

# Coherent Schools, Powerful Learning

When Shared Beliefs Fuse School Culture, Structures, and Instruction

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## **Incoherence: A School at Odds with Itself**

The first full-time job I had was as one of four biology teachers at a traditional, suburban high school of about 1,600 students. This was during the mid-1990s, and the school was situated in a New Jersey township with a majority white, middle-class base living in modest, postwar, stand-alone houses. There was an affluent section of town with well-manicured Tudors and stately Colonials, and, adjacent to the business district, a low-lying tract with what locals called “the projects,” which in fact were a mix of apartment complexes and smaller homes inhabited mostly by lower-income black and Latinx families. The one high school in town had earned national blue-ribbon status a few years earlier, and its leadership spoke proudly of the work staff was doing to close achievement gaps between its students of color, who accounted for about a quarter of enrollment, and its white and Asian students. Yet, as I was to learn, the unspoken ways in which adults interacted with each other and the lack of attention paid to teaching and learning created a buffer against individual and collective efforts to succeed with all students.

For example, my first teaching schedule comprised five sections of biology, three of which were “Honors” biology-track classes and two of which were called “Regular” (i.e., lower) track classes. I found, to my dismay, the Honors sections were provided with more recent textbooks and an additional hour each week for extended lab activities. The Honors students were also predominantly white and from the middle-class or well-off parts

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of town, whereas the Regular classes were populated mostly by the lower-income students of color living in “the projects.”

Despite these concerning inequities, my assigned mentor teacher demanded that I give all my students, in both the Honors and Regular tracks, the same 200-question multiple-choice midterm exam, which she had developed and used for more than a decade. When I refused, suggesting that this wouldn't be fair because, first of all, we weren't resourcing all the classes similarly, and, second of all, there were better ways to get at what each student had actually learned than multiple-choice tests, my mentor avoided the core issue and replied, in a haughty tone, that we should be holding all students to the same standards. I got the implication: by giving the same test to all students she was the one being fair, expressing high expectations for all. In contrast, my approach of acknowledging the stark differences in access to content and resourcing across the tracks was tantamount to racism—even though I was framing the issue as one of our decisions as practitioners rather than the inherent qualities of students. It was a hurtful slight. In spite of this, and the pressure I felt as a new teacher to heed my mentor's guidance, I maintained my stance that we could do better by our students, which at the moment meant not using a poorly constructed assessment in unfair ways. Subsequently, my mentor reported my alleged insubordination to our supervisor.

The science department head chose not to bring us together to reflect on this conflict and resolve it together. He missed an opportunity to align the stated values of the school with an adult culture that would drive instructional improvement and chip away at those shameful achievement gaps. Instead, the science supervisor met with my mentor and me separately and then issued a compromise: for my classes' midterms I could choose half of the 200 questions my mentor provided and add other open-ended items at my own discretion. I was not thrilled with this outcome, as it did not address the root issues, but given the diminishing time I had before midterm week, I accepted it. My mentor, on the other hand, was infuriated. She and the two other biology teachers gave me the silent treatment, not speaking to me for three months. They just flat-out ignored me in the hallways and in the cramped office space we shared.

This time in exile for me was exacerbated by the fact that there were no meaningful collaborative structures in the school for adults. Science department meetings were generally a blizzard of announcements and operational items like revisiting budgetary allocations, discussing new potential lab materials, and making science fair preparations. Plus, the mentoring relationship was clearly unmonitored and unimportant: the two of us were not

meeting anymore, and our department head avoided asking about it. The isolation and lack of instructional conversations contributed to a toxic adult atmosphere for those who had different ideas to offer than the established orthodoxy. In this kind of environment, I began to see that we weren't actually expected to collaborate with a goal of creating better learning experiences for every student.

Overall, the experience was disillusioning for me, a new teacher to the school and the profession. It seemed I was part of an organization designed to perpetuate inequity. However, I mostly heard rhetoric to the contrary: the all-white school leadership and the mostly white staff talked of education as a vehicle for greater social impact. Ironically, this was an important reason I took the job in the first place. The incoherence was bewildering. At best, I figured, the school was at odds with itself. And yet, there were no signs of struggle: everyone just went about their daily activities with no recognition of this internal conflict. This led me to believe that this community, so proud of its nationally recognized status as a "school of excellence," wanted these kinds of issues to get buried, to be sublimated, to be left unaddressed. As the newest teacher in the school, younger by a decade than any other staff member and already marginalized by the veteran science teachers, I couldn't fathom how to address the bigger, systemic issues at play there. I couldn't find any allies, either, who had interest in doing something about how we supported our most undermined and vulnerable students. As my second year at the school came to a close, I couldn't see things improving anytime soon. So I left.

### **A Model of School Coherence**

This early experience taught me little about good teaching, but it taught me a lot about school. I learned that any one teacher could be working in her or his classroom to do the right thing for all kids, but it was the school as an entity that dictated the quality of overall impact. Entering the profession, I had thought of education as the great equalizer across race and class divides, but the brand of schooling I had witnessed was stealing that opportunity from those who needed it most. In my teacher preparation program, I'd read *Horace's Compromise* by Ted Sizer (1984), and the silent agreement named in that book was the same one I encountered: I won't challenge you and you won't challenge me; that way, none of us will have to work harder than we have to. Worse, though, was the way racism and inequity were baked into this compromise. A part of me was so saddened by this crushing realiza-

tion that I began to consider other careers. My parents were both teachers, however, and my mother encouraged me to try again somewhere else. For those first few years of teaching, I had fully enjoyed interacting with my students and thought there was still much I could learn and do as an educator. So I started looking for a school that did things differently, that put core beliefs about schooling as a force for social justice into practice. A few weeks after resigning from that New Jersey high school, I found just such a place across the Hudson River in New York City.

The bulk of this article is about that school, Humanities Preparatory Academy, the powerful approach to education its leaders and staff developed, and reflections on my professional journey since I departed, taking on a succession of school and district support and academic policy roles. Insights and lessons learned from the past two decades of this work have provided a theoretical model of school improvement that I hope others can benefit from, with a focus on coherence of school culture, structures, and instructional approach—the kind of coherence that was missing from the high school at which I started.

Today, I lead the division of Bank Street College of Education that engages in large-scale partnerships to disrupt inequity through systems change in education. We believe that schools are the key unit of change in education systems and that the coherence of school culture, structures, and instruction must be grounded in shared beliefs about how students and adults learn best. We know that achieving and maintaining this kind of coherence is no easy feat, although it is the fundamental task of schools as communities. Districts and state agencies cannot generate school-level coherence from the outside in. It is the collective responsibility of a school's principal, staff, students, parents, and partners to ensure that the way the organization operates (“how things are done around here”) and how all its various resources align—from time to talent, money to mentors—in fact facilitate meaningful teaching and learning experiences for all students across classrooms. In practice, this coherence must be forged by beliefs and values rooted in research on human learning and development (e.g., young children learn through play; opportunities for ownership of learning matter intensely as children become adolescents and expect increased autonomy; relationships and expectations are important for learners of all ages). And because our greater society depends on the quality of our public school system, we must also seek to make the cohering glue for our schools reflective of aspirations for communal participation, equity, and a stronger democracy (Knecht 2018).

At Bank Street, we leverage more than a century of expertise on the intersection of human development and schooling practices to privilege a

learner-centered and socially supported educational approach for both students and adults for a more just society (Nager and Shapiro 1999, 2007). The beliefs driving behavior in our schools, programs, and partnerships make evident the priority of placing the learner at the center of a strengths-based educational enterprise. Whether it is in Bank Street's graduate school or its Head Start program, organizational culture and structures coherently reinforce the cyclical instructional practices of its educators: observing learners closely to get to know each as a whole person and then offering appropriately challenging and relevant tasks (e.g., explorations, assignments, texts) with requisite relational supports (e.g., respectful one-on-one interactions, safe small group learning communities), which then generates more information on the learner's development, interests, and achievement. These data on the learners in turn inform curricular and pedagogical decision making, and so on.

This is why, in our graduate school, for example, master's degree candidates are not only put through the paces of rigorous coursework and clinically rich, supervised teaching or school leadership placements. They are also organized in small conference groups of six to eight members, facilitated by a trained adviser, meeting weekly over many months to unpack and process their experiences together and build on them. As fledgling teachers or prospective school leaders, this scaffolded social structure helps them to deepen their practice, connecting their personal beliefs, challenges, and privileges to how they can effectively apply their reflections and learning on behalf of the children they serve. The results of a study by the Stanford Center on Opportunity Policy in Education of Bank Street's teacher graduates indicate the lasting power of this approach (Lit and Darling-Hammond 2015).<sup>1</sup>

In stand-alone public and independent schools affiliated or working with Bank Street, the goal is similar: build a learning environment that sets the bar high for student attainment while generating authentic opportunities for each learner to reach those heights by meeting her where she is, engaging her emotionally, socially, and cognitively with both complex independent and interdependent, developmentally meaningful learning experiences. To accomplish this challenging task, each school community must employ its beliefs about learning and its core values to tighten and fuse its culture, structure, and instructional practices.

1. In this study, Bank Street-developed teachers consistently outperformed comparison groups of educators in key areas: they rated their preparation experience as stronger, expressing more readiness for the demands of teaching; they demonstrated a longer average tenure in the classroom; and they garnered greater satisfaction as educators from their supervisors.

The following questions are often asked by various school and system leaders we engage with: What exactly does this look, sound, and feel like? What are the roles of districts and states in building more of these types of schools so that all children, not just those from wealthy families, have access to powerful learning opportunities?

### **Coherence from Beliefs and Core Values**

To address the first question, I will examine the case of Humanities Preparatory Academy,<sup>2</sup> the small, alternative high school I joined as its first science teacher in 1997. “Prep,” as the school was called, originated as a half-day program for underachieving youth in a big comprehensive high school. From those early days, reconnecting students to their education has been a moral imperative. The school’s mission statement asserts that Prep exists “to provide a haven for students who have previously experienced school as unresponsive to their needs as individuals” (Hantzopoulos 2016, 157; see also app. A for the entire mission statement). The mission continues: “We wish for all students to find their voice and to speak knowledgeably and thoughtfully on issues that concern their school, their world. We aid students in this endeavor by personalizing our learning situations, democratizing and humanizing the school environment, and by creating a “talking culture,” an atmosphere of informal intellectual discourse among students and faculty” (157). At the end of the statement, there is also a description of the school’s beliefs about how adolescents learn best, committing to “the best progressive principles of education, to promote emotional as well as intellectual development, and to cultivate the various learning styles and intelligences present in all students. To this effect, we advocate that depth of inquiry, not coverage of material, guide classroom instruction” (158).

As can be seen in the mission statement’s reference to emotional and intellectual development, the school’s approach was also rooted in developmental psychology of adolescence, which had been an interest in the graduate study of Prep’s founder, codirector, and English teacher, Perry Weiner. In conversation with Weiner on January 12, 2019, he shared his perspective on adolescence: It is a time of intense physiological and psychological change. Human beings at this stage of life engage in the reformation of their identi-

2. For a deeper look at Humanities Preparatory Academy, you can read a book I referenced here multiple times: *Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Education*, by Maria Hantzopoulos (2016), a professor at Vassar College and former teacher colleague at Prep.

ties as individuals, moving away from the family unit and into the community. In addition, curiosity about the world, a desire for independence, and ethical questions of right and wrong are central to the adolescent experience. The intention of connecting to the developmental experiences and issues of teenagers can be found in other phrases in the school's mission, such as "individuality is respected and cherished," "promoting intellectual behaviors which lead to students' discovery of their own humanity and the value of human life," "cultivate the natural idealism of youth," and "connections between the academic disciplines and moral action" (Hantzopoulos 2016, 157–58). To guide the school community in realizing this powerful mission statement, the founders crafted a set of seven core values: respect for humanity, the intellect, the truth, and diversity, and a commitment to peace, justice, and democracy. How adults and students talked about these values, and the ways they were lived each day at this new school, created coherence between the culture and structures while helping to build a shared instructional model. I will describe how this worked through the lens of each of the three elements of school coherence, starting with culture.

## Culture

Because Prep sought to establish a "talking culture" for students, voice mattered. Deeply. Everyone's voice. Staff worked to meet students where they were, offering and soliciting interesting, morally complex, and relevant topics to these New York City adolescents—from locally to universally compelling issues—to talk about and examine. Using the core values as North Stars and guardrails for interactions and discussions, such as a respect for humanity, the staff ensured students felt appreciated, safe, and well known so that students would express themselves and share their thoughts. They leveraged in-class and out-of-class opportunities and all the space available to them inside the school building and out in the city itself to engage students, to get them thinking and talking to each other and to their teachers and to people living and working in the community. For such a talking culture to generate true intellectual growth, relational trust and honesty, as well as a commitment to the truth, are required. The core values of respect for peace and justice called for an approach to resolving conflict and disciplinary actions that used restorative practices. For example, the school created a "fairness committee," in which students were part of the process of settling on appropriate consequences for any behavioral transgressions (Hantzopoulos 2013).

The culture of adults featured an expectation that teachers model the core values in their own development as professionals and community leaders (and I would argue, as human beings). Embodying a commitment to democracy, the codirectors handed facilitation of weekly, three-hour staff meetings for a rotating body of staff, and consensus and protocols were used for shared power and equity of voice. Teachers presented curricular tasks and related student work to each other for critical feedback, to diversify and make transparent teacher thinking and approaches. The adult culture also supported teachers in using prep periods when they could get into each other's classrooms, which further publicized instructional decision making and generated common language and practices as well as genuine human accountability to hold to our values.

Students were regularly celebrated and provided feedback using the core values as well. In semester-ending ceremonies, certificates were awarded to students who best exemplified "Respect for Humanity" or were judged by staff to be "Most Improved in Respect for the Intellect." Over time, the school began adding a qualitative description of a targeted core value to the midterm narrative assessments teachers wrote each semester for each student as updates on their performance (i.e., instead of report cards). For example, a class could have a focus on respect for diversity as a core value, as defined by the teacher in relation to the content and activities of the curriculum. As the teacher discussed the narrative reports with the students and their families, they would have an opportunity to talk through how the student was succeeding and could improve aligned to this core value.

## Instruction

Class composition of students at Prep was heterogeneous in both age and ability. Like college, courses were semester long, for which teachers created themes and essential questions. Together in department teams, teachers adapted and built challenging, college-preparatory, differentiated, project-based, and often interdisciplinary curricula that generated ongoing feedback and the aforementioned midterm narrative reports. The coursework then culminated in student-led portfolio presentations to teachers, other students, and expert panels. This system of performance-based assessment was eventually used to officially graduate students—as opposed to a reliance on high-stakes standardized tests.

In addition, within this context all students were provided choice and opportunities to pursue their interests through open-ended inquiry pro-



cesses—both individually and in groups—as opposed to the typical external imposition of broad content and strict procedure found in most public schools. This instructional approach had a symbiotic relationship with the school’s culture. Talking to each other was of high value, and, with respect for the intellect and truth as two core values, the use of evidence to justify one’s claims and thinking was of equal importance as having something to say. In addition, the values of respect for diversity and a commitment to justice played out in the culture of classrooms. It was imperative for students to understand that many of their peers had different home cultures and experiences that shaped their beliefs. Working to achieve consensus or some form of agreement on how best to resolve a complicated moral or social issue meant trying to relate to others who aren’t like you, which led to the mind-expanding opportunity to see the concept of justice through different perspectives.

## Structures

Prep’s culture and instructional model would not work without structures that undergird and enable them, such as block scheduling of 60- to 90-minute periods to allow for in-depth projects, personalized student programming each semester, coteaching classes when possible for instructors, and time for teachers to collaborate and plan inquiry-based coursework, meet with students, and provide them feedback (including many hours to write those narrative reports for each student).

Structures were also in place to support each student to succeed with what was, oftentimes for them when they came to Prep, a new and more challenging way of learning. Humanities Prep was consciously designed with a vision of education as an empowering and liberatory force (Freire 1972) for both students and adults. Prep also became designated as a “transfer school” because half of its enrollment was set aside for students in grades 9–12 who had already struggled in another high school setting and wanted a second, third, or fourth chance. As a small school of only about 150 students in the first few years, structures for guiding and advising students were easily personalized. Advisories of approximately 15 students were assigned to each staff member so that they could get to know each student as a person, help them navigate their progress through the school (i.e., support for healthy decision making, including guidance to take the right courses for graduation requirements), and build a small group community of discussion. Time was set aside biweekly for multiple advisories to come together, forming a group

of about 60 students, for the purpose of having larger group discussions, all of which were led by students. Town meetings were held monthly for all students and staff, and these too created a chance for students in their advisories to select, plan, and lead lengthy discussions on topics important to them. To expand opportunities for engagement, time and energy were devoted to building an internship program, connected to coursework, that bridged the work of learning to the adolescent interest to explore the world of work in the city.

Other previously stated structures also supported the culture and instruction, like weekly staff meetings and fairness committees, both of which demonstrated the core value of commitment to democracy. As mentioned, the school leadership was also structured to foster democracy, with two co-directors—as opposed to just one leader, a principal—and teachers taking on a variety of leadership roles that would normally be part of an assistant principal role. Even the space was democratized, with the school founders negotiating with district authorities to get a large enough room in its footprint to place all teacher desks for joint planning and connecting, some computer stations for students, and couches and comfortable chairs, a water cooler, guitar, and games like chess for community use. This space, called “Prep Central,” was a structural aspect of the school that became its beating heart.

One of the other most important pieces of the school was the performance-based assessment system because it connected culture, structure, and instruction so directly. Along with two dozen other high schools in the city and a few upstate, Humanities Prep was a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium (<http://www.performanceassessment.org/>), which constructed and continues to refine a pioneering set of performance assessments and related system of inquiry-based teaching and professional development that better prepares students—including students of color, low-income students, and students learning English—for graduation and college (Foote 2007, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

Prep’s commitment to justice was on full display when this system was threatened by state policy at the turn of the millennium. Early leaders of the consortium negotiated with New York State education authorities for a waiver from all of the graduation-level standardized tests, except English language arts, to pursue this educational model of deeper learning. However, during the late 1990s, a new state commissioner of education moved

3. A comparative data report of consortium schools drawn from NYCDOE data sources is available from the New York Performance Standards Consortium (2018).

to revoke the waiver. Staff, students, and families across consortium schools participated in sizable, coordinated, mobilized protest efforts, advocating to politicians through letters and direct actions in New York City and Albany for a differentiated policy (Knecht 2007). This commitment to democracy and justice, fueled by a respect for the intellect of students and educators, ultimately prevailed in maintaining the waiver from the standardized testing regime, allowing the schools to protect the learner-centered approaches each had painstakingly built separately and as a network.

Having cleared this policy hurdle a few years into existence, the Prep community could wholly embrace its inquiry-based instructional model, and accordingly, its culture and structures evolved to further support this way of teaching and learning. The school settled in and became known as a place for students of all abilities and backgrounds—some entering ninth grade reading at an elementary school level, some transferring from selective schools like the Bronx High School of Science—to grow, contribute, and excel. As Prep bubbled with activity, engagement, and collaboration, it was not easy for the school and teacher leadership to keep everything going, but the school's adherence to the core values held it all together.

More than 20 years later, the school is thriving, and the impact it has on its community members is palpable and documented (Hantzopoulos 2016). In 2018, for example, with higher rates than city averages of economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students of color, Humanities Prep graduated 88 percent of its students within four years, even though half of the students are transferring in from other high schools; this graduation rate is 12 percentage points higher than the city average and the same average rate as a set of similar high schools used by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) for peer comparisons (see app. B for more specifics on school demographics).<sup>4</sup> In addition, this four-year graduation rate includes success with 80 percent of the school's male black and Hispanic (to use the department's term) students who entered Prep designated as part of the city's lowest third in academic performance, compared with 55 percent citywide on that same metric and 64 percent in the peer group high schools. Equally impressive are the school's college readiness and persistence data:

- 70 percent of Prep students were deemed “college ready” after four years by city criteria, compared with 51 percent citywide and 63 percent of peer group schools

4. These NYCDOE public data, and more, on the performance of Humanities Preparatory Academy are available using the NYCDOE's (2019) interactive data tools.

- 74 percent of its students remained enrolled in a postsecondary institution six months after graduation, which is 15 points higher than the city average and 25 percentage points higher than the comparison group average
- 71 percent of Prep students remained enrolled in a postsecondary institution 18 months after graduation, compared with averages of 66 percent citywide and 63 percent in the peer group schools

Qualitatively, the NYCDOE’s school inspection process, along with outcomes from a school survey of students, families, and school staff, places Humanities Prep in the “Exceeding,” or highest, category for all reported summary measures: effective school leadership, rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties.

What this looks like at the ground level with students reveals patterns of meaningful developmental experiences emotionally, socially, and cognitively (Hantzopoulos 2016). Students alienated from their education connect with their intellectual interests and go on to college to pursue their passions. Students who could never imagine speaking out in front of hundreds of people regularly contend with issues in “Town Meeting” and, subsequently, become outspoken activists in their communities. Students feeling angry and disaffected learn to love themselves and see the humanity in others who are different from them. The school’s beliefs in how adolescents learn best—driven by its core values and supported by the coherence of culture, structures, and instruction—enable healthy attachments and identities to form and create a platform for future authentic learning and moral engagement with the world they are entering as young adults.

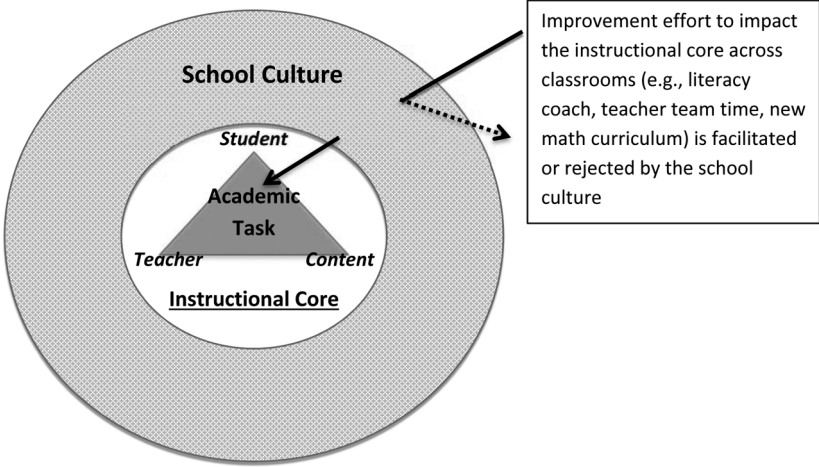
### **Culture and the Instructional Core**

Deal and Peterson (2009) write that “cultural patterns are highly enduring, have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the way people think, act and feel” (7). They acknowledge that there are various ways culture is defined, from the straightforward, “the way we do things around here” (Bower 1966, as cited in Deal and Peterson 2009, 7), to their own description: “Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time” (6). Hammond (2015) describes three layers of every human being’s sense of culture: “surface culture,” which is observable things, such as stories, food, music, hairstyles, and dress; “shallow culture,” which is unspoken rules about things like making eye contact, child rearing, ways of handling emotions, and concepts of time; and “deep culture,” which is be-

liefs and norms that form a foundation for group identity, such as concepts of self, relationships to nature, notions of fairness, and spirituality.

No matter the definition, culture is clearly a complex and important part of each individual's life, which she or he brings to school as a student or educator; and school culture clearly matters when it comes to the quality of teaching and learning of students. The power of culture was on my mind when I left Humanities Prep to explore the myriad ways issues at the intersection of equity and schooling played out in the education system. In graduate school, during a course I took with Dr. Richard Elmore in 2006, he shared a particularly helpful depiction of the relationship between culture and classrooms (unpublished visual presented in a lecture by Dr. Richard Elmore during a class at Harvard Graduate School of Education in spring 2006; fig. 1).

As Elmore and his colleagues later described in the influential book *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (City et al. 2009), the instructional core is the interactions of the student and teacher in the presence of content. The relationships between these points of the triangle define the quality of teaching and student learning in the



**Fig. 1.** Instructional core—the interactions of the teacher and student in the presence of content, which is tantamount to the “academic task”—surrounded by a ring of school culture (unpublished visual presented in a lecture by Dr. Richard Elmore during a class at Harvard Graduate School of Education in spring 2006, modified by the author). I added the arrows and text box in my notes as Elmore described the role school culture often plays in protecting, like an immune system, the instructional core from well-intentioned improvement efforts (dotted line).

form of academic tasks (Cohen and Ball 1999; Doyle 1983). The academic task is what the student is truly accountable for doing as the curriculum is enacted in real time—as opposed to, say, what is stated in the lesson plan.

In his lecture, Elmore added a ring around the instructional core and labeled it “School Culture,” as can be seen in figure 1. He described it as something like a semipermeable membrane. In schools, resources and strategies are constantly brought to bear for instructional improvement, such as a new math curriculum or literacy coach or making time for teacher teams. However, as the arrows indicate, it is the school culture that will either facilitate an improvement effort’s impact on the interactions of the students and teacher in the presence of content (the solid arrow) or reject it (the dotted arrow) like an immune system protecting the instructional core from change. (Elmore noted, however, that when school culture facilitates improvement efforts, the instructional core can be strengthened.)

As we see in too many classrooms, the introduction of a math curriculum, along with the district-mandated two or three days of training on it, doesn’t alter what the teacher is asking of his students in practice or how he asks it. Or the newly funded literacy coach, who has been a superstar teacher for six years with great reading outcomes, isn’t able to affect the practice of a host of veteran teachers because she isn’t perceived as senior enough to have earned the role. Or, thanks to the administration’s creative scheduling efforts, teachers get weekly time in “PLCs,” but there is precious little “PL” (professional learning) in the “C” (community): the grade teams turn “Looking at Student Work” protocols into making a case about how a particular struggling student isn’t really a good fit for the school rather than a reflection on the need for the staff to shift from a deficit mind-set or to try out different pedagogical moves with targeted students around specific content.

Ultimately, Elmore opined, very few schools possess the requisite coherence around beliefs and practices for instructional improvement across classrooms to take hold. Most suffer from what he called the “default culture” of educators working in isolation, avoiding conflict or publicizing practice, prioritizing compliance over engagement, and privileging time on the job over evidence-based expertise. Summing up, Elmore paraphrased the maxim that strategy is devoured by culture for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, every day.<sup>5</sup> Given my vastly different experiences at the two schools in which I taught, this assertion resonated profoundly with me.

5. Peter Drucker, business management guru, is most often associated with the quote, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” though the origin of the relationship between culture and strategy is disputed.

## **Structures as Values Made Manifest**

It was after graduate school, but before my time at Bank Street College, that the importance of a school's structures, which were implicitly addressed in Elmore's model (e.g., a new PLC structure), came into full relief. I rejoined the NYCDOE as a coach across a network of 26 schools, many of which had inspiring leadership and deep wells of teacher capacity to drive their own instructional improvement efforts. These were schools, like Humanities Prep, that you sensed were humming with purpose when you walked in the door—schools you'd entrust with your own child's education. Instructional interactions were rooted in developmentally appropriate practice, content, and processes. Teachers shared their work and stretched each other. Parents lauded the schools and gave of themselves accordingly. The principals told you what you'd see when in their classrooms, and you actually saw it.

With Elmore's model in mind, I tried to tease out how the cultures of these schools facilitated a consistent and high-quality instructional core, and I talked to school and teacher leaders about what made their school really work for kids, staff, and families. Interestingly, although they agreed with the notion that their values and beliefs shaped their culture and classrooms, they also pointed to their systems and structures as pieces that should be added into the equation, especially because the word "culture" was so ephemeral and had multiple meanings. Their schools' language, expectations, and practices about learning were tightly wound up in, and made manifest by, their concrete structures like student schedules, staffing assignments, hiring and mentoring processes, budget decisions, academic and emotional intervention protocols, and afterschool and external partnerships.

## **A Districtwide Gestalt**

The gestalt came into focus for me at that point: great schools possess coherence among their culture, structures, and instruction driven by shared beliefs in how learning happens. The result is nonstop powerful experiences for kids, and adults, in the school community. It's what appeared to separate the improving schools from the struggling ones and the best schools from the merely good ones.

This slight twist to Elmore's proposition proved useful in my work at the NYCDOE. After working toward supporting this coherence in dozens of schools, I joined forces with other New York City educators to advocate for a more robust school inspection process to balance the heavy weight

of test-based quantitative measures in severe accountability decisions, such as school closures. Following a series of policy conversations with senior district leaders, I was asked to revamp the quality review, the two- to three-day inspection process that acted as one of the two major school accountability tools of the district and included classroom observations, data and documentation reviews, and interviews with leadership, staff, students, and families. As the overarching concept of the process, we adopted the model of coherence among school culture, structures for improvement, and the instructional core to define school quality. To foreground the importance of beliefs as drivers of behavior, at the start of the quality review in any given school, principals were asked how the community believed students and adults learn best. From there, evidence of coherence across classrooms and constituents was collected to make the case for quality and impact, against the stated beliefs about learning. There were plenty of challenges and issues with implementing this version of the quality review, conducting approximately 600 inspections annually to reach all 1,700 schools in multiyear cycles, but school leaders generally agreed with how we defined strong schooling in the quality review rubric, and over time, different forms of the review developed to offer formative rather than summative feedback on schooling practices (Knecht et al. 2016).

### **Hard Questions for Districts**

Despite attempts to differentiate this school-centric process, the bright light shone on this concept of coherence inevitably raised harder questions, specifically for those in failing, toxic, and struggling school settings. It's one thing to be able to assess and describe levels of coherence for deeper learning in a quality review. Educators also wanted to know: What are the underlying conditions schools must create for such coherence? Depending on where the community is developmentally, where do you start? And, to the second question I raised at the beginning of this article, what is the role of the district in supporting schools, not just holding them accountable, for achieving greater coherence and reaching all students equitably?

Fortunately, progress has been made on these important questions. Recent research indicates that district offices often create conflicting initiatives that undermine instructional improvement efforts at scale and that the goal of central leadership should be to leverage a shared agenda for and vision of ambitious instruction “to support the development of school-level capacity for instructional improvement” (Cobb et al. 2018, 13). It would be fair to



then ask, What does it look like for schools to build that capacity? In *The Internal Coherence Framework: Creating the Conditions for Continuous Improvement in Schools*, Forman and colleagues (2017) present a road map for successful instructional improvement efforts for school communities. Perhaps not coincidentally, the book's lead author, Dr. Michelle Forman, was in that same class of Richard Elmore's with me in the mid-2000s. Following that semester, Forman worked for a decade with Dr. Elmore and others to synthesize long-standing and new research on topics like organizational leadership and instructional change, self- and collective efficacy, whole-school reform, and teacher teaming practices. They now have a powerful approach that addresses some of the questions about how to increase coherence at the school level and includes:

- An articulated vision of effective instruction from leadership, and shared among staff, that connects what students are doing with what teachers are doing together in the presence of challenging content
- A culture that engenders change efforts through psychological safety for the adults as they try to do things, individually and collaboratively, they have not accomplished before; together, they support each other in taking these risks, publicizing their practice in light of the shared instructional vision rooted in that academic content
- Resources (curriculum, coaches, etc.) and teaming structures connected to a professional learning strategy for ongoing adult learning and distributed leadership of improvement across classrooms

Once school leadership and faculty learn how to build their internal capacity in a targeted content area, like math, the processes for adult learning can be transferred to other content areas as a sense of collective efficacy grows. Knowing these are the general needs of schools, district leaders can then organize their supports around what they find their individual schools require for improvement to take hold. For example, if a school leadership team is lacking the expertise to articulate a clear vision for the instructional core in mathematics, then members of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) team in the teaching and learning office should be equipped to share some examples and coach the leadership team members through making it their own, tailored to their context. Similarly, if there is a lack of time or relationships present for productive teacher teaming, principal supervisors should know how to support the school leadership in redoing the schedule for or building the bridges between teachers within the teaming structures. If the roots of inequitable outcomes for students in a school

can be traced to a lack of trust in the culture for tackling issues of race directly, then coaching or other resources must be brought to bear to raise the leadership's and community's awareness of issues of implicit bias and to foster increased racial literacy.

As I read through this book, it was comforting to see that, at a high level, their research underscores both coherence among a school's culture, structures, and instructional model and the main role of districts focusing on supporting schools to develop capacity for instructional improvement. It reassured me that we were on the right track in our policy and support work in the NYCDOE from 2010 to 2015. One challenge from that work, though, has left a remnant of concern. Some educators have rightly asked, Accountability for coherence toward what end? What if schools possess coherence, but the result is bad for most kids, especially historically underserved children and their families?

As in the first high school at which I taught, there is the possibility that a school's structures and culture reinforce an internal accountability for work that does not embody stated values and practices meant to tend to all children's needs and interests (Abelmann and Elmore 1999). When beliefs that some kids can learn and others can't drive resourcing decisions, and shared values cement teacher isolation rather than collaboration, Elmore's default culture is dominant.

This is where a school's core values and beliefs about learning come into play. Implicit in the internal coherence framework are values that, foundationally, generate a sense of pressure, support, and collectivism for staff. Forman et al. (2017) are not agnostic about coherence toward what end: it is in service of building capacity for continual adult learning that increases efficacy in educating all children. Furthermore, at Bank Street College, we assert that the intersection of human development and learning must define what should be valued inside schools and classrooms.

School communities, then, must work to "define coherence up." The adults need to agree on the ends of coherence, what it means and what it doesn't (e.g., it isn't mere alignment of goals and initiatives, or every student quietly tracking the teacher with their eyes, or unanimous adherence of teachers to a curriculum script), and how people will be supported as the school goes about making change in that direction. This is a place for school leadership to start: Put the community's beliefs on the table. Ask how students and adults learn best. Inquire how these beliefs reflect the science of human development and learning and how well they are suited to surfacing and addressing relevant issues related to equity and race. Then work to ensure a shared commitment to a clear vision of what it looks like to put these

beliefs into practice (while also grounded in different content disciplines), and explore the best adult learning strategies to be leveraged that will foster instructional improvement across classrooms to support all students.

This kind of teaming at the school leadership level is essential to strengthening how a school serves its children. An interesting data trend from my time running the NYCDOE quality review underscores the point: an internal analysis of thousands of reviews over multiple years indicated that one of the two rubric criteria (out of 20 total) that was most correlated with the summary rating of a school was an indicator measuring practices in the school to monitor and revise school systems, culture, and instruction (the other indicator was the quality of curriculum, unsurprisingly).

As noted earlier, for school leadership teams to deepen their internal capacity for this iterative schoolwide change work, principal supervisors and district leaders must set the right conditions. This is no small task because the orientation of many school systems is one of compliance rather than learning for improvement. At present, Bank Street is partnering with Dr. Forman and a number of urban districts to investigate how school systems facilitate, rather than undercut, school-level coherence. Current insights from this work suggest that district leaders must recognize and remove their own central offices' conflicting agendas and resources (Cobb et al. 2018), instead pointing to the promise of linked professional learning communities through the layers of the district system, so that educators—from district executives to school leaders to teacher teams—experience the kind of developmental stretches and supports that adult learning research recommends are needed (Kegan and Lahey 2009) to adapt new resources and adopt new practices in service of reaching a diversity of students.

Another potential avenue for districts to pursue is doubling down on school-level success. In New York City, Humanities Prep, like other established schools, was able to spawn more school communities. Two sister schools, James Baldwin School and Harvest Collegiate High School, were both founded by Prep teachers-turned-principals. The core values that define these schools are either exactly the same as Prep's (James Baldwin School) or quite similar (Harvest); and the culture, structures, and instruction of both schools are clearly drawn from the same blueprint. In the case of the James Baldwin School, a group of founding teachers and students actually left Humanities Prep at the inception of the new sister school, bringing with them their own personal experiences and also Prep's cultural ways and institutional memory.

Interestingly, Weiner, the founder of Humanities Prep, was inspired to create a different option for struggling students when, as a teacher in an im-

personal, struggling, comprehensive high school, he observed the incubation of a new alternative school tucked in a back hallway of the building. This school, called Urban Academy Laboratory High School, has been hailed as a school that does right by students, fighting off the “business” of education reform by empowering those closest to the students: its teachers (Gabor 2018). It is also no coincidence that leaders of Urban Academy have been the epicenter of the New York Performance Standards Consortium. From what I have experienced and observed, the consortium is more than a political body: it acts as a networked improvement community that learns and spreads better, more coherent school and classroom practices across its constituent educator and parent bodies (Bryk et al. 2015).

It may seem obvious for districts and states to intentionally build these kinds of leadership pipelines, systematically investing in the people who have previously known the power of school-level coherence, in the networks of school communities they generate, and in policies that document and support their growth and expansion. However, school leaders are often selected and promoted with little evidence of creating coherence between school culture, structures, and instruction rooted in valid beliefs of child and adult learning, and system policies so often undermine school communities that put learners’ and their developmental needs at the heart of their work—we must ask why the obvious hasn’t become the rule. There is, unfortunately, coherence of another kind at play: the hollow, overwhelming system force of high-stakes tests (Cobb et al. 2018), which are a poor substitute for learner-centered values and practices. Despite drawing bipartisan support for standardized testing (on the right, the test scores are a reflection of merit; on the left, they spotlight the inequities and gaps to close), these regimes serve to keep schooling focused on fragile knowledge acquisition and meaningless learning experiences of students for the sake of test prep (Polakow-Suransky et al. 2018).

We must learn from our most powerful schools and shift from aggregate test scores of every child as our compass. Too often the test results are affected by changing political winds, made incomparable by rotating assessment company contracts, and rendered useless to educators as cut-score policies vacillate from one year to the next. Our educational policy and cultural ecosystem must prize a holistic rather than reductive vision of schooling and its measure of social impact. Only then will schools be freed and supported to focus on coherence of beliefs and values that fuse culture, structures, and instruction in ways that work for all students. Only then can the potential of educators, and the children and youth they serve, truly be unleashed.

## Appendix A

### Mission of Humanities Preparatory Academy from 1997 (Hantzopoulos 2016)

It is our mission to provide a philosophical and practical education for all students, an education that features creativity and inquiry, encourages habitual reading and productivity, as well as self-reflection and original thought. We agree with Socrates that the “unexamined life is not worth living,” and it is our desire to prepare students to live thoughtful and meaningful lives. We are committed to inspiring the love of learning in our students.

The mission can best be accomplished in a school that is a democratic community. As a democratic community, we strive to exemplify the values of democracy: mutual respect, cooperation, empathy, the love of humankind, justice for all, and service to the world.

Humanities Preparatory Academy is college preparatory. Our curriculum and pedagogy prepare students for the rigors of college work and motivate them to desire and plan for higher education. In preparing students for college we believe that we move students toward higher levels of intellectual engagement while they are in high school.

It is our mission, as well, at Humanities Preparatory Academy, to provide a haven for students who have previously experienced school as unresponsive to their needs as individuals. We wish for all students to find their voice and to speak knowledgably and thoughtfully on issues that concern their school, their world. We aid students in this endeavor by personalizing our learning situations, democratizing and humanizing the school environment, and by creating a “talking culture,” an atmosphere of informal intellectual discourse among students and faculty.

In order to achieve this, we intend . . .

- to restore a true understanding of the First Amendment: that freedom of expression is the highest democratic right and must be therefore taken seriously, and that democracy can only continue if opinions are based on evidence and meaningful thought;
- to encourage students to be passionate thinkers, seekers of truth and beauty, advocates for justice;
- to create an environment in which individuality is respected and cherished, an environment in which human beings are valued for the content of their character and the quality of their thought;
- to address the problem of student cynicism through promoting intellectual behaviors which lead to students’ discovery of their own

humanity and the value of human life, human feeling, human culture, human history, and the human endeavor;

- to promote an ongoing dialogue about the educational process, and to create an atmosphere of mutual intellectual and artistic endeavor in which students and teachers learn from one another;
- to cultivate the natural idealism of youth through promoting and honoring community work, and to acknowledge and engage the vital interdependency of the practical and the philosophical by creating meaningful external learning situations in the community at large;
- to advocate for peace and non-violence through an understanding of history, modeling respect and mutual esteem, and actively exploring and promoting alternatives to hurtful conflict in the realms of both interpersonal and political life;
- to provide moral alternatives and to help students become morally sensitive people, and to establish connections between the academic disciplines and moral action, the connections between learning and community, thereby creating a just community our school; and
- to employ the best progressive principles of education, to promote emotional as well as intellectual development, and to cultivate the various learning styles and intelligences present in all students. To this effect, we advocate that depth of inquiry, not coverage of material, guide classroom instruction.

## **Appendix B**

### **Humanities Preparatory Academy Student Demographics**

The most recent data released by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE 2019) on Humanities Prep are from 2017–18. The school’s student population included:

- 76 percent who were designated by the NYCDOE criteria as facing economic hardship, compared with the citywide average of 71 percent
- 19 percent who were identified as students with disabilities, compared with 17 percent citywide
- 3 percent who were identified as English-language learners, compared with 12 percent citywide
- 93 percent who self-identified as students of color, with 61 percent identifying as Hispanic, 22 percent black, 7 percent Asian, and 7 percent white; citywide schools average 85 percent students of

color: 41 percent Hispanic, 26 percent black, 16 percent Asian, and 15 percent white.

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