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District Workforce Development and Instructional Capacity:
A Strategic Perspective

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There is a kernel of truth to the often-stated criticism that educational establishments suffer from 'purpose ambiguity' with the human resource function

Young, 2008, p. 8

In his work on human resource management (HRM), Rebore (2007) argues that the goals of the human resource function are to achieve the objectives of the school district and help faculty maximize their potential and develop their careers. He identifies eight “essential” dimensions of the human resource function in school districts—human resource planning, recruitment, selection, placement and induction, staff development, appraisal, compensation, and collective negotiations. He alludes to the concepts fit and flexibility—two concepts we address in depth below—in his treatment of several of these dimensions. For example, he contends that districts should recruit and select personnel consistent with a broader vision. Staff assignments to schools should be made in consideration of balancing staff among buildings, individual staff preparation and experience, and working relationships. And, professional development should be provided based on assessments of needs for all staff.

While language of strategic practice begins to surface more frequently in education literature, Rebore and others (e.g., Seyfarth, 2008) do not go very far in exploring the strategic and systemic integration of these different dimensions nor the flexibility required to meet changing demands from the environment. These depictions of HR functions tend to see connections to core missions, e.g., teaching and learning, as a “hub and spoke” arrangement with HR functions such as recruitment, selection, induction, professional development, and so on. Clearly, the gap between strategic intentions and practice is a challenge across public and private sectors and across

industries. We also suspect that the lack of evidence of strategic practice in school districts may have something to do with limited conceptualizations of strategic human resource management (SHRM) that could otherwise lead to observations from which theorizing and evaluation can take place. Some researchers have recently contributed to theorizing about what SHRM in school districts might look like (Webb & Norton, 2009; Young, 2008). For example, Webb and Norton make the case that human resources administration should be a “foundational function for an educational program” (p. 3) and comprises three major components: human resources utilization, human resources development, and human resources environment. Echoing SHRM literature in organizational theory, they argue that HR is not a supportive function but should be integrated and on par with other organizational functions. Strategic references in recent HR literature include competency-driven organizations of human capital in which employees are hired, assigned and reassigned according to organizational mission and need (Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004; Webb & Norton, 2009). Young (2008) situates human resources within a strategic planning framework in which “policy makers” evaluate human resource alternatives and make the optimal choices given internal and external constraints.

Increasingly, we are seeing strategic considerations emerge with regard to HRM in schools and school districts. However, while logical and promising the education literature does not seem to be driven by a coherent conceptual framework of strategic human resource function. Moreover, little empirical literature exists that describes and assesses the efficacy and strategic nature of various approach to HRM in school districts. Therefore, our paper aims to push this conversation forward by addressing some

persistent conceptual challenges in the education-related HR literature. First, in spite of the emergence of strategic language in the discussion of HR, the conversation provides less help when trying to understand how school districts *become* strategic and *act* strategically with regard to HR. HR conversations continue to be anchored in discussions of practices related to function: recruitment, selection, hiring, professional development and so on. Second, the (best) practice approach to HRM limits our understanding of how various HR-related functions should interact and how those functions should interrelate with other organizational functions. Finally, current HR literature does not address the kinds of individual and group behaviors that support SHRM. Thus, in this paper we have three primary goals. First, we attempt to synthesize SHRM literature and clarify key concepts—most notably fit and flexibility. Second, we present and critique extant evidence of SHRM in education and non-education environments. Then we explore the intersect of SHRM and organizational learning theories (in particular *high reliability* and *continuously improving* organizations) in order to delve more deeply into the HR black box in which interactions among individuals, groups and the organizational structures and processes that define their work and ultimately the nature of HR practices. Finally, we use two brief forays into HR practices of two districts to reflect on the utility of our frameworks to provide insights into more robust research questions and directions for future study of SHRM in school districts.

Strategic Human Resource Management: Key Concepts

SHRM takes human resource management a step further by making explicit the linkages between an organization's HR practices and goals, and internal and external factors that influence and shape HR choices (Martin-Alcazar, Romero-Fernandez, &

Sanchez-Gardey, 2005; Wright & McMahan, 1992). SHRM literature has focused on “linking HRM practice with firm strategy and mobilizing people’s ability and actions toward organizational goals” in order to enhance organizational performance (Wei & Leu, 2005, p. 1902). While SHRM is more prominently discussed in the organizational management literature, these concepts are only recently becoming more explicit in the educational systemic reform literature (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Duffy, 2004; Emery, 2006; Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004).

Four major SHRM perspectives. SHRM theory is represented by four perspectives: universalistic, contingency, configurational, and contextual. The universalistic perspective, or the ‘best practice’ approach, asserts that some HR practices are superior to others (Colbert, 2004; Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). On the other hand, the contingency perspective argues that there are no best HR practices per se. Instead, strategic HR practice depends on ‘contingency variables’ such as the internal and external environments that must be taken into account when developing HR policies (Colbert, 2004; Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). According to Colbert, the concern is to align HR practice with organizational strategies as opposed to mere internal alignment. For example, while a training program might reflect best practice within the universalistic perspective, it may or may not be the best option given an organization’s strategic goals or external demands.

Delery & Doty (1996) explain that the configurational perspective differs from the contingency perspective by focusing concern on the “pattern of multiple independent variables” and how these patterns relate to the dependent variable, as opposed to the contingency perspective concern with the relationship between different independent

variables and the dependent variable (p. 804). In essence, the configurational perspective “acknowledges system interaction effects – that the whole may be more or less the sum of the parts” (Colbert, 2004, p. 345). The configurational perspective opens up the black box of the universalistic and contingency perspectives—perspectives which rely on linear relationships—to allow an examination of the complex and interactive system that is HR functions (Martin-Alcazar, et al, 2005). Furthermore, the configurational perspective incorporates the idea of *equifinality*—achieving the same goals with different combinations of policies that could be equally efficient—while at the same time rejecting the idea of finding best practices assumed by the universalistic perspective (Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005).

Finally, the newest SHRM perspective emanating from the European model of HRM is the contextual perspective. This perspective offers a shift toward a more global viewpoint applicable to a multitude of environments. SHRM becomes something more than managerial decisions, but instead is considered a part of a greater social system that is both influenced by and places its own influences upon HRM strategy. “Strategies are not just explained through their contribution to organizational performance, but also through their influence on other internal aspects of the organization, as well as their effects on the external environment” (Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005).

Common threads of fit and flexibility. The concepts of *fit* and *flexibility* are integral to each SHRM perspective. Fit refers to the extent to which HRM practices form internal consistency or congruency—the argument being that the greater the fit, the more effective the organization will be (Delery, 1998; Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004). Fit operates vertically and horizontally. Vertical fit refers to the degree of alignment of HR

practices with organization strategy, objectives, and external environment. Where *fit* leads to coordinated support of organizational goals, the vertical misalignment of HR practices, strategy, and goals make it difficult to achieve the organizational goals and meet external demands from the environment (Green, Wu, Whitten, & Medlin, 2006; Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004). Horizontal fit refers to the internal consistency of HR practices or how well these practices mesh into a coherent system—the assumption being that any one HR practice is more effective as part of a system of practices than it is individually (Delery, 1998). While the concepts of vertical and horizontal fit are straightforward, achieving them is made difficult by the state of flux organizations often face.

Flexibility refers to the ability to adapt to the diverse and ever-changing demands coming from both internal and external forces (Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004; Wright & Snell, 1998). Flexibility leads to quick and effective HR responses that help organizations address new challenges more fluidly and in ways that enhance performance. Further, the concept of flexibility is cyclical in nature and helps to link SHRM and organizational learning discussed below. For example, as school districts adapt to external accountability demands, they might orient their human resources to recruit, select, and train teachers differently to meet these new demands. Because the teachers themselves are a dynamic resource, the district must be flexible in its practices to meet their changing needs and varying capacities to enact district strategies. Flexibility, like fit, is not a snapshot solution, but a constant adaptation within the life of an organization.

Empirical Evidence of SHRM Practice

Non-education evidence of SHRM. Strategic human resource management has most prominently been explored in the business, health, and service organizations. This research has focused on the relationship of SHRM practices to individual and organizational outcomes such as employee satisfaction or profit margins. Recent studies have examined the relationship between SHRM and employee attitudes, satisfaction, and turnover within various industries across the globe. An analysis of the Pakistani banking industry found that employee satisfaction with HR practices was positively related to turnover intentions, especially with younger employees and employees in high performing organizations (Khilji & Wang, 2007). Green, et al. (2006) and Huselid (1995) found similar results in the United States, while Boswell (2006) found that organizations that implemented SHRM practices had a strong correlation to employees who understood organizational goals, objectives, and strategy—and understood how to contribute to them. Like the other studies mentioned, Boswell also found that these employees had a greater individual sense of belonging, attitude, job stress, and retention within the organization. Khilji and Wang (2007) uncovered a key component of SHRM implementation in the Pakistan banking system: the difference between intended and implemented SHRM strategies. They found not only a large gap between what an HR department believes is occurring and what is actually implemented, but also a strong relationship between this inconsistency and organizational performance. Minimizing this gap results in higher employee satisfaction and consequently higher organizational performance. An employee who has high satisfaction with the *HR management*, not *HR practices*, translates into improved organizational performance, thus supporting the SHRM concept that employees are a valuable source of competitive advantage.

In a broader unit of analysis, the performance of organizations has been linked to SHRM practices. Anderson, Cooper, and Zhu (2007) found a positive relationship between strategic HRM alignment and *perceived* firm financial performance in the Australian public sector. Green, et al. (2006) found in U.S. manufacturing firms not only a perceived organizational performance but support for a positive relationship between the use of SHRM strategy and *actual* performance, both at the HR professional level and the greater organizational level (see also, Buller, 1988; Delery & Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995). However, this performance can be contingent upon different factors, such as the particular strategy a firm adopts—whether it be a ‘high road’ strategy of investing in progressive HR practices or a ‘low road’ cost-cutting strategy—and external factors (Michie & Sheehan, 2005). Examination has begun on more specific or divergent questions in an effort to better explain what precisely it may be about SHRM that affects organizational performance, such as Youndt and Snell’s (2004) sample of public single-business unit organizations. In their study intellectual capital, human capital and social capital are part of a complex system influencing organizational performance, but one of the few that offers an understanding of what happens in the black box between micro HR activities and macro performance measures. The effect of top management team networks on organizational performance (Collins & Clark, 2003) is another such study focusing on one aspect of organizations, the networks developed by top management teams, which may add explanation to the effectiveness of SHRM strategy systems.

Finally, among the empirical literature are a few studies regarding the use of SHRM in public organizations. Daley and Vasu (2005) found that the public sector in the U.S. may be implementing only bits and pieces of SHRM strategy, suggesting a public

sector lag behind the private sector in adopting such strategic practices. Al-Arkoubi & McCourt (2004) found similar results in the Moroccan civil service sector, although they also found that a political understanding is vital in civil service before a true SHRM strategy can be successfully attempted.

SHRM evidence in education. There is an abundance of literature on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of individual teacher development and management practices (e.g., Smylie & Miretzky, 2004). However, little in the education literature documents and analyzes how these practices might function as a system or that examines the relationships among teacher workforce development and management practices across school, district, and state levels. This literature has yet to significantly examine how concepts such as fit and flexibility might apply to education organizations.

However, several published examples of schools, school districts, and states do exist that have implemented more comprehensive, strategic approaches to human resource management (see Smylie, Miretzky, & Konkol, 2004). These examples are largely descriptive rather than analytical or evaluative. They do not consider in a systematic way whether these approaches have been effective in promoting school improvement or improvement in teaching and learning. Their value is to show SHRM “in action,” to illustrate *how* schools, districts, and states can coordinate human resource management policies and practices and align them with organizational goals and strategies for improving teaching and student learning. Unfortunately, most of these examples do not speak to the issue of strategic coordination of practices *across* levels of the school organizational system (school-district-state). In spite of the limitations, these

studies represent a trend toward thinking about HRM strategically. We briefly review a selection of these studies.

Pointing to examples of systemic district-wide reform initiatives in places such as San Diego and New York's District 2, Fullan (2007) argues for coherence in building collective human capacity around district-wide instructional goals and frameworks. Drago-Severson (2007) explores four "pillars" of principal practice that purport to promote teacher learning and development effectively including 1) teaming and partnering with colleagues within and outside of school, 2) providing opportunities for teacher leadership, 3) engaging in collective inquiry, and 4) mentoring. While these pillars can be seen to form a "system" of human resource management practices, Drago-Severson, for the most part, treats them separately and does not explore the ways in which these practices may be organized around school organizational objectives or how they may work together in mutually-reinforcing ways to accomplish those objectives.

In another example, Heneman and Milanowski (2004) go farther than most in examining how, in their cases of two school districts, different human resource management policies and practices might be aligned with each other and with an overarching framework for teaching and learning. However, their empirical work, while useful, is largely descriptive (see below). Their assessment of the effectiveness of such alignment is highly inferential—if human resource management policy and practices are aligned with and promote the framework, it should be instrumental in promoting student learning. Both Drago-Severson's and Heneman and Milanowski's studies are typical of most studies with regard to evidence. Most empirical work from the education literature relies on either self-reports of practice (as in the case of Drago-Severson) or document

analysis (in the case of Heneman and Milanowski). Little work that we have found examines directly human resource management policies and practices as they may be actually implemented.

The few studies that examine more directly the function and effectiveness of multiple teacher human resource management practices tend to report positive outcomes. For instance, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) found that school districts that were successful in their reform efforts employed integrated systems of teacher recruitment and professional development that were strategically tied to the districts' goals for improving teaching and learning. Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthy (1996) found in their case studies of restructuring elementary schools that those that adopted the most comprehensive and strategic systems of human resource management were most effective in promoting "deep" instructional improvement. So, too, did Louis and Miles (1990) find that the improvement of urban high schools in their study was supported by more comprehensive strategies for recruiting, developing, and transferring out teachers, pursuant to a particular vision of the school.

Several studies have been conducted of two school districts—District 2 in New York City and San Diego, California—widely known for their strategies to employ systems of teacher human resource management practices to promote instructional improvement. The basic strategy for linking these practices with instructional improvement was developed in District 2 and transported, with some adaptation, to San Diego. The components of these strategies include recruiting and hiring new teachers, providing intensive professional development using teacher networks and extensive external monitoring and consultation, establishing active teacher evaluation, moving

ineffective teachers out of the district, preventing the transfer of ineffective teachers into the district, developing collaborative working relationships among teachers, redesigning teachers' work to provide new opportunities for leadership, and setting up a teacher incentive program—all focused on the implementation and institutionalization of a district-wide instructional framework and the achievement of student learning standards.

Initial anecdotal evidence from District 2 indicated that this system of human resource management was associated with changes in instruction in the direction of the framework (Elmore & Burney, 1997, 1998). Early evidence from San Diego suggested that its system had begun to alter the district's organization and the administration's orientation to teachers and instructional improvement (Hightower, 2002). This evidence also suggested that teaching practice across the district had begun to shift in the direction of the framework and that scores on standardized tests of student achievement had started to improve. Other evidence has suggested that these outcomes varied substantially by school, that over time student achievement did not show a consistent pattern of improvement, and that additional flexibility might have been necessary to address differences in local school contexts and capacities for instructional change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Thus, where SHRM-driven empirical work has focused on outcome measures such as profit margins and employee satisfaction as litmus tests for strategic practice, we believe that coupling SHRM with organizational learning theories such as HRO will lead to more robust research questions and designs for exploring SHRM in school districts.

Cases of SHRM Practices in School Districts

Because this paper focuses on the central office, the examples that follow illustrate SHRM at the district level. Drawing from some of the aforementioned studies and others, we present brief examples of some contemporary accounts. We do not mean to imply that any of these examples reflect accurately human resource management practices in these districts today. Rather, we present them only as concrete examples of what SHRM can look like in practice.

Cincinnati Public Schools. In their recent study of human resource practices and their relationship to teacher performance competency, Heneman and Milanowski (2004) provide examples of two school districts and how their human resource practices align with models of teacher quality and with each other. The first example is of the Cincinnati Public Schools in Ohio. In 2007, the Cincinnati Public Schools enrolled about 35,500 students in 62 schools. The district employed 2,275 teachers and 108 school-level administrators (all in FTEs). It also employed 745 instructional paraprofessionals.

According to Heneman and Milanowski (2004), Cincinnati has developed a system of human resource management around a model of teacher performance competency—Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching. This system contains policies and practices that they found to be more or less aligned with the framework. According to Heneman and Milanowski, the district paid particular attention to aligning teacher recruitment, selection, orientation and mentoring, evaluation and remediation with the framework. Less alignment was apparent with regard to teacher professional development and compensation policies. More specifically, Henneman and Milanowski report that the Cincinnati Public Schools tend to recruit new teachers from universities where students receive exposure to and have experience with the framework for

Teaching. New teachers are required to successfully complete an entry program about the framework and receive their initial evaluation that is oriented toward the framework. The evaluation system for all teachers in the district is derived from the framework, and feedback, coaching, and remediation are also guided by the framework. By state law, teachers seeking license renewal must design an individual professional development plan. In Cincinnati, that plan must be based on goals derived from standards of the evaluation system which are based on the framework.

Washoe County School District. The second example provided by Heneman and Milanowski (2004) is of the Washoe County School District in Nevada. This system is the state's second largest school district and encompasses the city of Reno. In 2007, this district enrolled about 63,000 students in 94 schools. It employed about 6,800 certified and classified teachers and 352 administrators. Like the Cincinnati Public Schools, the Washoe County School District also adopted Danielson's Framework for Teaching and has used it as the focal point for organizing and aligning much of its human resource management policies and practices.

Heneman and Milanowski (2004) describe substantial alignment between the framework and the district's policies and practices for new teacher orientation, teacher mentoring, professional development, and evaluation and remediation. They also show alignment between the framework and the district's teacher recruitment, selection, and compensation policies and practices. Much of the alignment among different areas of human resource management is driven by the system's teacher evaluation plan, which is organized around the domains of the framework. Specifically, the Washoe County School District recruits new teachers from area universities where students are exposed to and

receive experience with the framework in their classes and internships. In the application and selection process, reference providers are asked to rate applicants on each of the domains of the system's evaluation system that equate to domains of the framework. The district's mandatory induction program for beginning teachers and mentoring support are also organized around the domains of the framework. The district stipulates that all professional development and in-service courses must be related to the domains of the evaluation system. A three-year sequence of coursework for new teachers is also organized around these domains. Teacher salary progression is linked to professional development and coursework, which are linked to the domains of the evaluation system and to the framework. Finally, the district's leadership academy provides professional development for administrators in the teacher evaluation system and newly hired principals and assistant principals are required to take a course at an area university in which they receive specific training in the evaluation system.

Rochester City School District. A third example is the Rochester City School District in New York. In 2007, the Rochester City School District enrolled about 3,400 K-12 students in 58 schools and served an additional 10,000 adult students. The district employed approximately 3,600 teachers, 250 administrators, and 1,500 support personnel.

In 1988, in collaboration with the local teachers union, Rochester established its Career in Teaching Program (CIT) (Rochester City School District, 2000). This program was considered a ground-breaking effort to restructure teaching, improve teachers' knowledge and skills, and improve student learning (Koppich, Asher, & Kerchner, 2002). The program established a new model of preparing, recruiting, and retaining teachers. It

introduced shared decision-making in all of the district's schools, it made a commitment to strengthen home-school relations, and it increased teacher salaries substantially. The CIT program was to be monitored by administrators, parents, and teachers and supported by the teachers union. Each element of the program was organized around and aimed to promote a framework of belief statements about effective teaching and student learning. The underlying logic of the program was that educational improvement would follow from the recognition and treatment of teachers as professionals (Murray & Grant, 1997).

The most significant element of this program for our purpose of illustrating SHRM was the creation of a "career pathway" for educators. This plan included strategies for recruiting and hiring qualified teachers, supporting the induction of new teachers through mentoring, providing new opportunities for "highly accomplished" teachers to develop and share their knowledge and skills, establishing systems of peer review and assistance for teachers experiencing problems in their practice, and increasing the retention of effective teachers (Koppich et al., 2002). CIT contained provisions to develop schools to be more conducive to teaching and student learning. Based on the logic that professional support, effective teaching, and student learning are inextricably related, the Rochester program framed teacher development and the improvement of teaching as a career-long enterprise. It incorporated the sort of flexibility necessary to respond to teachers' professional needs at different stages of their careers. Although the primary focus of this program is on teachers within the system, CIT is noteworthy for involving parents and school- and district-level administrators as sources of development for teachers.

Illinois District 34. Our last example is of District 34 in Glenview, Illinois, a suburban Chicago K-8 school system. In 2007, District 34 enrolled about 4,300 students in 8 schools. It employed 370 teachers.

In the mid-1980s, District 34 began to create a system of multiple, coordinated strategies to promote the professionalization and development of its teachers (Smylie, 1993). The district began this work in 1984 by using a state grant to establish a teacher career development plan. This plan was a work re-design initiative jointly crafted by the district's central administration and the local teachers union. Named Project PEER, it established new teacher leadership roles at the school and district levels as well as commensurate compensation incentives. As a joint project of the administration and the union, it laid the foundation for a period of collaborative labor relations and "strategic bargaining" that produced the centerpiece of the district's reform efforts—its Constitution.

District 34's Constitution replaced the conventional teacher contract and differed from it in significant ways. It abandoned traditional work rules and replaced them with a preamble mission statement of service to students and the community and with statements of professional roles and responsibilities, expectations for teacher growth and development, and mutual accountability. In addition to these statements of principle, which were to govern and guide the district and its employees, the Constitution established a structure of governance and decision making that placed teachers in key leadership roles at the school and district levels, in areas of responsibility that included curriculum and instruction, teacher professional development, personnel (including recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and retention), and finance. The Constitution outlined an

enhanced teacher salary structure, one tied less to academic degree attainment and years of experience than to work roles and responsibilities. The principles of professionalism and professional responsibility articulated in the Constitution, coupled with new curriculum initiatives in literacy and in classroom technology, became strategic foci for the system's teacher development initiatives. These principles provided substantial latitude and flexibility for establishing teaching development programs and policies, conditions that would have been much less likely under a rigid set of work rules.

District 34 embarked on an extensive agenda of teacher development activity aimed at enacting the principles of the Constitution and supporting its efforts to improve teaching and learning. Emanating from the central office and the district's personnel and personnel committees, the district established an aggressive program of professional development activity for teachers across the system. Project PEER and the Constitution provided new opportunities for teacher leadership and participation in school- and district-level governance. The district reasoned that not only would teachers who assumed these new roles find opportunities for professional growth, they would also become sources of learning, development, and improvement for other teachers. The district also began aggressively recruiting and hiring teachers whose philosophies of teaching and professional orientations were consistent with its own.

In the early 1990s, District 34 designed and implemented a professional development school model with Chicago-area universities (Smylie, Attea, Brownlee-Conyers, & Miller, 1988). This model established an extended program of initial preparation and induction across university and district classrooms. Preservice teachers were hired by the district into multiyear internships to work alongside exemplary veteran

teachers who, with university faculty, would have previously taught them at the university and supervised them in initial practice settings. This model created a pipeline of new teachers into the district, provided a “grow your own” opportunity that was in line with system principals and objectives, and, importantly, provided veteran teachers opportunities for leadership and professional development.

Role of Organizational Learning in SHRM

In spite of calls for strategic approaches to human resource management, creating the conditions for strategic action has been overlooked. While organizational texts extol the virtues of strategic action (in HRM or otherwise), research has tended to focus on structure and outcomes, and organizations’ espoused talk of strategic action, in actuality most organizations continue to mimic the practices of others (Khilji & Wang, 2006). However, contingency and configurational SHRM approaches challenge the “strategy” applying “best practices” across contexts. Thus, if SHRM is to help school districts improve performance, it’s fair to ask questions such as *at what point is human resource management strategic? What organizational conditions foster strategic practice?* With questions like these in mind we turn to organizational learning theory—in particular, high reliability organizations (HROs)—to move beyond investigations of structure and outcomes and toward an understanding of the conditions and social processes that support SHRM.

Ericksen and Dyer (2005) coupled SHRM and HRO theory to help conceptualize conditions that support strategic practice. To understand the connections between SHRM and HROs we explore 1) what HROs are, 2) the types of behaviors possessed by HRO

actors, 3) the ways organizations as systems make sense of goals, objectives, and context in ways that lead to strategic human resource practice.

In organizational studies parlance HROs are organizations that cannot fail without grave consequences. Nuclear facilities and aircraft carriers are two common examples whose success is measured in terms of their ability to avoid, or “permanently delay” failure (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 916). It doesn’t stretch one’s imagination to consider large school districts as HROs in which failure has dire consequences for children served.

Ericksen and Dyer posited that successful HROs are adept at developing and implementing reliability-enhancing human resource strategies (REHRS) that reinforce and are reinforced by reliability-oriented employee behaviors (ROEBs). They identified four categories of ROEBs. First, *diligence* reflects employees’ ability to foresee and avoid problems, or at worst quickly identify and resolve emergent problems. Employees who are diligent consistently question their own and others’ actions and challenge taken-for-grant processes and routine thinking. *Facileness* refers to the capacity of HRO employees to move from routine to non-routine activities in the face of crisis, re-organizing human resources in novel ways to address problems and then returning to a new “normal” when the crisis passes. Facile work contexts emerge when employees are empowered to initiate action and who recognize and seek help when needed.

Where *facileness* refers to the ways in which employees organize and reorganize the structure of work, *fluidity* refers to how employees work and interact—especially in the midst of chaos when appropriate action is not immediately evident. As Ericksen and Dyer explain, employees work fluidly when they collaborate closely, developing “hypotheses about what is going on, to determine what should be done and to coordinate

action” (p. 912; see also Schulman, 1993). Expertise and experience—not influence and authority—determine how problems are addressed. Finally, ROEBs promote *generativeness*. When HRO employees are diligent, facile, and fluid they tend to “squeeze as much new knowledge as possible out of their successes and failures as well as the experiences of others” (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 913). These organizations eschew learning by trial and error and instead demonstrate attentiveness to new insights. These ROEBs reflect cultures that seek new information, share information, and improvise in order to not only perform at high levels, but to avoid problems originating either internally or externally to the system that could compromise organizational goals.

Strategic action, and the fostering of ROEBs, results in large measure from systems level thinking. Rather than thinking in terms of HRM practices, SHRM may be more likely when organizational leaders focus on *the principles* they would like to cultivate and work backwards to activities and practices (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Dyer & Schafer, 1999; Ericksen & Dyer, 2005). Wright argued that SHRM-oriented organizations identify a set of guiding principles that lead to specific practices and activities and finally desired outcomes.

What are examples of system-driven, principle-based human resource strategies in HROs? The HRO literature offers several examples we believe extend to school districts. First, HROs are obsessed with reliability (i.e., meeting objectives) and infusing the drive to meet objectives in all aspects of the organization. As Roberts and Bey (2001) argued, HROs celebrate reliability much more so than productivity or efficiency. Second, HROs spend significant energy gaining “contextual clarity” (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 918)—or developing the ability to see the big picture and how the systems’ parts work toward

those goals. Clarity also reflects the organizations and employees' understanding about how individuals' knowledge contributes to the larger mission.

Third, HROs develop cultures comfortable with contingency planning built on the qualities such as facileness described above. Contingency cultures “under specify and overstaff critical roles” (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 918) in order to respond quickly to new organizational demands. Accountability to the system is another strategic element of HROs. HRO-oriented accountability means clarifying roles, being accountable for responsibilities inherent in roles and fostering a “problem finding” culture.

Human development and employee security are two final strategic characteristics of HROs. Focusing developmental activities on core processes and procedures is par for the course in HROs. Training and development are targeted and can be reorganized to respond to new and unforeseen challenges. Importantly, training and development reinforces learning in one's area, but also in connected activities. Informal learning is fostered to encourage and reward continuous learning. Finally, HROs spend vast amounts of energy on recruitment and selection to minimize employee turnover. A critical point of HROs is that employees are rewarded, not punished, for raising concerns and pointing out errors; and rarely do HROs rely on outsiders to perform core activities.

Toward an SHRM Research Agenda

School Districts and SHRM: Insights From the Field

Addressing the issue of school district human resource management strategically presents challenges that echo challenges in other sectors. In what follows, we present insights gained from two brief forays in which we explored human resource issues through the SHRM lens. We use these insights and our literature review to propose

research questions and directions we believe offer promising ways to explore relationships between HR practices and organizational processes and outcomes.

Three general points result from our forays: 1) district understanding of “strategic,” 2) the role of fit and flexibility in district approaches to HR, and 3) the ways in which context/environment define, constrain, or support SHRM management. We found that understanding how districts define and understand strategic practice and how it applies to human resources management varies. For instance, understanding where on a continuum of strategic practice a district lies may be a first step in assessing relationships with HR practices and organizational outcomes.

The tension between wanting to be strategic and actually being strategic was clear in one school district. Although the district identified three district-wide goals that were communicated to employees and the community, connecting these goals to evidence of strategic action was less evident. Descriptions about infusing these goals throughout the district, empowering principals to hire the best teachers they could, and focusing on developing staff because “better personnel means saving money” were countered by standardized rubrics for teacher hiring, limited resources to hire experienced teachers, or lack of coherence of professional development activities to ensure focus on district goals. In short, these forays demonstrate the challenges districts may have related to 1) understanding and defining what it means to be strategic and 2) implementing action that is indeed strategic.

Second, horizontal fit results when multiple HR efforts and initiative form a system that supports organizational goals. Vertical fit occurs when HR practices, organizational goals, and external demands are in aligned, conjuring notions of Schein’s

external adaptation. Flexibility refers to the dynamism of change and the ability of the HR to respond to internal and external demands for change. As the literature suggests, organizations are more adept at articulating horizontal and vertical fit of their HR practices. However, implementing HR practices that are mutually supporting turns out to be more difficult in practice. This challenge was manifested in several ways in the districts we visited. For example, one district discussed HR functions such as recruitment, hiring, training, and evaluation of staff in a “hub and spoke” arrangement as they related to district goals. In another example, the district did not have the management information system it needed to get feedback from their practices and policies in order to act more strategically.

Missing from our conversations with district staff were references to elements of organizational learning necessary to foster conditions for strategic thinking and action throughout the organization. Interestingly, one “model” school within one district reflected strategic action with positive results (i.e., dramatically improved achievement data). In this model school, teachers were selected based on evidence of academic success with low achieving students in lower socioeconomic environments, or in the case of new teachers, demonstrated interest and preparedness to teach in these environments. These teachers were paid more than other teachers to strengthen the district’s recruiting position. The school principal was also given the freedom to choose instructional programs and professional development geared toward the school’s priorities. As Ericksen and Dyer (2005) predicted, an HR management principle was driven first, followed by a focus on practice, then outcomes to assess practice.

Our final point focuses on the influence of the external environment on SHRM. While the SHRM and organizational learning help understand the behaviors, nature of social interaction, and organizational supports that enhance reliability and performance, these bodies of literature continue to fall short when exploring the influence of environment on organizational decisions. While external influence is mentioned it does little to guide strategic organizational action, to describe the variety of influences, or to predict how organizations can or should respond to external influence. Our forays into the world of district HRM underscored the limits of current theorizing on the relationship between organizations and their environments. For example, district staff discussed the unique role school boards play in overseeing the formulation and implementation of overarching directions, policies and goals. This role was complicated (compared to other sectors) by the value-laden nature of decision-making. As one district official mentioned, their ability to act strategically was often hampered by directives to achieve a goal but resistance to provide adequate resources to fund it. Furthermore, in one district the board and district administrators responded to community pressure to address the goal to maximize resources above their other academically oriented goals. For example, the “board passed on long term needs” such as improving expenditures to upgrade infrastructure to support strategic decision making such as adequate information systems and databases in favor of activities that would result in quicker results. The press for resource efficiency also constrained the district’s ability to increase teacher salaries, something that district leadership hoped to implement as a way of replicating the success of the model school.

SHRM and School Districts: An Emergent Program of Study

Throughout this paper we have paid special attention to presenting the conceptual building blocks of SHRM, coupling those pieces with organizational learning theory in order to better understand how strategic practice occurs in school district human resource management. Through the application of high reliability organization theory, we have gained clarity on the instrumentality of SHRM as central offices formulate human resource policies and practices that lead to workforce development that improves student achievement. However, our work in understanding relationships between HR policy and practice and student outcomes has just begun.

As we stated at the outset, in education the intended purpose of SHRM is to link strategy with practice in ways that enhance the capacity of individuals and groups to achieve common goals (Smylie, Miretsky, & Konkol, 2004; Wei, 2005). SHRM theory contends that managing human resources to build organizational capacity requires the integration and a systems approach rather than the implementation of discrete functions such as recruitment, selection or induction. As Webb and Norton (2009) argued, in the age of accountability effective human resource management demands consideration along three dimensions: utilization of human resources, development of human resources, and consideration of external influence on the system. These three dimensions must work in unison if instructional capacity is to be built and supported throughout the system.

The literature and our forays suggest that elements of SHRM have been implemented in school districts. We found examples of strategic alignment between teacher development programs and district curriculum and between teacher evaluation and specific curriculum frameworks. In one case we found a comprehensive attempt at SHRM, albeit at the school level. We were left with the sense that both practitioners and

scholars are drawn to a focus on horizontal fit as they look for optimal ways to align specific HR functions such as professional development. This focus on internal integration more than likely fosters the “hub and spoke” approach we’ve discussed.

We know least about the “black box” of HRM and what distinguishes strategic from non-strategic approaches. The arguments made by Ericksen and Dyer (2005), shed light on important questions regarding organizational conditions that support SHRM on the one hand, and the ways SHRM practices might influence organizational culture on the other. Thus, while the structural and operational side of SHRM (i.e., horizontal and vertical fit) merits further exploration, we argue that exploring flexibility within the black box—how people think, behave, and work with others to address organizational needs and goals—is key to moving the HR conversation forward in scholarly and practitioner circles. In short, the concept of flexibility offers promise in determining how organizations define and adjust to internal goals and external demands, how problems are identified and solved, and the extent to which work roles are shared and work is conducted collaboratively. Thus, we argue that consideration of flexibility will lead to new and more promising questions the conditions that lead to and sustain strategic, systems-oriented approaches to HR.

Flexibility is a two-way street, however. That is, organizations must create the conditions for professional interactions that lead to “generative learning.” According to Ericksen and Dyer (2005), HROs focus on being reliable, understanding the big picture and its component parts, and developing dynamic, competency-based workforces that organize and reorganize according to need. Perhaps most importantly SHRM in high reliability organizations is a principle-driven approach. While paying particular attention

to concepts of flexibility and principle-driven HRM, we present ideas for future SHRM research in terms of studies that are descriptive, relational, and explanatory in nature—not as a hierarchy but as a set of research perspectives that address different yet mutually supportive questions.

Descriptive approaches and questions. Descriptive, in-depth case studies of school district human resource practices can lead to several important outcomes. First, descriptions of practice can clarify and distinguish between various patterns of HR practice in school districts. For example, case study research could explore the ways district central offices organize, think about, and act strategically (or not) in relation to HR functions. Our review of literatures on HRM in and out of public education suggest that developing accurate typologies of actual strategic organization and behavior is fundamental to the success of investigations seeking to identify relationships between central office policy and practice and important outcomes related to teacher quality and student achievement.

Descriptive case study research also lends itself to describing patterns of managerial and/or strategic practice within and across districts. SHRM concepts of horizontal and vertical fit can inform inquiries into the extent to which these practices support systemic thinking and strategic decision-making related to HR practices and broader district goals. Further, concepts that describe patterns of individual, group and organizational behaviors have been overlooked in past research, but are instrumental in understanding the role of thought, action, and interaction in fostering and sustaining SHRM. In addition to understanding patterns or HR practice within districts, as it accumulates descriptive research can support theorizing on the influence of contextual

variables such as district size, urbanicity, reform policies, etc. on human resource management and district performance.

Correlational and explanatory research. With the potential to identify and categorize salient aspects of the structures, functions and patterns of practice and behavior surrounding human resource management in school districts, researchers would be better situated to explore connections between these contextual variables and important dependent variables related to teacher learning and quality, student learning and achievement, and resource maximization to name a few. Establishing relationships among these variables could be further strengthened through research designs that account for mitigating factors associated with, for example, individuals' characteristics and attributes, work climate and culture, and external factors such as community support, accountability, and reform agendas. By identifying the linkages between school district approaches and goals related to human resource management, the contextual factors within and external to districts that influence the attainment of these goals, and selected outcome variables, research will contribute in more meaningful ways to the strategic management through more efficient allocation of resources that support patterns of activity which actually support teacher development and student learning.

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