

Change in Educational Policy and Practice
Through Online Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The internet continues to provide new and interesting solutions to age-old problems; this paper explores how education could benefit from online solutions. The history of public education in the U.S. is fractured at best, based on a system reliant on state and local control. As new legislation came into place to meet the needs of civil rights laws, and equal rights protection, the federal government has become increasingly involved leading to the national legislation “No Child Left Behind.” Despite the increased standards and federal involvement, schools still suffer from a multitude of problems including poor performance on international assessments, achievement gaps between males and females, income groups and ethnic groups, and non-representative leadership in education. Using the theory of Emergence by Margaret Wheatley, I argue that online Communities of Practice can be used to create large-scale, grassroots change in an effort to solve many of our current problems in education.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

It is in the media nearly every day- the state of public education in the United States is in crisis. Racial, gender and class based achievement gaps continue to grow, scores on global exams are consistently near the bottom of the list of comparable countries, high-school dropout rates continue to be high, and on average nearly half of all new teachers leave the profession within their first five years. The research regarding these issues, which will be discussed in more depth later in this paper, all point to the same end: the United States' education system is broken and the same old solutions will no longer work to fix it.

All of these issues are occurring despite some of the highest federal and state spending on education, and the highest "per student" cost in the history of education (Lips & Heritage Foundation, 2008, p. 1). The Federal Government passed the "No Child Left Behind" Act in 2001, in an effort to correct many of the achievement issues in education. What it did was create standards and expectations for achievement for students, teachers and schools, without clear guidelines for how to reach these goals.

The history of public education in the United States is not a nationwide public education system, but controlled by state and local governments, and so any directives from the Federal Government are frequently viewed as intrusive. Unfortunately this creates an atmosphere of heavy-handed, top down initiatives for standards, without input from those individuals who know the needs of education best- the "foot soldiers" of the profession: teachers, principals, parents, school secretaries, teacher preparation professors, tutors, resource specialists, etc.

Communities of Practice are one way for these front line workers to develop connections. When the people "in the trenches" of the field connect they are able to become resources for one

another to create change on a small scale. As small scale change occurs, and individuals continue to connect, eventually small scale change becomes large scale change, and can impact policy on a local, state and ultimately, federal level (Wheatley & Frieze, 2007). If the internet is used to develop communities of practice, in a non-proximate format, time and distance can be eliminated, and connections created where there once was isolation.

A Personal Perfect Storm

My own personal experience is one of emergence, where small convergences of connection and information built up to create “the perfect storm” of education. I was a lucky student; born into a middle-class, white family, in a high-income community with excellent schools. Outside of the access I had, due purely to my socio-economic circumstances, I was also selected as one of four students to be introduced in an intense format to technology. In the fifth grade I, along with one other girl and two boys, was selected to travel to our county office of education and learn a new program which combined “pages” that linked together with animation, graphics and text. Although the internet already existed in 1992, it was not yet in the majority of households, even in my wealthy neighborhood, so this was my first foray into thinking like a web designer. This young experience created those pathways in my brain that helped me understand computers and how they worked. I had continued access in school, ultimately enjoying training in high school for web design.

Fast forward ten years to when I signed up for a class titled “Intercultural Communication” at my local Junior College. I had been exposed throughout my education to intercultural and pluralistic educational practices, but never before had I considered communication as a field of study beyond mass communication. When I transferred to San Francisco State University later that year, I knew that I would major in Speech Communications.

Suddenly I understood that my world was impacted on every level by how people communicate, why they communicate the way that they do, and ultimately I wanted to know how to meet them there. I grounded myself in gender communications and intercultural communications, with the belief that I could make a difference in education (the field I desired to enter) if I could simply develop excellent communication skills.

Fast forward another six years to 2008 when I began taking courses in my Master of Science in Education program. This summer was one of political debates, with the presidential election coming in November, and a study of leadership. Under the direction of Will Fowler I took the focus of leadership to a national level. We evaluated each presidential candidate's educational platform, and how it fit within the systems of education as we understood them. Meanwhile I was asked to participate in a campus-wide political event called the Vote Smart Challenge. We were given the task as a team to represent each presidential candidate's educational platform. It was during these months that I spent time voraciously reading anything I could get my hands on about our federal educational policy. It was becoming more and more clear to me that our problems in education were much larger than I first had realized. With the progress of the national No Child Left Behind legislation, the country appeared to be moving deeper and deeper into an educational hole. It was not until my leadership professor Will Fowler brought Margaret Wheatley and her theory of Emergence to our attention that I was able to climb out of my cynical view that nothing could be done to solve our educational crisis.

Also during 2008 I enjoyed a personal milestone, marrying my partner of 9 years. We planned a wedding in Las Vegas in 3 months, leaving little time for extensive personal research, which was compounded by my own high standards. I needed resources and I needed them fast. This is when I discovered the true usefulness of a website I had been a member of for years, The

Knot. There was a huge community of other brides on this website with recommendations, ideas, and an empathetic ear. I quickly became an active member of this very active community of brides to be, sharing ideas, resources, and acting as a support system for one another during a very stressful life experience.

Shortly after the presidential election, my worlds collided when I had an epiphany. Teachers needed the same sort of resources as brides. They have unique job demands, difficult people to deal with, and limited resources. I had seen several teachers who were also brides utilizing this wedding website for connection, so why could there not be something just for educators? Brides need advice on how to handle their future in laws, while teachers need advice on how to handle difficult parents. Brides need ideas for favors to give and vows to say, teachers need ideas for creative curriculum solutions. Brides are challenged trying to please all of the guests, parents, the groom, and all within the (usually tight) budget. Teachers must please parents, students, principals, superintendents, tax payers, and policy makers, also within a usually tight budget. The connections are virtually endless.

From my technologically geared mind I immediately began to seek out existing tools like this. Although I did find some, nothing quite seemed like a perfect match. More importantly, they seemed like they were not being used by many people. So I began working on the research to support the design and creation of such a tool. Within the limits of my degree program, I accepted early on that actually building this website would not be an option. I moved instead to creating a foundation that would promote the design and use of such a tool based on existing research in education.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to set the stage for why a website like this is needed, and how it could be used to solve much larger problems in education. There is a great deal more research to be done but there is also a clear need for the potential change a website like this could bring. I hope that as our new technologically inclined presidential administration takes the helm of our country, resources like these will be identified, supported, promoted and utilized. I may not be able to create such a website on my own at this point, but I believe there are direct ways that I can incorporate my findings into my current professional role in education, furthering educational leadership through emergence via online communities of practice, which I will discuss later in this paper.

Beginning with a brief history of the federal role in public education in the United States, I will guide you through current issues in education, including the No Child Left Behind legislation, and how online communities of practice can be utilized to create large-scale, systemic change by way of a grassroots theory of change- emergence.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

According to their website, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) was formed in 1867. Its main purpose was to collect data to help states and localities establish effective school systems. In 1890 the (then named) Office of Education, with the passage of the Second Morrill Act, gave support and administration to the land-grant college and university system. With the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act, and the 1946 George-Barden Act, the next responsibility the office took on was to support vocational education, particularly focusing on agricultural, industrial and home economics training for high school students. During World War II direct aid increased with the Lanham Act and Impact Aid laws both giving federal funds directly to school districts in communities serving military populations. The GI Bill was also introduced, giving aid to nearly 8 million World War II veterans allowing them to attend university.

It was during the Cold War that the purpose of the Department of Education really started to shift. In 1958, in response to the Soviet launching of Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The purpose of this legislation was to ensure that there would be highly trained individuals in areas relevant to the Space Race (Science, Math, Foreign Language, etc).

The 1960s and 1970s brought a time of great legislative change in response to the Civil Rights movement and the Anti-Poverty Movement. The laws passed at this time included: Title XI of the Civil Rights Act, Title IV of the Education Amendments, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. All of these laws related to equal access and opportunity regardless of race, sex, and ability.

The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) marked the entry of the federal government into mandating requirements in local public schools. This was a departure

from the concept of education being solely a “states rights” issue. The No Child Left Behind Act served as part of the reauthorization of ESEA in 2001 (US Department of Education, 2009b).

In its 130 year lifespan, the DOE has changed form, function, and even location within the Executive branch of the government. It was in 1980 that the DOE took its current form, when several federal agencies were combined to work together to meet the department’s mission statement. According to their website, the Department of Education’s current mission statement is: “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (US Department of Education, 2009b). This mission statement is fundamental to understanding many of the conversations surrounding education today, as it establishes the United States national education goals. This goal was also clearly established in “A Nation at Risk”, a report developed by the Department of Education in 1983 to evaluate the US public school systems, in its very first paragraph: “Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (Gardner, National Commission on Excellence, in Education, & Others, 1983, p. 5). Global competitiveness is clearly the goal of federal legislators.

CHAPTER 3: CURRENT ISSUES

Failing Schools

It has become "common knowledge" (or belief) that the United States' public schools are failing. Public news sources are constantly reporting how high the high school drop-out rates are, how many children are unable to read at grade-level, and how poorly students score on international exams compared to other developed countries. Every stake holder is blamed by someone for this failure including teachers, administrators, parents, legislators, testing companies, and the students themselves. Instead of looking for someone to blame, it is time to evaluate the issues currently facing the educational system, so that they can be understood, and look for solutions to fix them.

International Assessments

Keeping the United States' national educational mission statement in mind, supporting student achievement towards global competitiveness, it is important to establish how schools compare to other developed countries. The Programme (*sic*) for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a product of the Organisation (*sic*) for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). According to their website, PISA is a standardized assessment given by participating countries to 15 year olds enrolled in the participating countries' schools. In 2006 there were 57 participating countries, and 62 countries are signed up to participate in the 2009 assessment. "PISA assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society. In all cycles, the domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). In

basic terms, PISA assesses mathematical literacy, problem solving, reading literacy, and scientific literacy. On the Science Assessments, the United States was ranked 29th out of 57 participating countries, or 21st out of 30 OECD countries, with an average score of 489, statistically significantly below the average score of 500. On the Mathematics Assessments, the United States was ranked 35th out of 54 participating countries, or 25th out of 30 OECD countries, with an average score of 474, statistically significantly below the average score of 498. Due to an error in the testing booklet, no results were reported for the Reading Assessment for the United States in 2006 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). For a country that is seeking global competitiveness, these scores are less than desirable.

National Assessments

Even on national assessments our students continue to struggle with the most basic skills. According to the “Nation’s Report Card” from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in 2007 33% of fourth graders and 26% of eighth graders performed below the basic skill level in reading (Donahue, Lee, & Grigg, 2007). On NAEP math assessments, 18% of fourth graders and 29% of eighth graders performed below the basic skill level (Lee, Grigg, & Dion, 2007). A score at the basic skill level “denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade” (Donahue et al., 2007, 6). Twelfth graders are not performing any better. Only 35% of all twelfth graders read at or above the proficient level, and only 23% were at or above the proficient level for math (Grigg, Donahue, & Dion, 2007). These students are presumably high school graduates now, entering universities or the work force without the most basic of skills. Beyond the gross data that shows students are still struggling with grade level performance on basic skills such as reading and math, the gaps are even larger when ethnicity, family income and gender are taken into account.

The average reading score for white twelfth grade students was 293 (out of 500), but only 287, 279, 272, and 267 for Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/ Alaska Native, Hispanic, and Black respectively (Grigg et al., 2007). In math, male students are still outperforming female students by an average of 3 points (Grigg et al., 2007). Low income students, based on eligibility for free or reduced price lunches, consistently score an average of 21 points below students not eligible for free or reduced price lunches on math and reading, regardless of grade level (Donahue et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2007).

High school graduation rates point to crisis as well. In 2006 less than 75% of students graduated high school (US Department of Education, 2007). “Among ethnic-minority children, the graduation rate is significantly lower. In 2002, only 56 percent of black and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduated, compared to 78 percent of white students. There is reason to believe that the graduation rates are considerably lower in some of the nation’s largest cities. A 2008 study published by the Education Research Center found that the high school graduation rate was below 50 percent in 17 of the nation’s 50 largest cities. The cities with the lowest graduation rates were Baltimore (35 percent), Cleveland (34 percent), Indianapolis (31 percent), and Detroit (25 percent)” (Lips & Heritage Foundation, 2008, p. 2-3). With so few students actually graduating from high school, and those students that are graduating, barely meeting basic skills, how can the United States expect to be globally competitive?

Responsibility

Frequently teachers and administrators are being blamed for these poor performances. The assumption is that if there are highly qualified teachers in every classroom, then students would be more successful and more likely to complete their education. Unfortunately one more challenge that the United States is facing is turnover and retention of teachers. Current statistics

show that one third of all new teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching. Within five years about half of all new teachers will leave. Teachers leaving the profession exceed those entering by 23 percent (Ingersoll, 2002). With a constant leak of teachers from the profession, eventually a point of crisis will be reached with no teachers left for children at all, let alone highly qualified and experienced teachers who are prepared to deal with students poor performance on basic skills assessments.

US Education System

To truly understand what these facts mean, it is important to understand that the public education system is in fact, not one system. Education is primarily a state and local responsibility.

The most important feature of the education system in the United States is that there is not one. It is much more productive to think of the United States as one might think of Europe, so that there are 51 systems (50 states plus the District of Columbia), and in many respects there are 17,000, since each school district has considerable autonomy in determining school organization, curricula, teachers' pay, and the day-to-day operation of its schools. The largest school district, New York City Public Schools, has over 1 million students – more than many countries – while the Lake Alice School District in Nebraska has just 1 school, 6 teachers and 77 students. (Black & Wiliam, 2005, p. 256)

To date, states maintain control over their school systems, be it at state or local levels. In fact, according to the federal Department of Education, only 9% of K-12 funding for education comes from federal sources. Even when additional funds for early childhood education and post-secondary education (including federal student loans, Pell grants, etc) are factored in the total is still only 12% of total education budgets (US Department of Education, 2009b).

Despite this fact, in recent years a major shift has begun to occur in the form of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. NCLB has created federally mandated standards and assessment requirements, with severe sanctions for those schools, districts and states that choose not to

participate, or fail in their efforts to reach published benchmarks for improvement. This piece of legislation exacerbated the country's high-stakes testing culture, and altered the way it prepares and assesses teachers, creates curriculum and teaches children.

There are other competing interests, however, involved in the fight for education. Spring (2005) identifies these major players in his book "A Conflict of Interests: The Politics of American Education." The interests he identifies are: politicians, administrative politicians, school boards, educationists, teachers unions, corporate sector (including both educationally related companies such as text book publishers and testing agencies, and non-educational companies), foundations, and other special-interests groups (representing religious, racial, and ethnic populations) (p. 33).

Conflicting Ideas about the Purpose of Education

These groups often have extremely conflicting ideas about what the purpose of education is, or how it should be executed. In many ways it is these conflicts of interest that both prevent change and drive change within the system(s). "Conflict is often the dynamic force that drives political systems to seek new solutions. On the other hand, conflict does result in losers and winners. Depending on your own political ideology, you might be pleased or distressed by who wins control of the U.S. educational system" (Spring, 2005, p. 34). Religious groups seek particular moral values in the educational system, politicians and the corporate sector seek global dominance, teachers unions frequently seek the "best" education for all students, while testing companies want to see standardized tests encouraged and utilized. An individual may fit into one, several, or none of these categories and as a result feel that his or her views are being supported or undermined. The unfortunate side effect of these conflicts, as Spring identifies, is

that there will always be losers in the game, and frequently it is the nation's children and future that really lose.

From "A Nation At Risk" to the many conflicts of interest, it is not difficult to see how the United States ended up with legislation like No Child Left Behind. When children cannot read or do math at a basic skill level, parents should have a choice to ensure their child's school can meet these standards. When children are not graduating from high school, someone must be held accountable. When schools continue to ask for more funding to pay teachers and keep services available, there must be proof that there is a return on our federal investment. Or at least that is what No Child Left Behind's stated goals include: standards and accountability for all students, schools and communities.

CHAPTER 4: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Despite the fact that states retain the right to control their own curriculum, and methods of teaching, the federal “No Child Left Behind” Act (a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act- ESEA) has created federally mandated standards, and assessment requirements, with severe sanctions for those schools/districts/states that choose not to participate, or fail in their efforts to reach published benchmarks for improvement. “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) is a huge piece of legislation that covers many aspects of education.

According to the DOE, NCLB is built on “four pillars” which guide the legislation. These four pillars are: Stronger Accountability for Results, More Freedom for States and Communities, Proven Education Methods, and More Choices for Parents (US Department of Education, 2004a).

Stronger Accountability for Results

This section of NCLB requires that states meet minimum standards every year. This is called Adequate Yearly Progress (or AYP). Each year every school must meet a minimum standard on their state exams both in aggregate numbers, and individual standards set for specific groups (English language learners, special needs students, etc) (US Department of Education, 2004a).

Under NCLB, each state has developed and implemented measurements for determining whether its schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) are making adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP is an individual state's measure of progress toward the goal of 100 percent of students achieving state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math. It sets the minimum level of proficiency that the state, its school districts, and schools must achieve each year on annual tests and related academic indicators. Parents whose children are attending Title I

(low-income) schools that do not make AYP over a period of years are given options to transfer their child to another school or obtain free supplemental educational services such as tutoring (US Department of Education, 2009c).

Schools are placed on a 7 year cycle when they do not meet adequate yearly progress which can then lead to school take-over by the state. Each year that schools do not meet AYP, they are given additional sanctions, beginning with offering school choice to families, offering additional services such as tutoring, and requiring the creation of 2-5 year improvement plans. Additional corrective actions are at cost to the school, district, or state, depending on the state.

More Freedom for States and Communities

The additional freedom that NCLB is promoting is essentially financial freedom. This allows states to use their federal funding in more discretionary ways that suit the needs of the community without additional approval. For some schools this may be outside programs, for other schools it may be additional funds for teacher salaries. It also opens doors for faith-based communities to get more deeply involved with education. Faith-based groups are allowed to apply for some federal grants through the DOE, and provide supplemental services to children (US Department of Education, 2004a).

Proven Education Methods

NCLB argues: “Ineffective teaching practices and unproven education theories are among the chief reasons children fall behind and teachers get frustrated” (US Department of Education, 2004b). Based on this argument, NCLB requires that only “scientifically proven” curriculum and methods be used to teach children. An example of this is the adoption of phonics-based lessons to teach reading, and the discarding of whole-language based lessons. Although there is

research to support both of these methods, under NCLB only phonics based methods are identified as “proven methods” and therefore the only acceptable option.

This also establishes a requirement for “highly qualified” teachers in every classroom. The designation “highly qualified” is specific to subject matter competency where a teacher has demonstrated high levels of competency in their subject matter through university level coursework or an exam. If teachers are not deemed “highly qualified” the parents of the students in these classes must be notified immediately. The assumption is that parents then have the choice to move their children out of such classes.

There is a shortage of teachers who would qualify under these new standards, thus putting additional burdens on school districts to locate and hire highly qualified teachers. Alternative teacher certification programs have also been created under this in order to “fast-track” experienced professionals from other fields into teaching (US Department of Education, 2004b).

More Choices for Parents

This pillar establishes the requirement that poorly performing, or unsafe schools, offer choice to their students to attend other schools supported by the same Local Education Agency (LEA). It also establishes the option for charter schools, allowing small like-minded individuals to create a school under a charter with their local district. The charter school receives funding and support comparable to a public school, while being able to function somewhat autonomously similar to a private school (US Department of Education, 2004a).

Federal Policy: Common Sense or Habit

Many of the points covered in NCLB are framed as simply “common sense”. It is “common sense” that standards are needed, which must be assessed, and someone must be

accountable to meet those standards. It is “common sense” that proven methods must be used to educate children. “What we take to be ‘common sense’ is not something that just is; it is something that is developed and learned and perpetuated over time... many aspects of schooling in the United States have become so routine and commonplace that they often go unquestioned....To reform schools in a fundamental way, one first must redefine common sense and reframe how we think about education.” (Kumashiro, 2008, p. 3-5).

It is necessary to truly evaluate how our schools are succeeding or failing and why. It is unrealistic to simply place additional requirements on them without giving them additional support. It will never work for the government to set up a web of standards and requirements and sanctions without setting up the support system needed to ensure success. Although the intention of this legislation was good, the effect is less than desirable. The standards for students and teachers continue to increase, making them more and more difficult to achieve. The emphasis on standardized testing has created a curriculum full of rote memorization, leaving little time for exploration or critical thinking, the effect of which is shown in the United States’ poor performance on the PISA exam. The pressures that teachers feel increase every year contributing further to a hemorrhage out of the profession. A different approach must be taken if large-scale change is to occur in the United States’ educational system.

CHAPTER 5: EMERGENCE AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

US Public Education: Alive or Dead

Public Education in the United States appears to be on a clear path towards its own demise. Policy makers at both the state and federal level continue to seek answers to this crisis by setting standards that they determine are important. Many of these individuals have not stepped foot in a classroom since the time that they were students themselves. Frequently policy makers come from privileged backgrounds, and do not understand the reality schools face today working with disadvantaged students. The individuals that best understand the needs of public education, are the people on the front lines every day. If the “foot soldiers” of education (teachers, tutors, principals, teacher education professors, induction program mentors, etc) were the ones creating policy, it seems much more likely that the real issues of education would be addressed, and creative solutions would be implemented.

Communities of Practice

In order for this work to be recognized, it is imperative that these “foot soldiers” connect, and share their success stories with each other, and others in need of solutions. Communities of Practice are an excellent, mindful way for individuals to become connected. A Community of Practice is “a persistent, sustained social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise” (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002, p. 495). Essentially, Communities of Practice take the idea of a network to the next level. It is a place for people with similar interests and/or experiences to come together, create meaning, solutions and history together, with a mindful intention to go beyond just connecting. Barab et al identified eight key characteristics of a Community of Practice:

(1) shared knowledge, values, and beliefs; (2) overlapping histories among members; (3) mutual interdependence; (4) mechanisms for reproduction; (5) a common practice and/or mutual enterprise; (6) opportunities for interactions and participation; (7) meaningful relationships; and (8) respect for diverse perspectives and minority views. (Barab et al., 2002, p 495)

A group of teachers from a particular school could create a small Community of Practice by meeting once a month to discuss their students and curriculum with the intention to manage the struggles felt in response to standardized testing requirements. It could also be a group of regional principals that meet to discuss issues surrounding a large migrant population in their community. All of these groups can be considered Communities of Practice, but these smaller, localized groups will not likely have a far-reach with their influence. They might have some inovative ideas that would revolutionize many schools, but without making further connections, the change stops with the group, and it's peripheral sphere of influence. It is necessary to build connections upon connections. Communities can connect with other communities, building a web of influence. As connections are made, large systemic change becomes possible.

Emergence

Wheatley and Frieze (2006) describe large systemic change as a function of “emergence” or many small changes happening simultaneously, connecting, and ultimately becoming a large change.

Emergence is a description of large-scale change. These Systems of Influence have broad reach and affect behaviors throughout the system. Yet emergence does not start big. It begins with small local actions. Large-scale change emerges from connections among these local efforts, from the exchanges of learning and the forging of relationships... At the start, these small efforts seem impotent, puny in the face of the dominating culture. And by themselves, they are insufficient... The work of educational leaders is to encourage local experiments, to watch for and nourish supportive beliefs and dynamics, and to sponsor faculty

and staff to connect with all the kindred spirits now working in isolation. This is how we intentionally work with emergence to create the future we desire... We believed that large-scale changes require large-scale efforts. But with emergence, it's not critical mass we have to achieve; it is critical connections (p. 36).

Any professional can tell you that professional networks are important for professional growth and development. The theory of emergence simply takes the concept of networking to the next level. By developing connections ultimately a web of information is created, allowing one small idea in a classroom to travel around the country or the globe to other classrooms. This grass-roots approach can spread ideas and solutions like wildfire, much too powerful for policy makers to deny. If every teacher in the country used their connections to deny the use of standardized tests (for example), no policy in the world would be strong enough to keep standardized tests in the classroom. Ultimately policy makers would be forced to evaluate the goals of the standardized test, and find a new way to achieve them.

CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES

The field of education offers many challenges that prevent or limit the ability to create lasting, self-perpetuating communities of practice. Educators, particularly teachers, are predominately women, a historically disenfranchised group (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2007). Although women have made great gains in the field of education, they are still relatively underrepresented in leadership positions, both at the administrative level, and the legislative level. Research shows that there are many contributing factors to this, but one common reason is that women, due to personal characteristics and values do not pursue leadership positions, or engage beyond the lower level teacher leadership (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2002). Beyond these issues with leadership educators are frequently isolated in their day to day work. Compounded by heavy workloads and minimal professional support, these isolated educators frequently have little time or energy to pursue connections which would allow them to create solutions and build change through emergence.

National Leadership in Education

There has never been a female President of the United States of America. The majority of congresspeople are still male, though women have made some great inroads taking on higher level positions within all three branches of the federal government. Despite the fact that education is a predominately female occupation, the representation on federal committees that deal with educational legislation is still predominately male. The US House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor has a total of 48 members on it. Currently, only 10 of those members are women, which is approximately 20% of the group (US Committee on Education & Labor, 2009). The US Senate's Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) has an even lower percentage of women. The HELP Committee has 22 members, only 4, or

18%, of which are women (US Senate, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education is no better. There are 27 published senior staff positions. As of February 27th, 2009, 5 of those positions were filled by women, and 16 were filled by men. With 6 positions still vacant, the DOE has a chance of having a staff that is 40% female, but that would require every single vacant slot be filled by a woman (US Department of Education, 2009a).

Non-representative Leadership in Education

Women are a historically disenfranchised group (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2007). They make less money for the same jobs as men, deal with a “glass ceiling” in regards to positions of power and money, and have been relegated to service jobs seen to be in line with their femininity. Despite the fact that the majority of pre-school and K-12 educators are women, these issues still exist in education. “The term ‘glass ceiling’ suggests that the mobility chances of males increase as the percentage of females in the occupation rises, while women have hardly any access to the top positions. In other words, men who work in female-type occupations receive the benefits of a glass escalator into administration, whereas the glass ceiling victimizes women (Maume, 1999)... Thus, women in female-dominated occupations have not converted their numerical dominance into power (Boyd *et al.* 1995), and continue to be excluded from leadership and high-ranking positions” (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002, p. 172).

According to the U.S. Census, in the year 2000, seventy-five percent of all pre-K-12 educators were women, and only twenty-five percent were men. The teaching population is not far off from this with nearly 78% of female teachers and 22% of male teachers. The administrative population does not reflect these same percentages. Only 61% of all administrators were women, and 39% were men (US Census, 2009).

Clearly when looking at the numbers of men and women in the field of education, men are being promoted at a higher rate than their female colleagues. It is not difficult to see that a glass ceiling and/or glass elevator is in effect in the United States educational system. This may be strictly tied to the disenfranchisement that women have experienced historically but research also indicates that there may be some personality characteristics, and personal values affecting this as well.

Women are historically the caretakers of children. They are physically tied to the children from conception through birth at least and usually beyond that to include breast-feeding. Men on the other hand are historically the breadwinners for the family. These two factors, although associated with traditional gender roles that are fundamentally socially constructed, are difficult to ignore due to the biological basis for much of it.

As a result of these needs, women are frequently seen as less committed to their work, since their primary responsibility lies with the family. “One of the ways for women to cope with their various roles is by working part time. This decreases their prospects of promotion to administrative positions that require full-time work, even when they have the same education and years of experience as men” (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002, p. 158).

Men on the other hand are more driven towards higher achievement in their career to ensure their ability to provide for their families. “While the various roles women fill lessen their motivation to take on demanding administrative jobs, men, being the main breadwinners of the family, are interested in holding these positions, which are prestigious and economically rewarding” (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002, p. 158).

Withholding any judgment regarding their commitment to career, and whether it is by preference or discrimination, it can be determined that there are only 24 hours in any given day,

and seven days in a week. If a woman is married, with children, and a working teacher, chances are she will not have additional time to actively pursue leadership and change in her professional life, especially if she personally subscribes to semi-traditional gender roles in the family.

Professional Isolation

In addition to all of the other strains and blocks that prevent women from gaining in their leadership roles in education, all educators face the problem of professional isolation. Education, particularly teaching, is an isolating field. The main purpose of teachers is to educate their classes, usually separated from their colleagues both physically and professionally. At best schools and districts promote an environment where time is given for educators to collaborate during staff development days or other staff meeting times. Possibly professional development is supported where educators have the opportunity to go outside their immediate school or district and learn new methods or tools. Usually there is very little funding for such training, and even less time and energy on the part of the teachers to pursue these outside possibilities. “In many cases, the quality and nature of a school’s human resources is directly linked to financial resources... The underlying goal of many of these strategies appears to be the reduction of teacher isolation as a means toward improving collegiality, collaboration, and adult development” (Drago - Severson & Pinto, 2006, p. 139).

There is limited time and even more limited money to get beyond this isolation in education, and yet there is a clear need for connection. It is imperative to get educators connected to begin to help them make a difference. “The alleviation of isolation as a means toward learning often requires tapping into wells of rich human resources. This attention helps teachers and school communities grow to be more effective in attaining their educational purposes” (Drago - Severson & Pinto, 2006, p. 151). Teachers are already doing great work in

the field. There is innovation happening all over the country, with new teaching methods, creative curriculums, and a strong focus on early intervention for students with special needs and English Language Learners. Yet, with limited time, money and opportunity, how can Communities of Practice that are so desperately needed be built?

CHAPTER 7: INTERVIEW WITH PENELOPE EARLEY, PH.D.

Sample and Site

On April 15th, 2009 at 8:30 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time, I interviewed Dr. Penelope (Penny) Earley to discuss the state of public education in the United States today, and the potential the internet might hold to help correct some of its current issues. Dr. Earley's expertise in educational policy and leadership is what initially drew me to her work.

Access and Permissions

Dr. Earley spoke at a professional conference that I attended in October 2008, covering women and leadership in education, and federal policy issues in education. Following her workshop, I met her in person and asked if she would be willing to speak with me by phone at a future date. She indicated she would be happy to speak with me and subsequently gave her written permission via fax.

Ethical Standards

This study conforms to all ethical standards of research as determined by the American Psychological Association. This project was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board and assigned IRB Approval Number 7081.

Summary

Dr. Earley is the Director of the Center for Education Policy at George Mason University in Virginia. She has been in education for over 30 years in a multitude of roles. She began her career as a middle school teacher, leaving to work as a mom and raise her two children. Once her children had reached school age, Dr. Earley went back to work joining the American

Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, ultimately becoming their Vice President for Governmental Relations and Issues Analysis. During this time Dr. Earley also completed her education earning a Master's in Foundations of Education from the University of Virginia, and her Ph.D. in Research and Evaluation from Virginia Tech (College of Education and Human Development, 2009). In 2002 Dr. Earley joined the faculty at George Mason University, where she teaches in the graduate program, and acts as the Director for the Center for Educational Policy.

Dr. Early and I discussed many topics ranging from the position of federal policy makers to actually affect change, to the usefulness of the internet, to the benefits of Communities of Practice within the context of education. Three major themes appeared in our discussion: the challenge of information in education- both having too much, and too little; the necessity of policy makers to create large-scale change, and yet their poor position to know what those changes should be; and the repercussions or challenges of having a top-down policy, when community building is the goal. Many of these issues have already been touched upon throughout the course of this written discussion, but Dr. Earley's perspective brings additional light to them.

The challenges surrounding information came up as two of the top five issues in education today for Dr. Earley.

We have both too much [information] and too little [information] about what is happening in schools. Every day I turn on my computer and I get, counting blogs and newsletters, maybe 15 messages, all telling me something about what's going on in education today. And I still like to look at all of them, some of them are redundant... All of them are just there, so there is almost so much information that I think as human beings we lack the ability to sort it and filter it. And what is really the important information for us, and what is not? And policy makers do not have any more time than I do; many of them probably have less. So they get these snippets, and they do not know what to do with them. On the other hand, we do not have the right information, so there are two information problems. And as

I mentioned before, I do not think decision makers really know what's going on in schools. And they should have a better sense of that. So on one hand I think people who are making decisions that are going to affect schools and children and families, may not have the information they need, but they may have too much information. So it's one thing but it's really two separate problems (Earley, 2009).

When considering the use of communities and the internet as a potential tool for grassroots change, it is important to remember that it is easy to be lost in this vast sea of information. Dr. Earley makes point that there is so much information bombarding educators, policymakers and the public, that it is difficult to sift through it to find the valuable information. A challenge to overcome is ensuring quality, and not just quantity of information. Another challenge is working to make sure the information reaches the pertinent people. Although certainly grassroots change is hard to ignore at some point, the process could be very slow if the right people are not privy to the changes happening.

As our system functions today, those “right” people are the people in policy making positions, at every level from principals to superintendents to congress people, and even to the President himself. Within the confines of current legislation, particularly No Child Left Behind, there is only so much that an educator can change without blatantly “breaking the law” at either the state or federal level. Many of the laws that were put into place are there to ensure equality for our students, especially those relating to civil rights laws. Frequently they are too broad and large to deal with the nuances that are required at the classroom level, but until our society can prove to be more equitable by nature, we need these laws to protect those groups that might otherwise suffer without them. “...Unfortunately, I think the legacy of schools discriminating against kids, really the Brown v. Board legacy is still with us. The policy makers are correctly worried that if they are not, particularly state and federal, if they're not watching what's going on, some of these old civil rights violations may start to occur again. So I do not really like the

idea of the Washington Congress and Senate making decisions about what happens in local schools, but the dilemma is, I really understand why they have to do it... And so, I guess it has to be a balance across levels of government because each level of government has the power, the authority, and we've given them the authority over education" (Earley, 2009). Dr. Early acknowledges that she does not believe that policy makers are doing a very good job of protecting our schools, but that they are necessary. She used the analogy that the work of policy makers is a bit like using a hammer. It is perhaps the only tool that they have, although at times it would be more appropriate to use a scalpel for a finer dissection of the needs of education. Grassroots leadership and change has the potential to offer a more scalpel like approach to change, at least better acknowledging the nuances from region to region than legislation can. The reality of the way our system works however, does offer some challenges to this. Legislation does exist for a reason, and it is important not to disregard it, particularly civil rights laws, which have been instituted to protect historically disenfranchised groups.

The final theme of our discussion related to way top down change is general received. When educators are faced with top down initiatives, the standard response is one of feeling like it is just "one more thing" that they "have" to do. The idea of creating a Community of Practice is a good one. The challenge it faces is how does it begin? If you have a person of authority requiring participation in a Community of Practice, it loses its necessary organic nature, and instead becomes just another meeting. "The difficulty is when it appears to be top down. When the principal says the superintendent wants to set Communities of Practice, so I'm changing the schedule and the lunch room will be available for the eighth grade teachers from this time to that time so you can do your Community of Practice stuff. And people are saying oh groan, you just told me I have to go to another stupid meeting. So it is the nature of creating something that, or

providing the conditions under which something like that can grow up and formed in a way that is going to have meaning for the people who are involved” (Earley, 2009). On the other hand, if the Community of Practice is not promoted and supported from the powers that be, the educators may not even find it, or deem it beneficial since it could easily be viewed as an “extra” for their already very full professional lives. Based on this idea, I think it would be important that the Community of Practice be run somehow by an independent party, supported by the powers that be (bring them in to their own community perhaps?), and promoted as a tool and support system for those already overworked educators.

Dr. Earley’s experience and ideas bring light to many of our dark corners. We know that civil rights issues continue to plague us in education. We continue to produce information about every aspect of education, and yet frequently our policy makers are lacking the most important information, or make decisions based on limited examples from the real world. Policy makers and the public are somewhat stuck in a system that does not always have the best tools to create the most appropriate change, and this presents a multitude of problems. If educators do not participate directly in what changes occur, and how new methods and policies are implemented, they may rebel against an apparent top down system. The interview with Dr. Earley is included as Appendix A for further reading.

CHAPTER 8: ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A simple solution to the time and space issues that educators face in community building is the use of the internet. The internet provides a resource that crosses all boundaries regarding space, time, and to some extent, even money. Teachers need only one computer available to them, whether it is in their classroom or at home, with an internet connection, and from there a community can be built. Science teachers from Georgia and California can compare lesson plans for teaching plant biology. Third Grade teachers in New York and New Mexico can share ideas on integrating structured and non-structured art into their History lesson plans. A principal in Arizona can confer with a superintendent from Maine about hiring and retention issues. When utilizing the internet issues of geography are eliminated, and all a teacher has to do is log on.

The basis for my idea of a “perfect” online community of practice for educators is a website designed for brides: TheKnot.com. The Knot is just one more resource in a multi-billion dollar industry, but it provides us with an excellent guide for how to make a useful online community. The Knot offers resources such as articles and guides, sells advertising opportunities to vendors that provide wedding related services, with a searchable database for brides-to-be to find the vendors that fit them, and offers pictures of real weddings and wedding magazine photo shoots, to help inspire brides-to-be. Most importantly, it offers a massive collection of community message boards. The Knot’s message boards include regional boards (so all of the brides in New York City or San Francisco can discuss local resources and challenges), topic based boards (including topics such as “the dress”, “honeymoon” and “destination weddings”), and “club” boards which collects all of the brides getting married

during a particular month. There are also options for members to send private messages to one another, when a topic is a little too sensitive for public consumption.

How this translates to education is reasonably simple. Education could have a similar website with very similar tools. Members could upload and share lesson plans, curriculum ideas, and articles they have written and published dealing with a multitude of educational issues. Educational vendors could sponsor ads for everything from textbooks to supplementary tools to crayons! Finally the community boards could be set up to cover similar areas that are useful to the brides on The Knot. Regional boards would be immensely useful for people dealing with geographically specific issues. Topic boards could easily connect science teachers interested in the inquiry learning format, or special educators interested in learning more about autism, or elementary school teachers looking for better ways to integrate their subjects. Club boards could be tied to seniority in the industry, giving beginning teachers a place to find empathy and common experience, and veteran teachers a place to address their burn-out and frustration with long-standing administrative problems. There is no limit to the ways these boards could be set up, and as new needs arise, it would not be difficult to address them.

The benefit of creating a community of practice like this is that it can serve a multitude of purposes. Clearly it can provide a place where educators can share ideas and tools, problem solve, and work towards solutions to professional problems. Beyond this, however, a community like this can actually support teachers mentally and emotionally by giving them a place to vent frustrations and share success stories to an empathetic ear. Who better to understand the challenges and rewards of being a teacher than another teacher?

The technology itself does offer some challenges. The availability of technology, whether it is computers or the internet, is limited in areas with low-income populations. If a

teacher in Detroit cannot access the community of practice, then they are no better equipped to impact their profession than they were before. This potentially can exacerbate already huge achievement gaps that exist in low-income and minority populations. Additionally educators are an aging population. Frequently it is difficult to engage older individuals with new technology, whether they just do not want to take the time to learn it, are scared of it, or feel that their way is “just fine” and believe the old quip that “if it ai not (*sic*) broke, do not fix it.” Even more concerning is the reality that fewer women have been given access to and support in learning technology, and so are much less likely to feel comfortable in utilizing a tool like this. These are three major areas that would be well served by additional research to further develop how these populations can gain access and training in order to fully engage with a solution such as this.

The internet is an inexpensive and convenient tool that should be further developed for use by educators. If truly excellent online communities of practice were developed and actually utilized by educators, change would emerge so swiftly it would be difficult to track it. As educators are able to work together to identify problems and solutions throughout their regions, subjects and ultimately the nation and the world, it is easy to see how policy change would follow. As aspects of the educational system continue to unravel, the United States faces the possibility of accelerating to a point where some form of intervention has to occur or the system has the potential for a complete collapse.

The history of educational policy has been on a trajectory towards destroying the United States national school system. It is time that the true experts, the foot soldiers of education, were given their chance to shine, by coming together, and creating solutions.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

The future of the United States relies heavily on our ability to educate its children. People may believe that this education needs to be moral, or political, or for global dominance, but regardless of the stated beliefs, education is the key. Education has the ability to change the future both for the good, and the bad. “Public education, after all, is seen by many Americans to be what philosopher Horace Mann called ‘the great equalizer of the conditions of men,’ as that which can rectify the unequal conditions in society and give every person a chance for prosperity. That is, public education has the potential to change the very conditions that historically have benefited certain groups” (Kumashiro, 2008, p. 6). The key is to get the daily experts: teachers, tutors, principals, mentors, university professors, etc., talking and sharing their ideas and experiences.

The challenges to building community in the field of education are immense. Resources are limited from every angle including time, money and direction, leadership is not representative of the working education population at the national and local level, and professional isolation is a major cause for professional attrition. Utilizing the internet to build these types of communities can bridge many of these apparently uncrossable divides. Building communities of practice online is a low cost and time efficient solution to creating connection between educators at all levels. As educators connect with each other, they build the type of community that helps build morale and encourages creative solutions to daily and ongoing problems. This in turn helps educators feel less isolated in their professional lives which in theory will encourage them to stay in the field. As educators develop connections they are also able to create resources for one another which can help indirectly solve many of the problems that our education system faces today. Ultimately as these connections grow, grassroots change

will begin to occur throughout the nations schools, effectively eliminating the need for heavy-handed, top-down policy.

There are already several of these websites already in existence. One location already available for exactly this type of Community of Practice is called The Apple (www.theapple.com) which is owned by Monster.com. Although this website has not yet been fully developed, or promoted for what it could be, the tools are there from discussion boards to lesson plans. Another great resource is the Inquiry Learning Forum (<http://ilf.crlt.indiana.edu/>) which was created by the Center For Research on Learning and Technology at Indiana University. This community is designed to function like a standard public school in the United States with classrooms, teacher's lounge, and private offices. This design makes it very easy to navigate for any educator familiar with a standard public school structure. Another website designed for similar function is Tapped In (<http://tappedin.org/>) which is a community of education professionals. Tapped In is a little less easy to navigate but offers opportunities for educators to even bring their students in to the community for lessons and collaboration.

Although none of these resources are quite perfect yet, the reality is that nothing will work to create large-scale change if it is not properly promoted and utilized. Administrators and mentors need to seek out resources like these and promote them to their communities. University teacher preparation programs need to get their students connected to communities like these when they are still in the connected environment of their training program. If they build connections to community while they are still students, it will be much easier to carry the connections on into their professional lives.

Teachers and other front line workers in education need to see themselves as valuable human resources with something to offer leadership. It does not matter if a teacher is a part time

employee, so that she can still participate in traditional gender roles as a mom in her home life; with an internet connection she can still engage in professional communities, seeking creative solutions to problems, and advancing the field with her innovative ideas.

As an advisor in a School of Education my goal is to help our university develop a Community of Practice for our students in Education. The sooner we can get our students engaged with an online community of practice, the easier it will be for them to carry their community with them into their professional lives. Our students in our teacher preparation programs could connect by program type (single subject, multiple subject, special education, etc), subject matter (English, Science, Math, etc), region (by city or county), or even their class cohorts. They can connect with one another, and maintain that connection after they complete the program and move into their professional lives. Former students become experts for future and current students. Relationships can be built across classes, programs, and districts. We could even work with our local partner schools and districts to support further engagement. Ultimately I would like to see the website grow beyond just our university, and include all of our local educators, supported and promoted by schools, districts and induction programs.

No solution is perfect, however this does provide a great deal of opportunity for future research. It is important to evaluate how educators use technology, how tools are promoted within education and what the most effective method of promotion would be, and ultimately, what exactly is it that educators would most benefit from having access to and connection with. I would be most interested in fully developing a website as previously described, and working with various educational groups (schools, districts, universities, and other education based groups) to promote the use of such a tool. From there I would want to monitor the website to see how it was being used and what the most effective areas were.

Ultimately evaluation is needed to understand how to better create educational policy and practice, and utilize our experts in the field. Education is a moving target as the global economy and demands change, technology improves and changes how children interact with their world. The best educators can do is aim for the target they see, and continue to adjust as times require it. The organic nature of a Community of Practice lends itself nicely to this moving target, growing and changing with the times, if educators are connected to it, and the powers that be promote it, support it, and then recognize the work that comes out of it. Change is possible, but it is time to view things from a different perspective to make the necessary change happen.

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APPENDIX A

The following is a transcript from a phone interview of Penelope Early, Ph.D., conducted by Karey R. Gauthier at 8:30 a.m. PDT on April 15, 2009.

Begin Transcript:

Karey Gauthier (KG): How many years have you been in education?

Penelope (Penny) Earley (PE): Well all together over 30. That was in three different places, right. I first was teaching middle school, right after college. And then I took a hiatus while my children were getting up to kindergarten age, the two of them. And then I went to work for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education where I remained for 26 years and was Vice President for Governmental Relations and Issue Analysis. And I've been at (George) Mason (University) since 2002.

KG: How do you view the state of public education in the United States today?

PE: Fractured, when you think of it pre-K- 16, I see it as adversarial in terms of fighting for resources between sectors. And I see it somewhat disorganized in terms of delivery advocacy. I think that would probably sum it up in my mind right now.

KG: Looking specifically at K-12, we hear in the news a lot that our schools are failing, the system is broken, and there are all these problems. Do you think that is an accurate representation?

PE: Both yes and no. I think some schools are failing kids. But I think also some families are failing kids, and sometimes the schools get blamed for the actions that are really beyond the purview of the school. Parents who may love their children, but do not want to be bothered with their children. So I think that in some cases there are schools that do not do the job that they should for a variety of reasons, but I think overall, schools are doing the job they have been asked to do and they've been funded to do. If you want schools to do something different I'd say policy makers have to be extraordinarily explicit of what they want them to do, and give them the money to do it. That said, schools do not want policy makers to be that explicit about how they do their work, and policy makers do not want to go back to tax payers and ask for the money that would be necessary to do the job. So I, you know, if there's this looping around and around, it's not really leading to anything happening. Other than, I think, a great deal of finger pointing.

KG: Staying with the policy makers' role, they are increasingly getting involved with what they are telling schools to do. What is your opinion on that?

PE: On one hand, the policy makers feel, correctly or not, that the schools are not doing what they should, and so they say to themselves "self- I'm an elected official, I can make this happen."

I think policy makers sometimes do not have a good idea of what's actually happening in schools. I think that they have a slightly skewed idea of what's happening based on examples from one or two places and so they try to use a hammer to fix a problem that maybe needs a scalpel. And it's the only way policy makers really can work at almost any level, they have to make laws that apply to everyone, and so at the Federal level you get things like No Child Left Behind, you get things at the state level and at the district level, rarely though, with the kinds of nuances that you maybe need at the classroom level. A really difficult issue, I do not think that policy makers are evil doers in any sense of the word. I think they are good, honest people who are trying to fix problems, as they perceive them. I think their perceptions are not always right.

KG: So what do you think are maybe the top five issues in education today?

PE: Well first is how we fund schools. We do not do it in a consistent way that allows for the kind of planning that schools really need to do work long term. With so much money based on wealth through the property tax, schools can only plan, at best, twelve to twenty four months in advance, because they do not know what the property tax money is going to bring them, and to some extent the state appropriations, which of course is at the whim of the state legislature. So because schools can not plan five years, ten years out, I think it makes it really hard for them to do some of the things, perhaps we'd like. Moreover, I mean everybody knows if you're a child of a wealthy person who lives in a wealthy area, you're going to get a different education than a child of a family that lives in a poor area where there is not a big tax base, and that's not fair. So clearly, it's not the amount of money, it's how the money is used to fund schools. I would much prefer a 1% national sales tax that would be used for schools and they would not have to rely always on the property tax. But we're not getting that!

The second I would say is the use of time. I believe we've really outgrown the idea of taking the summer off. I like the idea of children having time to play and explore, I think that's great. And my kids grew up in a time when they could wander off to the park and play, and I did not have to worry about some of the things that parents have to worry about now. And they were not programmed to have to be at a thousand activities every week, but we just need to think about time in a different way: about the length of the school day, and the length of the school year. I think we could make some better uses of the facilities, teachers time, children's time, if we really confronted that, and dealt with it in a serious way. I mean, you know, this idea of three months, kids are not in school is silly. We know they lose over time, they lose things that they have learned, over time: math skills, reading skills over those three months. That would be the second one.

The third one is actually two- information. We have both too much and too little about what is happening in schools. Every day I turn on my computer and I get, counting blogs and newsletters, maybe 15 messages, all telling me something about what's going on in education today. And I still like to look at all of them, some of them are redundant- something shows up in Fritz Wire which is one of the things I get every day, or Ed Week, or from the Forbes Foundation or Education Daily. All of them are just there, so there is almost so much information that I think as human beings we lack the ability to sort it and filter it. And what is really the important information for us, and what is not? And policy makers do not have any more time than I do; many of them probably have less. So they get these snippets, and they do not know what to do with them. On the other hand, we do not have the right information, so there are two information problems. And as I mentioned before, I do not think decision makers really know what's going

on in schools. And they should have a better sense of that. So on one hand I think people who are making decisions that are going to affect schools and children and families, may not have the information they need, but they may have too much information. So it's one thing but it's really two separate problems.

The fifth one is really what I call the silo nature of education, which separates pre-K from K-12, and K-12 from higher ed, and what often happens, decisions are made in the higher education sector that take no account of what is going on in the K-12 schools. Just one example, came up the other night in class, my student was presenting some of her research, which has to do with strategies to increase diversity in higher education, and she was talking about a particular study done in Chicago. It was done by a group of people who were higher ed folks and it was published in a higher education journal. That told me they probably were not in a college of education because most of these higher ed programs are not in colleges of education, they're off places. So my students had to critique the research, and they found it astounding that the researchers decided that the diversity of the high school would predict the comfort level of students going into a diverse college setting... And it took them about five minutes to come around to that the researchers had no clue about what a K-12 school setting was like. And so here is something, published in a prestigious journal, making policy recommendations that if you want students who are from a diverse background to feel comfortable in a diverse college setting, make sure you recruit students from diverse high schools, which was just a nonsensical finding. So it has to do with the departmentalization of K-12 and Higher Education, and I know you're focusing on K-12 but really there needs to be fewer knowledge barriers across the whole system. So those are the five.

KG: You talked about policy makers having to use a hammer instead of a scalpel to solve the problems. Do you think that they are in the best position to create solutions? Or who do you think is in the best position?

PE: Well the policy makers have the legal authority, so that's really where we have to look. I would like to think that with some very broad, agreed upon, national guidelines, that local schools and school districts would be the ones who would actually be making the key decisions. Do we need to focus on English, and if we need to focus on English and Literacy, we get to decide what the curriculum should be, which is sort of historically how things work. But unfortunately, I think the legacy of schools discriminating against kids, really the Brown v. Board legacy is still with us. The policy makers are correctly worried that if they are not, particularly state and federal, if they're not watching what's going on, some of these old civil rights violations may start to occur again. So I do not really like the idea of the Washington Congress and Senate making decisions about what happens in local schools, but the dilemma is, I really understand why they have to do it. Because they have to ensure the civil rights are maintained and kids go to school in a safe environment, so you have EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, you have OSHA for the safe working, all of the agencies, the school lunch program from the Department of Agriculture making sure kids get the right kind of food and that the school is not trying to say that they're getting a vegetable because there's ketchup for the hot dog. You remember that from the Reagan years? And so, I guess it has to be a balance across levels of government because each level of government has the power, the authority, and we've given them the authority over education. They just do not seem to be doing a very good job of it, and it's hard for me to sort out what should be done differently.

KG: Some of the research that I've done tells me that education professionals, particularly teachers tend to be very isolated in their work. Not necessarily by choice, but just by the nature of their job. How do you think a Community of Practice could be used to manage this? To help this as an issue?

PE: Well you've hit on something that's been sort of a little bit of a flashpoint in our college. The previous dean went through an exercise to come up with a series of strategic goals for the college and one was creating Communities of Practice. There was an immediate pushback from the faculty saying we are not practitioners we're scholars, we should have a Community of Scholars. So okay fine, he still wanted practice, so practice it was. But the setback was, he just wanted it to happen, you know, I'm waiving my deanly magic wand and there will be these Communities of Practice. And there was further pushback from the members of the faculty saying, you know, these sorts of learning communities have to be organic. They have to grow up. People have to say I see there are some people with common interests and then you create these Communities of Practice. About all the college can do is to have put some situations in place to let these things occur. The feeling of the faculty was that it was really top down rather than being bottom up. So I've really been mulling that over and I will tell you "Communities of Practice" has become a huge buzzword in the schools of northern Virginia. I do not know if the same consultant went to all the schools and talked about Communities of Practice or they had the same speakers at the big national meetings that the superintendents and principals attend but it's become really a buzzword. So I've talked to students about what it means in their schools and how it's working. The difficulty is when it appears to be top down. When the principal says the superintendents want to set Communities of Practice, so I'm changing the schedule and the lunch room will be available for the eighth grade teachers from this time to that time so you can do your Community of Practice stuff. And people are saying oh groan, you just told me I have to go to another stupid meeting. So it is the nature of creating something that, or providing the conditions under which something like that can grow up and formed in a way that is going to have meaning for the people who are involved. So I think a Community of Practice could work, but I do not think a Community of Practice can be a post.

KG: So one of the theories that I've come across is something I read from Margaret Wheatley which is her theory of emergence, which is great. It's based on the biological theory. And she talks about Communities of Practice as kind of a fundamental part to what she's talking about. To take what you would see as the local change, to the next level and grow it to hopefully, ultimately, very large scale change. Do you think that this could be, if there was a focused effort, towards kind of creating that web and that network at a grassroots level, do you think that this is something that could be an effective way to make larger changes?

PE: I do not know, because if it starts at the grassroots level, it will take longer, is the thing. Grassroots work always takes longer because you have to get a critical mass of people, and then they have to get the attention of the people who actually have the authority: superintendents, the school board, the governor. And to think about California, let's say there was a school somewhere in southern California and a Community of Practice got together and wanted to do something and they got some momentum behind it, the way things are in California, it's going to take a lot more than that to probably allow what they want to come to fruition just because of the

budget situation in which your state sits right now. So, I think the Community of Practice notion can work within the number of degrees of freedom that teachers have in their schools and some of that is determined by the district, some of it has to do with the nature of the principal. And maybe some of it has to do with the community. But the one thing that teachers are going to bump into when they are trying to make these changes is, you know, they can not ignore No Child Left Behind. So how do you use a Community of Practice to do something when No Child Left Behind is looming there, so I think they can do that but I think there are going to be some limitations on how far and how much they can do. My colleagues, assuming we had Communities of Scholars that actually got together, what's happened is we have a different dean now so the whole thing has sort of hovering off in Never Never Land, but there's only so much we can do at the college level. We can not do anything that would violate Virginia law. We can not do anything that would bump up against set policies in the university. So there are certain things we could do in a college but getting beyond that really is the challenge. It may be that Communities of Practice are good and the best way to do things within certain boundaries. It is an unfair expectation to assume that a Community of Practice can solve all the problems in L.A. Unified School District. It may be that the school and community, really meaning neighborhood, is about the unit of change that you can have for Community of Practice. And it might be unreasonable to think of using that theory as an avenue for bigger change. I do not know.

KG: Well my idea, is actually to take the concept of Community of Practice online, which actually extends that community that you're talking about. The potential community can be at that local level, which I think is exceptionally important, but it can also be regional or even by field of interest, you name it. Any kind of line of connection could be created into a Community of Practice online.

PE: There's a group called TNLI [Teachers Network Leadership Institute], and it's out of New York and then they have local TNLI chapters. They had one in partnership with Fairfax County schools and our university, the funding ended so it went away, though I am still on the TNLI listserv. So I get lots and lots of stuff that mostly I do not look at, I just scan very quickly, and probably 90%, maybe 80% from teachers, 20% from teacher educators, about this or that or the other, a lot of chatter from Chicago about Arne Duncan when he was appointed as a matter of fact. And what divergent views about what he did in Chicago, from the point of view of public school teachers there, which was very interesting to read. But so in a sense that could be a Community of Practice, but what it has become, and maybe it's because there's no monitor, it's become a venting board. And that's why I do not look at it so often, because people have gotten cranky about stuff, which is maybe to do with the economy, but it's just become a place for people who are not happy to vent about things. And so if you do this online, I think the challenge that you would have is how do you- without violating the organic nature of the community of practice- how do you use that in what is going to be a productive and a positive sense, without over programming it? Because if you do that then people will go away because it's just another meeting- it's just an online meeting.

KG: How do you think the internet itself is affecting our educational system and its policies?

PE: I think right now it's got too much information on it. That's my problem; it goes back to where I was before. If a Community of Practice could be a way to filter some of that, so that a

teacher who's got ten things in his or her email about the best way to teach math, would have a way to kind of sort out whether or not... There actually was a study that came out of Institute for Educational Sciences, on the teaching of math, and had three different programs and found no significance for any of them. And they said they used a randomized design and they could not find, really, there was a whole lot different from one to the other. So that just leaves the educator more confused, well how do I pick them, if I do not know, according to the research which one is better? In terms of influencing policy, the only problem you have with that is making sure that the information is correct, because there is so much misinformation. This TNLI blog that I was looking at for awhile, I was just so frustrated because I would read the posts and someone had read something somewhere, about the federal government doing one thing or another and it was just ludicrous. Beyond, it was in the, sort of Mars coming down to Earth realm of reality. And so I think in terms of influencing policy, its how do you use a Community of Practice to demonstrate best practices? Because that's a way to influence policy makers: to show that best practices are working.

KG: I wonder sometimes, most policy makers are not trained educators. I would be willing to bet that most of them probably have not even stepped inside a classroom other than maybe a PR shoot, since they were in school themselves. So I frequently think that they do not know what the best is. So who do you think could really help that?

PE: Probably, it would have to be someone at the district or state level. You know. Who would maybe go to this Community of Practice and just see what's going on, because they'd be the ones most interested in it. Not so much probably your other policy makers. But then again, they'd have to know about it, and they'd have to feel they could trust it. This is sort of new territory, so it's a little difficult to know exactly how any decision maker or policy maker would react. There is some research, although it's somewhat old, indicating that policy makers trust information that comes from people in role alike positions, more than anything else. So a state legislator is more trusting of another state legislator, even though there may be an expert living in that persons district on the very subject. Superintendents tend to trust other superintendents. Go figure! Which I think is kind of silly. But there may be a bit of a need to figure out how you would get around that way of thinking.

End Transcript.