Who Speaks for the Elephant?

"…and so these men of Indostan
disputed loud and long.
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong.
Though each was partly in the right,
They all were in the wrong!"
The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant

In The Chronic Failure of Curriculum Reform [EdWeek, 5/19/99] David Labaree asked the right question: WHY? [why new theory never translates into practice]; identified the right reasons, [eight enduring characteristics of American education]; and reached a "sobering conclusion" [the educational system will continue to resist overall reform] that would be accurate in all cases… except one.

Since we already know from logic and sad experience that the interdependence of those "system characteristics" can't allow them to be "changed" one-by-one, one might also conclude that they must be addressed *simultaneously, and coherently*, and moreover, in ways that have visible impact on *today's* children.

Impossible? Not really. We only *think* so, because of the way that we think. That is, the mental model encompassing what Labaree called *real* teaching, the *real* school, and the *real* school system stands in the way of our using knowledge we already have that would permit the educational system to change itself naturally and coherently from the inside out. But, as Labaree suggests, there have been no compelling reasons to act on that knowledge coherently. It still seems as if piecemeal, externally motivated reasons will work.

In fact, there is an unstated assumption that this sort of "whole" change is "impossible." Just as Larry Cuban once noted, "Teaching is impossible, yet teachers teach. Expected to give individual attention to EACH child, the teacher knows that it can't be done," today he might have added -- "System leadership is impossible, expected to address the needs of ALL children, leaders know that it can't be done."

Living with an underlying belief that you'll never get where you want to go because it's "impossible," may explain why so much effort is scattered at visible symptoms rather than underlying causes, and why practitioners can't spare time for many reforms that seem "long-range." This is unfortunate because two conditions have changed.

First, we now know from experience in other organizations that change of this scope and nature is possible. Unfortunately the successes of others, alone, have never met the "compelling reason" criterion for knowledge application to schooling.

But something else has happened. One learning from the history of organizational change is that whole systems only become willing to look at themselves in a different way when they *no longer have a choice*. They believe it is impossible to do what they want to do.

And there is increasing evidence that we have just about reached that all-encompassing choice point.   I'm not referring here to pressures from the aggregation of problems of, in, and around schools that seem somehow to be "connected." What I refer to, instead, can be found in the current language of society's leaders attempting to do something about them *"systemically."*

The system leader view

It's a fact-of-life that just about everyone has a diagnosis for what's wrong with schools and a prescription for what should be done about it. And while most observers of the broad scene have been calling for "systemic changes," there is a particular consistency in the "answers" being called for by CEO's in both the private sector and state and local government.

These individuals have a unique experiential perspective -- they are accountable for the *individual actions* and *total results* of a complete, connected work system. They know from experience that system thinking and planning is not enough. Effective results require being able to <u>act</u> as a system. Thus these *system leaders,* each in his or her own way is saying:

"Change it <u>all</u> [i.e., the whole school system and its parts], do it <u>all at the same time</u>...and do it <u>now.</u>"

But when they turn from their own systems to the work system called schooling, suddenly something clouds the knowledge gained from their experience. They can "see" education's "parts" but can't understand how they connect into the system that is producing the results they are also seeing. They join with many others who can't make sense of how "everything connects to everything else." Starting with this fuzzy map, they rely on the accepted wisdom of a seemingly-logical, linear process of piecemeal changes and then, as that does not work, seem to turn to a truly *systemic* process that meets all three of their criteria for changing a system -- i.e., <u>destroy it</u>.

Whether destruction of the American education system is the intended or unanticipated consequence of many systemic reform proposals today is not the issue. What is critical is recognition that this is not the only option that meet the criteria. Others strategies are not only *possible*, but with experience gleaned from similar endeavors, can become *probable* as ways that can allow a school system to solve the problems it faces <u>as</u> a system -- whole and parts, all at the same time.

For any of this to happen, however, -- and to avoid Labaree's "sobering conclusion: The American educational system seems likely to continue resisting efforts" at transformation -- requires new understandings of the *possibilities* for addressing effectively the eight "enduring characteristics" of American education Labaree identified as barriers to systemic transformation. And developing that understanding requires the addition of one more characteristic to his list.

Starting at the end

The key to tapping this knowledge is recognition that it has a different <u>starting</u> point. Reflecting the hierarchical nature of our thinking about schools, Labaree's eight focal areas <u>end</u> with "Teaching and Learning" which he calls the" last crucial step in the chain of reform."

- Conflicting Goals
- Credentialing Over Learning
- A Curriculum That Works
- Preserving the Curriculum of a Real School
- Preserving Real Teaching:
- Loose Coupling of School Systems:
- Adaptability of the School System
- Weak Link Between Teaching and Learning.

Yet to meet the compelling requirement to "Change it *all* [i.e., the whole and its parts], do it *all at the same time...and* do it *now*," requires a "system picture" that has that "end" as its core reference point. Starting there not only makes relationships and connections clearer -- allowing everyone to make sense of what too often seems like randomness -- but also makes it possible to understand the relevance of systemic *connecting* processes already proven effective in comparable settings.

For any of this to happen, however, I have to add a critical additional characteristic of the present scene to Labaree's list:

- There currently does not seem to be any place for observations such as his to be heard by those who can <u>act</u> on them coherently, in ways that have visible impact on today's children.

It's no longer an issue of *what* we know. We have, or have access to sufficient knowledge to create and operate the schools we need. The problem is that we have no places where those who must act on that knowledge can think about what we individually and collectively know, and transform that thinking into actions.

The Missing *Know-How*

Without sense-making forums like this, no one is articulating and integrating the processes that can allow a school system to solve the problems it faces <u>as</u> a system - whole and parts, all at the same time, -- learning about how to address the need of tomorrow's children by more effectively meeting the needs of today's.

What might be the compelling reasons to do this? First, while it is important to recognize the continuing political influence of external government and industry leaders whose three criteria for systemic change reflect their practical, "no choice" experiences as system leaders, it is equally important to acknowledge that those criteria reflect processes <u>already underway</u> across K-12 schooling, not some *future* reform plan.

The "system" at all levels is already acting systemically, ...but *dysfunctionally*. Regardless of "21st Century" planning and visioning processes, the "changes" a frustrated public -- and many practitioners -- are demanding are being driven by "*now"* requirements of *today's* children

and today's teachers. But, as they soon discover, every attempt to fix a *"part"* without support of its *"whole"* proves unsustainable; and resources continue to be scattered in random *either/or* swings aimed at meeting the needs of all children *or* special groups of children, but not *both* at the same time.

The second compelling factor is time. Fortunately, transforming a dysfunctional system into a functional one doesn't require creating a new one. It doesn't require additional time, but ways to use differently what is already there. To make those trade-offs however does require *self-understanding*. And, as noted above, the opportunities to develop a meaningful understanding of the scope and systemic nature of the schooling process are seriously lacking.

Who speaks for the "elephant?"

What will it take to develop that self-understanding -- to help the key influencers on *learning* and *teaching* realize that they have "no choice" but to deal with the *schooling* system *as* a system - every day? And then -- when they move that understanding from the shelf of "impossible dreams" to the workplace of *possibilities* -- that they already know enough to begin to do it?

Paradoxically. much of that knowledge can be found in the seldom linked experiences of teachers and district superintendents -- two groups who seldom have functional reasons to collaborate as peers. Yet, although both might dispute it, they play very similar system roles.

• Each works at one of the school system's openings to the world around it. An *edge* where it interacts with the system's environment and gets its sense of meaning and purpose from those interactions.

• Here, each has to respond to conditions -- outside the organizational "space" for which they are personally accountable -- that they can only *influence*, not control. The teacher responds to the needs of the system's customers [students], and the superintendent to it stakeholders [community.]

• Both are dealing with a "whole learner," and both are trying to create and manage an environment around it that can support its development. It's always been easier to understand the concept of responding to the needs of a "whole learner" in terms of children. Now society is learning that the organization, too, is a "whole" connected system that must learn as a whole since the only sustainable way it can improve is as a whole.

• Their "worlds" are undergoing profound, and similar, "paradigm" shifts. Those at the "tops" --superintendents in the world of the district, teachers in the world of the classroom-- are asked to "give up control" and trust the innate motivation of those at the "bottoms" [teachers, for the superintendent,; students, for the teachers] to do a good, steadily improving job -- continually learning from their daily experiences. At the same time, those at the "bottoms" don't trust the systems of work designed by the "tops," or their promises to make it different this time, so they spend lots of their time "fighting the system."

To compound this already complex situation, teachers have to navigate in both those worlds. In one they are the *controller*, the *manager*, the *leader;* in the other they are the *controlled,* the *managed*, the *led*.

In the old parable of the *Blind Men and the Elephant* , the Blind Men's need to make sense of the part they had hold of had to wait for leaders who could see the whole elephant. This article's perspective suggests that we don't have to wait for them to appear from the outside. Those leaders are already there -- at the system's two "edges." They are the only ones who can accurately develop, from the inside out, the picture of the "elephant" that is already in our communities.

They are the ones who could then speak for the coherent "elephant" that bounds the practical work of educators and others simultaneously attempting to meet the learning needs of each <u>and</u> every child in a community.

For this to happen however requires that national teacher and administrator leadership recognize that they are riding the same elephant. *Their* survival depends upon the elephant's survival, and that will be a consequence of how quickly they can develop their self-understanding of their interdependence in a single connected system.

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