

Redefining Teachers, Reculturing Schools: Connections, Commitments and Challenges

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While strategies of school restructuring often attend to the governance and decision-making, timetabling and programming aspects of school life as a lever for change, school reculturing buries deep into the heart of human attitudes and relationships that hold the school together and move it forward (or fail to do so). Drawing on four school case studies, Lynne Miller describes how successful school reculturing involves schools and their staff moving towards building professional community, putting learning before teaching, engaging in inquiry as a guide to improvement, developing their own systems of accountability and standards of learning, taking a whole-school focus, and widening the responsibilities for leadership.

Reculturing, Miller shows, is no easy matter. It depends on committing to long time frames, on the support of excellent principals, on teachers who are prepared to become leaders of their colleagues as well as teachers of their classes, on access to supportive networks outside the school, and so on. This chapter describes not only the theory and principles of reculturing, but conveys a vivid sense of what it means to try and reculture one's school in particular cases.

School reform has as many meanings as it has forms and strategies. To limit the scope of this chapter, I use the terms *reforming schools* and *restructuring schools* interchangeably to refer to those schools that are striving for changes in how learning is conceptualized and how it occurs. These changes are not a matter of rearranging the furniture; they require a major re-design of the environment. Too often, schools with new bell schedules, multi-age classes, grade level teams, and integrated curriculum units continue to construct learning from taken-for-granted and unexamined assumptions. Linda Darling-Hammond (1990) terms these “superficial reforms” and sees them as short-lived and ineffective. On the other hand, what Darling-Hammond calls “structural reforms” occur in schools where learning proceeds from a new set of premises.

To be more specific, in reforming schools, learning engages children and young adults in rigorous academic work that encourages them to “use their minds well” (Sizer, 1984) and to make connections between ideas and their applications in the world beyond the school. Ultimately, such a conception of learning depends on teachers – not on schedules, grouping procedures, or policy manuals. It is teachers who provide the support and challenge that promote learning; it is teachers who encourage improvement through the feedback they provide; it is teachers who present materials and ideas that engage student interest; and it is teachers who safeguard the academic integrity of the work that gets done in school. Teachers in

reforming schools do not view themselves as “delivering” instruction or “transmitting” knowledge. Rather, they “teach for understanding” (Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993) and assume roles beyond that of the didact. They are child developers, coaches, guides, advocates, and critics; they create environments where students can achieve their best work.

The teachers I am talking about are creating a new culture of learning for their students. But that is not all that they are doing; they are also creating a culture of teaching for themselves. If culture is defined as “the way we do business around here” and if the way schools do business is changing for students and teachers, then what we are witnessing is a fundamental *reculturing* of school. By that, I mean a shift from one set of assumptions, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and practices to another. In the section that follows, I explore what reculturing means for teachers.

RECULTURING TEACHING

Teachers in reforming schools are re-constructing learning and teaching at the same time. They are discarding the assumptions and practices of their own teaching past. Since so many of them were trained, inducted, and tenured within factory-model schools, where the norms of “uncertainty, isolation, and individualism” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991) dominated, they are re-inventing themselves as well as schooling. In the old order, they worked in highly individualized and personal ways and learned to depend almost exclusively on their students for feedback, rewards, and indications of success. They lacked the collegial interaction and peer supervision that other professionals take for granted in their work. They developed teaching strategies that were highly idiosyncratic, based on trial and error, and guarded as professional secrets. If they participated in professional development at all, it usually took the form of workshops and clinics where discrete skills and behaviors were introduced and transmitted. Their work was viewed as technical, concrete, and formulaic. While their teaching was invisible outside the classroom, the behavior of their students was not. As a result, teachers spent a disproportionate amount of time establishing control norms, and they expended enormous time and energy on enforcing rules and keeping discipline. The factory-model school sent a very powerful message to teachers about their position in the hierarchy of the organization. If students were products, then teachers were workers, and principals were foremen or bosses. As an assembly-line worker, the teacher was only responsible for her piece of the final product.

When teachers move to reculture their schools, they begin to change the conditions of their work. They make some fundamental shifts in the way they do business. Among these shifts are:

From individualism to professional community: Teachers are replacing the individualism, isolation, and privacy of traditional schools in favor of new norms of collegiality, openness, and trust (Little, 1981; McLaughlin & Talbert,