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From Activity to Learning

Introduction

David is principal of Greenway School, a mid-size junior/intermediate school with approximately four hundred students and twenty teaching staff. His school is average when it comes to students' large-scale assessment results, with the results in numeracy slightly higher than in literacy. For the past year, David has been trying to work with his staff through their professional learning community (PLC) to raise student achievement, but he sometimes feels that they are going around in circles. For the most part, the teachers are keen to participate, but there is little agreement about the purpose of their PLC, and the content that they discuss at their meetings seems to change frequently, depending on what's going on around them at the time. The atmosphere is almost always nice and friendly, and someone usually brings a snack to share. There are currently two district initiatives that the school is involved in, one around a teaching and learning inquiry cycle and the other around increasing school safety, so the group takes a portion of each meeting to work on one of these. A few months ago, one of the teachers suggested doing a book study on a new, popular book about student motivation, so David bought each teacher a copy, and they discussed it for a few meetings. A month later, the vice principal went to a conference on numeracy, and she came back and presented to the staff about what she had learned. And just last week, another teacher suggested that, at the next PLC

meeting, they meet in small groups to discuss how they are going to approach the upcoming report cards.

David thinks that these are all good ideas and is pleased that most of the teachers in the school are motivated to participate in the PLC. He wants to respect the ideas that they have and thinks it's important for the teachers to feel ownership over what they are learning, so he tends to embrace any suggestions that come up. But he does worry that the PLC is a bit disorganized and chaotic and wonders how it could possibly be having the impact on students that he intended. He worries that they are moving from activity to activity way too quickly. It seems that any time the group is on the brink of figuring something out, someone suggests a new idea for an activity, and they move on. He also worries about the behavior of his staff even within the activities they're doing. The teachers seem to tiptoe around one another and avoid sharing their honest thoughts about one another's ideas and practices. They seem not to know how to ask each other questions or how to provide feedback that includes any sort of challenge, and so their comments to one another tend to only include a kind of superficial affirmation, such as "sounds great." David knows enough about effective PLCs to wonder if this is problematic, but he has no idea what to do about it. He knows that the teachers are working very hard and are very busy, so he worries he'll discourage them if he interferes, but he's not sure if the PLC is actually making any difference. He frequently thinks about the fact that PLC stands for professional *learning* community and wonders if there's really any learning going on at all.

This scenario is one that we have encountered many times in slightly different forms, and it describes what we see as the major challenge of professional learning in schools and districts—that it is often more about activity than it is about learning. In this book, we take up this challenge by focusing on what it means to facilitate true professional learning—the kind that has an impact on classroom practice and on student achievement. This book is about why the diffused and unfocused professional learning that the Greenway teachers are involved in tends not to be impactful and what it means for professional learning to truly be about *learning.* And it is about why this kind of learning is so difficult and what it looks like to facilitate professional learning that results in deep and permanent changes.

Most schools in this day and age have some kind of professional learning agenda, and many schools have professional learning communities that look a lot like Greenway's. As you can see in this example, there is a lot of work happening at Greenway. Teachers at

Greenway are likely very busy and very tired, and they likely believe that their PLC is doing excellent work. You will see that our concern in this book is not with how to encourage people to do professional learning work; rather, it is with encouraging people to do the *right* work. And from our perspective, it is likely that Greenway's PLC is not doing the *right work* because, despite the fact that it's called a professional learning community, there is actually not that much learning going on, at least not the kind that will change anyone's thinking or practices.

As we will articulate throughout this book (particularly in the following chapter), we take a stringent view of what constitutes learning, and we define it as a *permanent* change in thinking or behavior. We will show that this kind of learning is very difficult to attain and that there are a number of barriers that stand in the way of it happening. Although Greenway's teachers are certainly working hard and likely believe that they are doing the right kind of work, the true test of their learning is whether it results in a change in their thinking and/or practices that make a significant difference for the students that they teach.

In the work that we do with schools, we frequently talk to teachers and administrators about the barriers that get in the way of making their professional learning efforts truly effective. Recently, we asked a group of administrators in a large school district to explicate in writing their experiences of the challenges around professional learning and what it would take to move professional learning in their schools and in the district to a more authentic place. Although there was a range of responses, from teacher stress, to lack of understanding, to negative school culture, to difficulty getting authentic teacher "buy in," by far the most common response we got was about lack of time. This is in line with what we've repeatedly heard from both teachers and administrators, as "lack of time" is consistently cited as the number one barrier to implementing authentic professional learning. There is an inherent problem with this explanation, though, that comes by way of an implicit assumption. That assumption is that people are confident that they are already using the time they do have to its greatest potential. But for reasons that you will come to understand as you read this book, that often isn't true. For many, having more time likely wouldn't help their professional learning be more effective at all because doing *more* work still doesn't make it the *right* work. If Greenway's teachers had double the amount of time to spend on their PLC meetings, for example, would the PLC be any more effective? Probably not. The teachers would probably just

be doing more work and be more tired and perhaps be more frustrated if they weren't seeing results. We would tell the teachers at Greenway the same thing we tell the administrators and teachers that we work with: Before you try to come up with ways to stretch the clock and make more time, it's important to figure out if the time you already have is being used to its greatest potential—that is, are you doing the *right* work? Our goal in this book is to show what the right work looks like and how to facilitate this kind of true professional learning with others. But before we explain that further, it's important to think about why professional learning is essential in the first place. Why are we even putting such an emphasis on professional learning?

Why Does Professional Learning Matter So Much?

Ask a group of people (in or out of education) what they think is the most significant predictor of student achievement, and you'll likely hear something about socioeconomic status, parental education, geography, or one of many other variables based on a child's family background. While these factors certainly contribute, there has been significant research concluding that regardless of background, the quality of classroom practice that a child encounters has unmatched potential with respect to influencing student learning and achievement. What teachers are doing in classes with students on a daily basis has the greatest potential to influence the academic outcome for students, and the more challenged students are in social capital terms, the more true this is (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Nye, Konstantanopooulos, & Hedges, 2004). This makes the goal for teachers seem quite simple: Engage in high-quality classroom practice and your students will succeed. If only it were so simple!

In fact, this awareness is an important first step. It is crucial to understand that high-quality teaching is essential for students to succeed. Many teachers are well aware of the areas in which their students are struggling. Assessment data has helped teachers and administrators determine areas of urgent student learning needs. For example, we often hear administrators saying that their assessment results have indicated that students have difficulty making inferences in reading comprehension or practicing critical thinking. Pinpointing the specific areas where students are struggling is important, but what comes next is even more important, and this is the part that frequently gets left out. It is often assumed that the problem is the

identification of what students need to learn, and that once teachers know what students need to learn, they will teach it. But research (e.g., Katz & Earl, 2005) has shown that identification isn't the primary problem; the problem is that teachers often don't know what to do about it. A teacher we know once summed it up succinctly when she said, "I know how to teach fractions; I just don't know what to do when they don't get it!" After identification of student learning needs comes the step where people recognize that if students are struggling with fractions, for example, then teachers need to think about the way in which they teach fractions. Simply knowing what students need to learn is not enough. If student achievement is so strongly dependent on classroom practice, then teachers need to think about how they are teaching in the areas in which students are not achieving as well as they may like.

That said, for the most part, it is likely the case that teachers are already teaching to the best of their abilities (as indicated by the teacher in the anecdote above). Teachers are in the profession because they want to make a difference and contribute to their students' success, and we don't believe that many teachers are holding out and not doing the best they can. We don't, for example, regularly hear teachers say, "These students don't deserve my best lesson on fractions; I'm saving that for students who are more deserving!" This means that you can't simply say to teachers, "It's fractions that your students are struggling with, so teach fractions in a way that makes them understand." We know that teachers are already doing their best.

Simply knowing the areas in which students are struggling is not enough for teachers to be able to teach differently. So what comes next? It is important to understand that teachers teach what they know about a concept. Changing teaching means changing the understanding that underlies the teaching. Sticking with the example of fractions, if teachers are going teach fractions differently (so that students understand fractions differently), then teachers need to learn something new about fractions and about teaching fractions. If they don't learn something new, then they don't have any basis on which to make a change in their classroom practice. The idea is that learning something new (about fractions, in this case) will make teachers understand fractions in a way that makes it impossible for them to continue teaching fractions in the way they were teaching them before. So, learning something new creates the impetus to change the way they're teaching the concept.

This is the foundation of our model (see Figure 1.1). Student achievement is most influenced by classroom practice, and classroom

practice is most influenced by teacher learning. Teaching something differently depends on teachers learning something new. It is the *learning* that is key here. In fact, the idea of *learning* in and of itself is even more important than the content area in which the learning is taking place. The requirement to learn new content will always be a part of any professional's job, teachers included. The real power comes in knowing *how* to go about doing that: in having the stance, strategies, and skills to know *how to learn.* Yes, teachers often need to learn something new about the particular content area (fractions in this case) in order to be able to change their practice, but it is knowing *how to learn* that is the transferable skill. In essence, teachers, like all professionals, must learn *how to learn* something new. This will be applied to learning about fractions, as well as every other content area in which the teacher has a learning need. The investment in *learning how to learn* is the one that will yield the greatest return.

Knowing that classroom practice is key to changing student achievement, many have tried to influence classroom practice through professional development (PD). The logic is that if teachers learn something new (through PD activities), they will teach differently and have a positive impact on their students. However, as we will see in Chapter 3, the link between professional development and teacher practice is often weak (for example, see Wallace, 2009). Even in areas that have strong research support, current models of professional development tend to be fairly ineffective in changing teacher practice. Thus, while the logic makes sense, the connection between professional development and changed practice breaks down at some point during implementation. This is a key foundational tenet on which this book rests; that is, that professional development often fails to make a real impact on its participants because it tends not to do enough to respect the psychological definition of learning—a *permanent* change in thinking or behavior. Professional development is often not about learning at all. Learning that changes what people

Figure 1.1　　The Path of School Improvement
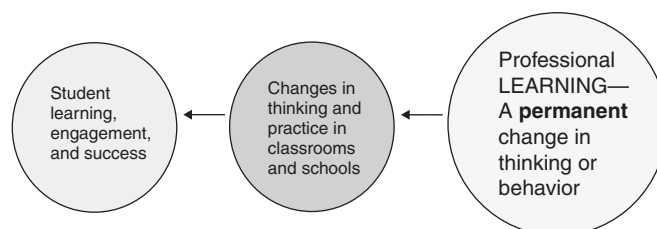
think and how they behave requires conceptual change. Conceptual change happens when people make their current beliefs explicit, subject them to scrutiny from themselves and others, consider how new information either fits or challenges their existing beliefs, and then make permanent changes to what they know and do. It is rarely the case that professional development activities encourage this kind of deep thinking and change, but this is how new learning happens, and (as we've argued above) new learning is required to change classroom practice. From our perspective, this is why the connection between professional development and teacher practice is weak—the actual professional *learning* is often missing. Enabling this sort of true professional learning is what this book is all about.

In an earlier book, *Building and Connecting Learning Communities: The Power of Networks for School Improvement* (Katz, Earl, & Ben Jaafar, 2009), we articulated and unpacked our model for learning communities in depth, focusing on the implications for cross-school networked learning communities in addition to individual school PLCs. Specifically, we explored what our research has identified as the three key enablers of professional learning that are the precursor to changed classroom practice: the practice of establishing and supporting clear and defensible *learning foci* for students, teachers, and leaders; the practice of *collaborative inquiry* that challenges thinking and practice; and the practice of *instructional leadership* (both formal and informal). These are the three enablers of the kind of professional learning that is about permanent change in thinking or behavior, and they will be unpacked further in Chapter 4. Going back to our opening example of Greenway School, it is likely that David's PLC is struggling with all three of these. There is the lack of a clear professional learning focus, difficulty with the practice of collaborative inquiry, and a principal struggling with how to effectively lead learning. And the result is an environment of clutter and activity, and likely of little impact on students.

In this book, we follow the same logic as in the last in terms of the importance of the enablers, but here we emphasize the connection between the enablers and the kind of learning that changes thinking and practice (i.e., how focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership actually enable real professional learning), as well as the barriers that get in the way of the implementation of these enablers. The logic of the current book (see Figure 1.2) goes like this: to change student achievement, it is necessary to change classroom practice, and changing classroom practice requires new learning. From our perspective, it is these three things—learning foci, collaborative inquiry

that challenges thinking and practice, and instructional leadership—that enable such learning. But putting focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership in place does not happen easily. There are significant barriers to effective implementation. People need to understand what these barriers are and how they prevent learning from happening, and then they need to intentionally *interrupt* them to enable the new learning. Learning is critical, and it's crucial to understand how to facilitate real professional learning and intentionally interrupt the things that get in the way.

Facilitation as Interruption

This book is about facilitating professional learning, and it is important to understand what we mean by *facilitation*. We have already said that the reason true learning is so difficult is because there are many barriers that get in the way of it. When left to their own devices, people's natural propensities are to shut down opportunities for real new learning. Being able to learn in ways that change practice and have a positive impact on students requires purposeful facilitation. We think of this kind of facilitation as *interruption*: an intentional interruption of

Figure 1.2   Building Capacity for Focused Professional Learning
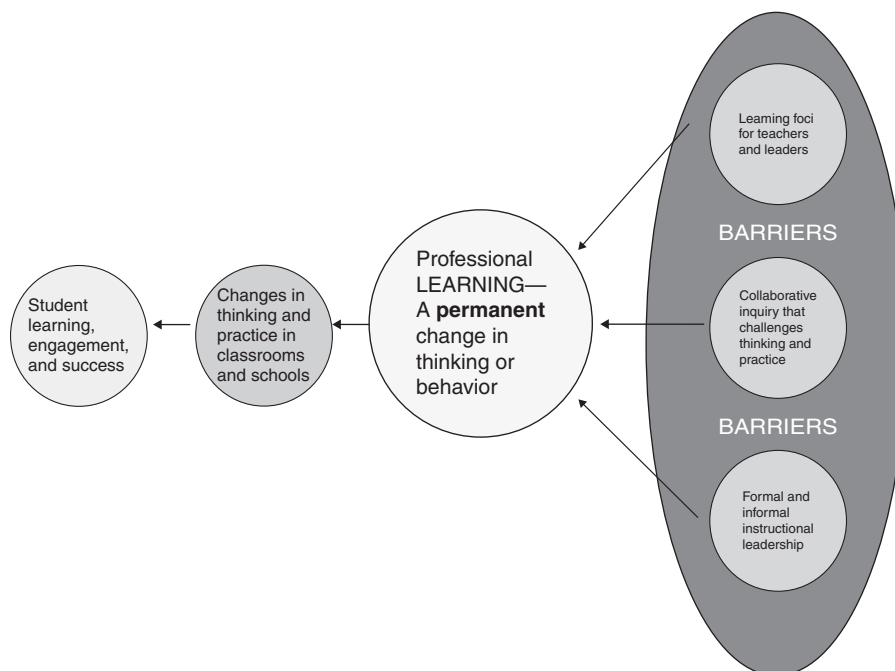
the subtle supports that work to preserve the status quo (the status quo being the *avoidance* of learning). When we talk about facilitation, we are not talking about a dedicated person who has the job (e.g., "the facilitator"). We are arguing that facilitation of learning is a role that *someone* has to intentionally play (and the "someone" can be anyone and can frequently change). The role of facilitation can be undertaken by anyone who has the responsibility of facilitating learning, regardless of who they are and what their formal position is. A facilitator of professional learning may be a formal leader (e.g., district leader, principal, consultant, etc.) or an informal leader (e.g., teacher who takes the responsibility of facilitating the learning of colleagues), and sometimes people even facilitate learning for themselves. The crucial point is that our conception of facilitation entails interrupting the status quo of professional learning in order to enable new learning that takes the form of permanent changes in thinking and practice.

The Sequence of What You'll Learn in This Book

This book is organized into six chapters: In Chapter 2, "The (Very) Hard Work of Learning," we take a step back and examine in depth what learning is from a psychological perspective (a permanent change in thinking or behavior) and why it is so difficult to make it happen. Think about these questions: Have you ever participated in a PD session where you really did think the ideas were meaningful, and you were inspired to change your practice, but then you returned to your school and life got busy and you never really thought about that session again? Do you think you really learned anything from that session? Chapter 2 will take up these questions and others like them. In Chapter 3, "The Problem With Professional Learning," we describe how educators typically try to enable learning—through professional development activities—and why this is problematic from a true learning orientation. As we briefly articulated already, despite the fact that the goal of professional development is to change classroom practice and influence student achievement, most professional development doesn't actually do this because it tends not to be about learning. Have you ever been sitting in a PD session in a big ballroom of a hotel or conference center and wondered how you will actually use what you are hearing about in your day-to-day work as a teacher or administrator? Chapter 3 will explore this question and others like it. In Chapter 4, "How Do Focus, Collaborative Inquiry, and Instructional Leadership Enable Learning?" we look at how professional learning

that does have the potential to impact on teacher practice and student achievement happens, specifically examining how it is enabled through focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership. We specifically articulate how each of these enablers assists in making real professional learning possible, to help give you a clear image of what you might like to see happen.

You will likely finish Chapter 4 thinking, "So why is this so hard? I've learned what learning is and why typical professional development is often not about learning, and I've learned what you need to do to get real learning in place. So what's the holdup? Let's get going and start our learning!" In Chapter 5, "The Barriers: How Our Minds Get in the Way," we describe the holdup. Putting the enablers (focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership) into place isn't easy or simple because the enablers are embedded in some major psychological barriers that interfere in the professional learning setting. In essence, human beings are predisposed to avoid learning (in the way that we've defined it) as much as possible, and so people unknowingly work very hard to *not learn.* One thing that all of us as human beings tend to do to avoid new learning (i.e., change) is interact with the world in a way that seeks to confirm what we already think, believe, know, and do, rather than challenge it. As an example, have you ever noticed the way you approach reading a professional article? Imagine you're asked to read an article and highlight the points you consider to be important. Most people will highlight points in the article that they agree with or that confirm their existing practices and rarely highlight ideas that challenge them. This small but relatable example illustrates how people (unknowingly) try to maintain the status quo and avoid challenge. Chapter 5 will look at this *confirmation bias* and other psychological biases like it. What all the biases have in common is that they are prevalent in all human beings, and they all work to preserve the status quo and inhibit real new learning. These psychological biases are the barriers to real learning that need to be interrupted. In Chapter 6, "Intentional Interruption," we look carefully at the notion of interrupting the barriers to learning. Specially, we explore strategies and methodologies for intentionally interrupting the barriers described in Chapter 5 to ensure that focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership unfold in a way that truly enables learning.

Time for Reflection

Take some time to think through the following questions:

- How does your PLC compare to Greenway's, the one described at the beginning of this chapter? What are some similarities and differences?
- From what you've read so far, what are your hypotheses about why Greenway's PLC might not be particularly "impactful"?
- Describe your greatest challenge when it comes to professional learning.
- Who facilitates your professional learning? Do you consider yourself a facilitator of professional learning (either for yourself or for others)?