

# What are common practices in schools? **1**

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If we could enter the minds of a superintendent, a principal, and other school leaders as they prepare for the opening of a new school year, we might find them preoccupied with a dizzying array of responsibilities and uncertainties. We know because we have been there ourselves. For example, the superintendent might worry about her personal image, her relationship with members of the school board, her role as motivator to the staff, her political need to advance student achievement and to look competitive when compared to neighboring school districts, the logistics of executing the day's agenda, and much more. A principal or dean might focus on keeping the school safe and orderly, with buses arriving on schedule and students being fed wholesome meals in the cafeteria. A department chair might focus on the competition for technology resources or the current status of a book order. In danger of being lost or subordinated in the web of preparation is overt attention to the core mission of schools: that students will learn, that they will develop their talents, and that they will hone their sense of good character and responsible citizenship. We hardly think that the few school leaders named above are alone in their preoccupations.

When we examined the school improvement plans from twenty randomly selected school districts, we were curious to see the trends among the targets that schools have set for improvement. From our examination, we drew three conclusions: (1) Schools first target the areas identified for measuring adequate yearly progress. Reading is the first concern, with mathematics following as a close second. (2) When schools have not made adequate yearly progress, they target improvement in reading or mathematics for a particular subgroup, especially ethnic or language minorities. (3) In addition to setting sights on increasing achievement in reading and mathematics, schools set goals related to a wide array of concerns and topics, some that one can recognize as related to the core

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mission of schools, and some that seem more distant. While it is reasonable to aspire to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics, we question the means that schools take to realize this goal, and we especially wonder about the second and third trends listed above.

Consider the seemingly reasonable tendency for schools to try to fix up the underperforming subgroups in an effort to make adequate yearly progress. In our sample, we see statements that express the intention to improve reading and mathematics achievement among African Americans, Latinos, and students from low-income homes. The presumption implied by such goals is that all African Americans, Latinos, and students from low-income homes perform similarly and that everyone else is more or less doing fine. In short, the model calls for correcting the deficient and for letting everyone else carry on. Of course, we question the assumptions, and we haven't seen schools make radical improvements by implementing tactics or interventions to remedy the deficient subgroups. We say more about this difficulty below.

The third trend reveals a kind of fragmented response to significant issues about learning and achievement. Here are some representative goal statements from our sample:

“Improve the participation of our Hispanic students in the PSAE [Prairie State Achievement Exam] math test.”

“Boost enthusiasm for learning.”

“Engage in courageous conversations.”

“Implement a restructuring plan.”

“Increase enrollment in rigorous programs.”

“Increase stakeholder involvement.”

“Increase professional collaboration.”

“Expand grading by objectives.”

“Implement and maintain consistent school wide initiatives that will adequately increase the graduation rate.”

“Review curriculum in all areas for alignment with College Readiness Skills.”

We understand that a committee or an individual administrator conscientiously wrote these goals because they seemed to be significant statements within the particular school contexts. However, we have to ask in each instance if the goal, aggressively pursued, will substantively improve the

quality of teaching and thereby significantly advance the learning for all students.

Our work in schools for more than a combined one hundred years, our thousands of hours of observations of classroom instruction as supervisors in schools, and our more recent observations in schools as university supervisors and consultants have convinced us that schools will not make significant progress in advancing the learning and achievement of all students unless they make significant strides in improving the quality of instruction in all classrooms. We urge renewed and sustained attention to improving the quality of instruction in schools. Furthermore, we insist that schools work against this effort when school improvement plans offer a labyrinthine network of initiatives, like having “courageous conversations” and increasing “stakeholder involvement,” that touch on the peripheral matters of schooling and often distract from the core effort to advance learning and improve the quality of students’ experiences in schools. We understand that students are likely to develop a deep understanding of essential concepts, to learn generative procedures, and to refine complex communications only when they experience quality instruction. We propose an approach to school improvement that does not single out struggling subgroups as the focus for correctives. Instead, we offer that schools need to conceive firmly and in substantial detail what good teaching looks like and sounds like. Schools must take the measure of the quality of instruction against this yardstick, and must work relentlessly to move the quality of instruction closer and closer to the ideal.

## **WHAT WE FOUND IN CLASSROOMS**

In the variety of schools we have visited over a three-year period as outside consultants, we have seen many hard-working teachers who apparently devote much time to planning lessons and who generally enjoy a positive rapport with students. In the classrooms, we have seen cooperative students, apparently willing to learn, and noticeably compliant with the directions of their teachers. We have seen schools rich in diversity, with students representing a variety of social, economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, functioning collaboratively and expressing pride in the harmonious mixture of students in their school. These two factors—conscientious teachers and willing learners—appear to be the basic elements for a formula for a high-achieving student body and a dynamic learning environment.

At the same time, we have witnessed learners enduring compliantly a lot of uninspired instruction, with implied simplistic learning goals, discourse dominated by teacher talk and student recitation, and assessments

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that placed greatest value on recall of disseminated information. We watched lessons that began *in medias res*, with no foregrounding through a review of previous activities and learning, no preview of subsequent activities and projects, and no explicit expression of current and long-term goals. The students we interviewed expressed some distress that while teachers set tasks and were available at various times to help students complete the tasks, the teachers did not make it easy to navigate the curriculum—the knowing *why* they were engaged in the assignment or project and *where* the work was leading. Indeed, we saw little evidence from classroom observations, from interviews with teachers, or from forums with students, that teachers could convey to students the unifying elements of the curriculum or had a sense themselves of the curriculum as a unified whole. We have to admit that our sample size is small, and the schools we visited across states and across socioeconomic boundaries may not be representative of a mass of schools where high-quality teaching and a commitment to its continual improvement are the norm. But, based on our experience, we judge that any school has a lot of room for improvement in the quality of instruction.

As part of our consultations in schools, we talked to administrators who spoke of magical qualities in the instructional practices in schools, but we failed to see this magic during our hundreds of classroom observations. Teachers testified of the need to have in place a supportive teacher evaluation system that set clear standards for performance and promoted teachers' development toward these benchmarks. We recognized an absence or inconsistent sense of what quality teaching is, making it difficult to know what to look for in hiring, mentoring, supporting, and retaining staff.

In short, what we have witnessed is an enormous potential for rapid improvement in learning in schools, with the concomitant closing of achievement gaps among subgroups of the student population. Most teachers are hard working and knowledgeable about their subjects, and most learners are willing to learn. And the administrators we have met are conscientious, hard working, and even courageous. While critics might be eager to fault everyone in schools for failing to see and do what needs to be done to improve schools dramatically, we find it difficult to fault anyone for failing to see truths hidden in plain view, especially since a variety of external factors conspire to obscure the obvious.

#### TRUTHS HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

Many schools and the administrators who manage them are under fire. In response to mandates to raise test scores or face dire consequences,

school districts rush to implement the programs or “scientifically proven” interventions to advance achievement rapidly in their schools. We say more about this problem in Chapter 2. What is largely ignored in school improvement plans is what goes on in classrooms between teachers and students around subject matter—the truth before our eyes. The reality is that administrators busy themselves with a wide array of responsibilities, and teachers invest precious time in workshops that promise to advance the way they teach. At the same time, the century old assign-and-assess method of instruction remains intact: teachers talk a lot, students listen a lot, and teachers grade a lot. If what we are trying to do in schools is fundamentally change how students write, compute, and think, then the pervasive assign-and-assess method of instruction must not only change but be transformed into a model of teaching. This model must promote quality interactions between teachers, students, and peers. Subject matter must be organized to draw students into disciplined approaches to solving contemporary problems and dilemmas, and assignments must be designed to replicate authentic responses to real-world tasks.

We think we have discovered some fundamental truths that have been hidden in plain sight. First, schools are never going to make substantial gains in improving students’ learning and achievement until they emphasize improvement in the quality of teaching across the curriculum. Citing recent research about the relative effects of teacher quality, Darling-Hammond and Haselkorn (2009) affirm that quality instruction from well-prepared teachers has a greater impact on student achievement than “the effects of race and parent education combined” (p. 30).

While schools strive to accelerate learning in the core areas of reading and mathematics for those students who struggle in these areas, the broader challenge is to improve the quality of instruction across a school or across an entire system. The research is clear that the quick fix might lead to transitory gains, but the overall improvement in instructional practices allows schools to boost learning substantially and sustain improvement in an environment of high expectations and high performance.

The second truth we have discovered hidden in plain sight is that students will only learn at high levels when teachers teach. Hillocks (2009b) has called for a “revolution” in literacy instruction (p. 8). To make his case, he cites his study of the impact of various coded activities in hundreds of observed lessons. Trained research assistants designated separate “episodes” within lessons and coded the episodes according to the current activity. Not surprisingly, the more episodes that were coded as diversions (for example, announcements on the public address system, students engaged in social conversation, teacher conferring with a colleague in the hall), the less learning occurred. There was a negative correlation: more

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diversions, less learning. Perhaps less obvious was that the more teachers devoted time to instruction, especially instruction to advance *procedural knowledge*, the more students learned. This is a positive correlation: the more teaching, the more learning. Time taken up with assessment had less positive impact on learning.

While we are reporting the obvious, we will add a third truth hidden in plain sight. Quality instruction must feature some basic routines, including the rudimentary practices of situating learning in the essential concepts of the curriculum, reminding students about what they have experienced so far, what the current and long-term goals are, and how the current activities will prepare them for subsequent learning and performance. As we have noted earlier, the dominant assign-and-assess model just doesn't work well. As Willingham (2009) suggests, students will engage if they see instruction as a purposeful effort at problem solving, with classroom discourse patterns elevated above mere recitation.

### TRANSFORMING ACCOUNTABILITY

Jumping off the treadmill of a decade worth of accountability mandates and attending to the classroom truths children experience each day requires a fundamental change in how we talk about accountability and how we act upon this new conversation. Based on our extensive observations in real classrooms in a variety of schools, we recommend a four-part strategy for transforming the truths in American classrooms.

First, educators must stop using business terminology such as *accountability*, *quality dashboards*, or *metrics* to describe what they do in schools. Unlike typical circumstances in the business sector, the certainties of inputs, outputs, and means of production are not a part nor will they ever be a part of uncertainties of teaching twenty-five or more students how to read, write, compute, and think well. The term educators should be using is *responsibility*. *Accountability* implies that supervisors and employees guarantee, will be held accountable for, implementing certain methods in certain ways resulting in certain outcomes within certain times. *Responsibility* implies that administrators and teachers create the organizational configurations, staff development opportunities, and acquisition of materials to support an agreed upon instructional worldview—a coherent response to the fundamental questions of schooling (How do children learn? What knowledge is of most worth? How should subject matter be organized? How should we teach? How should we assess what students understand?). Entering conversations dominated by the fundamental questions of schooling returns professional educators to responsible

discourses over how best to organize curriculum and instruction to draw out the interests, talents, and emotions of young people.

Second, school administrators must orchestrate a conversation about what is quality teaching. Our interviews with teachers about what they do in classrooms reveal that teachers envision patterns of instruction that closely align with research and best practice in the field, although the vision is often inconsistent with their actual practice. While the implementation of these patterns of instruction are complex and often are opposed to current institutional configurations of schooling, the outcomes of these conversations establish a common vocabulary or understanding of what is quality instruction. The shared understanding of what quality teaching is should inform much of the aligned business of schools: recruitment and hiring, induction, mentoring, certified staff evaluation, and professional development.

Third, school administrators and other school leaders must enter classrooms to observe the instructional truths in their buildings. The goal of these observations is to identify the depth and breadth of the existing gaps between the truths in the classrooms they supervise and an agreed upon instructional worldview. If school administrators feel they lack the expertise to conduct an instructional audit of their building, the responsible alternative is to seek out knowledgeable colleagues in the field and academia to assist with the important function of identifying the *what is* and *what ought to be* going on in a school's classrooms.

Finally, school administrators and teachers must work together to develop a plan for narrowing the gap between a school's instructional worldview and prevailing truths of what teachers are actually doing in classrooms. To flesh out this responsible plan further, we suggest that it should contain the following elements:

1. *Define quality teaching.* The foundation of school improvement is defining the criteria for effective teaching, identifying the gaps between that definition and actual classroom performance, and providing teachers with quality staff development programs that close the gap between what teachers are doing in classrooms and what they should be doing in classrooms. The research on effective teaching provides us with long lists of effective teaching behaviors; however, these lists of behaviors are often transformed into incoherent catalogues of teaching behaviors pasted onto teacher evaluation plans. A meaningful strategy for developing quality teaching in schools requires a process in which teachers and administrators author a model of instruction linking the activities of teaching with a deep understanding of how children learn. Responsible school leaders provide teachers with the materials, time, expertise, and organizational

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configurations to construct an instructional worldview (recurring patterns of instructional practice) that dominates daily classroom instruction.

In conjunction with promoting coherent patterns of teaching, responsible school leaders develop and become partners in a purposeful approach to evaluating how quality teaching and a coherent curriculum are enacted. Continuous improvement in curriculum and instruction cannot occur in a vacuum, or for that matter, by analyzing mounds of data lodged in the main office. Teachers require knowledgeable feedback on how well they orchestrate subject matter content, instructional activities, and materials in pursuit of content goals. The feedback must come from trained observers and coaches who observe what teachers do in classrooms, examine what teachers hand out in classrooms, and review what students produce in classrooms.

2. *Take the measure of the current state of teaching.* In order to know what kind of staff development is required and the distance a faculty needs to move in improving the quality of teaching, it is important to take a baseline measure and take other measures at a later date to judge the effects of school-sponsored professional development. One of the many problems with the current accountability model is that administrators, and sometimes teachers, examine academic achievement data and must make inferences about the factors that might account for students' poor or strong showing. In other words, a principal or team of teachers might be looking at a summary of test scores and are left to *guess* why one group of students didn't learn much from instruction that has occurred *in the past*. Since we already know that quality teaching is the factor that has a tremendous impact on student learning and achievement, it makes sense to look for evidence of this factor. Of course, quality teaching is a rich amalgam of many behaviors and dispositions. A team of observers can find patterns of these behaviors and dispositions to judge where specifically a staff exhibits strengths and deficiencies and where they need support through professional development, mentoring, and coaching.

3. *Pursue a purposeful approach to staff development.* Another truth hidden in plain sight is the gap existing between theoretical constructs of effective teaching behaviors and a school's capacity to develop teacher understandings and applications of complex instructional strategies. Schools continue to address this gap with one-day workshops, weekend conferences, and summer curriculum writing projects. Teachers continue to respond to underdeveloped staff development programs with a variety of defensive reactions. The focus on underfunding of staff development programs has overshadowed the more important question—what constitutes a quality staff development program? Similar to teacher



evaluation programs, quality staff development programs must move away from indirect delivery of knowledge (guru on the stage) and skills to direct involvement with teachers as they wrestle with complex instructional strategies. Responsible school leaders design staff development experiences that include the following features:

- cultivating ongoing relationships with an expert/mentor who models, observes, and provides feedback on gaps between theory and practice
- offering continual opportunities to work with colleagues/experts on closing the gaps between the abstractions of policy documents/instructional theories and the realities of a teacher's classroom
- designing instructional venues where teachers learn the theories supporting ambitious teaching practices
- providing teachers with the flexibility to adapt the theories and practices of ambitious teaching practices to personal and situational conditions of their classrooms

4. *Promote a purposeful approach to instructional program coherence.* A given of the American curriculum, which includes the standards movement, is the habit of covering too much and understanding too little. On a daily basis in our schools, students are expected to make sense out of catalogues of names, definitions, and routines in specified units of time. Added on to this profusion of knowledge and skills are idiosyncratic efforts on the part of teachers to make sense out of these catalogues of knowledge and skills, all of which offers a recipe for incoherence. The only students who thrive in this instructional chaos we call the American curricula are ones who bring to the classroom an experiential background providing a context for these catalogues or a cognitive proclivity for imposing order on abstract symbol systems. Few students fall into either category.

The final component of a quality instructional program is a curriculum that is meaningful to the diverse populations coming through our school doors. What does a meaningful curriculum look like? It is not apparent in the mountains of materials sent out by textbook companies nor found in long lists of state or professional content standards. Meaningful curricula originate from the questions children ask and the stories that capture their attention. As children progress through the grades, these questions and stories evolve into common themes or problems aligned with disciplined ways of responding to situational problems. A coherent curriculum brings the full power of disciplinary theories, concepts, and principles to bear on questions young people ask and what

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they care most about. If pursued in a rigorous manner, constructing disciplinary pathways between the child and the curriculum and the school and society require teachers and administrators to look at knowledge and skills, not as discreet entities floating around each grade level, but as a spiral of themes, ideas, and concepts whose understandings are deepened at each grade level.

Bringing depth of understandings to the American curriculum, however, occurs only in classrooms where the criteria for effective teaching and how student understandings are assessed agree with how subject matter is selected and organized. Ultimately, for teachers and school administrators, the truth of promoting the intellectual growth of young people lies in a coherent approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment founded on a deep understanding of how children learn (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001).

### NEW DIRECTION

Our experience in observing in hundreds of classrooms and in examining the school improvement plans for dozens of schools has led us to some truths that have been hidden in plain sight before us. Here are some simple observations that must seem obvious to the reader:

- If students are going to learn and reach high levels of achievement, teachers have to teach, and teach well.
- Students' learning efforts must be situated in the context of a coherent curriculum, with the teacher expressing goals explicitly and linking these targets to previous learning and to subsequent activities and performances.
- School improvement and literacy growth and achievement depend on quality teaching *across the curriculum*. This means that an entire staff would have to share a common understanding of what quality teaching is, and the criteria for defining *quality* must underlie several aligned endeavors: recruiting, hiring, inducting, mentoring, coaching, evaluating, and training.
- In order to know how to improve the quality of teaching, someone must first take the measure of the current state of teaching in a school. The protocol for such an assessment should include direct classroom observations and interviews with students.
- Sustained staff development should focus on the areas of teaching that require growth. Our experience has indicated that most

often a staff requires help in making the curriculum coherent, in shifting the nature of classroom discourse away from recitation and toward authentic discussion, and in enhancing the assessment practices.

The decade of school reform has been dominated by the ideology of *accountability*—a strong belief in rational methods of analysis, cause and effect relationships, and extrinsic incentives. We don't see evidence that the emphasis on accountability and the proliferation of testing has significantly advanced the quality of teaching and the learning and achievement of students.

The theme of this book is apparently simple: If schools are going to realize significant improvement and advance the learning and quality of learners' experiences in the classroom, then attention must focus assiduously and persistently on helping teachers to refine their craft as teachers. In the balance of this book, we remind the reader that some pedagogical practices are better than others, we account for the environment that distracts school leaders from their core mission, and we suggest a rigorous plan for improving the quality of schools by advancing the quality of teaching. See the graphic at the end of each chapter for a summary of the plan and its recursive nature.

## **ARE THERE “BEST PRACTICES” IN TEACHING?**

If we insist that the key to school improvement, advanced learning, and increased student achievement will come only by way of quality teaching, we should have in mind a conception of what quality teaching is. In some ways, it would seem relatively easy to offer a solid definition or vision of what quality teaching is, what it looks like, and what it sounds like. After all, students readily evaluate teachers in such forums as [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com), and school board members from a variety of professional backgrounds express confidence that they can identify good teaching and that they know how to promote it. And, apparently, many writers judge themselves to be authorized to propose best practices for teaching. Using Google, our search for “best practices in teaching” resulted in 21.6 million hits. A similar search on Amazon yielded 792 titles. These links and titles on Google and Amazon offer both generic best practices that teachers of all sorts should honor, as well as context-specific best practices, such as how best to teach rhetoric and composition to first-year students at a community college. By the way, there is even a Best Practices High School in Chicago, although we are

unfamiliar with the school's mascot. Apparently, a lot of people know what the best practices are for teaching.

## **BRINGING BEST PRACTICES TO SCALE**

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan learned from his predecessor Paul Vallas in Chicago that a key to school reform is identifying best practices observable in the classrooms of a few teachers and then expanding those practices to a grander scale. This approach requires the adoption of teacher-proof curricula. The approach signals a surrender to a perception that there are weak teachers in a school and it is too much trouble to help them to grow or to try to get rid of them. Instead, the teacher-proof approach relies on highly scripted instructional materials and then monitors teachers through surprise inspections and checklists to prod the teachers to stay true to the script. Such teacher-proof systems arrive under the protective label of being “scientifically research-based,” and managers of such programs insist that any variation from the script will compromise the “fidelity” of the approach.

On the surface, such a system seems to be common sense—find out what works and then hold everyone accountable for following the script. At the same time, academics don't agree about best practices. Even a cursory examination of several of the publications found through a Google or Amazon search will reveal that many of the claims about best practices contradict each other. This hardly seems possible if an understanding of best practices derives from a solid research base. Part of the problem, of course, is that scholars do not universally agree about what constitutes solid research practices and whether acceptable research practices were followed in conducting a study. Some authorities, including Marzano (2003, 2004) and Graham and Perrin (2007) come to their understanding through meta-analyses or other empirical means. Others like Daniels, Zemelman, and Hyde (2005) and Daniels and Bizar (2004) base their claims on observations and on reflection about their own teaching and the teaching of others over a number of years.

## **ARE SOME PRACTICES BETTER THAN OTHERS?**

The question of whether or not anyone can say what best practices are with any degree of certainty is represented strikingly in a published debate between Peter Smagorinsky from the University of Georgia and George Hillocks Jr. from the University of Chicago. Smagorinsky (2009)

insists that it is impossible to say for certain that there are best practices in teaching. Here is his reservation:

A Vygotskian perspective suggests that the quality of instruction is dependent on the particular people who come together to teach and learn and the qualities of whatever precedes and surrounds them in the setting of the classroom. It further suggests that learners might have developed different kinds of worldviews and ways of thinking to motivate their schoolwork and that different teachers may be more skillful with one approach than with another due to their training, their dispositions, their experiences, and other factors. As a result, what works best for me in my classroom at my school might not work so well for you in yours. (p. 18)

In other words, according to Smagorinsky, all teaching is bound by a context. A problem with following a rigid routine or script for teaching—finding what works and taking it to scale—is that when real teachers work with real students in specific schools in specific communities, teachers have to make decisions about the match between goals, materials, and activities for a group of learners and reflect on the effect of decisions in order to inform further decisions. This decision-making process occurs in planning, from episode to episode or moment to moment during lessons and during reflection about the lessons.

In his response to Smagorinsky, Hillocks (2009a) agrees that the blind following of a script for teaching that someone has determined to be best practice strips teachers of appropriate decision-making autonomy. Hillocks agrees that it would be inappropriate to claim and follow best practices in the sense of routines to which practitioners conform. At the same time he offers this insight:

If the teacher is the only one who counts in these matters, then perhaps one practice, method, or paradigm is no better than any other. But if the learning of students counts, then there can be no question that some methods, practices, and even paradigms are better than others. (p. 29)

In other words, if we are only concerned with the teacher's comfort in following a practice and with the maintenance of order and compliance in the classroom, then any teacher should be free to say what works for him or her. If, however, one is concerned with students' learning and achievement and with the quality of their experience in the classroom, we can

learn much from research that tells us that some practices are better than others. Hillocks continues:

Efficient reflective practice is dependent on being able to construct clear objectives and their criteria, to evaluate outcomes in terms of the criteria, to identify reasons for failures, and to invent better approaches to reach the objectives. None of this is likely to happen unless we, as a community of teachers, administrators, and university people concerned about teacher effectiveness, have a serious discussion about what English teachers need to know and unless that discussion, to borrow from President Obama's Election Day speech, empowers us to put our hands on the arc of history and bend it toward more fruitful practice in all of our classrooms. (p. 29)

Hillocks stresses the importance of knowing how to teach English well, but his observation applies to teachers and administrators generally. While there might not be a standard set of best practices that everyone should honor no matter the context, there are some practices and habits of thinking that are better than others.

### **THE POVERTY OF PRESCRIBING BEST PRACTICES**

Even if we could say with absolute certainty what best practices are in every field of teaching, we doubt the wisdom of imposing on teachers and students a scripted system of instruction based on these practices. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2000) and Pink (2009) remind us that such an imposition would work counter to the forces that inspire good teachers to become exceptional teachers and would create a learning environment that emphasizes compliance over community. And if we care anything for the retention of good teachers, we should recognize from the work of Ingersoll and Smith (2003) and of McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) that the “stayers” are the ones who have a voice in the decision making in schools and who have a sense of their personal contribution to students' development.

Citing the work of Harlow (1950), Deci (1971), Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (2001), Pink (2009) reminds us that generally the tasks that people face in a workplace are of two kinds: *algorithmic* and *heuristic*. Doing jobs like repeatedly mounting circuit boards into television chassis as they pass on an assembly line would fall under the category of *algorithmic*, that is, repeatedly doing the same task in the same way. In managing a workforce that completes such jobs, it makes sense to monitor carefully and perhaps

to offer some extrinsic inducements to complete the work quickly and accurately. In our view, the work of teachers is largely *heuristic*, requiring critical and creative thinking, and rational decision making from moment to moment, from a planning stage to a broader reflective stage. For such work, providing a script or prescribing a routine will actually undermine the quality of the teachers' efforts. Teachers need flexibility to make decisions that are most appropriate for their teaching context. They need a sense of efficacy in that they are continuously honing a craft, and they need an affirmation of the significance of their endeavor and its contribution to enriching a community and connecting them to it. In a similar way for students and for the work they do, they need some autonomy to make choices, a growing sense that they are developing significant skills and gaining significant knowledge, and a feeling of connectedness with others in similar circumstances.

While we eschew attempts to treat teachers like automatons who blindly follow someone else's prescription, we remain skeptical about claims that teachers should all follow the particular style that they decide works best for them. We judge, for example, that the style of a military drill sergeant who wants to strip his charges of personal esteem and individual identity in order to re-form the learners as elements in a cohesive unit is not a style that works for the primary grades in a public school. Clearly, we can exclude some practices as worse, even if we cannot specify a narrow definition of what is best. In the following chapter, we describe some teaching practices that we think distinguish high-quality teaching. More importantly, we suggest procedures for engaging a staff in the crucial conversations about what distinguishes exceptional teaching.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter we report our observations from viewing hundreds of classrooms in a variety of schools. In our sample of schools, we have witnessed a recurring pattern of teacher presentations, student recitation, simple seatwork, narrow assessments, and relationships built on control. While these features seem to dominate, there is clear evidence that it is the quality of teaching that has the biggest impact on school improvement and on the quality of students' experiences in the classroom. Although we express some skepticism about claims about best practices in the sense of prescribed routines that remove decisions from teachers, we affirm that research reveals that some practices are clearly better than others. Furthermore, we insist that the path to consistently strong teaching will not follow from merit pay or the elimination of tenure. Instead, the

process of improving instruction overall will require a common understanding about what good teaching looks like and sounds like, and a concerted effort to align several school efforts to promote good teaching.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. As you recall the practices in the school with which you are familiar, characterize whether or not they match the descriptions that authors offer about the dominant practices in schools. What evidence do you see of distinctive and highly proficient teaching?
2. The authors express some skepticism about claims about best practices. At the same time, they insist that educators can identify with confidence what practices are better than others. Where do you stand in regard to the best practice debate? What features of instruction do you associate with best practices? Do you judge that every teacher should be in a position to follow any teaching “style” with which he or she feels most comfortable?
3. The authors presume to offer some truths hidden in plain view. To what extent do you embrace their observations as truths? If their observations can be taken as truths, how would you account for the difficulty in seeing the obvious?
4. The authors offer a seemingly simple plan for school improvement. But the plan might be simple only to the degree that it has few steps. What difficulties do you see with their plan? What leadership challenges does the plan present? How could school leaders overcome these challenges?
5. The authors claim to offer a new approach to school improvement and reform. In many ways, their approach may seem rudimentary. What, if anything, is new, and what makes the plan distinctive from the practices that are common in schools today?

## ACTION STEPS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Examine your school improvement plan to check that the high priority goals focus obviously on improving the quality of teaching across the school.
- Meet with your instructional leadership to initiate a conversation about what quality teaching looks like, sounds like, and feels like.



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- Set a leadership agenda that focuses on the improvement of the quality of teaching as the highest priority.
- Begin to fashion your communication with central office administrators to emphasize that advancing the quality of teaching is the focus for school improvement. The language of your communication should sound supportive of teachers and be consistent with the goals set by a superintendent and school board.
- Examine the ability of organizational systems and the capacity of district resources to support a focus on quality teaching. Determine the changes that you might need to make to key systems and determine how resources might be redirected to emphasize teacher development.