FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page ix

Preface

Ten years have passed since the first edition of this book. In that time, we have learned a great deal, deepened our appreciation of the importance of reflective practice, and strengthened our conviction that it holds powerful, empowering, and healthy possibilities for change and betterment in the educational community. We are optimistic, but we have also lived another ten years of educational history.

During these last ten years, we have seen wonderful things happen in education, particularly at the elementary school level. With the introduction of new approaches to literacy and an increasing emphasis on project-based learning intensified by many children's easy access to literally a world of people, information, and ideas, the learning experience in many schools is indeed a rich one, far distant from the experience of these students' parents and grandparents. On one hand, we seem to be coming to a renewed appreciation of the importance of engaging children in learning. At the same time, there are many schools where children are not learning; there are many "good" schools where some children's learning needs are still neglected; and many schools where the joy of learning has been suppressed by pressure to pass the test. Unfortunately, the approach to reform remains the same.

Ten years ago, we referred to a variety of solutions that were on the agenda at the time: new and higher standards, integrated curriculum, better teacher preparation. Now, ten years later, we still observe an educational system struggling to address what it defines as failure. The fix-it mentality and model of change still reigns supreme, but there is a new iteration, an almost maniacal pursuit of the Holy Grail of high-stakes testing. Establishing thoughtful, comprehensive standards is essential to reform. Similarly, gathering and collecting outcome data is invaluable for organizations to assess performance relative to those standards. With data in hand, the most effective organizations then engage their staffs in a critical analysis of their own performance. With evidence before them, they critique their work, develop and implement

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page x

alternative strategies, and use data to assess their efforts. Unfortunately, in many instances, the test has become an end in itself, and accountability demands have had little positive effect on practice and have aggravated the very conditions they were designed to address. While standards and assessment are two integral and essential processes, the legislatively empowered evil twin of high-stakes testing, by promoting reliance on single—and faulty—indicators of educational performance, has suppressed and marginalized the critical voice of standards, its important counterpart (Thompson, 2001). For all practical purposes, the once vaunted authentic standards-based reform has joined many of its predecessors among the *desaparecidos.* For those concerned about the impact of high-stakes testing, however, history offers some comfort because today's solution soon becomes yesterday's initiative.

Unfortunately, that is the problem. In the history of school reform, one new program follows another, yet the more things change, the more they stay the same. Seeing this fix-it history repeat itself, we are firmer in our conviction that short-term behavior adjustment only maintains the status quo in the long run. It is simply not enough to develop a new program, however well designed, if the process of implementation does not provide an opportunity to explore the ways of thinking, seeing, and believing that affect what we do and how we do it. Without this conscious dialogue, even the best solution will not be sustained in the face of continual demand for newer and better solutions.

We remain convinced that the most enduring changes will take place in schools as teachers, administrators, and parents ponder how students learn and how the adults responsible for their learning can best support them. In fact, research is becoming increasingly clear that schools most successful in creating change are those functioning as learning organizations, schools where every person and the organization itself are consciously and continuously learning. We believe firmly that reflective practice is an important and effective change process that is integral to the learning organization. At the same time, we are not so naive as to believe that a practice that cannot be packaged, distributed, and imposed with a promise of immediate results will be readily embraced by schools, school districts, or policy makers who are looking for quick solutions to complex problems. Reflective practice lacks cache. Nonetheless, the term has become embedded in the language of education, and, more important, there are a growing number of schools and districts that have adopted the principles of reflective practice to create effective schools that are indeed meeting the diverse learning needs of their students.

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xi

OUR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

There is a rich theoretical and critical literature on reflective practice. This book focuses on the application of reflective practice in school settings, yet it has a theoretical perspective that distinguishes it from similar books. Although the term is widely used, conceptions of reflective practice differ. Some authors emphasize the reflective aspect, equating reflective practice with silent introspection and retrospection; others emphasize practice, viewing this thoughtful process as a means of developing a better solution to a problem. Our conceptualization stays close to its roots in the work of Argyris and Schon (Argyris, 1982, 1993; Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978): It emphasizes thought and action as integral processes but extends beyond to consider how context and culture shape both thought and action. Our description of reflective practice respects the autonomy of the learner but recognizes the value of incorporating lessons drawn from theory, research, and practice. For others, thought or cognition holds primacy; in our conceptualization, systematic observation of practice emphasizing thought, action, feelings, and consequences is the keystone of the process. As we explain in a later chapter, reflective practice depends on careful observation and data-based analysis of practice as well as experimentation with new ideas and new strategies.

Argyris has continued his work, describing a process that he calls action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). This process, like action research, is another formulation of reflective practice. What these processes all share are systematic procedures for critically examining thought and action in an effort to improve our professional practice. While action research does not intentionally highlight the importance of examining assumptions and beliefs, the process often leads to this deep analysis.

We advocate reflective practice under a definition that always encourages the possibility of deep change in assumptions, thoughts, and actions. Our interest is in profound (double-loop) learning and change, in an educational paradigm shift that goes beyond thought to action and beyond action to thought. As we explain in Chapter 1, our goal is to transform existing educational organizations into true learning organizations. For this reason, our notion of reflective practice is grounded in the concept of community and communication. While organizational change or cultural change will not come about without individual change, organizational change will not come about until dialogue about change absorbs the whole community (Cambron-McCabe, 2003; Kottkamp & Silverberg, 2003).

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xii

Over the last ten years, our conception of reflective practice has not essentially changed; however, we have come to a deeper appreciation of the richness of reflective practice as we have explored its connections with other major schools of thought (Kottkamp, 2002; Kottkamp & Silverberg, 1999b; Osterman, 1999). As a process of learning, reflective practice builds on and draws from experiential learning, constructivism, situated cognition, and metacognition, and the critical literature on professional development frequently incorporates these important principles.

Reflective practice is also rooted in the notion of intentional action. This cognitive perspective that what we believe, what we value, and the way we view the world is indeed reflected in our action is evident in much research about teachers, administrators, and children. Within the organizational change literature, we see similar ideas and processes in Senge's (1990; Senge et al., 2000; Senge et al., 1999) discussion of system thinking as he encouraged practitioners to examine problems thoroughly, examine their mental models, articulate and share their vision, and work collaboratively to improve practice. In the research on leadership and school leadership, through the work of Leithwood and others (Leithwood, 1995; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Fernandez, 1994; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995), we find increasing attention to cognition and intention and an emphasis on the clear articulation of goals or vision and also on the continuous assessment of performance relative to those standards of performance.

Fullan and Hargreaves (Fullan, 1997; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) wrote about the importance of deep dialogue, collaboration, and reflection and the often anxiety-producing nature of this endeavor. Elmore and colleagues (Elmore, 1992, 1995; Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996) are among others who have come to appreciate that structural reform without change in the underlying beliefs about teaching and learning leads to naught. Conversely, we are beginning to see the power of collective energy as educators unite, often with the guidance and support of transformational leaders, to engage in an ongoing analysis of their practice. In these learning organizations, we see educators engaged in reflective practice and the potential for change realized in meaningful ways.

It is nice to be part of a broadening stream of thought and dialogue focused on improving our ability as professionals to learn and, as educators, to serve our very important clientele in an ever-improving manner. In some settings, reflective practice has become an integrated part of organizational life. At the same time, there is still a long way to go until the exception becomes the norm.

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xiii

HOW THE BOOK HAS CHANGED

The format of this edition is similar to its predecessor. Topics are similar, but in most cases the ideas are far more developed. Because we feel that cognition is such an important determinant of action, we continue to pay a great deal of attention to developing a deep understanding of reflective practice. Kofman and Senge (1994) argued that simple formulas, "seven step methods to success" or "similar how-to's," are not very practical because "life is too complex and effective action too contextual" (p. 17). We agree and believe that a strong theoretical understanding provides educators with greater flexibility to integrate reflective practice, formally and informally. We also share Fullan's and Leithwood's appreciation for problems. In Fullan's (1997) words, "problems are our friends"; they're "inevitable and you can't learn without them" (p. 15). From our perspective, the problem, or the discrepancy between where we are now (the current situation) and where we want to be (the preferred situation), is an impetus for change. Accordingly, we develop that contrast throughout the book.

The original book was targeted to school administrators. At the time, there were many resources dealing with reflective practice for teachers and prospective teachers but very little information that would explain its value and application for school leaders and schools. In addition to defining and explaining the process, we included three case studies describing administrators engaged in reflective practice and facilitator strategies. One described prospective administrators' introduction to reflective practice in a graduate class and its effects. The second looked at a professional development program designed to facilitate leadership renewal among experienced school principals. The third depicted school district administrators involved in an ongoing effort to incorporate reflective practice in their own work. While these cases are not reprinted here, they remain valid and may still be of interest (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

Since the first edition, our priorities have sharpened. This volume also includes three cases drawn from our own work, but they focus specifically on how reflective practice facilitates change in the classroom. While reflective practice has important applications and can benefit professionals at every organizational level, ultimately, the primary concern is student learning, and our deepest concern is for those children who are consistently failed by our schools. We believe that all children can learn; we also believe that achieving this goal requires a very different approach to teaching. To illustrate how reflective practice can facilitate this change, all of the cases in one way or another deal with marginal students: those children who stand out from the rest because of behavior or learning

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xiv

problems. In many cases, they are children who are poor and of color. In other cases, they are children from affluent homes in predominantly White districts. Regardless of their demographic status, most are perceived as troublesome. They are the children who, in teachers' words, drive them nuts, the ones who give them gray hair, the ones who make teaching difficult. For these children, there are no expectations of success and often attributions that they are responsible for their own failure because they lack ability or motivation. These cases show teachers confronting these assumptions and changing their beliefs and their practice, often in very dramatic ways and with dramatic results. In one situation, the teachers are prospective administrators and the stimulus is a class assignment. One involves teachers and administrators working with one another to address important issues of classroom practice. The third shows teachers and children engaging in reflective practice as they change their approaches to teaching and learning.

Our intention here is not to place all responsibility for children's learning in teachers' hands. To the contrary: Within the school, there is no question that teachers play the most critical and direct role in student learning. At the same time, it is very clear that organizational conditions, including the nature of leadership, directly influence the quality of teachers' work. As Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) noted, schools that have bad teachers usually deserve them. It is also clear that leaders can create environments that enhance teaching and learning. By creating trust; promoting inquiry, dialogue, and initiative; encouraging critical examination of current practices and continuous and collaborative learning; and providing resources that foster personal growth, leaders directly influence the quality of teachers' work (Murphy & Datnow, 2003a, 2003b; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). Essentially these are the same conditions that facilitate reflective practice, and we hope this book supports leaders' efforts to create these positive learning environments. At the same time, we believe that this book is important for educators at all levels who want to become more effective through their work with their colleagues. Schools where everyone assumes responsibility for student learning are more effective schools. This book is also useful to educators who wish to engage in this process of continuous improvement and to educators in higher education who wish to develop reflective skills in preparation programs.

These cases illustrate another difference in our thinking over the years. It is possible to engage in reflective practice without using that label, and reflective practice, while it may lead to surprising and even astounding insights, does not necessarily lead to conflict or anxiety. In each of these situations, educators engaged in reflective practice, but no one called it that. The first case was intended to generate reflective practice but

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xv

was focused on problem framing. The second was an action research project initiated in a school by an elementary principal concerned with bullying and victimization. In the third, children and their teachers engaged in reflective practice and critically examined their own learning without ever using the term. What these cases also illustrate is that reflective practice can be integrated into professional life, with minimal disruption but maximum effects. In fact, we would argue that reflective practice cannot be sustained as an add-on. We also downplay the conflict-generating potential of reflective practice. The cases we present show educators encountering very critical information about their own practice and sharing that information openly with colleagues without distress. We attribute this to professional commitment, a supportive environment, and the teachers seeing this information as a means to improvement.[1]

In the first edition, there was more attention to the facilitator role. In each of the cases, the facilitator played a direct role in structuring the reflective practice. In this book, the facilitator plays an important role in initiating, framing, and supporting the process but is less visibly directive. The most important responsibility of the facilitator is to promote problem identification and data gathering. Once educators become engaged in data gathering and analysis, the process takes on its own momentum, and the key role for the facilitator becomes one of active listening, as Chapter 4 explains.

The final chapter is essentially unchanged. We believe now, as we did then, that reflective practice is an empowering process that has far greater effects on people than most other learning experiences and produces visible outcomes, including changes in attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions, relationships with professional colleagues, and behavior. While recognizing the value of articulating core values and beliefs, we now give greater significance to the role of information as the stimulus for reflective practice and professional development. Knowing where you stand as an educator is one critical piece of information, but it is also essential to understand other elements of your practice: what you want to accomplish and your effectiveness, the strategies you use and more broadly how you experience and interpret your work, and most important the underlying ideas that shape your action. Equally important is sharing data openly in a collaborative and supportive setting. Communicating openly to improve professional practice enables educators to draw on and develop their expertise. It enables them to create knowledge; it helps to build professional community and learning organizations. Finally, reflective practice works because it respects the professionalism of educators and empowers them to assume personal responsibility for their own learning and professional growth. As we explain, it is an empowering process that enhances educators' self-efficacy.

FM-Osterman.qxd 3/9/04 6:11 PM Page xvi

We concluded earlier by seeking "colleagues who will join us in this quiet approach to change . . . " and opined that "If we have learned anything in our personal journeys with reflective practice, it is that only through changing ourselves do we have any hope of changing others" (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, pp. 188-189). We reaffirm these positions and feel gratified when we look around to see people actually doing it and often marveling at the outcomes.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book consists of two sections. The first, including Chapters 1 through 4, explain reflective practice, provide a conceptual framework or rationale, detail the stages of the process, and outline basic ideas and strategies that facilitate reflective practice. In Chapter 1, we explain our understanding of reflective practice as a professional development strategy and its potential for creating meaningful individual and organizational change in the context of our current reform efforts. Chapter 2 describes reflective practice as an experiential learning cycle, providing a detailed explanation of each phase. Reflecting our belief that valid information is one of the most important aspects of the reflective practice cycle, Chapter 3 outlines ways to gather data about the different dimensions of our practice as a means to facilitate reflection. In Chapter 4, we talk about introducing reflective practice in an organizational setting. Here we explore organizational obstacles to reflective practice and identify important assumptions and strategies to facilitate this new form of interaction.

As in the past edition, the second section describes and explains reflective practice in action. Reflective practice is a form of problem-based learning, and the next three chapters deal with important problems confronting educators. Chapter 5 considers the "problematic" student and shows educators confronting their unstated assumptions about these children. In Chapter 6, working with their principal, teachers engage in action research to break the cycle of bullying and victimization in the classroom. Chapter 7 describes how new data about their learning help children and teachers to join forces in a radically different response to concerns about test results. Chapter 8, as noted previously, offers final thoughts on the efficacy of reflective practice as a professional development strategy.

NOTE

1. McLaughlin (2001) made a similar point, noting how access to data and opportunities to analyze those data relative to their own performance actually help to create communities of practice.