teachers understand that *how* students learn makes a difference. Similarly, in schools where adults learn, leaders understand that the learning practice of teachers, departments, grade-level teams, and schools can be in very different developmental places.

Constructive-developmental theory can be used to characterize two typical adult learning practices as *instrumental* and *socializing*. Understanding the distinction between *instrumental* and *socializing* can help leaders build schools where adults learn.

Instrumental learning practice. An instrumental learning practice is built on precise solutions, specific processes, and unambiguous answers. The new teacher who is having difficulty understanding how to organize and manage guided reading groups might simply want a clear, tangible procedure, not an inquiry question or a chance for reflection.

Her learning practice is instrumental because she wants concrete steps and specific advice about how to group kids to read. "Instrumental knowers orient toward following rules and feel supported when others provide specific advice and explicit procedures so that they can accomplish their goals" (Drago-Severson, 2008).

An instrumental learning practice is particularly useful for teachers, teams, departments, schools, and districts needing concrete solutions, practical information, or specialized advice. And while what these schools need to learn can change over time, a school or teacher with an instrumental learning practice always wants to learn clear procedures for making students better writers, or specific strategies for teaching in longer blocks of time, or concrete steps for implementing inquiry-based science lessons.

Publishers, professional learning providers, universities, and researchers have lots of instrumental answers — concrete processes, specific advice, highly articulated programs and initiatives — and many of them have merit. Leaders who support instrumental learning practice in their schools have expertise with explicit teaching and learning strategies, or they need to be able to easily access that expertise.

Sue Snyder, principal of the Hannah School in Beverly, Mass., had a straightforward approach to developing an instrumental learning practice in her school. "We just figured out

> **Constructive-developmental theory makes two broad claims: Adults continually work to make sense of their experiences (constructive), and the ways that adults make sense of their world can change and grow more complex over time (developmental).**

that our faculty meetings needed to be classes" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 15). Working with Sue Charochak, an elementary principal in the district, Snyder turned faculty meetings into classes, complete with lesson plans, homework, essential questions, guided practice, and opportunities for reflection.

Beginning with a focus on building classroom community and behavior management, the schools used this instrumental learning practice to address a variety of learning needs. Charochak noted, "It is interesting that in order to have my greatest success as a leader, I became a teacher" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 14).

As teachers implement new learning in their classrooms, the limits of instrumental learning become noticeable. Instrumental learning helps teachers learn the *content* of a new program or strategy, but not necessarily a *process* to integrate that new practice into their teaching.

Integrating a new practice requires discussion, feedback from colleagues, classroom learning experiments, and collaborative work (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Instrumental learning can be useful, but it tells particular teachers little about how to implement new learning in their particular classrooms with their particular students.

Socializing learning practice. A socializing learning practice is not dependent on straightforward, concrete answers. Instead, a socializing learning practice focuses on learning about the perspectives of others and taking them into account as part of systematic experimentation with different teaching practices.

Educators who have a clear capacity for reflection, flourish when working in teams, and can sacrifice their own interests to benefit the group have a socializing learning practice. "These adults are most concerned with understanding other people's feelings and judgments about them and their work" (Drago-Severson, 2008, p. 61).

Developing and supporting a teacher's socializing learning practice requires a very different kind of leadership. In most schools, there are exceptional teachers of reading, math, social studies, and science, teachers who are expert in helping students think scientifically or adept at engaging students in making historical judgments.

However, content knowledge as well as practical knowledge, good judgment, expertise, and accumulated wisdom in schools is often confined to the classroom of the teacher who possesses that knowledge, wisdom, and expertise. To become better places for adults to learn, some schools intentionally become places where educators learn with and from one another. These schools develop a socializing learning practice.

Jennifer Flewelling developed a socializing learning practice at North Beverly Elementary School. Describing that approach, she says, "There is no other way than collaboration, collegiality, and collective responsibility. This is what we do. We look at our practice and figure out how to make it better. Because you

know what? You don't have it all figured out" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 2).

Flewelling's goal was to create a socializing learning practice by building more collaborative school groups, supporting reflective practice, and creating a coherent learning-focused school culture.

Flewelling was unambiguous about her role in developing a socializing learning practice: "My job is not to be expert on everything — I have to be focused on adult learning" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 105). Unlike Sue Snyder, Flewelling was not the content expert. Her goal was to teach teachers to learn with one another, to share what they knew, and to make transparent what they needed to learn. She directed resources to support collaborative work and created a school that had a socializing learning practice.

Flewelling began to advance a socializing learning practice by creating a structure called STARS Club, in which members of the parent and business community regularly came to the school to offer enrichment activities to the students while the faculty worked together in new ways.

During these collaborative times, the STARS Club teachers looked together at student work, analyzed how writing was taught, gave each other feedback about dilemmas of practice, examined the coherence of the curriculum, and developed SMART goals. Flewelling quickly discovered that teachers were very interested in jointly pursuing a wide range of questions connected to their practice.

As the school community became more comfortable taking a socializing learning approach, the faculty took on more challenging topics and incorporated more demanding processes that required them to give one another feedback and build consensus about good teaching. In other words, they shifted the focus from isolated, individual, *instrumental* practice toward a collective, *socializing* emphasis on improving teaching and learning.

At the heart of socializing learning practice is the regular use of protocols to look at student work, adult work, and texts (Ippolito, 2013). For example, the faculty regularly used text-based protocols to build shared understandings of practice, the Tuning Protocol to help each other with lesson planning, the Consultancy Protocol to consider dilemmas of practice, and peer observation protocols to give each other feedback (School Reform Initiative, 2013). Flewelling and the North Beverly faculty used these structures and many more to teach the skills of socializing learning: reflection, collaboration, shared practice, and focus on student learning.

LEADING SCHOOLS WHERE ADULTS LEARN

The leadership lesson from our work is twofold. The first is simple: Think like — and consequently lead like — a teacher. Think about how the adults in the building learn, think about what they need to learn, and let your teaching/leading decisions

Cultivating and intentionally using new technology takes a disposition to risk and try again. It begins by redefining the roles of teacher/student and learner/leader. When educators create inclusive-synergetic learning communities, students often share insightful perspectives and create new possibilities.

Using digital tools to access information and to connect with others is common practice outside the school day. In the classroom, if educators want to learn how to leverage 21st-century skills, opportunities abound to create a classroom learning community where all members are learning and leading together.

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be driven by these two considerations.

Kathy Bieser, principal of the International School of the Americas in San Antonio, Texas, says that, in the same way that good teachers plan with particular students in mind, she plans every faculty learning experience with the learning practice and needs of the adults in mind. "I have to be open to what is going to happen and adjust, adapt, keep working at it with the teachers, the leadership team, and myself" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 99).

The second lesson is more complicated. It is quite clear that when a group needs an instrumental approach, a socializing approach will not be helpful. Sue Snyder made the right choice in turning her faculty meetings into classes. The adults needed concrete procedures and specific knowledge. However, there are limits to instrumental learning practice.

Jeff Price, principal of Serna Elementary in San Antonio, articulated the limits when he encountered them in his school: "We ask ourselves: Why aren't we going to scale on this? Why aren't we seeing whole school learning? When we are not, we know it's often because teachers aren't sharing their work and learning, especially from our success. We can't go to scale without sharing our work" (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 95). An instrumental learning practice helps individual teachers improve their teaching practice; a socializing learning practice improves the school.

Building schools where adults learn requires leaders to be persistent, intentional, and transparent in their efforts connecting a learning practice to improvements in teaching practice. While this is easier said than done, with time and systematic experimentation, learning leaders can meet teachers where they are by providing professional learning that both supports current learning and teaching practices and nudges faculty toward more complex and collaborative ways to work and learn.

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