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Reaching Our Common Goal

High Achievement for All Children

In a high-stakes context, school leaders must search for ways to create a culture of high expectations and support for all students and a set of norms around teacher growth that enables teachers to teach all students well.

—Linda Lambert (Lambert et al., 2003, p. 2)

Reflective Questions*

1. What are some of the values, beliefs, and dispositions that you think are needed in a learning community?
2. How do you feel the standards movement has affected your school's climate or school climate in general?

(Continued)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Throughout the book, reflective questions or reflective practice suggestions will be interspersed. These questions can be addressed in several ways. The students can write their reflections individually or discuss them with their neighbors (pair-share). The instructor can create a synchronous or asynchronous online discussion, divide the class into groups and discuss, and/or set up microlabs (see Chapter 7 for directions in class or online).

(Continued)

3. Where do you think high-stakes testing has the greatest impact? Why? And how?
4. What do you think is the relationship between high-stakes testing and reflective practice?

Despite different philosophical and political orientations, we can say that all educators and politicians presently voice agreement on one principle: the primacy of high expectations and achievement for all of our children. And most agree that performance-based accountability is necessary for large-scale improvement in achievement and improvement in school quality across the board (Elmore, 2003). The differences begin to surface when the discussion turns to how to reach this goal. On the government side, almost all states established standards for student learning and testing systems to assess achievement in the 1990s. Many urban districts, for example, Chicago and New York City (Herszenhorn, 2004; Steinhauer, 2004), recently chimed in, advocating for an end to social promotion and the use of standardized tests to retain students. In 2001, the federal government arrived on the scene at full throttle with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), placing the single measure of standardized testing at the center of student improvement and achievement.

The hue and cry that we discuss in this chapter derives from three sources:

- Schools that are buckling under the pressures for accountability
- Parents who observe their stressed-out children
- Scholars who struggle to defend their beliefs in reflective practice and constructivist teaching methods

We will begin with a few reports of the dilemmas created by the "one-test accountability" movement. We will then present background on reflective practice and constructivism. These two concepts underlie the practices that we believe can enable schools to meet the common goal of achievement for all children without sacrificing a quality pedagogical environment for adults and children.

Children, Parents, and Their Schools in the Era of Accountability

The media are replete with stories of the sleepless nights of young children the days before the "big test," and the declaration of the "failure" of schools based on one measure: standardized tests. Our goal is to share some of the tensions that result from a high-stakes standardized testing environment and then focus on the ideas and means to build a different leadership climate. The deep and shared learning we propose ensures long-term achievement for adults and children. We believe that this timeless approach to leading and learning can succeed in whichever shifting sands you may be forced to navigate.

Making Leaps But Still Labeled as Failing

This title of a recent newspaper article is about a veteran principal's struggle to help the children in her school meet state and federal standards. The principal has compromised her educational principles to avoid holding third graders back. Despite her belief that "children need to play and sing and draw," she eliminated the third-grade music, art, and physical education programs to provide an extra 50 minutes of reading every day. The school went from a C to a B on the state report card system. The schoolwide reading and math scores also met federal standards, but the school was labeled "failing" under the NCLB system. The special education subgroup scores were too low despite the school's Herculean efforts. The principal concluded, "The teachers work so hard; the kids work so hard. It's discouraging to be told you're failing" (Winerip, 2004a, p. B9).

City Tests Loom and Third Graders Feel the Heat

In 2004, the New York City mayor introduced a new promotion policy. Third graders who scored at the lowest of four rankings in reading or math would not be promoted. As the tests drew near, it was reported that "teachers, parents and third graders across the city spoke of sleepless nights, butterflies in their stomachs and not a few tears" (Herszenhorn & Gootman, 2004, p. B2). One parent commented, "She's crying at night. . . . The poor kid's like a frazzle. She dropped off the softball team. Something had to give" (p. B2). Another parent commented, "Not only are the teachers feeling the pressure, but the children are feeling the pressure and the parents are

becoming lunatics because all they are thinking about is this test" (p. B2). The extra preparation outside of class recalls SAT preparation: private costly classes on Saturdays, extra test preparation before and after school, private tutors, and 15,000 children attending spring vacation classes in the public schools. Parents and teachers reported that in many cases, drilling for the exams preempted regular schoolwork. Need we say more?

Principal Sees Mistake in Plan to Hold Back Third Graders

A 26-year-veteran New York City principal explained why he felt the 2004 third-grade retention policy was a "big mistake" (Winerip, 2004b, p. B9). In one of the city's poorest schools, he has third graders whose scores on the citywide reading test are the lowest: "1." And every year, thanks to all kinds of extra programs the school provides, most of the third graders who scored "1" are transformed into fourth-grade "3s" and "4s." Retention in his school does not make sense, because his students are divided into reading groups according to their abilities; there are fourth graders reading seventh-grade books and some reading second-grade books. Outside funding and grants support computer hardware and software programs that permit children to move at their own pace, no retention necessary. What the principal has found is that "you have to make the decision based on best interest of the child, not best interest of the bureaucracy" (Winerip, 2004b, p. B9).

Reflective Practice

Discuss with your neighbor two examples of the effects of standardized testing on your professional life or in your school.

Try to provide one positive example and one negative. Explain and support your choices.

The most important observation we can make from these examples, from those a host of others practitioners recount, and from federal, state, and district mandates is that high-stakes testing as an assessment measure is here to stay, at least for a while. These vignettes also reveal one of the greatest dangers in the focus on standardized tests: the reduction or elimination of individual- or school-based

instructional choices. What we offer is not an alternative; it is a foundation upon which meaningful (effective), child-oriented school decision making can be based, no matter what the "forces from above" impose. This foundation is built from reflective practice and constructivist learning practices.

Reflective Practice

Reflective Questions*

1. How would you define reflection?
2. What opportunities do you give your students to reflect?

   How do they respond?
3. When does your faculty have the opportunity to reflect?

   What happens?
4. What impedes reflection in your life?

   What promotes it?
5. Do you think reflection is important?

   If so, why? If not, why not?

*NOTE: A class or online microlab would be a particularly appropriate forum for these questions.

The first level of this foundation is *reflective practice.* We believe that leaders who personally apply and model reflective practice, cultivate it among their staffs, and then develop these thought processes in their students build the first level of a sound decision-making model for their learning communities.

We also maintain that reflective practice underlies effective leading, teaching, and learning at all levels. All of the approaches, strategies, and techniques in this book begin with reflective practice as the underlying framework. We agree with Osterman and Kottkamp, who "believe firmly that reflective practice is an important and effective change process that is integral to the learning organization" (2004, p. x).

What are the assumptions of reflective practice that form the core of this book and that will assist in building a learning organization?

- It is a professional development and a problem-solving strategy.
- It is based on a belief that organizational change begins with individuals.
- It proposes that our actions and behavior depend much less on our "espoused" or conscious theories than on our "theories-in-use" or our deep tacit beliefs and assumptions.
- It is ultimately a way for educators to search for ever-improved ways to facilitate student learning. (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004)

Although reflective practice contains other assumptions, we feel that those that we have highlighted are the most important for deep, long-lasting individual and schoolwide growth.

Reflective Questions

1. When do you think people feel a need to learn?
2. What makes you resist change?
3. What encourages you to embrace an innovation?
4. What does "walking one's talk" mean?
5. What do the above questions have to do with children's learning?

Espoused Theories and Theories-in-Use

To appreciate how an understanding and use of the concepts of espoused theories and theories-in-use in the school building can impact teaching and learning, we continue with what has often become the primary school focus: improving test scores.

One way to "prove" that all children can learn and improve is through standardized test scores. Many schools are focusing their efforts to improve achievement on (a) drilling students on the information needed for local and state tests and (b) teaching test-taking skills. The teachers give practice tests regularly, creating homework assignments and tests in the same format as the "real" tests, basically using the tests as the goal of teaching. In high-achieving schools, less time needs to be spent preparing for the tests. In struggling schools, little time is left after drilling.

We concur that raising test scores does indicate enhanced skills in the area being assessed and improves test-taking knowledge. What standardized tests do not address is instilling a love for learning. We believe that understanding the concepts of "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use" can influence how teachers work with each other and with children.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) have created an exercise that they call "The Problematic Student," which allows teachers to learn how they actually deal with a "problematic" person, as opposed to how they say or think they do. Our ability to understand and work with all of our students may be the best predictor of their success. Rather than improving achievement scores for the year, we can create "lifelong learners" who can improve every year, with or without our support. The exercise, which is described in more detail in the Resource section, is deceptively simple:

1. Identify a problematic student or person in your life. Note the problematic behavior, and indicate how you would prefer the person to be.
2. Observe the person in as many different settings as you can.
3. Describe what you learned about the person, yourself, and your attitudes (or mental models) toward this person. (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004)

When one of the authors first assigned this exercise to her leadership students, she chose to observe her own interactions with one of her leadership candidates whom she found "problematic." The student was highly participative—so participative that she dominated discussions. Other students got bored and impatient, but it was difficult to intervene in a polite manner. The candidate's written work was also problematic, vague, and discursive. The author was frustrated and felt that she was more than patient. Much to her surprise, another candidate mentioned to the author that the student felt that the professor did not like her. So, the author decided to observe herself and the student as objectively as possible. She noticed a visible impatience on her own part and a tendency to avoid the student. The student, on the other hand, cheerfully participated, communicated with other students, and attempted to address her written work with the professor. The author consequently changed her overt attitude toward the student, whose behavior and responses immediately took on another tone. The candidate volunteered to help in a special project,

explained the difficulties she had had with her written work, and made revisions.

This situation could have taken place with a teacher at any level and a colleague or student of any age. It reveals how student success often hinges on our deep understanding of our behavior and actions, rather than on our professed beliefs. It also can bring to light information about a student's needs and abilities that can result in longer-lasting outcomes than an improved standardized-test score.

Thus what we profess and say we believe, our "espoused theories," are often not congruent with what we do, our "theory-in-use."

Reflective Questions

1. Recount an experience where you were told that you acted in a manner that was inconsistent with your intentions.

   How did you respond to the observation?

   What were the consequences of this experience?

2. Have you ever suggested to someone that his or her behavior was inconsistent with his or her expressed beliefs?

   What was the reaction of the person?

   How did the interchange conclude?

3. What did you learn from these experiences?

Espoused theories are what we are able to say we think and believe. "They exist at a conscious level and they change with relative ease in response to new information" (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 9). Since these theories are explicit, all we have to do is ask the person what he or she knows or believes. Our schoolhouses are filled with espoused theories: the mission statement on every classroom door, the classroom rules the students can recite, even the Pledge of Allegiance. How many of these espoused beliefs are enacted in the day-to-day activities of the school? Leaders surrounded by constant crises, emergencies, and problems that needed to be solved yesterday often feel obliged to rule by fiat or just do not have the time to delegate or think of a collaborative strategy. Teachers concerned about "covering" curriculum, preparing for tests, and dealing with challenging children are often hard-pressed to apply the strategies they embraced at the university or at the last professional development conference.

Why do the best of our intentions get sidelined? Why do we end up "teaching the way we were taught" and bringing up our own children the way we were raised? Our *theories-in-use* can clarify some reasons. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) have summarized what these theories-in-use are and how we acquire them:

> Unlike espoused theories that develop through conscious and intentional thought, theories-in-use develop through acculturation. As we grow from infants to adults, society shapes our understanding of how the world works. Just as traditional societies pass on understandings about childbirth, family, natural forces, and the relationship of human beings to the cosmos, so too does our culture transmit, through the daily processes of living, interpretations of the world that shape our behavior. As adult members of that society, we no longer focus consciously on many aspects of our organizational behavior; we function by rote, doing what others have done before us. We may be unable to articulate the reasons for our actions; we may also lack full awareness of what we're doing and its effects. (p. 10)

Reflective Questions

1. Can you think of any of your teaching practices that may have roots in the way you were taught?

   Were you aware of their origins?

   Do you find them effective?

   Does this awareness raise any questions about their use?

2. What customs or behaviors do you see originating from your family?

   Which would you like to pass on to another generation?

   Which ones would you like to change?

3. What are some of the practices in your school that are consistent with the espoused theories?

   Which ones are inconsistent? Why?

   Have there been attempts to foster consistency between theory and practice? What happened?

Now that we are aware of the difficulties of practicing what we preach, what can we do? And why should we do it?

Change and learning occur when a problem or question exists for which one seeks a solution or answer. This simple sentence underlies our belief that reflective practice lies beneath meaningful learning in a school. Administrative, pedagogical, and learning questions and problems are effectively addressed through the reflective-practice process.

The process itself is based on experiential learning theory. Dewey (1938) explained that learning or inquiry begins with a problematic or indeterminate situation. The "KWL" (What I KNOW, What I WANT to Know, What I LEARNED) charts that so many teachers use provide a simple schema of how learning occurs: The student knows something, but the knowledge is incomplete or problematic. The teacher first explores with the students what they already *know.* The list allows them to see their present knowledge and to question information about which they are not sure. Then, the teacher asks the students to determine *what they want to learn.* How can we answer the questions, solve the problem, complete the knowledge? The third part pulls together what has been *learned.* The KWL cycle, however, is a linear process, whereas the reflective practice process is cyclical (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 KWL Chart

Social Studies: France		
What We Know	*What We Want to Find Out*	*What We Have Learned*
1. It is a country.	1. What's the climate like?	1. It varies from cool and rainy in the North to warm and sunny in the South.
2. It is located in Europe.	2. What kind of government do they have?	2. It is a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister and a president elected for six years.
3. Europe is a continent.	3. Where does "French toast" come from?	3. Since the French have always eaten a lot of bread and most used to live on farms, they dipped their stale bread in eggs and milk and fried it.
4. The people speak French.	4. What religion do the people practice?	4. It is a secular country. Most people are Catholic, but there are many Muslims, Jews, and Protestants.

NOTE: Just imagine all the fascinating conversations and a whole new set of questions that could ensue from four simple questions.

The reflective practice process begins as follows:

Stage 1: A *concrete experience* or *identification of the problem.* As Dewey described, it can be a problematic or indeterminate situation or an unsettling or troubling situation. What is essential is that inquiry leading to new information and knowledge is required.

Stage 2: *Observation and analysis.* Data collection takes place. Whether the "researcher" is looking at deepening knowledge or trying to resolve a personal or interpersonal situation, information is gathered from as many sources as possible. *Analysis* of the information or data leads to hypotheses or the third stage.

Stage 3: *Abstract reconceptualization* is a different or new perspective of the problem or enhanced knowledge.

Stage 4: *Active experimentation* completes this cycle. As differentiated from KWL, it assumes that the new theory, knowledge, or hypothesis has to be tested. Once new ideas or behaviors are enacted or tried out, adjustments or new questions emerge, thereby necessitating the beginning of a new cycle. (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004)

At this juncture, we have provided a very general description of reflective practice that can apply to all learners. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) have focused their framework on adults. We believe that reflective practice's positioning within experiential learning, situated cognition (Bridges, 1992), and, more recently, constructivism (Fosnot, 1993; Lambert et al., 2003) validates its use as a model for adults and children.

Reflective Questions

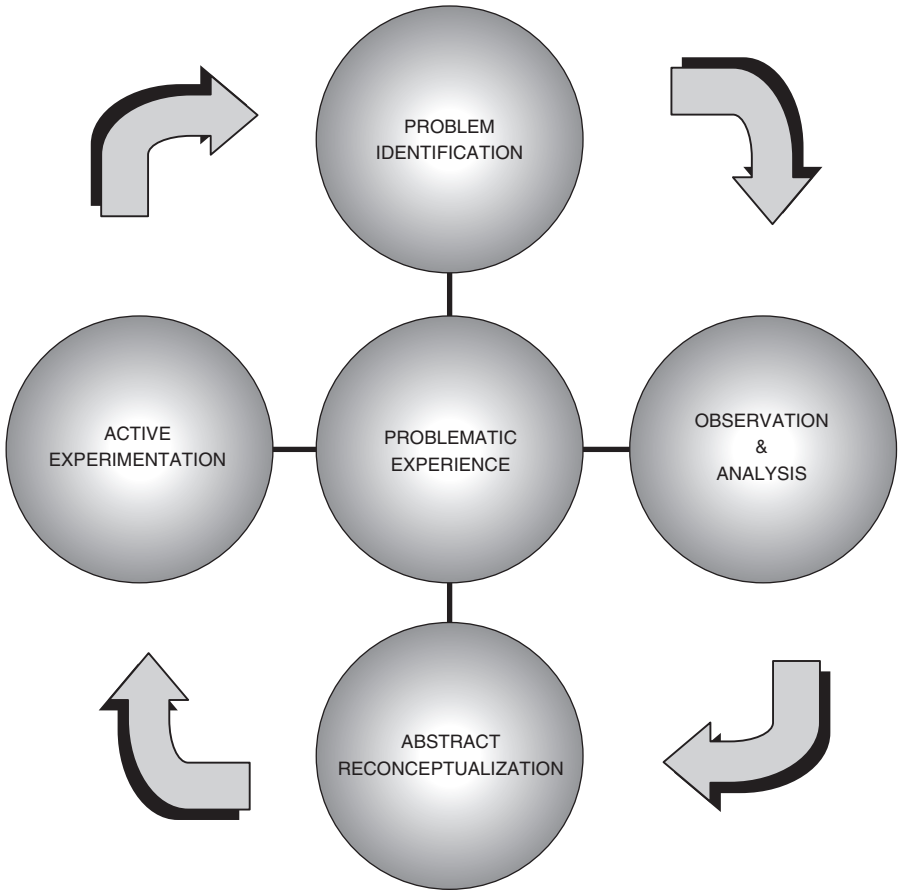
1. If you have used the KWL cycle, provide an example of an effective cycle and why it worked.
2. Discuss an ineffective cycle and why it didn't work.

   How could you have improved it?
3. What other problem-solving cycles are you familiar with?

   How are they set up?

   What has been effective or ineffective in their use? Provide examples.

Figure 1.1 Reflective Practice: An Experiential Learning Cycle



SOURCE: Osterman and Kottkamp, *Reflective Practice for Educators, Second Edition*. Copyright © 2004 by Corwin Press. Reprinted with permission.

Constructivism and Reflective Practice

> An empowered teacher is a reflective decision maker who finds joy in learning and in investigating the teaching/learning process—one who views learning as construction and teaching as a facilitating process to enhance and enrich development. (Fosnot, 1989, p. xi)

So many definitions of "constructivism" exist today that it is difficult to figure out what it is, what it does, and how to view it. Von Glasersfeld (1997) described it as a "vast and woolly area in contemporary psychology, epistemology, and education" (p. 204). The origins of

constructivism stem from the theorists in 20th-century psychology whom we all studied in our psychology, educational psychology, and sometimes even philosophy classes: Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohler, Bruner, Dewey, and others.

Psychological or Individual Constructivism

Piaget is the best-known theorist of psychological or individual constructivism. He focused on meaning as the individual constructs it. He proposed that individuals pass through six cognitive stages. Thinking at each stage builds upon knowledge and thoughts acquired in the previous stage.

Social Constructivism

Vygotsky (1934/1986, 1978) is the best-known theoretician of social constructivism. He argued that since knowledge is constructed in a sociocultural context, social interaction, cultural tools, and activity shape individual development and learning. According to some scholars (Woolfolk & Hoy, 2003), Vygotsky bridges these two main branches: social and individual. "By participating in a broad range of activities with others, learners appropriate (take for themselves) outcomes produced by working together" (Woolfolk & Hoy, 2003, p. 91). Since Vygotsky was primarily interested in the development of the individual, some psychologists classify him as an individualist, while the sociocultural focus convinces others that he was a social constructivist. We agree with Woolfolk and Hoy's conclusion that Vygotsky bridged both camps.

Vygotsky's most well-known concept, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), is an example of the blending of the social and individual. On one hand, the ZPD development demonstrates how the learner mediates and negotiates knowing; the learner stretches just enough to construct new knowledge slightly above the current level of knowledge (Zepeda, 2000). On the other hand, it is with the support of another that the problem is solved.

Our favorite example of the ZPD is the ring toss game that the Efficacy Institute (Howard, 1987) uses in its seminars on development. Participants are given several rings and the stand on which to toss them. The goal is to figure out how to get the highest number of rings on the target. It is solving a problem, learning a new task. No other directions are given. Some choose to stand so far away that none of the rings land on the target. No learning occurs because the approach is

unrealistic. Others choose to stand almost on top of the stand so that all the rings make it onto the stand. No learning occurs because no challenge exists. The facilitator then guides the group to stand just far enough away so that it becomes a challenge, but not an impossibility, for some of the rings to make it. The participants can actually feel the learning process as they refine their aim. Individual development takes place with the guidance of a more able peer or adult.

We can also distinguish the four stages of reflective practice in this example:

Stage 1: *Identification of the problem:* The participants must decide how to get the most rings onto the center of the stand.

Stage 2: *Observation and analysis:* The participants experiment with various strategies and analyze which work and which do not.

Stage 3: *Abstract reconceptualization:* The facilitator guides the participants toward a strategy that allows for success and also challenges (the ZPD).

Stage 4: *Active experimentation:* The participants try the new strategy, and the cycle can begin again.

The above exercise, a vivid example of the intersection of reflective practice and constructivism, is also very effective as a learning tool for children. What better way for children to learn about setting realistic but challenging goals?

The ring toss game also exemplifies social constructivism played out in a larger context, in which culture creates cognition or learning when the teacher uses tools and practices from the culture to steer the learner toward goals the culture values. In turn, the learning creates culture as the learners construct new practices and solutions that are incorporated into the culture (Serpell, 1993).

It is this dual concept of individual and situated or social learning that is so integral to our conception of constructivism. Reflective practice permits the leaders and the teachers to construct the self-knowledge that facilitates the creation of the school culture. If all the adults in the school community are involved in this individual and social learning, they can then proceed to incorporate the children in the reflective, constructivist learning process. Almost all of the processes presented in this book can be used or adapted for K–12 classroom use.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004, p. 16) have summarized best how learning through reflective practice draws from constructivism, experiential learning, and situated cognition:

- Learning is an active process requiring involvement of the learner. Knowledge cannot simply be transmitted. For learning to take place, professionals must be motivated to learn and have an active role in determining the direction and progress of learning. Meaningful problems engage people in learning.
- Learning must acknowledge and build on prior experiences and knowledge. Accordingly, professionals need opportunities to explore, articulate, and represent their own ideas and knowledge.
- Learners construct knowledge through experience. Opportunities to observe and assess actions and to develop and test new ideas facilitate behavioral change.
- Learning is more effective when it takes place as a collaborative rather than an isolated activity and in a context relevant to the learner.

Reflective Questions

1. Can you think of a situation where you took an unrealistic risk?

   What happened?

2. Try to think of a time where you chose to stay in the very safe zone.

   What were the consequences?

3. Which of the three behaviors (very safe, moderate risk, extreme risk) best characterize(s) your approach to your work? Explain.

   Which characterize(s) your personal life? Explain.

4. Identify one area of your personal life and one from your professional life where you might use this type of analysis in your decision making.

The Outside Perspective

It is clear that we see reflective practice and constructivism across the entire school community as the basis of the learning community. The goal of this book is to provide school leaders—a role that can span the school community—with the knowledge and skills to create

this reflective, collaborative environment. Some of you may be concerned that this type of individual and social reflecting and construction of knowledge may be a passing phenomenon limited to the world of education. Disciplines outside of education can give us insight into current organizational and business perspectives on organizational learning. These points of view can either support our ideas or bring them into question.

We have found that the extensive interest in the "information society" and in the "knowledge economy" has not lessened the importance that business and organizational scholars attribute to how learning occurs. We are including some quotations from business and organizational scholars that resonate with our ideas:

> Knowledge is always a process, and a relational one at that, which cannot therefore be located simply in an individual head, to be extracted and shared as an organizational asset. Knowledge is the act of conversing, and learning occurs when ways of talking, and therefore patterns of relationship change. . . . The knowledge assets of an organization lie in the pattern of relationships between its members. (Stacey, 2001, p. 98)

Some organizational researchers explicitly link what they call "communities of practice" to the knowledge economy. Whether implicit or explicit, reflective practice is an integral part of the community of practice:

> Companies at the forefront of the knowledge economy are succeeding on the basis of communities of practice, whatever they call them. . . . Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4)

Michael Fullan (2003) has culled Brown and Duguid's (2000) ideas about a knowledge community and created a list of their beliefs about the effective use of knowledge:

- Knowledge lies less in its databases than in its people. (p. 121)
- For all information's independence and extent, it is people, in their communities, organizations, and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters. (p. 18)

- A viable system must embrace not just the technical system but also the social system—the people, organizations, and institutions involved. (p. 60)
- Knowledge is something we digest rather than merely hold. It entails the knower's understanding and having some degree of commitment. (p. 120)

Learning communities are clearly not unique to the world of education. Gladwell's (2000) prescription for changing people's beliefs and behavior is completely consistent with the current educational thoughts about schools:

> To bring about a fundamental change . . . that would persist and serve as an example to others, you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practiced, expressed, and nurtured. (p. 173)

> Envisioned change will not happen or will not be fruitful until people look beyond the simplicities of information and individuals to the complexities of learning, knowledge, judgment, communities, organizations, and institutions. (p. 213)

The following vignette addresses Gladwell's idea about bringing about fundamental change in a community where teachers look at "the complexities of learning, knowledge, judgment, communities, and organizations" (p. 213). This case also exemplifies how reflective practice and constructivist learning can be practiced in an urban school where teachers are implementing mandated curricula.

Literacy and the Ring Toss Game

In the mid- and late 1990s, a number of school districts around the country, and in particular large urban ones, contracted with Jeffrey Howard's "Efficacy Seminar" to explore with teachers their beliefs about development of children and then to generate a plan to improve the academic performance of their students. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) played an important part in the Efficacy Seminar's ideas on development. It was also a time when the standards movement was gaining ground across the country and the balanced literacy approach was being introduced in many school districts as a means to improve literacy achievement.

One of the authors participated in a series of Efficacy Seminar workshops in the Bronx, New York. On the first of the 4 days, the participants participated in the ring toss game. The culminating project took place on the fourth day of the seminar. The teachers from the same school developed a goal or project in which they integrated their learnings from the workshops. One group of teachers that the author observed was initially resistant and defensive. The novice teacher in the group inspired them to create a project that incorporated many of the features of reflective practice and constructivism that we have discussed in this chapter. Three Bronx elementary school teachers made up this group:

- Roberta is a veteran Caucasian teacher who is struggling to adapt to the new literacy mandate. She is used to using a basal reader in which stories are incorporated with the phonics approach. In the past, her class library was a reward for those who finished quickly—rarely used in the past few years as school scores plummeted. She is nearing retirement, and until this seminar on personal and child development, she was becoming more and more convinced that the children in her school just could not learn. Roberta stood almost on top of the stand the first time she played the ring toss game.
- Nilda is a second-year bilingual teacher who grew up in the neighborhood as it changed from African American and Puerto Rican to primarily newly arrived immigrants from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and a host of non-Spanish-speaking countries in Africa and Asia. She studied the balanced literacy approach in college and has been frustrated with the resistance of the more veteran teachers to the approach and with their attitudes toward the children. Nilda stood a little too far away the first time she tossed the rings.
- Mildred has also been teaching for a good number of years. She is African American and believes above all in structure and discipline. She is very wary of an approach that allows kids to choose their own books. "How are little kids going to know what level books to choose?" She blames the home for a lot of the problems the teachers handle on a daily basis. Mildred also stood too close to the stand her first try at the ring toss game.

Roberta: I feel like I've learned a lot about myself and my attitudes toward kids these last three days, but I don't see how that's going to help me develop a curriculum goal or project.

My attitudes may be different, but we've still got to teach the same stuff to the same kids.

Mildred: I see how my changed attitudes can affect my interactions with the kids, but it isn't going to get those parents or guardians to read to their kids or listen to their kids read.

Nilda: I understand your frustrations. But I'm so excited about what I learned about myself from the ring toss game that I want to see how our students could gain from it. Does anyone have any ideas?

(silence ensues)

Roberta: If we could only use the ring toss game with our students in a way that it wouldn't only be a game. If we just do the game, they will get so caught up in it that they won't focus at all on the learning process.

Nilda: What if we related it to something in the curriculum? Maybe something in the balanced literacy program?

Mildred: That's all well and good, but as long as they don't get any backup at home, it's hard to keep up with the mandated pace. Our kids are coming from so far behind that it would be almost impossible to succeed even with parental involvement.

Nilda: Okay. We've got to figure out two things then: how to integrate the ring toss game into our project and maybe literacy curriculum and how to get parents involved.

Roberta: I know where I'm having a lot of trouble and need something to help, or I'm going to give up. I can't get the kids to figure out how to choose books on their own from the class library. Either they choose picture books that are too easy or books they can't read at all.

Mildred: That kind of sounds like the ring toss game. We either were too close or too far away the first time. So if we could somehow get the kids to link the game to their choice of books, that could be a beginning.

Nilda, Roberta, and Mildred continued their brainstorming until they came up with an ingenious plan that allowed their students to understand how to choose the books through the game. In short, the children chose books according to how they played the game the first time—generally, too easy or too hard. When they learned how to apply the ZPD in the game, they then chose their books using the

strategies of moderate challenge. Mildred came up with the idea of inviting the parents to an enactment of the ring toss game with their children. The children created their own ring toss game with the help of the art teacher so that they could take it home (especially for the parents or guardians who did not attend). The triumvirate convinced the principal to ask one of the publishers who supplies books for their class libraries to donate books for the event, so that each child took home a book at his or her ZPD.

Reflective Questions

1. What do you think enabled the teachers to use reflective practice here?
2. How is constructivist learning applied at the different levels in this scenario?
3. How could you adapt, apply, or encourage the application of the ZPD in your school?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we introduced the dilemmas of standardized testing and high-stakes accountability. We also presented a brief overview of the concepts of reflective practice and constructivist learning that underlie the strategies in the rest of this book. A scenario that demonstrated the intersection of reflective practice and constructivism for adults and students models the multilevel process we advocate. Our conviction that the reflective practice/constructivist model has to be initiated by self-reflective leaders of the school community lies behind the next chapter on leadership styles.

Suggested Readings

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