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ABSTRACT

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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper offers a traditional but often neglected view of schools as places of work. It argues that schools are best understood as places where people work and face problems similar to those encountered in other work organizations. Good schools are places where the quality and quantity of work is greater and the work is integrated more effectively. Since learning is the joint product of the work of staff and students, increasing learning requires more or better work by one or both groups. This sounds so simple that it is an idea easily and often rejected. Yet it is the central premise of this paper that understanding how more and better work can be done in the schools is essential to successful reform.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

According to economic reports submitted to the President over the past decade, the stagnation in productive growth is a significant and growing problem in this country. In both the public and private sectors, productivity improvement is a major concern. This is a major reason why the management practices of the Japanese and approaches based upon Theory 2 have been in vogue (Ouchi, 1981; Peters and Waterman, 1982).

Many proposals to increase productivity have been suggested: reform government regulatory practices, establish new incentives, provide better job training, support more research and development, use more high technology, and so on. Often absent from these proposals, however, is the important contribution that can be made by re-structuring work situations in ways most likely to motivate employees to become more active participants in problem solving, quality assurance, and resource-saving activities.

In addition to the gains made by implementing suggestions from employees, employee involvement is associated with less absenteeism, reduced turnover, increased organizational loyalty, improved cooperation, better communications, and more effective conflict resolution. Techniques that increase the participation and commitment of employees have been implemented effectively in such diverse settings as Norwegian fisheries, British coal mines, Swedish automobile plants, Japanese electronic firms, American food processing plants, and the Danish postal service. These reforms, though varied in character, are referred to as "quality of work life" improvements (see Cummings & Malloy, 1977; Hackman and Suttle, 1977).

Quality of work life (QWL) is a catch-all phrase. It may refer to an individual's reaction to the work place, i.e., to a general sense of psychological well-being at work. It may also refer to a movement, an ideology, that seeks democratic reforms in the work place. And it is used to refer to specific methods and related projects which seek to change the work place. Used in the latter sense, QWL refers to a variety of techniques for raising productivity and job satisfaction by altering the nature of the work place, increasing the employee's stake in the organization, and/or creating new opportunities for employee participation in decision making. Work improvement programs such as job enrichment, job redesign, participative management, quality circles, autonomous work groups, flex time, profit sharing, and employee representation on boards represent different quality of work life strategies. These reforms have been tried in a wide range of public and private organizations and there are many success stories (Guzzo, 1983; Greiner, Hatry, Koss, Millar, and Woodward, 1981).

Such programs do not offer quick-fix solutions, however. They require time, energy, effort, and, most of all, long-term commitment by management. Some of these efforts have had implementation problems. Some short-run successes have flopped in the long term due to lack of commitment or failure to resolve fundamental issues. Nevertheless, the overall picture remains a promising one -- improving the quality of work life can raise both job satisfaction and productivity.

Quality of Work Life and Productivity

Improvements in the quality of work life and increases in productivity do not necessarily go together, of course. QWL can be improved at the expense of productivity when worker autonomy or social interaction is carried to the point where efficiency is obstructed and costs are raised.

Similarly, productivity can be increased (in the short run, at least) at the expense of QWL. The classic example of this is found in continuous process assembly lines. In the long run, however, job satisfaction and productivity appear to be mutually supportive goals. Indeed, in many organizations productivity increases may be impossible without improvements in QWL. Complex organizations can be successful only if people are committed to the organization and make optimal contributions to its performance. The tasks are too complex and supervision is too difficult to achieve high performance through controlling people's behavior. In such settings, the quality of work life is critical.

Quality of work life is a subtle notion which covers a broad range of topics and activities. However, the pioneering work of Herzberg, et al. (1959) on sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in work; Ford's (1969) studies of the impact of job design at AT&T; the studies of Susman (1976) and others on autonomous work groups; research by Likert (1967) and others on participative management; and countless related studies of work improvement suggest that the following seven factors are significant to QWL:

- o the job is challenging and requires learning
- o individuals have some autonomy to make decisions about their work
- o the individual is part of a work group and feels a sense of belonging or community
- o there are decent physical working conditions
- o the work place is safe and secure
- o there are rewards associated with work -- both intrinsic rewards (recognition, opportunity for growth, a sense of achievement) and extrinsic rewards (pay, status, promotion)
- o individuals are treated with dignity and respect.

The ideas and techniques being tried in QWL experiments are not new. Some have been used successfully in some sites but failed in other sites due to poor implementation. There are no panaceas here; what works in one setting may not work in another. Organizations can achieve high productivity and high QWL with radically different approaches. Yet, there are some concepts and elements commonly found in the successful cases. In different ways, successful organizations have met most or all of the conditions listed above and have made the long-term commitments needed to effectively implement QWL programs.

These businesses and industrial concerns have taken a different tack in attempting to resolve their productivity problems. Instead of focusing on the individual worker and seeking to dictate and control how he or she goes about accomplishing work (like the time and motion studies of an earlier era--or like examining teaching techniques for that matter) these companies have sought to raise the motivation, commitment, and productivity of employees by altering the organization itself and the conditions of work it provides for its employees.

High employee productivity requires the following six conditions to be met in the work place:

- o there are clear goals that are challenging but achievable (McClellan, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell, 1961)
- o adequate resources (tools, time, support, and legitimacy) are available (Stein, 1983)
- o there is motivation to act effectively (Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman, 1959)
- o there is the competence to know how to act effectively (Ibid, 1959)
- o opportunities for high performance are provided and there is feedback on performance (McClellan, 1961)
- o there is good coordination and integration to turn individual efforts into organizational results (Stein, 1983).

The Public Schools as Work places

There is a fair amount of evidence to support the view that the public schools need reform. Despite recent gains, test scores still reveal vast disparities in performance among social and ethnic groups and unfavorable comparisons with both our own past history and the achievements of students in other nations. Only 34% of public high school students were enrolled in academic curricula in 1979 as the proportion of students in academic programs steadily decreased during the past two decades (Coleman, 1980).

America's schools also suffer from employee discontent. Teachers feel their profession is held in low esteem, and that they are underpaid in relation to the significance of their work. Teachers consider the performance of school board members and school administrators to be mediocre (Gallup, 1985). Students preparing to be teachers are among the least able of the young people to be found in our colleges and universities.

As work places, schools differ from the assembly lines at General Motors and from the loan departments at Chase Manhattan Bank, yet all are places where people come together to produce products or deliver services. If we accept the notion that schools, factories, and banks are all places where people work, and that they all are experiencing similar signs of malaise, the search for reform clearly must expand beyond attempts to change the techniques or materials used in the classroom. Wave after wave of new and promising instructional delivery systems have washed over our schools in recent years--instructional television, open classrooms, the "new" math, contract teaching, mini-courses, and, most recently, computer-assisted instruction. These technologies and methods have brought about some change in the way teachers presented information to their students. Undoubtedly, some of these changes have had positive results, but, overall,

student achievement has continued to decline. These technologies, when they were able to be implemented, did not alter the fundamental conditions of the work place, and therefore did not alter the level of effort of staff or students or their productivity.

Recent research on effective schools and classrooms suggests that the problems of schools are perhaps best understood as problems of productivity. Effective schools are similar to all successful organizations. They have strong leadership, sound management, clear goals, efficient allocations of resources, effective use of time, few disruptions or distractions from their instructional mission, high levels of staff commitment, and high levels of cooperation (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Corcoran and Hanson, 1983). They are characterized less by their curricular and instructional approaches than by their characteristics as work places--places where people work toward shared goals, work hard, work together, and feel they can get their work done. This is not to imply that ineffective schools are staffed by lazy or incompetent people, but rather to suggest that some working conditions do not encourage or even permit high levels of productivity.

Conditions in the public schools have been moving away from those associated with high productivity and high job satisfaction:

- goals have become more ambiguous due to the new functions assigned to schools, debates over equity versus excellence, and bureaucratization
- social promotion, poor supervision, and vague standards have undermined the task orientation essential to high levels of performance
- authority and responsibility for many decisions affecting curriculum, instruction, materials, and discipline have become more centralized. District staff and state and federal offices have reduced the influence of teachers and their areas of discretion and contributed to their loss of professional status

- overwhelmed with paper work, discipline problems, and new mandates and feeling a loss of influence over policies and practices, teachers have lost their sense of efficacy, and, as a consequence, an important source of job satisfaction and motivation
- large workloads, declining morale, strained management-labor relations, and the need to pursue second jobs have reduced teacher volunteerism, an essential component of effective communication, cooperation, and positive student-teacher relations in the schools
- teacher participation in decision making has been reduced due to centralization, collective bargaining, autocratic management, and strained management labor relations
- managers have sought to achieve efficiency and effectiveness by tightening controls over teachers with more specific curriculum guidelines, more evaluations, MBOs, and stronger accountability systems.

In sum, these efforts are producing what might be expected--declines in morale, higher levels of employee dissatisfaction, higher rates of absenteeism, higher levels of stress, higher turnover of people able to move into other jobs, and lower levels of effectiveness. The National Educational Association's polls show declining job satisfaction, higher rates of turnover, and growing frustration. Studies have shown that high levels of teacher stress and burn out are real and are directly related to conditions in the schools (Schwartz, Olson, Bennett, and Ginsberg, 1983).

In addition, the media's consistent criticism of education, the attacks on the teaching profession by politicians, the failure of teacher salaries to keep pace with inflation, and the problems of safety and security in the schools are not conditions conducive to high productivity. They are a recipe for decline and failure.

Such conditions do produce union militancy and strikes. However, the gains achieved by collective bargaining in education seldom produce satisfaction for the members because they do not alter management styles, the

work itself, provide for increased responsibility, or create opportunities for recognition or professional growth. Indeed, the conventional industrial model of collective bargaining may further weaken the profession by creating strong antipathy between teachers and administrators and by reducing the influence of individual teachers while strengthening the role of union officials. In conclusion, it seems clear that the public schools are sub-optimal work places and that a significant part of their "effectiveness problem" can be traced to a poor quality of work life and to low productivity.

Perspectives on the Productive School

Changes must be made in schools if they are to become more effective work places. Purkey and Smith note that ". . . there is a remarkable and somewhat disturbing resemblance between the traditional view of schools as serious, work-oriented, and disciplined institutions where students were supposed to learn the 3Rs and the emerging view of modern effective schools" (p. 440, 1983). Similarly, Ravitch (1981) notes that the results of the Coleman study of public and private schools suggest that those who achieve the most are those who work the hardest. And Sara Lightfoot (1983) concludes her charming analysis of six good secondary schools with a discussion of the need for balance between intellectual play and work in schools. Yet her notion of intellectual play is in fact intellectual work performed in an atmosphere where the controls are relaxed and the players or workers have discretion to shape the means of attaining academic excellence.

Three significant studies of schools as work places have been produced by Bruce Joyce (1982), Arthur Wirth (1980, 1983), and Tom Tomlinson (1980). There has been other relevant work done on this subject, but these three studies have been selected for examination for two reasons. First, they offer differing perspectives on schools as work places. Bruce Joyce's work was selected because he deals comprehensively with teachers in the work place and because of his experience and stature in the field. Arthur Wirth views schools as work places and examines them from the perspective of other types of work settings. Tom Tomlinson looks at schools as places where students work. Second, the three studies complement one another. Their analyses and recommendations add up to an almost complete picture of the school and the reforms that are needed to achieve higher productivity. These three studies summarize and interpret a great deal of information essential to understanding the problems of increasing productivity in schools.

Teachers in the Work Place

Bruce Joyce (1982) and others have pointed out that reforms in schools, even carefully-implemented ones, are typically short-lived if they have any life at all. Joyce contends that the inability of schools to institutionalize reforms is due to several forces within schools that resist change. One of these forces stems from the people working in schools trying hard to make their working lives predictable, and resisting change as a threat to that predictability.

Several aspects of the organization of schools also contribute to the difficulty of making changes. Schools are organized into cells run by one person who has complete authority in that cell. An administrator can create a new cell, but has a difficult time inserting change into the

existing cells. Change is difficult to bring about in loosely coupled organizations such as schools. Central authorities often lack the force to support a change and assure that it is carried out. The absence of strong organizational control over resources, personnel, and activities permits individuals to develop and protect considerable autonomy and makes reform difficult.

Joyce makes the point that energy is drained from most organizations, including schools, in simply maintaining the status quo and the comfort of organizational members. He cites the position of principal as an example, pointing out how the job has evolved from head teacher to full-time "maintenance of the logistical functions."

Thus, the forces that resist reform in schools are stronger than the forces for change. Innovative ideas can come from a number of sources: from a group of teachers, from a principal or a superintendent, from federal and state initiatives, or from an outside educational research group or consultant. But in order to be successful, these ideas must gain the support of the teachers, of the administrators, and of the community. Since these groups are seldom unified, it is usually impossible to muster the support needed to implement and institutionalize major changes.

Joyce emphasizes the need to involve teachers in making schools more effective. He suggests four conditions be developed for successful reform to take place. The first he calls Instruction-Related Executive Functions. By this he means that the loosely coupled organization of the school must be replaced by one in which district staff take increased responsibility for the educational program, and for decisions about curriculum and instruction. Second, he says schools must organize into collegial teaching units. This would be administratively more efficient and also help

professional educators change the way they think about their work and about coordinating their work. "Having to work together to make a decision, having to work together to receive instructions, and working together to improve one another's competence will affect the frames of reference with which professionals view their work" (p. 65). Third, Joyce recommends continuous staff development. Teachers must be continuously informed of the findings of educational research and development and be trained to implement them. Finally, he suggests stronger community involvement and more education for parents about education. He proposes involving the community in the organization and revision of curriculum through teacher-community councils.

Schools as Work Places

Arthur Wirth (1980, 1983) compares schools with other organizations. Schools separate what they teach into subjects, Wirth observes, dividing the staff into compartments and the curriculum into isolated bodies of knowledge. Industry does not divide high technology tasks or knowledge in this manner. Technology is changing the work place and jobs are rapidly being refined. What Wirth calls the "new work" no longer depends on an ability to follow specialized sets of prescribed actions from manuals, but upon general ability to understand how systems work and to think flexibly in solving problems.

Wirth underlines other ways in which schools are not organized to prepare students for the new work. The new work will not be based on competitiveness but on cooperation; schools need to reorganize to emphasize cooperation. The new work also will require people to cope with constant technological and social innovation, but schools are not helping students learn to adapt to change.

Wirth points out that schools have adopted the same narrow cost-benefit model of system efficiency used by industry that places an emphasis on short-run productivity and stresses quantity over quality. The effect on schools has been to narrow school life to "mastering" measurable components of instruction (usually the basics) as engineered by outside experts. This emphasis has led to decreased productivity, lack of commitment, alienation, and malaise in schools, problems compounded by the increased difficulty school employees have in advancing in their jobs. When work is performed in bureaucracies such as schools, where hierarchy and internal politics obscure goal attainment, it is difficult to foster trust, cooperation, or risk-taking.

Wirth calls for schools to become more responsive to human needs, suggesting that schools need to provide more elbow room for their staffs, more opportunities for teachers to learn on the job, more help and respect for teachers from peers, and more opportunities for staff to take initiative. He suggests providing more variety in the teaching job and more incentives and opportunities for professional development and advancement.

He points out that schools can learn from industries that are moving toward more humane and democratic systems. Increased worker participation and collective decision making in decentralized school systems would, Wirth argues, help increase school productivity, reduce alienation, help schools cope with reform, and better prepare students for work in industry.

Wirth says school tasks can be structured as production tasks or as research tasks. Production-type teachers present the content of their teaching as individual pieces of knowledge to be learned one at a time. This type of teaching fits with jobs in which persons must follow

instructions. The research-type teachers allow students to learn for themselves through research and discussion using teachers as resources. This, Wirth says, is much more consistent with "new work" in which workers must be able to see the whole picture and to solve problems using specialists as consultants, where appropriate.

Students in the Work Place

Tom Tomlinson (1980) looks at students as workers, focusing particularly on the needs of poor and low ability children. These children often enter school with little understanding of the tasks of learning or of the connection between work and grades. Schools do little to help them see these connections. As a result, many of these students do not develop a sense of control over their learning or experience success in school. They may work with enthusiasm initially, but their work efforts are ineffective and they do not succeed.

Low ability children and those who are not prepared for school demands have to work particularly hard to be successful in school. Efficiency in work is especially useful for these children but schools do not teach these skills, according to Tomlinson. Since poor and minority children are over-represented in the two groups (low ability and/or weak preparation), they are less likely to experience academic success unless they learn how to work effectively in school. He also points out that schools do not provide environments that promote attention to the task of learning; instead they provide many distractions for students. This makes working hard even more difficult, which is particularly disadvantageous for poor and low ability children.

Another roadblock to working hard faced by low ability and unprepared children is a lack of motivation. High ability children, who often have not worked as hard, usually receive most of the rewards, so there is no perceived connection between hard work and rewards for these children. Also, children are less likely to see a relation between school and their futures. This is particularly true, Tomlinson says, of black and minority children. Without this motivation, these children do not work hard and often fail. Schools do little to address this cycle of ineffective work, failure, and declining motivation. Indeed, schools often set more rigid standards and make stronger demands upon the children least prepared for school work.

Tomlinson also makes some recommendations for improving the ways schools meet the needs of low ability and poor children. He suggests that schools directly teach these children how work is related to grades, how to do work and do it more efficiently, and the relation of attention and effort to success. Then if schools would reward students with better grades for mastering these methods as well as for mastering the content, low ability and poor children might experience greater success. Schools must find ways to motivate children by convincing them that school is worthwhile. They must also eliminate all "counter-learning" distractions and work to help students stay on task.

Conclusion

In most discussions of effective schools, there is little attention given to the work that is done there. If work is discussed, it is the work of the staff. Children are notably absent in most of the studies. The notion that children are the primary workers in the schools has been neglected by those who are concerned with service delivery and those who

assume teachers "cause" learning to occur. Similarly, those who focus on teachers often ignore the conditions under which teachers work. If achievement is a consequence of sustained work by staff and students, then the task is to create school cultures and environments supportive of the desired work effort.

Researchers have found that productivity of workers is affected by the characteristics of the work tasks and the work setting. Effective schools are similar in many regards to all productive organizations: they have clear goals, high task orientation, feedback on performance, high levels of employee discretion, adequate resources, and effective leadership. The critical conditions that motivate and satisfy employees are met in effective schools. There is a sense of achievement, there is recognition, the work is not narrowly prescribed, and staff participate in decisions affecting their work. When teachers have such incentives, their productivity increases and student achievement rises.

Many school districts do not provide the conditions necessary for effective instruction. Management is autocratic, teachers are isolated, goals are vague, achievement or effort goes unrecognized, discipline is poorly enforced, absenteeism is high, resources are inadequate, and the problems facing school administrators working to create more effective schools are similar to those confronting business executives seeking higher productivity. There are some obvious differences in the two situations, but there are also significant parallels.

Joyce has made it clear that structural changes in schools are a prerequisite for reform and effectiveness. Wirth underscores the need for schools to prepare students for a society that is changing and for a new kind of work. Schools are not now organized to prepare students for the

emerging economy. Both Joyce and Wirth agree that the educational bureaucracies that operate schools must recognize the needs of the people who work in them and be more supportive of the desired behavior by staff and students. Tomlinson points out ways in which schools must be changed to enhance the work effort and success of low ability and poor students.

Tomlinson also develops and supports the old argument that variation in children's ability and effort explains much of the variation in school performance. The important school characteristics, in his view, are those that shape students' work habits and motivation. Since students attend involuntarily, their willingness to work must be seen as problematic. Students are an unusual work force since their participation is mandatory, their material rewards come long after they lose their student status, and, in a sense, they are their own products. The involuntary nature of this work force creates central problems of motivation for schools.

Increased student learning requires increased work by both students and staff. Productive work requires competence, motivation, opportunity, and resources. And, in an effective school, as in any other organization, the efforts of many workers must be orchestrated into a harmonious whole. This requires leadership, good management, and a good work climate. These are areas of improvement which appear to have high potential for improving the quality of work life in schools, and their productivity, which translates directly into improved student achievement and performance.

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