

Foreword

The knowledge base for improving schools is thought to reside in large-scale social science research. When policymakers in Sacramento, Tallahassee, or Washington want to know what is right or wrong with public schools, what should be changed, and how school leaders should accomplish this, they turn to the work of a Richard Elmore or a Peter Senge.

There is another knowledge base of inestimable value for the improvement of public schools. This “literature” is much less evident than formal research in discussions about school reform. Craft knowledge is the massive collection of experiences and learning that those who live and work under the roof of the schoolhouse inevitably amass during their careers. These are the insights garnered by teachers, principals, guidance counselors, librarians, school secretaries, and parents about important matters such as parent involvement, staff development, curriculum development, discipline, teaching, leadership, and school improvement.

Tragically, the wisdom from the craft rarely is viewed—by outsiders or by school people themselves—as legitimate or rigorous, let alone useful, in the important work of school improvement. I believe there are three reasons why this happens: First, when a 4th-grade teacher or a principal speaks, it is believed that out will come, not craft knowledge, but a war story. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire a teacher.” Eyes glaze over.

War stories are descriptions of practice, verbal portraits of the events of the schoolhouse. Craft knowledge is description of practice accompanied by analysis of practice. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire a teacher—and here’s what I learned from it. If I were to do it again, here’s how I would do it differently.” Such hard-won learning from practice is the gold of the realm.

Second, in the cruel world of schools, which places practitioners in the position of competitor with others for scarce recognition

and resources, few are willing to share their gold, panned from years of experience, lest their fellows come to occupy a position of greater respect and admiration.

Finally, even if a teacher or principal chooses to, it is often not safe for a practitioner to disclose his or her craft knowledge to fellow educators. It is likely to be greeted in a faculty room with put-downs: "Big deal. I've been doing that for years."

Thus, our profession seems to neither welcome nor value either the giving or the receiving of craft knowledge. What a tragic loss to the profession, to the professionals, and to the cause of school reform!

I recently completed and published a collection of stories about my many years sailing the coast of Maine. In the course of writing this book, I have come to learn something of the extraordinary power of storytelling and the gifts that it can bring to the teller and the audience alike. In addition, I am discovering that storytelling may provide an important key, capable of unlocking the wisdom of the educational, as well as the nautical, craft.

Susan Villani has discovered this key as well. She tells us that "we need to hear more stories about leadership." The book you are about to read is replete with stories and vignettes from her 21-year career as a public school principal. Embedded in them is a treasure trove of craft knowledge. Her learning on the job, courageously disclosed, becomes strikingly accessible, useful, and even healing for aspiring and practicing principals alike.

I think you will find this collection of stories, and the analysis that accompanies each, deeply personal, engaging, and introspective. Above all, you will find that through storytelling, Susan Villani brings an abundance of authenticity.

Enjoy, and make wise use of the gift of the hard-won wisdom offered by this accomplished and reflective practitioner.

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