Reflective Practice, School Reform, and Professional Development

1

This is a book about reflective practice. It is also a book about children. Reflective practice is a meaningful and effective professional development strategy. Even more, it is a way of thinking that fosters personal learning, behavioral change, and improved performance. Through systematic inquiry and analysis, it is a way for individuals to create meaningful and enduring change by changing themselves. It is a way to address problems rather than symptoms. As a basic learning strategy, reflective practice is relevant for any type of organization and in any walk of life. Here, however, we focus primarily on its value for educators—and for the children they serve.

In this chapter, we develop a conceptual understanding of reflective practice as a professional development strategy and explain its potential to create meaningful change in schools. In schools, reflective practice is ultimately a way for educators to search for ever-improved ways to facilitate student learning. Reflective practice is based on a belief that organizational change begins with individuals. Unless we as educators change the way we do things, there will be no meaningful educational change. Unless we identify new ways of acting, we will make little progress in achieving our goals. Reflective practice also incorporates the belief that much resistance to change is rooted in unexamined assumptions that

shape habit. To create change, then, we must examine current practice carefully and develop a conscious awareness of these basic assumptions. We also consider the organizational conditions necessary to support reflective practice and the way reflective practice, in turn, can help develop a learning organization. To understand reflective practice as a change strategy and its significance for schools, we begin with a critical perspective on school reform.

UNDERSTANDING THE FAILURE OF SCHOOL REFORM

In this new century, critiques of public education remain pervasive, and, with the erosion of public confidence, increasing numbers of parents are seeking alternatives through charter schools, voucher systems, or home schooling. The common perception is that schools are failing, and our children are not being prepared well academically or socially to meet the challenges of life in a rapidly changing and complex world. While some argue that criticisms of public education are inaccurate and oversimplified (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), the societal response to these concerns has been aggressive.

Over the last 40 years, governmental agencies, business leaders, profit and nonprofit organizations, elected officials, universities, special interest groups, and professional organizations—through financial incentives and disincentives, legislation, research, product development, and political persuasion—have bombarded schools with innovations designed to reform education. While the thrust of these reforms has shifted, the intention has been constant—to fix problems through a constant and continually changing barrage of externally developed and often mandated initiatives intended to change how and what teachers teach, how school leaders lead, the organizational conditions under which learning takes place, and how schools establish accountability and assess learning. The list of so-called solutions is long. Organizationally, schools have introduced site-based management and shared decision making—involving teachers, parents, and community—while manipulating schedules, reorganizing teachers into interdisciplinary or grade-level teams, and shifting students from tracks to heterogeneous age and ability groupings. School leaders have been encouraged to develop effective schools by adopting new and improved leadership strategies. In the classroom, teachers encounter constantly changing directives: new math, old math, back to basics, balanced literacy, phonics, interdisciplinary and integrated learning versus subject specialization, computer-assisted instruction, drill and skill, push outs and pull ins, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning. These are only

a few of the procedural, programmatic, and structural changes that have been prescribed and implemented—sequentially or simultaneously—in schools struggling to improve learning while addressing public concerns. What is omitted here is a list of perhaps thousands of individual programs developed for schools—packaged, marketed, and sold—complete with training and new materials. As one administration gives way to another, as one fad gives way to another, in response to carrots and sticks, schools adopt new, different, and costly programs—programs to improve instruction in reading, math, and science; in-class and afterschool programs to meet the needs of special children, such as gifted students, students with learning disabilities, non-English speakers, and children who simply fail; and programs to address special interests, such as school violence, bullying, character education, sex education, or multicultural education. Programs, programs, and more programs, all designed to solve one or more problems.

Implementing these constantly changing strategies requires substantial investment in professional development. In 1995, a Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) policy brief indicated that most states and districts had no idea what they were actually spending for professional development but estimated that state investments alone probably ranged from less than 1% to more than 3% of total state spending on public education (Corcoran, 1995). In 1993 alone, the federal government spent more than $615 million on teacher development programs in only one programmatic area: math, science, and technology. Information on total expenditures is not available, but it is clear that reform has attracted extensive resources. Cost aside, what benefits have we reaped? The answer to that question is obviously not a simple one, but costs seem to exceed benefits. In some cases, reform efforts have led to actual change. Recent research on comprehensive school reform, for example, shows that consistent, focused, research-based, and integrated schoolwide efforts that engage staff in collaborative efforts to examine and address educational problems have led to observable improvements in student achievement (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Murphy & Datnow, 2003a, 2003b). With few exceptions, however, little has changed.

As Tyack and Cuban (1995) explained, "For over a century, ambitious reformers have promised to create sleek, efficient school machines 'light years' ahead of the fusty schools of their times. But in practice their reforms have often resembled shooting stars that spurted across the pedagogical heavens, leaving a meteoric trail in the media but burning up and disappearing in the everyday atmosphere of the schools" (p. 111). Despite devoting extensive fiscal and human resources to reform, and despite good intentions and sound ideas in general, the way that schools are organized and the way that teachers teach has not changed in important ways.

From a researcher's perspective, the more things change, the more they stay the same (Sarason 1971, 1990). From the perspective of an enlightened teacher commenting on the teaching practices in her own school, "you'd think it was 1950." Despite the intensive and continuous involvement in change, how schools are organized, how teachers teach, and how children learn in the majority of our schools is very similar to the way we did things in the 1950s or even in the 1920s. Students are organized in age-graded, daylong classes and presented with lockstep curricula (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Many classrooms are still teacher directed rather than student centered; our emphasis is still on information transmission and recall rather than the development of critical analytic skills. In classrooms, students spend little time actually reading and writing, discussing what they read, thinking about issues with elusive answers, or working in independent activities or group projects (Cuban, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Newmann, 1992). The advent of standards-based education and the emphasis on accountability through frequent mandated and publicly compared testing, in some cases, seems to have reinforced enduring practice and widened the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Critiques of high-stakes testing, for example, note negative effects on teacher creativity and the richness of the curriculum, as teachers and students devote even more time to test preparation. Of even greater concern is the disproportionate rate of failure and dropout of students from low socioeconomic and minority backgrounds, and some argue that attention to the test distracts us from deep discussions of problems confronting children who live in poverty (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Fullan, 1999; McNeil, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Little has changed in the classroom, and little has changed in the ways that schools are organized and operated. Despite decades of calls for restructuring, site-based management, shared decision making, and the development of professional communities, many schools retain traditional bureaucratic practice. For many teachers, working conditions are still characterized by overload, isolation, exclusion from decisions about their work, and a lack of meaningful professional development opportunities (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Ingersoll, 2003). Efforts to reform education by changing the way that teachers relate to students and to each other through structural changes—in schedule, student groupings, and teacher groupings—have also encountered resistance. Changes are difficult to make and difficult if not impossible to sustain, particularly at the secondary level. More important, even when structural changes are introduced, the anticipated changes in teaching and learning do not materialize. While "standard ways of organizing schools may limit teaching practice and undermine good teaching," we "have so little

evidence that changes in organization lead directly to changes in teaching and practice, and ultimately to changes in student learning" (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996, pp. 213-214).

Professional development, too, has had little effect on teaching practices (Little, 2001). While some reform strategies may be ineffective or counterproductive, many of the reform proposals introduced are based on sound research, often drawn from the experience of exceptionally successful schools and classrooms. Despite the quality of the program or proposal, despite the commitment to the goal or the enthusiasm for the particular strategy, efforts to enact even the best-conceived proposals are frequently unsuccessful. Changes are not implemented as designed and intended, or changes are implemented but, over time, cannot be sustained. As Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan (1996) explained, while "the surface and style of schooling may have changed," the deep structures "have been reproduced from generation to generation" (p. 2).

Why have these reform efforts failed to achieve their objectives? There are a number of factors that affect the efficacy of change initiatives. Basically, this approach to change is symptomatic rather than systemic and externally imposed rather than internally designed. It's a piecemeal, patch-up approach that works around and essentially ignores basic structural flaws. While the problems are complex, the solutions are frequently quick fixes that are universally applied, regardless of the specific features of the organizational, social, or cultural context. Solutions are developed and imposed—on districts, administrators, and teachers—without the input or involvement of those who must implement them. Without commitment to change, new ideas—like new materials—will be shelved sooner or later as educators get back to business.

Even when professionals are involved and committed, translating new ideas into practice is a complex process and a goal that has largely eluded professional development efforts. From the perspective of critics, professional development efforts are frequently "limited and misguided" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 16) and ignore important principles of learning. Different staff development initiatives are often unrelated to one another or to teachers' problems or concerns. As educators are bombarded with one new "solution" after another, this fragmented approach actually mitigates against sustained change.

Further, and most important, professional development assumes a mechanistic approach to change—that simply presenting new ideas or strategies leads to changes in practice. Elmore et al. (1996) examined three schools deeply invested in reform, and all three "looked like models of enlightened practice" (p. 222). The schools provided a supportive collegial environment and actively involved teachers in change decisions. Teachers held high standards for children's learning and believed all

children could learn. They were committed to student-centered learning and worked hard to introduce new practices into their work. When the researchers evaluated the process, however, they found that, despite enthusiasm and effort, the majority of the teachers were unsuccessful in implementing changes. There was a major discrepancy between what they said they wanted to do and what they accomplished. The researchers concluded that accomplishments were limited because teachers lacked a deep understanding of what they were doing and because professional development did not provide ample time for them to explore their assumptions and beliefs about their work. "The assumption was that if the teachers had access to good ideas, they would know how to put them into practice" (p. 231). While incorporating many valuable change principles, this effort, like many others, ignored the fact that behavior—and teaching—is a complex phenomenon, reflecting ideas, experience, and judgment within a social context.

> How teachers teach at any given time is a composite of how they taught in the past, how they think they ought to be teaching in the present, and how they reconcile the latter with the former. Teachers are not ciphers for their organizations; they do not simply and immediately translate the prevailing ideas about teaching practice in their schools into some new form of teaching. Teachers are active decision makers who are constrained in their capacities to act on new ideas by their past practice, by their judgments about what is worth doing, and by deeply rooted habits that are often at odds with their own espoused views of what they ought to do. (Elmore et al., 1996, pp. 238-239)

Further complicating reform is a sense of powerlessness among many educators. Paradoxically, educators are involved in an almost continuous process of change, yet are cynical about the value of new mandates and prospects of change. Organizations consist of people, ostensibly working together toward a common purpose. Yet individuals get lost in the shadow of the system. We understand organizations as highly rational, impersonal, and mechanistic systems (Weber, 1947). Rules and regulations rigidly determine behavior, and decisions are typically made by someone higher up. These bureaucratic procedures preclude individuals from becoming actively and wholeheartedly engaged in the search for truly effective change. In this impersonal context, individuals are submerged, invisible, and seemingly powerless, and the system takes on a life of its own.

Within the system, change consists mainly of mechanistic approaches—hiring outsiders to fix this and that or add a bit of something

here or there. Educators are told how to implement somebody else's solution but are seldom involved in identifying the problem or developing the response. In fact, many of the solutions seem designed to fix the educators themselves. In the face of continuously changing and externally mandated changes that fail to change educational practice in important ways, many educators become passive, thinking, "You can't beat the system."

The most recent innovation soon gives way to the next, and educators comply, sometimes wholeheartedly, sometimes begrudgingly, knowing that the tide will soon turn—or return—to another miracle cure. They hunker down and reassure themselves that this, too, shall pass (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As seasoned educators know, what goes around often comes around again. While whole language temporarily captivated the educational community, phonics is once again in vogue, with the assistance of federally supported research and new federal mandates (Taylor, 1998). Ditto sheets displaced by math manipulatives soon regained cache as part of the back to basics movement. Efforts to introduce authentic assessment are overshadowed by increasing accountability demands that require paper-and-pencil tests easily administered on a mass scale. Despite almost continuous change, little changes. "The more things change, the more they stay the same" is both an accurate descriptor and a self-defeating prophecy.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO SCHOOL REFORM

Reflective practice offers a more optimistic perspective on school reform: Meaningful change is possible. It also offers a very different road map, one based on a very different set of assumptions about personal and organizational change.

For Schools to Change, Educators Have to Change

Whether schools are effective in facilitating student learning is the result of the efforts of all those involved in the learning effort: teachers, administrators, guidance personnel, custodians, secretaries, the students themselves, parents, and community groups. The actions they take, individually and collectively, determine whether children succeed. School improvement, then, requires a change in actions. Although organizations certainly exert powerful influences on the people who inhabit them, organizations are human creations guided by human intentions and decisions (Greenfield, 1986, 1991), and individuals have the potential to shape organizations to their purposes.

Change Requires More Than Good Intentions

Reflective practice takes an optimistic perspective: Real change is possible. At the same time, it recognizes the seemingly intractable nature of organizational and personal behavior. Despite what we know about "good" practice, these "behavioral regularities" (Sarason, 1971, 1990) are tenacious. Even though our conscious ideas—about teaching, about administration, about our relationships with parents and community—change, we continue to behave in the same old ways. Despite a stock of new knowledge and our best intentions, we tend to resist change and to behave in very predictable ways. Despite the substantial body of research demonstrating the superiority of heterogeneous over homogeneous grouping, schools still track students and assign children to different ability groups for instruction. Despite a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative decision making, many administrators resist involving staff and parents in meaningful ways. Despite considerable evidence of the failure of fix-it model change efforts, we continue to prescribe one fix after another. It is the aggregation of these behavioral patterns that constitutes the organizational status quo. Organizations won't change until these patterns are interrupted. Yet, as we have seen, introducing new instructional or leadership patterns is difficult, even when we recognize the impotency of old approaches and accept the need for change. So how do we understand this we-believe-in-it-but-can't-seem-to-do-it phenomenon?

New Approaches Require New Ways of Thinking

Many of our previous reform efforts were based on an assumption that structures shape people's actions. To a certain extent they do. Nonetheless, research and experience on the effectiveness of structural reforms basically show that few of these efforts in school reorganization led to meaningful change in how teachers teach or how students learn (Elmore et al., 1996). The consensus is that real change depends on a change in ideas and beliefs. Unless educators examine and modify their mental models, there will be no important changes in behavior. Quoting Tyack and Cuban (1995), "better schooling will result in the future—as it has in the past and does now—chiefly from the steady, reflective efforts of the practitioners who work in schools" (p. 135).

Reflective practice, as a learning model, emphasizes the importance of cognition, maintaining that thought influences action. In essence, personal action theories, our ideas about the world, govern our behaviors—the decisions we make, the actions we take. Typically, *theory* connotes

abstract ideas about issues detached from the world of practice. In reflective practice, however, theories are linked closely with daily experience. They are simply the assumptions and beliefs we hold about how things should and do work (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Everyone has action theories: Teachers have theories about discipline and instruction, administrators have theories about leadership and supervision, parents have theories about child rearing and discipline, and change agents have theories about facilitating change. Some action theories are stated in formal language; others appear in aphorisms: for example, "spare the rod and spoil the child" and "learning should be fun." In reflective practice, however, two distinct types of personal action theories are key to understanding behavioral stability and change: espoused theories and theories-in-use.

Espoused Theories

Of the two forms, espoused theories are easier to understand. They are simply what we are able to say we think and believe. Espoused theories have two distinct characteristics: They exist at a conscious level, and they change with relative ease in response to new information. Individuals often emerge from professional development and university courses able to articulate new ideas and goals. Their espoused theories have changed. And since espoused theories reflect conscious ideas, intentions, and beliefs, if we want to know what they are, we simply ask. Responses to questions likely indicate an individual's broad range of information and beliefs acquired through experience and formal education.

Traditional models of education generally presume that espoused theories guide our actions, but this is often not the case. To illustrate, consider professional development. While attending a course or workshop, we encounter exciting new ideas that we may be eager to try. Despite good intentions, however, we return to the office or classroom, find ourselves bombarded by the usual demands, and, lacking support or sufficient experience to introduce the new strategies with ease, our practice remains unchanged. The more things change . . .

While it is relatively easy to develop new ways of thinking, these new ideas often remain distanced from and independent of our practice. While our espoused theories may change, these changes will not necessarily lead to changes in behavior, and our behavior is not always consistent with our espoused theory. We do not always practice what we preach. While knowing the research on constructivist teaching, we put aside project-based activities to cover the material. While talking collaboration, we retain decision control and reward compliance.

Theories-in-Use

If espoused theories don't directly influence behavior, what does? As Figure 1.1 illustrates, it is theories-in-use that directly, persistently, and consistently influence behavior. In much the same way that genetic code influences our physiological development, these theories are the ideas that actually guide our behavior. Consisting of beliefs and assumptions, the theories-in-use are our mental models. Consisting of tacit knowledge, they account for the apparent resistance to change in professional and organizational behavior (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2000; Sergiovanni, 1991, 1992).

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 of our behaviors or the assumptions behind them. In 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.

Language acquisition illustrates the nature of theories-in-use. We learn a native tongue through immersion, that is, acculturation. Through listening, imitating, practicing, and receiving feedback from others, we acquire a very complex set of beliefs and knowledge, or a theory-in-use for language. The knowledge component includes grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. We also learn how to make meaning, not only from words and structure but also from vocal and facial nuance, tone, volume, and other factors. By age five years—no matter what our culture or language—we possess a very complex language theory-in-use that enables and governs verbal communication. But, while the five-year-old can use the language adeptly, he or she will be unable to explain the grammar and syntax. It is apparent that the child knows the rules governing the language but can't explain them. Being able to demonstrate but not describe is what Schon (1983) describes as knowing-in-action.

In the same way that we learn language, we also learn rules governing how things work and how we should behave in different situations and in different roles. A clear example of the force of cultural influence in creating habitual behavior is the schooling process itself. Educators are perhaps the most thoroughly socialized of all professional groups. Some

Figure 1.1 Reflective Practice: A Conceptual Framework
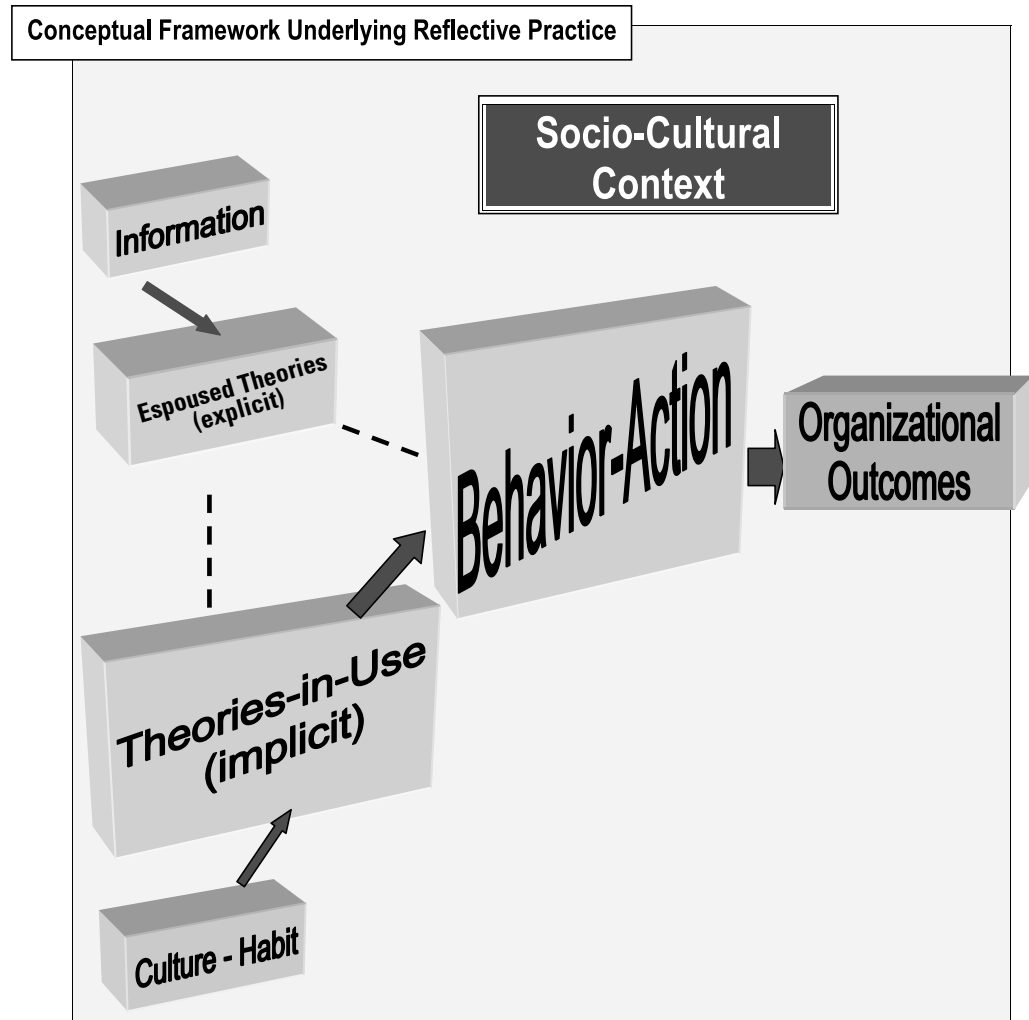
begin their experience with school culture in infant day care. Others begin in nursery school or kindergarten and may continue, as a learner or professional, until retirement and beyond. Through this lengthy and relatively consistent experience, complex sets of knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors are ingrained in us so deeply that we are no longer aware of them, yet they guide even minute details of our daily work.

Because of this deep acculturation, we act in very consistent and predictable ways, but we may be unaware of what we do or why. Margaret

Mead commented if fish were learning about their culture, the last thing they'd discover is water. Like that water, these theories-in-use disappear from our conscious foreground and become background, but they continue to influence every aspect of our behavior.

At the same time, through careful observation, we can identify these behavioral regularities and detect the assumptions that lie beneath them. For example, when children play school, the youthful teacher, through tone, words, and actions, demonstrates a clear understanding of teachers' thoughts and actions. If we analyze the child's behavior, we often find an amazing correspondence between underlying assumptions and Dewey's (1938a) description of schooling: The chief business of school is to transmit bodies of information and skills worked out in the past to the new generation. Accordingly, learning is largely the acquisition of what is already incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders. Toward this end, teachers are agents for communicating knowledge and skills, and "since the subject matter is handed down . . . the attitude of 'pupils' must . . . be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience" (p. 18). The child exhibits the same teacher-centered approach to instruction that predominated in 1890 and is still dominant in the beginning of the twenty-first century (Cuban, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As we explain in more detail in Chapter 4, there are also predominant theories about leadership that shape organizational behavior in very predictable ways, and these ways of thinking and acting are communicated formally and informally to new recruits as a means to ensure continuity and stability (Fishbein, 2000; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991).

Theories-in-use are functional because they reduce the complexity of decision making, yet they also maintain the status quo and prevent change. Every day, we confront a myriad of tasks. Like an autopilot, these assumptions or mental models and their related internal rules guide us as we deal with routine and more complicated tasks. However, our theories-in-use can also be dysfunctional as they direct us to act in similar ways, even when those actions may be ineffective or counterproductive. Our theories-in-use keep us lecturing to students, teaching math in the same way regardless of new methods and materials, and acting in non-collaborative ways as group leaders. Quite clearly, we learn to do things the way they are usually done. But, unfortunately, the way they have always been done is not necessarily the best way or the way we might choose if we really thought about it.

The key to change, then, is identification and assessment of these theories-in-use or mental models. Because these beliefs and assumptions are so ingrained, they are difficult to identify, but, by carefully examining behavior, it is possible to develop a profile of these action theories. By

observing how teachers teach and how administrators enact their roles, for example, we can come to a deeper understanding of why they do what they do.

If the goal of professional development is improved practice, success can be achieved only by modifying existing theories-in-use. This is the goal of reflective practice and what differentiates it from other change strategies: It aims to achieve deep and meaningful change by uncovering, exploring, and eventually modifying these basic assumptions that lead us to act in predictable, but often ineffective, ways.

Double-Loop Learning

Reflective practice, then, is designed to facilitate identification, examination, and modification of the theories-in-use that shape behavior. Using terms drawn from organizational literature, we are seeking to create second-order changes (Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 1991) through double-loop learning (Agyris & Schon, 1974). In our traditional approach to reform, we introduce changes in procedures but fail to examine—and change— underlying beliefs. While some changes may lead to temporary improvement, these first-order changes have no effect on basic organizational processes, including the way people perform their roles. Second-order changes, in contrast, "seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures, and roles" (Fullan, 1991, p. 29).

To create fundamental change requires changes in the underlying theories-in-use, or what Argyris and Schon (1974) described as double-loop learning. In this form of learning, change in action is accompanied by change in these underlying assumptions and beliefs. The traditional approach to problem solving follows a rational decision model: a problem is observed, alternatives are generated and considered, a decision is made, and the change is implemented. This analytic process Argyris and Schon (1974) characterized as single-loop learning. Although new strategies may provide symptomatic relief, because assumptions and basic organizational processes remain unexamined and unchanged, the changes are likely to be short lived. Single-loop learning leads to first-order, typically transitory changes.

Double-loop learning begins at the same place, with an observed problem, but it goes further. Instead of simply asking "What next?" double-loop learning involves two additional questions: "What are we doing now?" and, most crucial, "Why?" In double-loop learning, we personalize the problem. We attempt to develop a more objective perspective on our behavior and consider not only what we do but also the way in which personal or organizational behavior (or both) contributes to the problem.

We then begin to develop an understanding of why we act as we do. In this critical process (reflective practice) the taken-for-granted and often unspoken assumptions not only become explicit but also often give way to a new and different perspective. Popular organizational literature refers to new paradigms or metanoia, a shift of mind (Senge, 1990). This new set of ideas, beliefs, orientation, or perspective, the new theory-in-use, leads to an often-radical transformation in behavior. Double-loop learning leads to second-order changes; reflective practice facilitates double-loop learning.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While reflective practice shares a common goal of improved practice with other more traditional approaches to professional development, its approach is noticeably different. In traditional professional development, for example, there is an assumption that changes come about through access to new information. Reflective practice, in contrast, views professional development as a more complex process that requires change in deeply held action theories. To confront this task, reflective practice is grounded in constructivist learning theory. These assumptions and related practices sharply differentiate it from more traditional approaches to professional development, as we show in the following illustrations.

If we observed a typical professional development session in a university classroom, a school district, a teacher center, or a corporate headquarters, we might see this scene: The instructor, often an outside expert, is clearly identifiable and occupies a central position at the front of the room, accompanied by handouts and visual aids. The presentation usually focuses on a single concept, program, or model that—if implemented—will lead to positive change. Although some are longer, many of these offerings run from a few hours to a day. The instructor has a carefully outlined plan intended to convey information. Although the learners may have an opportunity to ask questions and experiment with new skills, for the most part they sit facing the instructor and listening. Questions tend to be infrequent, and presentations are seldom interrupted. Although ostensibly geared to "success" in the professional context, professional education consists primarily of transmission of knowledge. Knowledge is the province of outside experts, and learners have access to it through the instructor. The instructor's role is to convey that information in a clear and concise manner; the learner's role is to absorb it.

While reflective practice may occur in a classroom setting, it is an approach to professional development that can and should be integrated

into educational practice. In a postobservation conference, an administrative supervisor or peer mentor uses data to facilitate reflective practice. Elementary students in a circle of friends use reflective practice as they consider their own role in shaping a supportive school community. A teacher engages in reflective practice while preparing her portfolio to apply for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. An action research project or a disaggregated analysis of student test scores may be the entree to reflective practice for teachers and administrators. In some schools, reflective practice is the standard operating procedure as administrators and teachers regularly critique their own practice, whether in staff meetings or in the lunchroom. At its best, reflective practice is not a separate activity but a way of doing business that broadens the notion of professional development and takes it into the mainstream of organizational life.

From these brief descriptions, we see distinctive differences between these two learning models. In the following section, we extend this analysis, discussing how its purpose, assumptions, and strategies distinguish reflective practice from other forms of professional development.

Purpose

The ultimate purpose in the traditional model may be improved performance, but, as illustrated in Figure 1.2, the directly observable purpose is knowledge acquisition. The instructor spends most of the available time in these sessions transmitting information to generally passive recipients and testing the acquisition of that information. In reflective practice, the learning goal is not merely acquiring knowledge but creating and applying knowledge in effective and appropriate ways. Specifically, the purpose of reflective practice is the improvement of professional practice through behavioral change.

Assumptions About Learning and Behavioral Change

The traditional model reflects an assumption that knowledge acquisition leads to behavioral change. It focuses exclusively on changing espoused theory based on an assumption that when espousals change behavior will also change. This is a very simple but widely held theory of behavioral change, tenaciously held in both general education and professional development. In reality, there is little evidence that it leads to significant, lasting change in professional practice (Bredeson, 1999; Firestone & Corbett, 1988; Sarason, 1971, 1990).

Figure 1.2   Contrasting Approaches to Professional Development
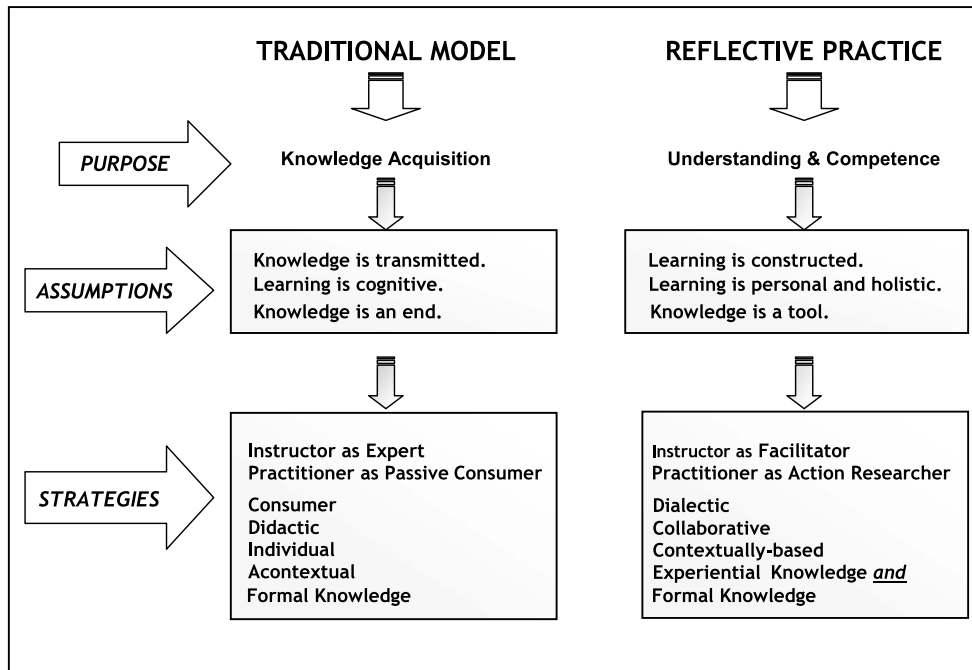
In contrast, reflective practice seeks to identify, assess, and change the underlying beliefs and assumptions, the theories-in-use, which directly influence actions. While espoused theories play an important role in learning, behavioral change depends on change in these deeply internalized ideas. To confront this task, reflective practice adopts a very different set of strategies incorporating key principles drawn from constructivism, experiential learning, and situated cognition (Osterman, 1990, 1999):

- 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.

As the following discussion illustrates, the application of these principles clearly differentiates reflective practice from traditional approaches to professional development.

Learning Strategies

Engaging the Learner

Reflective practice adopts several strategies to engage the learner. Since learning begins with a personal desire to learn, reflective practice begins with problematic experience drawn from personal professional experience. Awareness of a problem, a discrepancy between a goal, or preferred situation, and the current reality, creates a need to know, or the motivation to learn. Consequently, as detailed in Chapter 2, reflective practice often begins with the articulation of the professional platform or goal statement as well as an identification of troublesome problems of practice. The question confronting the reflective practitioner is a personal one: What is my role in this situation, and what can I do to make a difference?

While reflective practice begins with a question or a problem, traditional professional development usually begins with a solution, typically one that is drawn either from the formal knowledge base or from expert experience. In the traditional model, the instructor assumes the dominant role. Whether university professors, consultants, or other external experts, instructors control the nature and direction of the learning process, establishing expectations and providing expertise. In Dewey's (1938a) words, they "start with knowledge already organized and proceed to ladle it out in doses" (p. 82). In contrast, the learner adopts a subordinate and passive role as a consumer of knowledge, complying with expectations and comprehending (or ignoring) what is offered.

In reflective practice, teacher and student roles change. The learner is active, establishing the agenda and guiding the search for solutions. "The practitioner becomes a researcher . . . and engages in a continuing process of self-education" (Schon, 1983, p. 299). Similarly, the instructor's role shifts from expert to facilitator. The main task is no longer to provide answers but to raise questions and guide personal inquiry and professional growth, providing support and resources. Reflective practice is a collaborative search for answers rather than an effort to teach a predetermined response to a problem.

Exploring Personal Beliefs, Knowledge, and Experience

Reflective practice, like constructivism, maintains that ideas influence action and that learning builds on prior experiences and knowledge. Accordingly, an understanding of experience is a basis for development. Since so much of our thinking and related action occurs at a subconscious level, reflective practice begins by scrutinizing experience to gain deeper understanding of practice and personal action theories. Essentially, reflective practice is a critical assessment of personal and organizational practice relative to personal, organizational, and social values and goals. It requires an examination of our behavior and its consequences. To understand behavior, we focus not simply on observable actions and outcomes but also on the unobservable—our thoughts and intentions, our feelings, and the feelings of others.

Reflective practice is also grounded in a sociocognitive understanding of behavior, namely, that the social context affects emotion and behavior. While we may begin with the current situation, the inquiry may also explore prior experience in the family, community, schools, and workplace. This contextual analysis may help to identify important conditions influencing our behavior. It may also help to identify contextual constraints or supports for change. The ultimate objective is to identify key leverage points to facilitate change (Senge, 1990).

The preliminary stages of the learning process, then, require careful observation of many dimensions of practice before new learning can take place. It is through careful examination of our own work that we begin to identify areas for improvement and opportunities for change. Through this examination, we develop a conscious awareness of our behavior. We begin to understand more clearly what we do, the consequences of our actions, and the ideas that shape our action. Awareness is the basis for change, yet this important step is often omitted in traditional professional development.

Constructing Learning: Reconceptualization and Experimentation

In reflective practice, the definitive test of learning is competent performance, enacting new and more efficacious strategies. Toward this goal, reconceptualization is an essential step and a distinguishing feature of reflective practice. To be enduring, changes in practice must be accompanied by changes in thought. Attention to reconceptualization and experimentation represents integration of theory and practice. Too frequently, professional development efforts fall on either end of the continuum: Theory is isolated from practice or practice is unconnected to theory.

Administrative preparation programs, for example, have been soundly criticized for concentrating exclusively on theory unrelated to practice. Conversely, criticism is just as intense with respect to programs relying exclusively on war stories devoid of a relevant conceptual framework. Reflective practice takes a middle ground and recognizes the interdependent and integral nature of theory and practice. Since ideas affect our behavior, it is important that we know not only what to do but why.

Reconceptualization is important. It is equally important to test new ways of thinking. Through analysis, the learner develops new ideas about what needs to be done and why, but, given the intractability of the theory-in-use, learning is not yet complete. The challenge remains to directly confront the former theory-in-use and introduce behavioral strategies consistent with the new espousal. Experimentation tests the feasibility of the new ideas in action; it also develops new competencies. Success confirms and reinforces change. Failure, in a supportive learning environment, becomes an opportunity for reassessment with encouragement for renewed effort.

Information

Like Dewey, Schon (1983) recognized that professional development relied almost exclusively on information drawn from the formal knowledge base, ignoring and even denigrating experiential knowledge. Too often, the focus of traditional professional development is detached from the real concerns of educators and fails to build on their experience and knowledge, relying instead on externally generated information. Consisting of ideas, information, skills, perspectives, facts, or ways of knowing, this "specialized, firmly bounded, scientific, and standardized" knowledge (Schon, 1983, p. 23) is assumed to be truth and can then be given to others (Berlak & Berlak, 1981). In the traditional model of professional development, the formal knowledge base is both the beginning and end of the process. Consequently, Schon's model of reflective practice shifted attention back to the practitioner and assigned a conspicuous, explicit, and central role to experiential knowledge. If learning is constructed, it is essential to establish and examine prior knowledge. In addition, the knowledge gained from personal experience can provide valuable insight in the search for improved understanding and better solutions.

At the same time, however, formal knowledge plays an important, if different, role in reflective practice, serving as a tool to support inquiry and learning. The goal of the educator is not simply to absorb externally developed information but to use knowledge to develop understanding and competence. Educational research has changed dramatically in the

last twenty years, with far more school- and classroom-based inquiry and attention to important problems of practice. Much of this work is very relevant to educators and may be useful to identify areas of inquiry, to challenge prior assumptions, or to provide a critical perspective on professional practice. When educators realize that previous beliefs and strategies no longer provide meaningful explanations or generate predictable outcomes, formal knowledge may be a source of new ideas to enrich and expand their conceptual and strategic repertoire. By emphasizing both forms of knowledge, reflective practice expands the types and sources of information available to support professional growth (Hart, 1990).

Dialogue and Collaboration

Because behavior is so habitual, we often lack a full awareness of its many dimensions. For this reason, dialogue and collaboration are critical for reflective practice and learning. Traditional models of education frequently rely on didactic instruction. Reflective practice, in contrast, relies more on dialectic learning, involving dialogue, discussion, and a critical, open analysis of competing ideas. Dialogue and discussion enhance the learning process. As learners ask questions, challenge ideas, and process learning verbally, they clarify their thinking and deepen understanding. They learn more. Dialogue is even more valuable when it incorporates intellectual conflict (Fullan, 1999). Contrasting, opposing ideas or alternate explanations stimulate engagement and further challenge learners to assess and refine their thinking.

Collaboration, too, is an important aspect of reflective practice. The reflective practitioners—and facilitator—are united by a common concern and share responsibility for their professional growth, each bringing knowledge and expertise to the situation. Sharing insights and observations facilitates learning (Fullan, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The emotional support from colleagues as professionals identify, analyze, and resolve problems also helps to motivate and sustain commitment throughout the difficult change process (Fullan, 1999).

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: CREATING A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

Research and experience demonstrate that solutions are not necessarily interchangeable. What works in one situation may not be successful in another. Reflective practice addresses this by exploring problems in context. Professionals who engage in reflective practice work on issues

relevant to them in the settings where they work. At the same time, context also affects individuals' ability to engage in reflective practice and implement change.

Reflective practice is a professional development strategy; it is also a problem-solving strategy. It is about individuals working with others to critically examine their own practice to resolve important problems. To engage in reflective practice requires an environment of support. It requires an organizational climate that encourages open communication, critical dialogue, risk taking, and collaboration.

As we explain in Chapter 4, many organizations adopt bureaucratic procedures that restrict and tightly regulate communication. Problems are hidden, and changes come in the form of directives, developed by upper echelons of the hierarchy. Bosses make the decisions; workers implement them. Everyone knows his or her place, and people are expected to mind their own business, often ignoring blatant problems. In such an environment, reflective practice is difficult but still possible. At a minimum, reflective practice requires a sense of security. Individuals must be assured they may speak freely, without fear of retribution. In addition, they need organizational support: time to work with others and encouragement to assume the difficult work of change. A school leader, in whatever role, can create the conditions necessary to support reflective practice, if only on a small scale. The experience with reflective practice can be important in challenging existing norms, breaking down boundaries, and creating a more positive culture.

In contrast, there are other organizations where hierarchy, depersonalization, and standardization play little part. These organic structures are characterized instead by flexible working arrangements, shared responsibility for decision making, and open communication (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1983). Rules are flexible and worked out to meet the needs of workers and clients. Responsibility and authority are widely shared. Members take initiative to resolve problems and introduce improvement, often going beyond the boundaries of their roles. Organizations like these empower people and enhance individual and organizational effectiveness by distributing leadership.[1] In these organic systems, the focus is on the goal and the goal is consistently defined as student learning. Accordingly, people work together to examine, assess, and revise their individual and collective practice to better achieve this goal. These organizations, "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together," are "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990, p. 3). These communities of

professional practice are organizations where reflective practice thrives as an integral part of the culture.

Our goal is to create learning organizations. While organizations certainly exert powerful influences on the people who inhabit them, they remain human creations guided by human intentions and decisions (Greenfield, 1986, 1991), and individuals have the potential to shape them to their purposes. While not the norm, outstanding schools frequently operate like this (Fullan, 1999, 2001; Leithwood, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy & Louis, 1994). Many have developed this culture of reflective practice under the direction of exceptional leaders, transformational leaders, who have both a vision and the skills to enact this vision. Whether intentional or not, this vision incorporates reflective practice. Because we believe that these mental models or action theories are so important in determining how we enact our roles, as we proceed through this book, we continue to discuss not only the strategies involved in reflective practice but also the assumptions, the beliefs—the mind-set—that lead individuals to be reflective practitioners.

In this chapter, we explored the conceptual roots of reflective practice and considered its role in educational reform. Specifically, we proposed that reflective practice is an alternate approach to professional development. Building on constructivist learning principles, this approach facilitates change in ideas and practice. It is an approach to school reform that begins with individual change. While reflective practice is suitable for individuals, it works best as a collaborative process. In effective school organizations—learning organizations—reflective practice thrives as an integral part of the culture. At the same time, reflective practice can help organizations develop the skills and processes needed to become learning organizations. In the next chapter, we develop a more detailed understanding of how reflective practice takes place.

NOTE

1. For additional information about distributed leadership, see Murphy and Datnow (2003a, 2003b), Ogawa and Bossert (1995), and Pounder, Ogawa, and Adams (1995).