

“In an age when schools and leading educators talk about how important it is for principals to be “instructional leaders” most...spend little time on anything that resembles student learning or school leadership” and “every year there is something more that’s dropped on your plate,” they say. “They’re exhausted and overwhelmed, and spending too much time on discipline, but they say they enjoy the chance to do what their unique role does allow: helping students and families through their most difficult moments.”

[EdWeek 4/12/00] Toughest Job in Education

SAVING THE STARFISH SAVERS

I glanced at the business card a superintendent had just given me. We had been talking about the frustrations of a job that might -- for the sake of his family and himself-- soon force him to move on to another district. What caught my eye on his card was the light brown background image of a starfish beneath the letters and the phrase printed at the bottom -- “*Making a Difference for Children.*”

Of course I knew what it referred to. You can find similar “starfish” symbols in school districts all across America today on lapel pins, posters, and even mission statements. Popularized by Joel Barker a few years ago, it refers to the parable of the person walking along a beach who sees someone picking up beached starfish one-by-one and tossing them back in the water.

“*It won’t really make a difference!*” he shouted to the person tossing the starfish back into the surf.

“*It will for this one!*” the person replied, ... “*and this one... and this one...*” and continued to run down the beach.

Clearly, this metaphor about not letting go of a seemingly fruitless task has great meaning for school practitioners - both teachers and administrators. But it should have even greater meaning for those who are frustrated with similarly fruitless attempts at meaningful changes in schooling. For hidden in this parable lies a key -- to not only saving the “starfish” -- but also its *prerequisite* saving of the “starfish savers.” Unfortunately, most of the observers in the parable don’t stay around long enough to notice the burn-out and drop-out rate of the *Starfish-Savers*.

Making a difference

For teachers and administrators in local communities, the *Starfish* parable confirms and validates fundamental beliefs and values about what they, and schools, are all about. At its deepest level, it resonates with why they originally went into education -- their intrinsic drive to make a difference in the lives of children.

As George Locke Land had suggested in *Grow or Die*, *psychological* processes are extensions of *biological* processes. Noting the similarities in the ways that a simple cell and an individual human learn and grow, he said “In essence, the destiny of a cell, and a human is to reach out and to affect its environment . . .” Each acts, then takes in and processes the environment’s response to that act in a way that produces learning and growth, and then acts again.

Making a difference in the lives of children is how this common human requirement plays out in school practitioners.

Making a difference for *Each* vs. Making a difference for *All*

But this intrinsic drive that keeps school practitioners returning to the job each day must continually confront a level of usually unarticulated “knowing” - a sense that “something isn’t quite right.” Things that should work, don’t quite.

Lying at the root of this strange sub-cognitive dissonance is awareness that “making a difference” only takes place in *individuals*. Yet, in schools, this is supposed to happen in a work setting structured and assessed as if it could happen to *groups*. Knowing that they must *first* affect *each* child, leaders are held accountable for meeting the needs of *all*.

This paradox is so invisible that few notice that it doesn't exist in other organized work settings similarly intended to respond to individual human needs and requirements. In a hospital, for example, acceptance of the uniqueness of each individual mandates that there be a common process of continual "diagnosis and prescription" that enables them to maintain the critical connections to the individual. Effective results come from the *quality of that interaction*, so the organization gains value by putting resources [people's time and knowledge] into supporting that interaction (which industry calls the *moment-of-truth*).

But this isn't the way it is for people who work in schools. Caught between the pressures for *personal* and *organizational* accountability -- one intrinsic, the other extrinsic -- and not recognizing the nature of the problem constraining them -- school practitioners have been forced into a form of organizational schizophrenia.

They form themselves into two seemingly disconnected "systems." One (a school and its classrooms) intended to meet the needs of *each* child, the other (usually a central office) to meet the needs of *all*. And the scope of these separate accountabilities affects the nature of what people in each system do. So we end up with two natural systems with their differing accountabilities and few ways to connect them.

And that is why there is a third dimension of accountability. School systems exist to ensure that these two seemingly polarizing purposes be accomplished *simultaneously*. They must have ways to address the needs of each child [educational excellence] and all children [educational equity] as part of the school's common work. This uniquely American bi-polar purpose is a primary cause of the organizational schizophrenia infecting our schools.

And the key to their *capacity* to do this lies in the organizational connections they develop and sustain between the two natural systems that enable them to *share responsibility* for their common end:

- One that includes all those who sense of *personal meaning* and *organizational accountability* is defined by what happens to *each* individual child.
- And the other that includes those with the same sense of personal meaning, but whose organizational accountability is for what happens to *all* children for whom their organization is responsible.