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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Disrupting the Teacher Opportunity Gap*.

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# Preface



“Of all the factors that affect students in schools, it’s teachers who have the greatest impact. I want to go back to that fundamental finding that the biggest influence in schools is teacher expertise.”

—John Hattie, *TES Magazine*, January 11, 2023

“Sometimes in life you should stick to your worldview and defend it against criticism. But sometimes the world is genuinely different than it was before. At those moments the crucial skills are the ones nobody teaches you: how to reorganize your mind, how to see with new eyes.”

—David Brooks, *NYT*, July 21, 2022

Resolved: Make every school a reliable engine of constant learning about High-Expertise Teaching. This book is about how to accomplish that within a school district, and the expert leadership it takes to get there.

I would like to begin with a few assertions I believe this book will support.

## The Teacher Opportunity Gap

The knowledge and skill to teach really well is far more extensive and complex than our voters and policymakers realize. It is on par with that for architecture, law, or engineering. But our teacher workforce is for the most part denied access to this knowledge and skill, and thus, through no fault of their own, lack the skills for High-Expertise Teaching. *High-Expertise Teaching includes anything a person does that impacts the probability of intended learning.* This is a huge palette, indeed, and is profiled in Chapter 1. The knowledge and skills to implement Deep Learning, Project-Based Learning, and other advanced conceptions of schooling are included in this definition of “anything.” We should remember, however, they are at the advanced end of a continuum for teacher development considering how many large elements of foundational expertise are missing.

After the years we have been through recently, readers may wonder why I would advance this case now. After all, in 2023 here we all are, the adults and the children, experiencing urgent staff shortages, record numbers of people on emergency licenses, hiring difficulty, transportation problems. Even more alarming are crisis

levels of mental health issues, children who have forgotten how to do the routines and expected behavior in school, and a level of behavior problems (emotional dysregulation in the new jargon) that is exhausting. The need to accelerate learning puts great pressure on every class. Our staff members feel unsupported and are subject to vitriol instead of being honored and respected for the work they have accomplished in their lives as professionals and the heroic dedication shown in getting through the pandemic.

Many crave somehow “getting back to normal.” But “normal” before the pandemic was a litany of heart-sinking NAEP statistics like only 34 percent of fourth graders reading at grade level or above and dozens of other such performance measures. Thirty-five percent were below basic in 2019. Normal will not be acceptable.

In a couple of years, we will have come to terms with the crises of personnel and behavior that consume us now. I write for that time when it will be possible to see if we can do better—significantly better—for all our children. There will be steps we can take even now while still in the crisis mode that will lay the foundation for the plans I advance here.

This opportunity gap for teachers results in widespread mediocrity of the teaching our children receive. Many readers use the term “opportunity gap” to describe the cause of the persistent gap in academic performance between children of color compared to white children. Fair enough. What we never see, however, is a focus on the “expertise gap” between what most of our teachers know and can do and what they could be able to do. But let’s be clear: “Quality teaching” is not a function of getting better people; There is nothing wrong with the people we have. Quality teaching will come when we provide our educators with the opportunity to gain the expertise we deny them. And then the student opportunity gap will be under serious pressure to collapse.

After all these years I am convinced this is the one overweening problem in American education: *the denial of the opportunity for our teacher workforce to acquire the knowledge and skills of High-Expertise Teaching*<sup>1</sup> (HET). Even the best teacher preparation program is inadequate for the professional preparation that the scope and complexity of professional knowledge demands.

I am conflicted about sharing this as a take-off point. It sounds like such a downer given the heroic commitment of so many of our teachers and the dynamic effect we all know leaders can have through inspiration and positivity to mobilize collective effort. And above all, this claim about mediocrity is not a criticism of teachers who are victims of the awful personnel system in which we were all raised. This book says “fix the system, not the people. There is nothing wrong with our people.” But unless we face the stark consequence of our terrible failure to create high-level

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this book I will capitalize High-Expertise Teaching to highlight that it is, indeed, a real thing. I am not referring to some ill-defined abstraction. I am referring to a huge, codified, validated body of knowledge and skill about which there is agreement and which could be described even now in drill-down detail.

professional practice and professional workplace conditions, we will continue to get the results our system is designed to get—unequal and unfair.

Startlingly, you would get agreement to the statement about mediocrity from dozens of my very well-known colleagues and professional acquaintances. These are distinguished educators known throughout the education world by virtue of their voluminous publications, keynote presentations, best-selling books, and well-regarded courses. This is, in a sense, a dirty little secret very rarely appearing in journals or sponsored forums because it is embarrassing and potentially incendiary. I will cite some of their more pointed findings about teaching quality in Chapter 1.

Some readers may recoil at this point about mediocrity because they believe their own teachers are wonderful. And they may be right. Their children get exciting, engaging lessons that are created by exciting, creative teachers. But across the 14,000 districts in the United States, this is not common, and particularly not common where the needs are greatest. This situation has created a large community of disinterest among voters and policymakers who wield power. Their belief that “my children are doing fine” breeds disinterest in addressing the larger society-wide dysfunction of the education system. Moreover, that the children of the most politically influential people are “doing fine” is not typically a product of High-Expertise Teaching, but of a system that rewards class privilege.

Why would we allow this as a country to befall 55 million children whom everyone would acknowledge represent our future? This is a question I hope readers will discuss after they get into the text.

Despite legions of educators who educate themselves to high levels of practice, this condition of mediocre teaching reigns throughout the country, not just in urban schools so easily stereotyped. And conversely, brilliant, self-educated teachers can be found in any city neighborhood surrounded by poverty.

Those children who happen to be of color and who live in poverty as well experience the opportunity gap themselves from two sources. Their situation is compounded by the impact of racism. They cannot make up lost ground with mediocre teaching. They *can* if they do get High-Expertise Teaching, and there is evidence aplenty for that.

As a result of these opening pages, one might easily guess that this book is aimed at teacher preparation programs. Well, partially yes. But it is aimed much more at leadership development. Teachers cannot reach the level of expertise our children need solely in a preparation program—any preparation program. The knowledge and skill sets for successful teaching are intellectually complex, difficult, and demanding far beyond what our policymakers and voting public realize. Therefore educators need a workplace environment that enables—more—requires, continuous learning about High-Expertise Teaching. That can only happen when school leaders can create such a workplace, because they have the knowledge and skill to make their school a reliable engine for continuous adult learning about High-Expertise Teaching. Individual school leaders, in turn, and their successors can

only acquire those skills when preparation programs and central offices make the learning of school leaders the highest priority.

Therefore this is a book for leaders. For teacher–leaders as well as administrators we will focus on reengineering the structures and processes that already exist at the school level. (e.g., Common Planning Time teams) and the district level (e.g., supervision of principals). Thinking concretely, we will focus on the routines and interpersonal behavior within these structures so they operate as engines of teacher learning. Each chapter takes on one of these structures and the skills to reengineer it and lead it to function as a growth engine for teacher learning.

This is not an easy fix, but it is the only way to give all our children a fair chance at a decent life, a mark we miss by miles right now.

There are about a dozen processes in every district that can be redesigned and operated so they are deliberate engines for teacher learning about High-Expertise

Teaching (see sidebar, “Processes that impact teacher learning about High-Expertise Teaching”).

Despite a gloomy introduction, this is an optimistic book, because after sixty years as an educator, forty-five of them as a change agent immersed almost every day in the life of individual schools and central offices, I have seen what can be done when the problem is defined correctly, the resources are correctly aligned, and leadership is stable. District 2 in New York City in the 1990s is a clear example (Elmore, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Montgomery County, Maryland, where we participated deeply is another (Mehta & Cohen, 2017). The overall plan and the individual action steps in this book are exactly what the large-scale policy changes we await would enable at scale. But until then, there are steps here that are guided by a new North Star. We could get this star in our sights right away.

Here is an if-then type proposition. The more innovative districts that can create (1) the conditions for schools-as-learning-organizations for adults, (2) broad understanding and commitment to High-Expertise Teaching properly understood, and (3) the ability to bring systems thinking to the orchestration of improvement, then the more persuasive evidence we will have for the eventual sweeping policy changes we need in larger units of governance. This book is a field handbook written at the

These are the twelve processes of the book title—processes that can be designed to impact teacher learning about High-Expertise Teaching:

1. Hiring
2. Induction
3. Teaching and Learning Academy
4. Building Instructional Leadership Team
5. Operational Relationship of Instructional Coach to Principal
6. Process for embedding Professional Learning topics in school routines so as to reinforce the learning and keep it alive
7. Adult Professional Culture
8. High-functioning Common Planning Time teams and schoolwide use of data  
This item includes schoolwide commitment to a culture of continuous improvement; collection of key data for cycles of collaborative analysis by teachers and leaders; collaborative identification of problems of teaching practice.
9. Principals’ Routines of Where to Show Up and What to Do
10. Teacher Evaluation System
11. Coherent Curriculum Aligned to Rigorous Standards with Interim Assessments
12. Supervisors of Principals Skill and How They Influence the Quality of Instruction (twelve places to show up).

<sup>2</sup>It is a great oversimplification to say as some do that District 2 achieved its outstanding results by an intense focus on literacy. There was simultaneous focus on developing principals as instructional leaders, coaches and principals as nurturers of Adult Professional Culture, Common Planning Time teams that could do error analysis and design re-teaching collaboratively, and universal teacher learning of high-impact instructional skill clusters like leading robust student talk where students talk more than teachers. Each of these thrusts is considered in this book.

drill-down level for what one does and what it looks like in action when we accomplish those three broad goals.

As I finished writing this book, I remembered how great leaders mobilize collective effort. They bring inspiration, focus, and the bonding energy of mutual commitment to the improvement efforts they lead. They empower others, validate them, and enlist many to take initiative to do things for the good of the school. But inspirational leaders move on.

Leaders who make enduring improvements may not be flamboyant or charismatic people (Collins, 2001), but they all do know how to mobilize collective support from multiple constituencies. Watching this happen anywhere is like standing outside in a warm rain of good feelings and hope. I have seen it and rejoiced in it myself. But standing next to this spirit is that the improvements are aimed at exactly the right changes that will not only make for short-term wins but also big improvements that last. My conclusion after all these years is that the *right aim is what is missing in this country*.

Linda Darling-Hammond and Art Wise (1999) perceived long ago that enduring school improvements needed to be guided by a vision of a true profession for teaching and leading. This vision would be embedded in policy changes made by political structures that surround Local Education Authorities (LEAs; school districts). These are structures such as state legislatures, Department of Education regulations, professional organizations, government and foundation funding priorities, and business alliances that are concerned with their worker pipeline. Art Wise took on the presidency of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) because he believed the quality of such programs (we have approximately 26,000 state-approved programs in the United States) could be a powerful lever for coherence in teacher preparation and elevating teacher performance—something that the most fully developed professions have but that education doesn't (Starr, 1982). Linda has spent her whole career trying to bring the best research into practice, and the latest Learning Science into policy, on which she is our premier expert. She has led, pushed, and probed at many levels, finally taking the political role of Chair of the California Board of Education herself, a direct role in shaping policy in the most populous state in the country. The Learning Policy Institute she has created is a combination of think-tank, convening group for players who influence policy, and *soto-voce* lobbying group. Art and Linda's wisdom, courage, and their persistence in the face of unfavorable political conditions for so many years is little short of heroic.

Michael Fullan, another heroic figure of improvement, has combined working deeply within Local Educational Authorities with continuous efforts to influence policy that resulted for a decade in his role as the power behind the throne of the Ontario Ministry of Education. That is an important story of governmental policy and tangible support facilitating unprecedented collaboration between teachers and across different LEAs.



Though these educators are correct about the need to focus on policy, this is not a book that focuses on national and state or provincial policy. Most of us in education are immersed in our local school districts, doing the best we can without the support of sweeping policy changes. I am writing this book primarily for school district and building leaders. Secondarily it is for those who can bring the issues herein to the attention of policymakers.

The plans in this book are one level of abstraction down from the policy recommendations that Linda and her Leadership Policy Institute colleagues make. And every district that will actualize these plans can be a case study that brings powerful evidence to the policy changes we so sorely need. What I lay out in this book is a paradigm shift about school improvement. It focuses on all the processes that as a *system* shape teacher capacity. It elevates these processes to the forefront of any agenda for school improvement. It is based on what can be done—indeed has been done—in real districts around the country.

For us at Research for Better Teaching (RBT) this is not a theoretical treatise, for we have been active agents not observers for multiple decades in real districts and participated deeply in the design and the implementation of changes that have endured. From our point of view, these projects—whether they be the creation of a comprehensive induction program, a new model of principal supervision, an institutionalized study group and peer observation model, or a healthy teacher evaluation system—have always been pieces of a larger vision: *making every school a reliable engine for constant learning about High-Expertise Teaching*.

We have helped real districts put in place many of the changes these chapters describe, and gone beyond implementing just pieces to tackling the whole plan in a few districts. The small number of comprehensive success stories with High-Expertise Teaching as a systemwide redesign is the natural consequence of the missing policies and resource framework to sustain the improvements. But even a few rousing successes with systemwide redesign should be enough for proof of concept. So I write this with a kind of passionate advocacy and hope to inspire. Convincing evidence has rarely been sufficient to influence policy, but if we can marry evidence to emotional appeal, good storytelling, and political savvy, there are grounds for hope.

## A Note on the Ethnographic Lens

I was a political scientist before I was an educator—an analyst of how power works and how it was exercised through structures and interpersonal interactions. Then, being immersed in the daily operations of schools for so long, I evolved into another mold—that of an ethnographer of school organizations and school people. I had been a school person myself for fifteen years at that point.

My immersion led to a shift, unconscious at first, to ethnography. As a method, ethnographic observation involves embedding oneself deeply and over the long-term in a field site in order to systematically document the everyday lives, behaviors, and interactions of a community. Sometimes I would feel like Margaret Mead or

Ruth Benedict. Ethnographers seek to deduce the customs and patterns behind interactions, also the structures and the politics that determine where power resides formally and informally. This broad approach to inquiry yields insights into the group norms and structures, the moral values that are jointly held. Ethnographers often wind up seeing the connections between elements of a system that were obscure before. I think this is because their observations come from an open and inclusive way of taking in data, that of the participant observer, not channeled by the canon of questions of more fixed academic disciplines.

Anyway, I now found myself looking from some different angles on how our structure of doing school got calcified—an historical view—and then how it had evolved—somewhat therefore like evolutionary sociology. But ethnography offered more. Ethnographers began using systems thinking before there was a field called “systems thinking.” That is because ethnographers set out to be impartial observers (as least as impartial as possible) taking field notes on the behaviors of their subjects and the conditions and environments in which the behaviors are taking place. As Wolcott (2009) emphasized, ethnographers apply a *cultural* lens to interpreting what they see: Without that cultural lens, ethnography is not distinct from other forms of qualitative inquiry. And part of that cultural interpretation is political.

The political lens allowed me to see the fundamental importance of policy, something very clearly visible in the systems of education in Finland and Singapore. I think the ethnographic lens got me to focus on detailed behaviors underneath abstractions that would allow us to profile good teaching in all its range and complexity. Analyzing teaching was the starting point of RBT’s research in the 1970s and it posed a very open question—“What are the most important things teachers do that make a difference for student learning?” As I noted before, the constantly evolving categories in subsequent editions of *The Skillful Teacher* were where those answers were assembled.

Then the second big question became “What do *leaders* do and what are the surrounding conditions that allow teachers and leaders to do what counts for successful schools that collapse the achievement gap? And what are the parts of the system these leaders redesign to preserve and enhance the results they are getting?”

The last and third big area for exploration was how to educate incoming leaders or sitting leaders so they could become proficient at using the skills and taking the actions surfaced in the second inquiry. That is the question in which I am currently immersed with some fine colleagues.

These questions led us at RBT to use the openness of ethnographic inquiry again and again for our own reflection even as we became embedded participant observers in schools working on contracted projects to improve one of the processes (e.g., teacher evaluation, induction). Local improvement plans do, indeed, have to be tailored to local context. But one must think “systems” to understand where the current project or task fits into a bigger picture and also to decide what should be the next focus. It certainly was intriguing and rewarding work, but showed with each passing year the limitation of working on only one process without



bringing in all the others. We did learn that change agents must make differentiated plans on what to improve and how to improve a given process in light of local conditions—such a creative enterprise! But Lord, how frustrating to see great improvements go up in smoke after great beginnings when there was no embedding in the larger system, and constant rotation of leaders and school boards.

This book is the result—a systems analysis for a new kind of plan that affects every part of the system that impacts High-Expertise Teaching. I have certainly learned a great deal about the system of interacting processes, but an equal amount about the interpersonal skills and the political savvy leaders need to accomplish what our children need. So in this book we will take a deep look at how leaders orchestrate the improvement initiatives that can result in High-Expertise Teaching for *all* our students.

Those of us who work in schools are holding on by our teeth waiting for the external policy changes and resources that will enable growing a true profession for teachers and leaders. So what can we do now?

My hope here is to galvanize readers' energy to reengineer the systems and processes that already exist within districts—processes that influence what any educator knows about High-Expertise Teaching. And it is also about how to diagnose how those processes are currently working or not working within a school district, how to improve them, and how to integrate them. I am making the case here that making these processes integrate well with one another to grow High-Expertise Teaching is the most important improvement agenda for U.S. education because these systems are now isolated, disregarded, and tragically dysfunctional. Please fasten your seatbelts. The consequence of this inattention and dysfunction to teacher capacity is titanic, and the opposite of what successful countries have done for the last twenty years. And it is the pathway to collapsing the achievement gap in this country.

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