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# CHAPTER 1

## The Purpose and Promise of Schools

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**H**ow do we talk about the value of school? How do we define the meaning of a quality education? The value of school has traditionally been measured in terms of results—grades on exams, projects, and essays designed by teachers to match the taught curriculum and dutifully recorded in report cards sent home to parents each term. Over the last two decades, these kinds of results have lost ground to external measures: standardized tests that allow for the easy ranking and comparison of students across disparate settings. Increasingly, these have become the markers of quality, the measures by which we assess progress, and the outcome that teachers are teaching for, that students are working toward, and that parents expect. But is this really why we send our children to school? Is this truly the goal of education to which we collectively aspire?

Commenting on education reform in a back-to-school issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, historian Diane Ravitch stated, “The single biggest problem in education is that no one agrees on why we educate. Faced with this lack of consensus, policy makers define good education as higher test scores” (“How to Remake Education,” 2009). Although the definitions of policymakers surely matter, they are not the final arbiters in this debate. Policy is ultimately shaped by societal, organizational, parental, and student-held definitions of “good” or “great” or any adjective we use to define exceptional quality. These definitions establish the broader context in which schools operate. It is these conversations about quality that give rise to the standards that shape the lives of teachers and students and that define the outcome to which all efforts must be aligned. We must change the way we talk about education. As Elliot Eisner (2003) has said, “As long as schools treat test scores as the major proxies for student achievement and educational quality, we will have a hard time refocusing our attention on what really matters in education” (p. 9).

Ultimately, our definition of “a great school” or “quality education” matters because it will define what we give time to and what becomes a priority in the day-to-day life of the classroom. It will shape our expectations of what schools can contribute to our lives and to our society. In short, our definition of what makes a quality education shapes our aspirations as parents, educators, and as a society at large. So, yes, it matters how we talk about schooling and its purpose. It matters how the society talks to its politicians, how

policymakers talk to the media, how principals talk to teachers, how teachers talk to students, and how parents talk to their children. It matters because our talk shapes our focus, and our focus directs our energies, which will shape our actions.

## **THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT OUTCOMES**

To help us think about what makes a quality education and about the purpose of schooling in our society, try this simple thought experiment. When I speak with groups around the world, be they made up of parents, teachers, or administrators, I often begin by posing a question: *What do you want the children you teach to be like as adults?* Although I use the word “teach,” I mean this in the broadest sense of educating, so that it applies to parents and administrators as well as teachers. When speaking to parents, I emphasize that I want them to think about all the students at the school, not just their own children. This ensures that they consider outcomes as a member of society who has a much broader stake in the outcomes of education. Take a moment now and consider how you would respond to this question. What do you want the children we are teaching in our schools to be like as adults?

Frequently, I have people engage with this question by using the Chalk Talk routine (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). In this routine, individuals share their thoughts silently by recording them on large sheets of chart paper. As individuals share ideas, they read and respond to the written ideas of others by making comments, raising questions, asking for elaboration, making connections between comments, and so on. At the end of ten minutes, we have a very rich image of the kind of student we, the collective members of this particular group, want to graduate from our schools. We are hoping for someone who is curious, engaged, able to persevere, empathetic, willing to take risks and try new things, a go getter, able to problem-solve, creative, passionate about something, a listener, open-minded, healthy, committed to the community, respectful, analytical, inquisitive, a lifelong learner, an avid reader, a critical consumer, helpful, compassionate, able to take a global view, willing to learn from his or her mistakes, collaborative, imaginative, enthusiastic, adaptable, able to ask good questions, able to connect, well rounded, a critical thinker . . . And the list goes on with much elaboration, explanation, and assorted arrows connecting the various qualities.

What is interesting about the lists and charts created by these disparate groups all over the world is how similar they are. It matters little whether the group is from a suburban district of Detroit, an all-boys’ school in Melbourne, a gathering of teachers from international schools in Europe, a group of parents in Hong Kong, a consortium of

charter schools, or an urban high school in New York City. The same sets of qualities tend to appear over and over again. There is often an emphasis on attributes that drive learning: curiosity, inquisitiveness, questioning. And those that facilitate innovation: creativity, problem solving, risk taking, imagination, and inquisitiveness. There are the skills needed to work and get along with others: collaboration, empathy, good listening, helpfulness. And those that support the ability to deal with complexity: analysis, making connections, critical thinking. And usually there are those that situate us collectively in the world: as a global citizen, a member of a community, someone aware of his or her impact on the environment, able to communicate.

You'll notice that there are few traditional academic skills mentioned. Does that mean they aren't important? Of course not. It's just that they do not adequately define the kind of students we collectively hope to send into the world. Nor do they define the kind of employee whom businesses are looking to hire in the twenty-first century. In a survey of four hundred businesses across the United States conducted by a consortium of human resource, education, and corporate entities (Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, & Society for Human Resource Management, 2006), employers were asked to rank the skills they were looking for in potential applicants, working from a list that included both academic and applied skills. Applied skills such as professionalism, work ethic, collaboration, communication, ethics, social responsibility, critical thinking, and problem solving topped the list over more traditional academic skills. Only when it came to the hiring of recent high school students did a single traditional academic subject, reading comprehension, make the top five (it was ranked fifth) in terms of its importance. This list from employers mirrors the qualities that Tony Wagner (2008) heard mentioned in his interviews with business leaders. Wagner distilled these into what he calls seven survival skills: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, communication skills, the ability to analyze information, and curiosity and imagination.

It could be argued that businesses assume a high level of basic skills and knowledge as a given and are thus only identifying these applied skills as the icing on the cake. Perhaps, though in the aforementioned survey, this appears not to be the case. Prospective employers recognized deficiencies in academic skills, yet still ranked applied skills as both being more important and even more lacking in applicants than was academic preparedness. One crossover category topped the list in terms of deficiency. Writing in English was identified as deficient among 72 percent of applicants, and its applied skill corollary, written communication, as deficient among 80.9 percent of applicants. After

that, the skills, both applied and academic, listed as most deficient were (in order): leadership, professionalism, critical thinking and problem solving, foreign languages, self-direction, creativity, mathematics, and oral communication. All of these skills were identified as deficient in more than 50 percent of applicants. Perhaps the biggest takeaway is that applied skills are not considered an add-on, but rather an integral part of workplace preparedness.

The goal of cultivating a lifelong skill set that propels innovation and invention is championed internationally as well. In a 2011 study of the educational practices of the top-performing countries as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment, Marc Tucker (2011) reported that “one cannot help but be struck by the attention that is being given to achieving clarity and consensus on the goals for education in those countries” (p. 5). His group, the National Center on Education and the Economy, found a concern, particularly among Asian countries, with the development of cognitive skills as well as noncognitive skills that facilitated both global competitiveness and personal fulfillment. This sentiment is captured in remarks made in 2002 by Singapore’s minister of education, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, in which he described as a top priority the need for Singaporean students to develop “a willingness to keep learning, and an ability to experiment, innovate, and take risks” (Borja, 2004, p. 30). Likewise, China’s Central Committee stated that education in the country must begin to “emphasize sowing students’ creativity and practical abilities over instilling an ability to achieve certain test scores and recite rote knowledge” (Zhao, 2006).

The qualities I consistently hear as important to teachers and parents, like those emerging from the world of work, are being called for by other sources as well. In 2002, in the book *Intellectual Character*, I reviewed the call for habits of mind, intellectual passions, and thinking dispositions being championed from various circles and found agreement around six broad characteristics: curiosity, open-mindedness, being strategic, having a healthy skepticism, being a truth seeker, and being metacognitive. The learner profile of the International Baccalaureate promotes students as inquirers, thinkers, communicators, and risk takers, and as being open-minded, reflective, well balanced, caring, principled, and knowledgeable. Likewise, the Building Learning Power initiative (Claxton, Chambers, Powell, & Lucas, 2011) seeks to develop a set of some twenty learning capacities around reflectiveness, resourcefulness, reciprocity/collaboration, and resilience that are quite similar to many of those already mentioned. Philosophers recognize these traits as encompassing a set of intellectual virtues. Once again, the more traditional academic skills that make up the standardized tests, define our graduation requirements, and serve as gatekeepers for university entrance don’t appear explicitly on these lists.

Thus a new vision of what a quality education is and what it should offer arises from the data. Although a host of different vocabulary is used and the traits parsed slightly differently, what emerges is a rich portrait of *the student as an engaged and active thinker able to communicate, innovate, collaborate, and problem-solve*. What we see as most important to develop is not a discrete collection of knowledge but rather a set of broad characteristics that motivate learning and lead to the generation of useable knowledge. Some might say this is the profile of a twenty-first-century learner (Trilling & Fadel, 2009); others might see it as what it means to be a well-rounded citizen (Arnstine, 1995; Meier, 2003); still others might incorporate this definition as part of global competency (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). I choose to see this portrait of a student as the vision of what a quality education affords. This is what we must be teaching for and trying to achieve for every student. The big questions then are: How do we get there—how do we realize this vision? How are our schools doing currently in producing this vision of students as thinkers? What are the forces we must marshal and master to truly transform our schools? These are the questions I take up in this book.

## TEACHING AS ENCULTURATION

The qualities found in the various lists I've mentioned—reflective, imaginative, curious, creative, and so on—are often classified as *dispositions*. A disposition is an enduring characteristic or trait of a person that serves to motivate behavior. When we say a person is curious, a particular dispositional attribute, it is because we see a pattern of behavior—such as questioning, exploring, probing, and so on—emanating from that person over time and across circumstances that relates to that particular disposition. Our dispositions define who we are as people, as thinkers, as learners. In previous writings, I've argued that the dispositions that define us as thinkers make up our intellectual character (Ritchhart, 2002).

We might think about these dispositions not only in terms of the outcomes of a quality education but also, to borrow a phrase from Ted Sizer, as the residuals of education—that is to say, what is left over after all the things practiced and memorized for tests are long forgotten. What stays with us long after we have left the classroom? Speaking at the Save Our Schools rally in Washington DC on July 30, 2011, Matt Damon highlighted the importance of these residuals, saying, “As I look at my life today, the things I value most about myself—my imagination, my love of acting, my passion for writing, my love of learning, my curiosity—all come from how I was parented and taught. And none of these qualities that I've just mentioned—none of these qualities that I prize so deeply, that have

brought me so much joy, that have brought me so much professional success—none of these qualities that make me who I am . . . can be tested.”

The key aspect of these dispositions, even though they are manifest in the exhibition of specific skills and actions, is that they cannot be directly taught or directly tested. Think about it. It would be absurd to teach a unit on curiosity or risk taking or collaboration and then to give a multiple-choice test to assess students’ development. Sure, students might learn “about” the disposition, but they would be unlikely to develop the disposition itself. Rather, these qualities, these dispositions, have to be developed over time. They must be nurtured across a variety of circumstances so that they become ingrained and are likely to emerge when the situation calls for them. *Dispositions must be enculturated—that is, learned through immersion in a culture.*

One of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s most famous quotes is, “Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (1978, p. 88). This statement beautifully captures what enculturation means. It means surrounding the child with the kind of intellectual life, mental activity, and processes of learning to which we want them to grow accustomed. It suggests that learning to learn is an apprenticeship in which we don’t so much learn from others as we learn with others in the midst of authentic activities. If we take Vygotsky’s quote to heart, then we must take a hard look at our homes, schools, and classrooms and ask ourselves about the kind of intellectual life with which we are surrounding our children. What kinds of models do they see? What kinds of opportunities do they experience? What kinds of thinking are being valued, privileged, and promoted on a day-to-day basis?

## **CULTURE AS THE ENACTMENT OF A STORY**

Parents play an important role in building character, both intellectual and moral, and enculturating dispositions in their children. Parents are the first and most important models for children. A parent’s values and dispositions are regularly on display, and his or her behaviors are the ones a child will first imitate. At the same time, when it comes to the dispositions related to thinking and learning, schools play a privileged role in society. Schools are designed as places of learning and so send important messages about what learning is, how it happens, and what kinds of learning are of value. Each and every day, year in and year out, students are being told a story of learning. Enculturation is a process of gradually internalizing the messages and values, the story being told, that we repeatedly experience through interaction with the external, social environment.



This internalization takes time as we identify the messages and values that are consistent and recurring in our environment.

This notion of culture as a story we tell is a metaphor that I have been employing in my work with schools and organizations for a number of years. It was first presented to me in the book *Ishmael*. In the novel, author Daniel Quinn invites readers to be a part of dialogue between a skilled teacher and a skeptical but willing student around the very nature of the role of humans on the planet. The fact that the teacher, Ishmael, is a gorilla eager to pass on his acquired wisdom about the human race through telepathy adds a bit of a twist to things. Early on, Ishmael lays out some definitions that will be key to the dialogue, in particular that of “culture.” He defines culture as “a group of people enacting a story” and says that to enact a story “is to live so as to make the story a reality.” For the purposes of the novel, the story being enacted concerns the relationship between man, the world, and the gods. Drawing on this metaphor, I define the culture of schools as a group of people enacting a story. The story concerns the relationship between teachers, students, and the act of learning. Everyone is a player in this story, acting in a way that reinforces the story and makes it reality.

The idea that culture can be transmitted through storytelling has long been recognized. Likewise, the idea that a culture sends messages about what is valued and worthwhile through its use of traditions, behaviors, symbolic conduct, and other means is also generally well understood. Carolyn Taylor (2005), writing for a business audience, takes this idea a step further, saying that “culture management is about message management. If you can find, and change, enough of the sources of these messages, you will change the culture” (p. 7). Clearly, the role of messages in revealing and shaping culture is important. However, it is the self-reinforcing, continual construction of culture through the dynamic enactment of both individual and collective values that I find so powerful. This perspective on the power of the story *in the making* can help us understand the symbiotic role every participant plays in creating culture, as well as the privileged role leaders play.

So to understand the culture of a school or classroom, we need to look at the story about learning each is telling. Beliefs, messages, values, behaviors, traditions, routines, and so on are not the culture itself, but are significant indicators of culture to the extent that they reinforce the core story being told. They are the means by which we identify the story of learning. With this in mind, there are three stories of learning we should examine before we can look at how to transform culture. The first is the old story—that is, the story each of us was told as a student. The second is the current story dominant in schools and classrooms today. The third is the new story we want to be telling.

## Uncovering the Old Story

We all have different experiences of schooling. Even within any individual's experience, there are different teachers and classrooms that might be enacting different, even competing, stories. Acknowledging these differences, it is nonetheless useful to individually uncover the story of learning we were told. This is as true for parents as it is for teachers, principals, classroom aides, museum educators, or corporate trainers. The story that we were told as students is most likely to influence, positively or negatively, how we interact with our own children and students.

Michael identifies a recurring theme from his school experience:

From my first days in school, I was told a story of sorting, classification, and ability. We were put in reading groups, and it wasn't hard to figure out who had the right stuff and who was struggling. At the end of first grade I experienced another kind of sorting, being left back. I didn't make the grade and wouldn't stay with my peers. But for some reason, the next year I was still in that low reading group. And so it went up through middle school and being placed in shop class and then in high school in the vocational track. There was never talk about what I wanted, just imposed sorting and classifying.

Jason recalls his elementary experiences most vividly:

I remember school as being a silent place, at least for me. We weren't allowed to talk. One time I recall the teacher asking me, "Why are you talking? Your work isn't done." I remember thinking how strange it was to link talking with being done with my work. I was a slow worker. I was never done with my work early. So that meant never talking. Of course, recess was my outlet. That was real for me. The classroom wasn't.

It was a pivotal experience in just one class that left a big mark on Ruth:

I remember one particular algebra class. Algebra was new and different, and for me exciting. I liked the puzzle aspect of it, and it was much more interesting than just doing sums. One day in class, the teacher was explaining a difficult problem, and I remember being totally engrossed in the problem and trying to figure out why he was doing it the way he was when it seemed like there should be another way. My way. I kept puzzling over it until I was convinced I was right. My way did work. I worked up the courage to raise my hand to ask about it. The teacher said he had already answered that question. Wasn't I listening? From that day on, I never asked another question in that class, and I lost my interest in math, even though I was good at it. I guess the message I got was school was about listening to the teacher, not figuring things out for yourself.

For Nicole, the story of learning she was told is a familiar one:

It was all about the grades and pleasing the teacher. I was good at that, but I don't really feel like I learned all that much. I played the system and got rewarded for it. I used grades to keep score.

A similar theme comes up in Max's account:

It seemed to be all about speed. I remember timed tests and spelling bees, and everything always having a time limit. If you got done early, it meant you were smart. First hand up to answer the teacher's question? Smart. I guess it was like a competition.

Distance and exclusion were themes for Marcella:

My language and culture weren't represented or even acknowledged in my school. We were told we were not to speak Spanish. Of course, among my friends we did, but we had to be careful not to get caught. Even in simple things like asking for help or chatting between classes, we were to speak in English. It sent the message that something was wrong with our home language, that school was a foreign place we were visiting rather than a place in which we were included. We could only get a small bit of the instruction at first and so were always struggling, which sent the message we weren't good learners.

These are just a few accounts of “old stories of learning” that were told. Maybe they resonate with your school experience. The themes of these stories are powerful and pointed: that school is a sorting mechanism, that you either fit or you don't, that there is not a place for dialogue and conversation, that learning requires individualized seat work and practice, that learning is competitive versus cooperative, that being fast means you are smart, that there is no room for questioning, that getting the grade is what learning is all about. These themes shape students' experience, frame how they come to view learning, and in some cases distort what true learning is.

Although the stories presented here aren't particularly positive, I don't mean to suggest that this is always the case. When I ask groups of parents and educators to share the stories of learning they encountered as students, I invariably hear a story like Antonia's:

I remember my fifth-grade teacher. She was passionate about learning and so excited. She was always telling us stories about new things or places she had been. It was contagious. You wanted to learn because you wanted to be a part of her world. Have a conversation with her. That has always stayed with me. She was a big reason I became a teacher.

As parents and educators, we should never forget the power of the individual to make a difference and often to transform negative, unproductive, and demoralizing stories of learning into positive ones. At the same time, as a society, district, or school, we need to examine the dominant story that students and teachers are enacting. What messages about learning and thinking are we imparting over time?

### **Taking a Hard Look at the Current Story**

Although students aren't always the best evaluators of their long-term educational needs, they can be excellent barometers of the focus of instruction and its meaningfulness to them. They know when they are and are not being intellectually engaged, and they are quite adept at recognizing when they are truly learning and developing as human beings. It is in their voices that we will find the current story of learning being told in our schools. Bringing students into the conversation about outcomes and purpose is important for all schools and teachers, as it helps develop a shared mission that all can work toward. The Building Learning Power initiative (Claxton et al., 2011) in Britain includes students in the regular audits of classrooms to help look for the kinds of thinking the school says it values. Masada College in Sydney, Australia, also engages its students in planning part of the Cultures of Thinking initiative there. To better uncover the story of learning in your classroom and at your school, you'll need to elicit students' perceptions of the learning they are encountering. Suggestions for doing so can be found at the end of this chapter.

As never before in history, students around the world are making their voices heard and talking about the story of learning they are experiencing by using social media, blogs, YouTube, and Internet news sites. Nikhil Goyal (2011), a sixteen-year-old student at Syosset High School in New York, wrote an article for the *Huffington Post* about how a focus on test preparation has "hijacked classroom learning." He expressed the need to focus more on "creativity, imagination, discovery, and project-based learning." In his YouTube video titled "Open Letter to Educators," university student Dan Brown (2010) discusses why he decided to drop out of a system dedicated almost solely to imparting information over stoking creativity and innovation because "my schooling was interfering with my education." Cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch (2008) has labeled this a "crisis of significance" in which "education has become a relatively meaningless game of grades more than an important and meaningful exploration of the world in which we live and co-create" (p. 5). He captured this disconnect in the 2007 YouTube video "A Vision of Students Today," featuring his own students at Kansas State University.

At Teenink.com, Sophia W. (2011) writes a scathing article about Advanced Placement courses in which she renames them as "Absolutely Preposterous Weapons of Mass

Instruction,” decrying how these courses only teach students what to think, not how to think, and serve to distance students from their own ideas, opinions, creativity, and reason. Sophia’s rant about the disconnect between AP courses and real learning is borne out by a 2006 study by researchers at Harvard University and the University of Virginia which found that AP science courses do not significantly contribute to success in college (Bradt, 2006). Instead, the study found that a focus on the in-depth study of a few topics, rather than the coverage approach of AP, was a better indicator of university success in science. Thus the very thing being promoted as preparing students for college isn’t.

The story of learning emerging from these voices is that school can be mind numbing and irrelevant, focusing mostly on memorization. Of course, these voices belong to those speaking out in very public forums to express discontent and frustration. It is reasonable to ask how typical they are of most students. These same themes can be found in the much more representative Gallup Youth Survey (Lyons, 2004). In this survey, middle and high school students were asked to select three words from a list of adjectives to describe how they usually feel in school. Topping the list, the word “bored” was chosen by 50 percent of the students. In second place was “tired,” with 42 percent. “Happy” and “challenged” were next with 31 percent, a bit more hopeful and positive to be sure. However, it should be noted that students were more likely to choose positive adjectives if they self-identified as being “above average” or “near the top,” indicating that the story of learning that students are encountering may differ by ability.

One can also see this same pattern of experience in the findings of one of the largest longitudinal studies of how students experience elementary schools, conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, Morrison, & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2007). The ongoing study involves classroom observations of 1,364 students as they progress through school to assess the type of instruction they experience. The most recent assessment, of students’ fifth-grade year, involved 956 students (some students dropped out of the study) enrolled in 737 classrooms distributed across 502 schools (both public and private) in 302 districts (mostly middle class) in thirty-three different states. Taking just the fifth-grade observations as an example, it was found that 58 percent of students’ time was spent on basic skills learning and less than 13 percent on higher-level learning involving analysis and inference. Furthermore, less than 5 percent of the instructional time involved collaborative work, and less than 1 percent of the observed class episodes (approximately six hours in each classroom) were classified as instances where students were highly engaged. The image that emerges from these classrooms is similar to that expressed by Daniel Pink

(Starr, 2012): too often the good kids are compliant, the so-called bad kids are defiant, but no one is engaged.

One might expect things to get better as students progress through school, but the evidence says otherwise. The Collegiate Learning Assessment tracked twenty-three hundred students through their university experience at twenty-four schools in the United States and found that just slightly more than half (55 percent) of students showed any significant improvement in key measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing by the end of their sophomore year (Gorski, 2011). These statistics improved only slightly by the end of four years, with 64 percent demonstrating improvement on these measures. The study found that the overall school experience for students was similar to that reported by Michael Wesch's students in his YouTube video, in which the reading isn't relevant, little writing is done, and lectures dispense information but don't ask students to think (Wesch, 2007). As University of Missouri freshman Julia Rheinecker stated, "Most of what I learned this year I already had in high school . . . I just haven't found myself pushing as much as I expected" (quoted in Gorski, 2011).

It may seem from these reports that there isn't much of a difference between the old story many of us experienced and the current story, with its emphasis on rote learning and grades, and in many cases an irrelevant curriculum. Some are arguing that the current emphasis on testing and accountability is actually leading schools to diminish students' opportunity rather than enhance it (Meier, 2003; Ravitch, 2011; Ritchhart, 2004; Rose, 2009; Wagner, 2008; Zhao, 2009). What is being created is a testing culture rather than a learning culture, in which we see scores on tests going up but learning, understanding, and engagement decreasing (Shepard, 2000).

Although we don't have good historical data to make such a comparison, there is evidence that current educational policies do in fact have an inhibiting role when it comes to opening up learning, promoting creativity, and promoting thinking. In a 2000–2001 survey by the National Educational Association (2003), 61 percent of public school teachers said that testing stifles real teaching and learning. This survey predated the implementation of the No Child Left Behind reform, which mandated much more testing. In their book, *Imagination First*, Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon (2009) note how the test culture has warped our perspective of what it means to educate: "Too many public schools focus on the measurable to the exclusion of the possible. As a result, too many students end up better prepared for taking tests than for being skillful learners in the world beyond school" (p. 30). In the United Kingdom, the focus on the national curriculum has made it harder for teachers to bring enthusiasm, creativity, thinking, and a responsive curriculum to students as teachers struggle with the increasing

standardization, centralization, and vocational focus of education (Claxton et al., 2011; Lipsett, 2008; Maisuria, 2005; Robinson, 1999; Wagner, 2008).

As Australia began its move toward a national curriculum and its associated testing, policymakers looked at the impact similar reform efforts had in the United States and the United Kingdom. One analysis concluded, “Full-cohort [all students system wide] tests encourage methods of teaching that promote shallow and superficial learning rather than deep conceptual understanding and the kinds of complex knowledge and skills needed in modern, information-based societies” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2009, p. 3). Nonetheless, policymakers enamored with notions of accountability, value added, and measurable results seem poised to impose a testing policy that mirrors all the failed aspects of those imposed in the United States and the United Kingdom, ignoring the mounting evidence that such testing warps and distorts the story of learning for both teachers and students.

Nikhil Goyal, mentioned earlier, talked about classrooms as test-prep factories. Indeed, the Center for Educational Policy found that since 2001–2002, most school districts in the United States (84 percent) had made changes to curriculum and the allocation of instructional time to focus on tested content (McMurrer, 2007). Tony Wagner, author of *The Global Achievement Gap*, has visited classrooms in some of the best public and private schools in the United States, assessing the intellectual challenge being offered to students through schoolwide learning walks. In typical learning walks, he finds that little time is spent on activities that require higher-order thinking and that teachers rarely ask questions involving more than recall. He is lucky to visit a single class out of a dozen where all students are actively engaged and thinking. In my own research group’s study of teacher questioning in direct-instruction classrooms in the United Kingdom—defined as classrooms where teachers deliver instruction based on meeting specific objectives as delineated in an externally prescribed curriculum—we found that the majority of teachers’ questions (58 percent) were either of a procedural nature or focused on reviewing content. Just 10 percent were designed to push, probe, and facilitate students’ thinking. In Jo Boaler’s study of traditional high school mathematics classes in the United States, she found that virtually all, 97 percent, of questions involved recall and review (Boaler & Brodie, 2004).

Several themes are emerging from these disparate accounts: that learning in schools is often boring, largely entails memorizing and repeating facts, rarely demands that students think, and is generally an isolated exercise. These themes are given much of their traction, life, and longevity by another common story thread: competition. The idea that learning is a competitive rather than collaborative venture is practically baked into

our system of education, in which rankings, GPAs, and exam scores are used as measures of accomplishment and criteria for admission to university programs. In the documentary *Race to Nowhere* (Attia, 2010), the effects of this competition on students are explored in terms of the stress, disengagement, alienation, cheating, loss of creativity, and overall mental health issues that competition induces in many of those who choose to buy in, and the high dropout rates that result when students choose not to buy in or find themselves locked out by the testing culture. The documentary gives voice to students, mostly from highly competitive public and private schools, who feel that grades and scores, rather than learning, have become the purpose of school. Inspired by her own daughter's stress-induced illness, documentary director Vicki H. Abeles and writer Miamone Attia have issued a wake-up call for schools to change the story of learning they are enacting.

Another wake-up call was issued by Sir Ken Robinson (2010) in his widely popular TED talk viewed by more than five million people, "Bring on the Learning Revolution!" In his address, Robinson stresses the urgent need for nurturing human potential on an individualized basis as an educational outcome, a theme that emerged from his committee's report to the secretary of state for education and employment in the United Kingdom (Robinson, 1999). To the TED audience, Robinson speaks about this need as a crisis of human resources being brought about by an education that dislocates people from their natural talents rather than helping them identify and develop those talents. He lays the blame for this dislocation and death on the dominant story of learning being told in our schools today. Specifically he identifies two story themes: linearity and conformity. Schools present learning as a track that students are placed on, with the end goal often being attending a good college. However, this linear view of education ignores the organic nature of learning and human development. This linearity also leads us to seeing education as a competition to reach the end goal faster and better (attending a more selective college) than others.

Accompanying, and perhaps even exacerbating, the linearity Robinson identifies is the theme of conformity, the idea that we can have a one-size-fits-all system of education. One sees this playing out in the increasing calls for standardization of curriculum, tests, and teaching. Robinson (2010) says that "we have sold ourselves into a fast food model of education, and it is impoverishing our spirits and our energies as much as fast food is depleting our physical bodies." Instead of accepting the belief that quality comes from conformity, he suggests that we attain the highest quality when we strive for customization over standardization. The focus on conformity kills creativity and imagination, Robinson argues. This is more than a mere belief, however. A review of almost three hundred thousand scores of children and adults on the Torrance Creativity Test reveals a



steady and “very significant” decline in scores since the 1990s, with those of American elementary school students showing the “most serious” decline (Bronson & Merryman, 2010).

As with our review of the old story, this examination of the current story has to be considered as only a partial view. Certainly there are schools and classrooms telling a different, more engaging, and more thoughtful story of learning. Having worked with Disney’s American Teacher Awards program and coauthored the Creative Classroom series, I know many excellent teachers. I’m sure you also know of some excellent schools and dynamic teachers. That said, we shouldn’t be too quick to pat ourselves on the back or become complacent about how our students are experiencing learning in our schools and classrooms on a larger scale and over time.

It takes a degree of nerve, ambition, and fortitude to steadfastly and honestly work to uncover the story of learning one is telling students. Once we have done so, we must then assess how that story stacks up against what we truly want for our students. Are we in fact cultivating the kinds of adults we want our students to be? This alignment isn’t easy, precisely because we have allowed low-level outcomes on tests to shape our view of what a quality education is and should offer. The story of learning we are enacting also gets framed through the lens of our own experience as students. We tend to perpetuate and reinforce the status quo because it is the only story we know. In this way, the culture of schools, the story of learning we are enacting, becomes invisible to us. However, as the large-scale studies mentioned earlier have all found, the dominant story is not one that is serving students well or adequately promoting the outcomes we say we value. Therefore, we must think about telling a different story of learning.

### **Crafting a Different Story for Schools**

Creating a new story requires us not only to rethink the purpose and vision of education but also to examine the way schools operate and function as delivery agents of that vision. To change the story and achieve different outcomes, such as those set forth previously, we must send new messages about what learning is and how it happens. Crafting and sending new messages is not an easy task. It requires us to really walk the talk. The old story and its accompanying practices are quite ingrained in us as students, teachers, and parents, making it easy to fall into familiar ways of doing things. In the following chapters, we will focus on how we can marshal and master the forces at work within group culture in a way that will enable us to enact a different story. But first, we must allow ourselves to dream a new vision and articulate its essence.

All too often, we educators find it difficult to dream. There is a tendency to see the barriers, constraints, and structures around us as impenetrable. There's the time table, the external exams, university entrance requirements, fifty-minute instructional periods, government mandates, annual yearly progress measures, outside inspectors, parental expectations, and so on. All these cause us to throw up our hands and say, "Until the system changes, there is nothing we can do." David Jakes (2012), an educational advocate interested in transforming schools through technology, also uses the story metaphor to think about schools and their vision. He suggests that we need to change our language from one of limits to one of possibilities: "Creating a new story requires that the author or authors of that new story cast aside the destructive 'Yah But' mentality, and ask 'What If?'"

Let's consider a few "What ifs" that suggest a new story:

- What if schools were less about preparing students for tests and more about preparing them for a lifetime of learning?
- What if schools measured success not by what individuals did on exams but by what groups were able to accomplish together?
- What if schools took the development of students' intellectual character as their highest calling?
- What if understanding and application of skills and knowledge rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge were the goal?
- What if students were really engaged in their learning rather than merely compliant in the process of school as it is done to them?
- What if students had more control of their learning?

There is an endless array of "What if" questions we might ask to help us rethink our schools and to dream a new vision of education. The ones here might spark fresh thinking and rich dreaming on the part of you and your colleagues as you explore what the implications of these "What ifs" might be for teachers and students. In addition, you might want to identify your own "What if" questions, either individually or as part of a professional group, for exploration.

The "What if" question at the core of this book is: *What if we sought to develop a culture of thinking in our schools, classrooms, museums, meetings, and organizations?* Taking up the question in earnest, in a way that transforms schools and organizations, means enacting a new story by harnessing the power of the forces that shape group culture. These forces will be explored in detail in the coming chapters. However, before we jump into the "how," we need to have a bit more clarity around our story. Just what is

it we are trying to accomplish? Only when we are clear about the core messages we wish to send can we hope to capture the essence of this story in a way that we can tell it to ourselves over and over again until it becomes the very heart of our new vision.

In this story, our schools, classrooms, and organizations become *places in which a group's collective as well as individuals' thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted as part of the regular, day-to-day experience of all group members*. This is the beating heart of our story. We must strive to constantly make thinking valued, visible, and actively promoted in all our interactions with learners; as part of the lessons we design, central in the assessment process, and part and parcel of our instruction; and in ways that are generally integrated in all we do. Each of these core actions—making thinking valued, visible, and actively promoted—needs a bit more unpacking so that we understand our mission and have a better idea of what it entails.

We must begin by sending a robust message about the value of thinking. Of course, what educator is going to say he or she doesn't value thinking? But in fact, schools send students very mixed messages about the value and importance of thinking, and often may be clear about the task at hand but not always about the thinking needed to accomplish it. Too often students are sent the message that memorization is the only tool necessary for learning and that there isn't a place to bring in complications, questions, or connections from outside the classroom that might make learning more real. If we truly value thinking, then we must be able to articulate what kinds of thinking we are after, why they are important, and how they might help one's learning or accomplishment of the task at hand. We must communicate that learning is a consequence of thinking, not something extra that we tack on but something in which we must actively engage to promote our own and others' learning.

So what kinds of thinking are of value? What are we after? Naturally, this depends on the learning context, but broadly speaking we want students to become proficient with the kinds of thinking they can use to develop their own understanding of things. For example:

- Asking *questions*, identifying puzzles, and wondering about the mysteries and implications of the objects and ideas of study
- Making *connections*, comparisons, and contrasts between and among things—including connections within and across the discipline as well as with one's own prior knowledge
- Building ongoing and evolving *explanations*, interpretations, and theories based on one's ever-developing knowledge and understanding

- Examining things from different *perspectives* and alternative points of view to discern bias and develop a more balanced take on issues, ideas, and events
- Noticing, observing, and *looking closely* to fully perceive details, nuances, and hidden aspects and to observe what is really going on as the foundational evidence for one's interpretations and theories
- Identifying, gathering, and *reasoning with evidence* to justify and support one's interpretations, predictions, theories, arguments, and explanations
- Delving deeply to *uncover the complexities* and challenges of a topic and look below the surface of things, recognizing when one has only a surface understanding
- Being able to *capture the core* or essence of a thing to discern what it is really all about

This is by no means an exhaustive list of types of thinking. My colleagues and I have written elsewhere in more detail about what might constitute effective thinking (Ritchhart et al., 2011), but this list is a good place to start. In addition, one could take some of the goals identified earlier and begin to unpack them for the types of thinking they require. What kinds of thinking are important in problem solving? What kinds of thinking encourage innovation and creativity? What kinds of thinking are needed to be an effective communicator or advocate? What kinds of thinking support the development of global competence? You'll likely find some overlap with the list here, but some new types of thinking are likely to emerge as well.

Once we are clear on the kinds of thinking we are trying to encourage, we must strive to make this very elusive entity, thinking, as visible as possible so that it, too, can become an object of development as much as the concepts, knowledge, and skills that are more typical parts of the curriculum. When we make thinking visible, we are provided a window into not only what students understand but also how they are understanding it. Uncovering students' thinking provides evidence of students' insights as well as their misconceptions. We need to make thinking visible because it provides us with the information necessary to plan the opportunities that can take students' learning to the next level and enable continued engagement with the ideas of study. It is only when we understand what our students are thinking that we have the information we as teachers need to further engage and support our students in the process of building understanding. Making students' thinking visible thus must become an ongoing component of our teaching.

Teachers are used to asking questions that uncover students' knowledge and test their memories. Individually and collectively, we also must get better at asking questions that

probe, push, and help to uncover students' thinking (Ritchhart, 2012). Then we need to listen to our students so that we can truly hear what they have to say. Listening means taking a vigorous and genuine interest in the other. When we do that, we send students the message that their thinking and ideas matter, that they are part of the conversation and integral to the learning. We then can take our listening to the next step and document students' thinking so that we have a record of our collective thinking and our community's progress toward understanding. This record becomes one way to examine and talk about our thinking and its development. It is a vehicle for both capturing and advancing learning. What is more, the very act of documenting students' thinking sends an important message about its value and importance.

But we can't stop at visibility. We must also seek to actively advance and promote students' thinking if we are to produce students who are engaged learners and active thinkers able to communicate, innovate, collaborate, and problem-solve. This means that a chief goal of instruction, right alongside the development of content understanding, is the advancement of thinking. This dual focus, what Claxton et al. (2011) call split-screen teaching, depends on and builds on our efforts to value thinking and make it visible. It is the completion of our triadic goal.

Taking the promotion of thinking seriously moves most teachers into new and somewhat less charted territory. On the one hand, one advances any skill through the opportunities one has to engage it. Therefore, teachers must create opportunities for thinking and provide time for it—not always an easy thing amid the press for coverage, but a necessity nonetheless. On the other hand, practice alone does not ensure progress and meaningful development. One also needs feedback and coaching on one's practice. This kind of coaching calls for a nuanced, situated, and embedded assessment of students' efforts in the moment. It is an assessment that feeds and spurs the learner's efforts, being purely formative in nature.

I hesitate to use the word “assessment” in this context because it carries so much baggage for educators. Some cannot get the red pen or grade book out of their minds as soon as they hear the word. Others cringe at the deadening effect so many forms of school-based assessments have on the learning and teaching process, turning even the most enjoyable exploration into mere “work” for the teacher to grade. But these are most assuredly not the forms of assessment that are helpful in advancing students' thinking. We are after the kind of assessment employed by a coach on the playing field, able to identify where a player is in his or her development and what is needed to take performance to the next level. This is the skill of a coach. It is also the skill of an effective teacher. Practically anyone and, increasingly, anything can dispense information. Real learning is advanced through the creation of

powerful opportunities for mental engagement accompanied by the discerning eye and targeted feedback of someone more expert than oneself.

## **ENACTING OUR NEW STORY, REALIZING OUR VISION**

In this chapter, I articulated a new outcome defining a quality education: the promotion of the dispositions needed for students to become active learners and effective thinkers eager and able to create, innovate, and solve problems. It is this outcome that is most needed for success in the world today. Although not wholly new, it is an outcome that has enjoyed only peripheral attention, seldom capturing our attention, too often pushed to the side by a focus on exam scores alone. However, it's an outcome that encapsulates a higher vision for us as educators, representing what we are able to achieve when we allow ourselves to dream outside the well-worn constraints of the school bureaucracy. It is the stuff of passion, energy, and drive—for both our students and us.

I then identified the vehicle needed to get us there: enculturation. We must surround our students with an intellectual life into which they might grow. To do this, we need first to identify and evaluate the story of learning we are currently telling our students through the messages we send them. Some ideas for doing that follow at the end of this chapter. Then we must work to shift those messages in order to enculturate students into a new story of learning where thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted as part of the ongoing, day-to-day experience of all group members. We must become shapers of culture and message managers to realize our vision and transform our schools.

But how do we shift the messages within an already established culture? How do we enact a new story of learning for both our students and ourselves? How can we understand the ins and outs of group culture so that we may harness its power and shape it to tell our new story? These are the questions we take up in the coming chapters as we delve into an exploration of the eight forces shaping group culture.

## UNCOVERING THE STORY OF YOUR SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM

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- Using the method of the Gallup Youth Survey, create a list of twenty-five adjectives: ten positive (engaged, interested, curious . . . ), five neutral (coasting, comfortable, fine . . . ), and ten negative (tired, bored, frustrated . . . ). Ask students to select three words from the list to describe how they usually feel in school in general or in your class in particular. Include a question asking students to identify how they see themselves academically: near the top, above average, average. What does the pattern of response tell you?
- Use the “My Reflections on the Learning Activities in This Class” survey (appendix A) to assess students’ views about the types of thinking that are most present in a particular class lesson. How do students’ views match with your own?
- Uncover the messages the school sends teachers about what it means to teach at your school. Have the faculty respond in writing to the prompt, “For a first-year teacher beginning his or her career at our school, what messages would he or she pick up about what it means to be a teacher here? What kinds of professional conversations would he or she recognize as dominating our time? What would he or she notice about how one develops as a teacher over the course of his or her career if one stays at this school?” Share and discuss people’s responses in small groups to identify themes, and then share them with the larger group.
- Go on a “learning message walk.” Visit as many classes at your school as you can on a given day, stopping in each class for just five to ten minutes. The purpose is not to evaluate teacher performance but to get a general feel for students’ experience in classes. Pay attention to engagement and participation. Are all students participating or just a few? Note the level of intellectual challenge and the teacher’s press for thinking. Is this just more of the same, or do students really have to dig in and think? Get a feel for the discourse in the classroom. Are students engaging and responding to one another, or is it only a Ping-Pong dialogue with the teacher? Take note of how students are working: whole class, small groups, in pairs, or individually.

