Schools as Sites of Human Flourishing: Musings on Efforts to Foster Sustainable Learning Communities

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Abstract

In this conceptual article, the authors suggest that, in tune with the movement in popular culture towards intentionally creating a more compassionate and caring society, we ought to increasingly focus research with schools on factors and forces related to helping schools becoming more compassionate, caring, and positive organizations. The authors claim that there is a critical mass of scholarship that encourages us to give enhanced attention to what is working, researching what gives life, focusing on what we want more of, and figuring out how to develop and sustain thriving communities. Viewing school improvement research through positive lenses offers a different and complementary model of traditional school improvement perspectives. The authors suggest that a focus on the human capabilities, capacities, and potentials of the school organization—attending to the human flourishing—can be an important component of developing sustainable learning communities within which students and their teachers thrive.

positive school improvement, flourishing learning communities, compassion in school organizations

What might be gained by research that sees school communities as sites for human flourishing? We know that encouraging adult members of school communities to care for everyone, helping students learn to do the same for their classmates, and planting learning seeds that grow into future generations is an appealing and satisfying aspect of the teaching profession and integral to what it means to be a educator (Beck, 1994; Greene, 2000; Noddings, 2005, among others). We know from Henderson and Milstein (1996) that "more than any institution except the family, schools can provide the environment and conditions that foster resiliency in today's youth and tomorrow's adults" (p. 2). Their resiliency wheel, and the various other models (Seligman, 1998; Werner & Smith, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993) for helping students thrive rather than merely survive, have long provided educators ways of framing the mitigation of

threats to well-being and commending deliberate sponsorship of flourishing in and through schools. Yes, schools have long been considered significant, surrogate and generative contexts for the intentional promotion and facilitation of human flourishing.

Moreover, we suggest from recent foci on the human capabilities, capacities, and potentials, that the development of these in vulnerable and targeted populations is critical to the future of school communities who are intent on thriving (Nussbaum, 2011; Scheffler, 1985; Sen, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Attending to the human flourishing of educators, themselves, is an important component of developing sustainable learning communities within which students, their families and the entire learning community can also thrive.

Hoy and Tarter (2011) suggested that their proposal is a modest one. In it they say:

> We advocate the use of positive psychology as a perspective to refocus the study of educational organizations and administration. We are suggesting evolution, not revolution. The strength of the ***positive perspective*** is that it encompasses much of what already is good in our research and gives a lens to see events from a new vantage, a framework to incorporate existing positive research, a means to correct the negative imbalance and shift from the negative to the positive, and a new conceptual rendering that helps integrate a diversity of ideas into a coherent whole. (p. 441, emphasis added)

"Positive perspective!" In the last number of years, this phrase is too seldom heard. Rather, much of the rhetoric, rumours, and ruminating concerns the dire state of schools and has tended to be deficit

oriented, using rubrics of accountability, assessment measures, assorted proxies for achievement (and sometimes learning), and accompanying talk of blame, shame and threats to accord declarations of underperformance of expectations. Yes, schools are systems to be managed; but schools are also living systems. We think we understand the instrumentality of successive school reform efforts and the wide-range of strategies to re-order schools to increase efficiencies and better meet socio-economic demands, but we hasten to suggest that the balance of our attentions needs to be re-addressed. This article claims that there is a critical mass of scholarship that encourages us to give enhanced attention to what is working, researching what gives life, focusing on what we want more of, and figuring out how to sustain all that results for thriving learning communities.

This article resonates with the Hoy and Tarter proposal and we, too, affirm teachers and other school leaders who have long been recognized for their contributions to a more just, caring, democratic, and civil society (Palmer, 2007; Starratt, 2004; Ungerleider, 2003). With the Hoy and Tarter proposal, we, too, see the movement in popular culture towards the intentional creation of an increasingly compassionate and caring society, and the resurgence of attention to well-being and positive phenomena. Surely these impulses provide a worthwhile focus for research with schools. We believe that developments in positive organizational studies and allied fields are at a stage where suitably rigorous and highly relevant research can now be conducted with school communities. We want to ask: What are the factors, mysteries and

dynamics that interact to explain how it is that certain schools and people in schools flourish? If we are able to gain further insights related to this, and other such questions, then the likelihood of fostering increasingly compassionate and life-giving learning communities is more probable.

For decades, school effectiveness and improvement research has helpfully illuminated what we know about creating effective schools. This research encourages improvements to support thriving learning communities. For the most part the focus has been on aggregate performance measures and the correlates for effective production of qualities associated with

enhanced learning achievement levels and increasing the life-chances of student cohorts. Much of this good work has focused on antecedents of effectiveness and asserting connections between inputs and outputs (guessing at what might be in the transitor "black box"). For example, we know that teachers' levels of commitment will have great effect on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hattie, 2008; Leithwood, 2006). Through school improvement research we also know that principals create the conditions within the school culture for teachers to carry out their work toward increasing student achievement within learning communities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2009). Through sus-
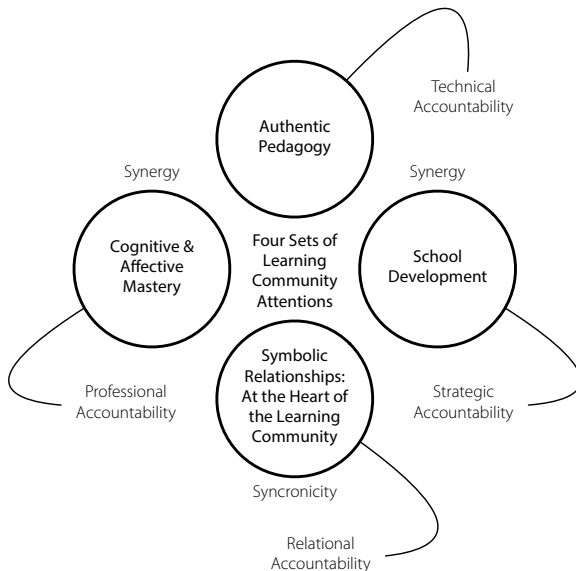

Figure 1 Typical Learning Community Attentions for Purposes of Accountabilities

tained and explicit study of school organizations, we have come to learn much about what effective schooling looks like. There are numerous summaries of the "favourite" variables and correlates for lifting schools to higher levels of performance, health and learning.

We have summarized some of these antecedents of effectiveness and improvement in Figure 1, from our own research (Walker & Sackney, 2011; Sackney & Walker, 2007; Sackney, Walker, & Mitchell, 2005). In the figure we suggest four types of accountability (pressures) are satisfied through four sets (within circles) of interactive variables (enabling factors).

We think there is much of value to commend in this representation of typical learning community attentions, which is similar to a plethora of alternative articulations and school improvement frameworks. In addition to the more usual factors for "successful, improving and effective schools" (mostly in the authentic pedagogy circle), there are also hints of the positive dynamics proffered by Hoy and Tarter (2011). In addition, there are factors and constructs that accord with an ecological views of schools, such as: synchronicity, synergy, and symbiotic relationships, as well as attention to relationships, human development, caring, sharing, trust, dialogue, collaboration, support, capacity building, and respect; all of which are akin to the positive features of a living system. Absent from this figure are the negative, pathological, messy, risks, threats, challenges or toxic realities that are ever present in earthly schools. We are interested in expanding and deepening the variables and complementing the accountability

pressures with the moral teleologies that concentrate efforts on giving rise to more well-being and flourishing (personal and collective). We ground our musing and aspirations for focused and sustained attention to the human capabilities on the assumption that schools can and ought to become increasingly positive human systems and that vibrant learning communities can become the "vehicles for bringing more humanity, courage, wisdom, love and value into the world" (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2010, p. 3).

Reframing Approaches to Account for Insights from Positive Psychology

Martin Seligman is often seen as the seminal progenitor and animator of the movement towards positive psychology. In his roles as President of the American Psychological Association, in the late 1990s, he, with others, began a conscious effort to shift some research from a disease and deficit model to a positive, wellness approach. He and people such as Ed Diener (2009) have done much to refocus attention on what works for people and communities; with the sense that we will get more of what we give attention to and, therefore, if we look at achieving well-being (rather than always looking at pathologies), we might see more well-being. Both join behaviour economists, and others, to re-examine motivations and attentions to foster flourishing organizations and communities. Seligman's (1975, 2002, 2001) work on flourishing, authentic happiness and optimism has made a significant impact on how we study and learn about how humans can maximize their happiness and lead more fulfilling lives. Recently, his work has shifted to encompass a fuller under-

standing of what it means to live a good life. He has moved beyond the notion of seeking happiness toward a construct that he calls well-being.

In simple terms, well-being is about a search for human flourishing, rather than merely seeking to maximize happiness and minimize misery. Well-being is about attending to our strengths in each of five areas of our lives: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. In positive psychology, people would be counseled to learn to notice and use their strengths in each of the five areas of well-being as a way of shifting their negative moods, and even depression, towards a more positive way of coping and, eventually, thriving. This shift from focusing on what is not working well in a person's life, to attending to what could be doing better is an important paradigm shift in psychology and is aimed at fostering a full life of positive growth, rather than trying to simply reduce or relieve misery. Seligman (2011) explained that traditional psychological counseling tended to leave his clients empty—reduced of misery but not necessarily fulfilled or capable of finding fulfillment. Positive psychological practices are designed to build and encourage the development of positive outlooks, habits, and mental models. Predicated on the belief that there is a "reflexive reality" (p. 234), a reality that we can influence with our perceptions and expectations, positive psychologists would suggest that it makes sense for us to focus our perceptions in a way that maximizes the positive potential of those realities. In other words, positivity will not overcome everything, but where we are able to exert influence through our perceptions and expectations to shift our reality, positivity would seem to be the preferred choice.

We see how Seligman's theory of well-being provides potential for approaches to "school-life improvement." The elements that contribute to well-being— positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement—are intimately linked to the work that goes on in schools for teachers and the learning that is at the heart of what it means to be a student. Moreover, the paradigmatic shift that ensues from a focus on elements that are fulfilling, that contribute to a rich and meaningful life, support the arguments that we make in this article: namely, re-focusing school improvement towards a metaphor of human flourishing provides a significant shift in how we organize schools as learning communities. We have begun to image the potential for school improvement when teachers and other school leaders explicitly notice and attend to the positive human capabilities of the organization—love, courage, kindness, wisdom, compassion, for example. These human capabilities are the focus of a new discipline of organizational studies, positive organizational scholarship.

Flourishing by Giving Attention to Positive Organizational Scholarship

In organizational studies, the concept of researching positivity and attending to the human capabilities within organizations as scholarship is gaining momentum (Gallos, 2008; Pace, 2010). Positive organizational scholarship emerged from the field of positive psychology, and is a growing field of theory and practice

(Cameron & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Pace (2010) described this new scholarship as a different way of exploring why certain organizations perform so much better than others and explained, "concepts about virtue, compassion, and positivity may seem simple but they turn out to be crucial elements for broader success" (p. 1).

Positive organizational scholarship reflects a desire to build and sustain organizations from a strengths-based perspective. Similarly, positive organizational development is "centrally about the design of positive institutions that not only elevate and connect human strengths (internally) but serves to refract and magnify our highest human strengths into society" (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2010, p. 3). In positive organizational development organizations are seen as mysteries of human relatedness, living systems reflecting and influencing human imagination (Cooperrider, nd). Of great interest here, is the parallel between the description of positive organizational scholarship and development and the tenets of sustainable learning communities for schools—interconnected relationships, living systems, human imagination, and mysteries of learning. Through our inquiry, we aim to elicit more direct attention to the human relatedness of the school organization through the focus on human capabilities, such as compassion.

Towards a Reinvigorated Model of Flourishing Communities of Learning

Understanding how to organize schools for the outcomes we desire for our children has been an important focus in decades of school improvement research. We sometimes worry that there might be a tendency to reduce the work of schools to the production of test scores. Surely no one would admit to this trivializing of the grandeur of human transformation! An environment of increasing anxiety around the ability and capacity of schools to prepare children for an unknown future characterized by the complexity, diversity, and creativity of the new knowledge paradigm of the 21st century has been heightened with annual reports of international educational rankings. We are in need of new ways of looking at raising and enriching capacity of our education enterprises. There have seen significant shifts in the way we organize schools, away from the industrial, bureaucratic and hierarchic model of school organization towards what has become understood as the learning community model. We offer a different and complementary model of school improvement that reflects the palpable sense we have gleaned from the work of others that we are at a critical juncture for re-positioning our societies towards sustainability, social justice and freedoms, and personal well-being. Our great hope is to spark the imagination of researchers and practitioners towards the potential for deeper transformation of our school communities from places focusing on deficits to places of well-being, academic attainment, and nurturing of human capacities, capabilities and potentials. We recognize the importance of academic achievement, but suggest that our fixation with measurable outputs as evidence of effective schooling marginalizes the importance of developing human capabilities for both students and teachers, a development that has implications and impacts for creating just, caring, and democratic societies.

In thinking about school improvement that builds schools as communities, Sergiovanni (1996) used Tonnies' (1957) concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Tonnies argued that as society moves toward the *gesellschaft* state, community values are replaced by contractual relationships, with rational-technical sets of expectations, pressures and accountabilities. In the "s

ystemworld" of *gesellschaft*, scientific rationality, technology and the market economy are the motivating forces. In this view, we relate to each other because we see some goal or benefit from the relationship, the emphasis is on the "I." In the "lifeworld" of *gemeinschaft*, natural, generative and sustainable relationships are the motivating forces. Persons relate to each other because of intrinsic meaning and transformative significance. The focus is on the "we." Our contention is that, if we are to build schools as learning communities, then we need to foster more *gemeinschaft* notions, because vitality, zest and thriving are much more likely to exist in settings characterized by *gemeinschaft*. By definition, *gesellschaft* may offer efficiencies and scientific amenability, but long-term community well-being are not priorities (only utilities). These two states result in two different ends, or teleologies, and make different assumptions about what school communities are and what they ought to be. We suggest that school communities need to be seen as fragile ecosystems, comprised of a complex network of relationships, bound in purpose toward learning—at individual and social levels—in ways that last, thrive, improve and result in high quality outcomes for all.

The concept of human flourishing has ancient moral and ethical roots in the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, understood as the desired and dignified end of a good life for which we all ought to strive (Nussbaum, 1994). Through our conceptual model (see Figure 2), we aim to place the aspiration to enhance human flourishing at the core of school improvement and to provide a significant shift in the way we attend to school organizations. We want to engender a broad conceptualization of the notion of human development through "schooling."

Flourishing as Finding Flow and Getting Traction

Since their inception in the early 1990s, establishing sustainable learning communities in schools has become an increasingly popular organizational approach (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2009). The notion of learning communities represents a shift in thinking about the ways educators conceive of schools and reflects an interdisciplinary trend toward a less mechanized and a more ecological ontology. In a professional learning community members take an active role in their professional development to generate authentic learning opportunities within schools. Though we have gained some insights (as below), more research is needed to understand the ways in which a shift towards an authentic learning culture is sustained.

With our colleagues, we have had a particular interest in the characteristics and models of learning community schools, leadership, and how knowledge management works in such schools. Some 140

Abundance – Unlimited Potential

Flourishing Theories

Antecedent Theories Adult Development State of the Art Practices

Flourishing Schools

Life Cycle

Barriers to Growth: Fear, Toxicity

Human Capacity Development

Intentional Noticing (Appreciative Processes) Inspiring Stories Sustaining Dynamics

Flourishing Practices
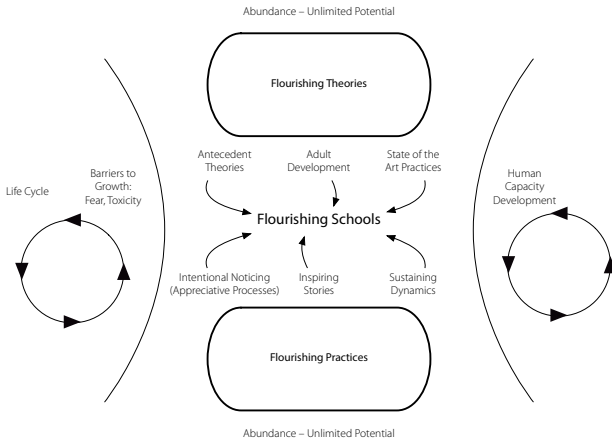
Abundance – Unlimited Potential

Figure 2. Flourishing Schools as a Metaphor For School Improvement

schools from two provinces in Canada participated in various phases of a study where we were able to identify some principles and attributes that underlie successful development and effective extension of learning communities (Walker & Sackney, 2011; Sackney & Walker, 2007; Walker, 2006; Sackney, Walker & Mitchell, 2005). The first principle, *deep respect*, is the foundation of all engagement in schools. In our view, deep respect positions members of the learning community as valued participants in the life of the school. Respectful dialogue protects the dignity and self-respect of the other, especially as conflicts, pressures and insecurities emerge.

Collective responsibility is a principle that encourages school staff members to take responsibility for all students in the school. This type of responsibility extends to parents and the community—the

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"whole village" commits to educating the child.

A third principle is the honouring and *appreciation of diversity*. Schools seem to flourish where differences are valued as features of the school and the school is seen as a living system of difference. There is wide-spread acknowledgement and enactment of the diverse teaching styles and breadth of facilitated avenues for personal growth and strong encouragement for the stretching of professional repertoires, beyond the usual, habitual, or comfortable practice.

In schools that flourish we see a *problem-solving orientation* that shapes and channels engagement. People are encouraged at every juncture to remain flexible, adapt, habituate agility, tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty in order to foster extensive experimentation (with both failed

efforts and successful innovation). Every member of the learning community is responsible to ask questions about the nature of their practice (why are we doing this?) and the effects of their practice (is this working and giving us the results we are looking for?), and to participate in creating a climate of dynamism and nurturing growth in all aspects of school life.

We have observed that *positive role modeling* throughout the school leads to a vibrancy and "leaderfulness" in school learning communities: i.e., a school full of leaders. Everyone is encouraged to lead with a "can do" and affirming attitude that is contagious. Positive deviance is rewarded with emulation. Each moment is viewed as a learning moment and every person in the school (whether staff, parent or student) knows that it is important to think about what they are learning in the moment and whether their enthusiasm for learning is at a level that ignites enthusiasm in others. Leadership is distributed and a positive culture of growth and development synergies to the benefit of all.

The learning community model has value for creating meaningful learning experiences within a just and democratic school organization. We suggest that a shift in focus towards the construct of well-being provides a new way of thinking about the positive potential within this model.

Flourishing as Developing Human Capabilities

A call for a more humanist approach to education has recently been noted in business education (McKenna & Biloslavo, 2011), higher education (Walker, 2010), and in the non-profit sector (Hayward, Pinnozo, & Colman, 2007). For example, Melanie Walker (2010) suggested reimagining university education policies using a human capabilities approach to develop graduates who are more socially conscious and likely to influence society toward the end developments of human freedoms and justice (p. 481). Similarly, Starratt (2004) suggested that we have strayed too far toward what is understood as a neo-liberal organization of schooling (Apple, 2010) and that we need to re-consider how we attend to developing capacities for democratic responsibility and social justice in our schools. McKenna and Biloslavo (2011) advocated for a more explicit focus on values, ethics, and moral decision-making in business schools as a way to promote sustainability, rather than the rational economic views so prevalent in contemporary societies. In a report from the Canadian Institute of Wellbeing, Hayward et al. (2007) argued that healthy and socially sustainable communities must be underpinned by education models that focus on more than academic achievement. They called for schools to attend to a holistic education that develops intellectual competencies, but also, and perhaps more importantly, moral, social, and emotional competencies for all learners. Similarly, Walker (2010) argued that economic prosperity can never be attained without concern for human flourishing. We appreciate Starratt's (2004) argument that education must move beyond an instrumental approach to increase grades and test scores to provide an authentic learning experience that leads to students developing social habits for contributing to the democratic public good. We suggest

that these authentic experiences are located within positive environments that focus on the human flourishing of those within the school.

As we have described (Cherkowski & Walker, 2014), Nussbaum (2011) enumerated ten central capabilities that provide some benchmark thresholds for attainment of all members of the learning community to be at least minimally thriving: living a normal life span; having good health; being able to move freely from place to place; being able to use senses, to imagine, think and reason, being able to have attachments, to love and be loved, to form conceptions of good and engage in critical reflection, to be able to affiliate with others and engage in respectful social activities, living with concern and respect with the world of nature, being able to laugh, play and enjoy, and being able to have some control over one's environment (political and material; p. 34). While this paraphrased list seems basic, it is our contention that these capabilities are too often assumed to be provided by school communities.

Flourishing as Nurturing Collective Compassion

Western culture is currently rife with examples of a common desire to re-align ourselves, individually and as a society, with the concepts of civility, virtue, and the notion of the common good. As a society, we have evolved from our tribal roots and are no longer, in the Western world at least, fighting for our very survival. This shift in consciousness makes room for the possibility of societies based in cooperation, empathy, and compassion (Armstrong, 2006, 2011; Rifkin, 2009). A focus on compassion, coop-

eration, and care for one another are becoming integral threads of our evolving social fabric. Social scientists suggest that as a culture, we have evolved with a moral sense and that most people can "detach themselves from their own interest and consider what is fair for the group as a whole. They can also widen their sense of the group to include, dare we hope, the interests of the whole human race" (Layard, 2005, p. 107). Layard, an economist who researches in the area of happiness and public policy, rejected the current obsession with schooling as solely an individual pursuit with emphasis on increasing test scores. He suggested that education ought to be a means for developing and sustaining the pursuit for a common good in society. To achieve this, we must balance the need for increased academic achievement, based mainly on competitive testing, with moral growth through schooling,

> [w]e are talking about a sensible balance, which means a balance that is less obsessed with rankings than at present. For our fundamental problem today is a lack of common feeling between people—the notion that life is a competitive struggle. (Layard, 2005, p. 163)

In other words, we need to provide a balance of individual competitive pursuits in schools with striving to contribute to the common good and serving others through compassion.

Compassion can be described as noticing and wanting to act to alleviate the pain and suffering of our fellow person, or a mindful awareness of the interconnectedness of our lives and the impact our actions and thoughts have on one another. At its deepest level, compassion evokes a desire to act in a generous way

for all humans to alleviate physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual suffering—these thoughts and actions are undertaken as right action, regardless of any reward or benefit for the giver. Compassion is a cornerstone value of most religions, wisdom traditions, and notions of social justice. In schools, research has highlighted the use of compassion to ameliorate conditions in schools faced with such as bullying (Hollingshead, Crump, Eddy, & Rowe, 2009), inclusion (Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa, 2009; Boyden, 2009), and as general character education for students (Mclain, Ylimaki, & Ford, 2010b). Since practicing compassion is not only an act of service towards others, but has been found to increase personal feelings of happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007) and reduce symptoms of depressions (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007), compassionate school environments give opportunities for community members to give and receive of the benefits of compassion.

In positive organizational scholarship, the research on compassion reveals that, "organizations that support and encourage individual expressions of compassion, however, build capacities for collectively noticing, feeling, and responding to pain, which can be instrumental in replenishing and strengthening individuals' emotional resources" (Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, 2004, p. 826). Compassion is an important component to the emotional health of the organization. In schools, we know that the best learning takes place in safe, caring, and emotionally secure environments—paying attention to the emotional well-being of the teachers entrusted to create conditions in the classroom for students' well-being is

essential. We share Wheatley's (2005) assertion that "as leaders, as neighbors, as colleagues, it is time to turn to one another, to engage in the intentional search for human goodness" (p. 57). Teachers and other school leaders are essential links in the chain of emotional well-being and the search for human goodness in the school organization.

An interest in exploring organization through a humanist lens has led to researchers adopting new lenses for viewing educational leadership. For example, a Buddhist lens framed an inquiry into principals' perception of compassion (McClain, Ylimaki, & Ford, 2010a) and wisdom (Ylimaki & McClain, 2009). This work highlights the desire for formal school leaders to embrace their work in a holistic way. Our exploration of compassion and other human capacities in a new model of school improvement builds on our work on teacher commitment in learning communities and the findings that school leaders are inherently influential in how teachers understand their commitment to their craft. In one study, teachers' beliefs about commitment to a professional learning community were positively challenged by the administrator's propensity to extend compassion (Cherkowski, 2012). Studying compassion and other human capabilities is becoming an important part of understanding how organizations, such as schools, can become the vehicles for goodness and positive human development in our societies.

Flourishing as Fostering Warranted Hope

A decade ago, Fullan (2001) contended that the educational leaders of the future

ought to be agents of cultural change, persons attuned to the big picture, and sophisticated conceptual thinkers. To his way of thinking, five essential components that characterize such leaders in a knowledge society: moral purpose, an understanding of the change process, the ability to improve relationships, knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making. Moral purpose and coherence making are closely allied with the notion of hope-fostering as a key feature of flourishing school communities (Walker, 2006; Walker & Atkinson, 2010).

Peter Senge's description of leadership resonates with notes of optimism, hope, and positive emotion: "At its essence, leadership often comes down to how people move from fatalism to an awakened faith that they can shape a different future" (cited in Senge et al., 2008, p. 369). The idea of teachers and other school leaders awakening optimism, hope, and other positive emotions, in themselves and in the community, to contribute to a common desired future is at the heart of our new conceptual model of school improvement. We advocate borrowing and adapting from the disciplines of positive psychology and positive organization scholarship to describe and encourage the shift in thinking about school improvement to one that sees schools as places of human flourishing.

We have said that educational leaders need to be "mindful of their schools' cultures and enabled in their own learning processes, intentional in their engagement of people in capacity building efforts, and they need to be superordinately teleological in their general professional orientation" (Walker, 2006, p. 555). School communities that are sites

for flourishing need to be "constantly and coherently thinking about the future, the Ends, the greater good, the best interests, and larger purposes of each activity taking place in the learning community" (p. 555). In addition, each person in the learning community needs to be encouraged to possess adaptive confidence in themselves and other members of the community – the continuous work of moving individual efficacy towards collective efficacy. Quinn (2004) helpfully reminded us that practicing adaptive confidence means that "we are willing to enter uncertain situations because we have a higher purpose and we are confident that we can learn and adapt as we move forward (p. 148). Kouzes and Posner (1993) suggested that flourishing takes place when leaders (and we suggest everyone in the school) "uplift our spirits and restore our belief in the future" (p. 218). They said "leaders must keep hope alive" (p. 218) and "arouse optimistic feelings and enable their constituents to hold positive thoughts about the possibilities of success" (p. 221).

A Flourishing School Approach to School Improvement

In the earlier sections of this article, we touched on several facets of how flourishing might be seen in the context of school communities. As we conclude, we offer a tentative conceptual model of schools as sites of human flourishing, grounded in notions of learning community theory, positive theories of well-being, collective compassion, and attention to hopefulness for the future. A visual representation of this metaphor reveals the connection between the elements of what we propose for a new model of school improvement:

Positive School Improvement. The model is conceptualized as a recursive spiral, or life cycle, of *Flourishing Theories* (antecedent theories, concepts of adult development, and current state of the art practices of school improvement) and *Flourishing Practices* (noticing, inspiring/multiplying, sustaining) influencing and shaping *Flourishing Schools*. The spiraling life cycle of this model is underpinned by theories of adult mental and moral development (Kegan, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Maslow, 1954), where attaining levels of self-actualization or higher levels of consciousness is the ultimate human aspiration. The principle upon which the model is grounded is that of abundance, of unlimited potential. This shift in mindset from deficiency to unlimited potential is a new way to ground conceptions of school improvement and provides new lenses for viewing learning communities as school organizations. Finally, the shadow side of this model is acknowledged, with concepts of fear, systemic barriers, and toxic contributors included in the collection of potential negative detractors located beside the central construct of the model—*Flourishing Schools*.

Conclusions

Premised on the belief that what we pay attention to grows, our article contributes to school improvement research and resources for school leadership, with a focus on human flourishing in compassionate communities. This article provides a renewed metaphor for schools—as sites of human flourishing. We believe this is a shift in the ways we currently think about school improvement and certainly an alternative to rational technical, high-risk performativity models for school improvement and accountability. We tap into the critical mass of scholarship that encourages us to attend to what is working, researching what gives life, focusing on what we want more of and learning about how to nurture the outcomes we see for thriving communities. In this way, we provide a new theoretical emphasis on well-being and hope-fostering mindsets towards human flourishing in schools grounded in learning community theory.

Schools have traditionally been organized around the mechanistic model, steeped in hierarchy and bureaucracy. We have made a shift in the last few decades towards more democratic, community oriented school organizations. Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) reminded us that a breakthrough is "a sudden, dramatic and important discovery or development ... [and/or] a significant ... overcoming of a perceived obstacle, allowing the completion of a process" (p. xi). We join with others who would be spurred on by these authors who say "a quantum breakthrough in public schooling is tantalizingly close. Nothing, we mean nothing, is more critical to the future of the world than rapidly and constantly improving systems of public schooling that serve all students" (p. 100).

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