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ABSTRACT

In response to widespread perceptions about school failure and student underachievement, this paper proposes that the culture of the nation's schools must be transformed to improve student motivation and achievement. The problem of schools is rooted in the core beliefs held by staff, students, and school leaders about the purposes, goals, and personal incentives associated with schooling. Goal theory research has underscored the importance of perceptions of purpose in determining the nature and quality of investment in a task. Teaching, schooling, and learning may be defined as task-focused, or concerned with the intrinsic worth of doing the task for its own sake; and as ability-focused, or using the task as a sorting mechanism to demonstrate who has ability. Adopting either goal has important consequences for behavior generally and for motivation and learning in particular. Students adopting a task-focused definition tend to view a task more positively, showing a continued interest even after the formal instruction is completed, and are likely to be academically venturesome, choose challenging activities, and adopt deep-processing strategies. In contrast, students who adopt an ability focus tend to use surface-level strategies, such as memorization and rehearsal, and avoid mistakes and failures. Preliminary findings and conclusions are discussed. (Contains 21 references). (MLH)

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TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION

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INTRODUCTION

School reform is on the nation's agenda---and has been for some time. One is reminded by Will Rogers' wry comment, "Schools are not what they used to be; they never were" that school reform perhaps is and possibly should be a continuing process. Yet there is special fervor, perhaps note of desperation that pervades current discussions. It is not just that we are worried that our children are not growing up to be like we want or expected. Rather, the perceived failure of the schools is thought to forecast the future doom of our society. In response to this concern that we may not only be losing achieving students but also an achieving society, many approaches have been taken and multiple options proposed.

Needed: A Transformation of School Culture

With Sarason (1982, 1990). I propose that the culture of the nation's schools must be transformed if the motivation and achievement of students is to be improved. The problem of schools is not just a problem of bad teachers, poor administrators, unsupportive parents or inadequate curriculum. Though more resources would be welcome, lack of resources is not the problem either. The problem is rooted in the core beliefs held by staff, students---and leadership. It is most importantly rooted in the perceived purposes, goals and personal incentives that are associated with schooling.

Paper Overview

In this paper, I intend to do more than to specify a need --though doing such is not unimportant. I will present the essence of a program of research directed toward responding to that need. That program of research began as descriptive: the goal was to determine whether or how school culture affects motivation and student achievement. Increasingly, our results have encouraged us to become prescriptive and recommend how school cultures should be changed.

TWO DEFINITIONS OF LEARNING AND SCHOOLING

The concept of school culture can and typically does readily embrace a variety of beliefs, goals, purposes, thoughts, knowledge and expectations (cf. Deal & Peterson, 1990). While aware of this, we have decided to focus on a set of beliefs that have been found to be especially critical in the determination of motivation and student learning. A decade or so of research in the framework of what has come to be called "goal theory" (Ames & Ames, 1989, Maehr & Pintrich, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ames, 1990; Nicholls, 1989) has underscored the importance of perceptions of purpose in the determination of the nature and quality of investment in an task.

Simply put, it is possible to define teaching, schooling and learning in essentially two different ways. The choice of definition has profound and pervasive effects on student motivation and learning. Both definitions are concerned with the purpose, goals and meaning of learning. But they define these in quite differently.

¹Paper presented as part of a symposium, "The Future of Schools in American: A Motivational Perspective," AERA, San Francisco, CA, April 1992. The author is indebted to his multiple collaborators including in this case especially Carol Midgley, Eric Anderman, Rachel Buck, and Tim Urdan. The author's research is in part supported by grants from the Department of Education-OERI (RT215A00430, R117C80003).

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Table 1

Task-Focused

A first definition is task-focused in nature. That is, it is focused on the intrinsic worth of doing the task for its own sake. Learning is the goal, not a particular product. "Success" is defined in terms of effort, progress in reaching achievable learning objectives, the quality of the engagement in an activity, even the sheer enjoyment of being invested. The goal, however, is not just to enjoy, but to experience the sheer joy in learning and intellectual exploration.

Ability Focused

A second definition is especially concerned with ability: its demonstration on a task, who has it and who doesn't. Implicit in this definition is a sorting mechanism in which learners are placed in different categories and perhaps in a hierarchy of comparative achievement.

Ability vs. Performance Definitions

Obviously, these definitions of purpose represent contrasting views of why one should engage in a task. Theoretically, they are minimally correlated verging on orthogonal. Thus, these purposes exist side by side in schools, classrooms and in the heads of teachers and students. But there can be and usually is a greater stress on one or the other (Maehr, 1991; Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, in press; Maehr & Buck, in press; Maehr & Anderman, in press).

**TASK AND ABILITY DEFINITIONS:
Consequences and Causes**

Consequences

Adopting primarily one rather than the other of these two goals has important consequences for behavior generally, but for motivation and learning in particular.

Figure 1

As students adopt a task-focused (compared to an ability-focused) definition, they are likely to be more positive toward a task, showing a continuing interest even after the formal instruction is completed (cf. Maehr, 1976). They are also more likely to exhibit "academic venturesomeness," choosing to pursue challenging activities (Ames, 1990; Elliot & Dweck, 1988). Additionally, research has clearly and consistently demonstrated that children who adopt a task orientation use "deep-processing strategies." By "deep" strategies, we are referring to the monitoring of comprehension, relating newly learned material with previously learned material, and trying to understand conceptual and abstract relationships. In contrast, students who adopt an ability-focus tend to use surface-level strategies, such as memorization and rehearsal (Nolen, 1988; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988).

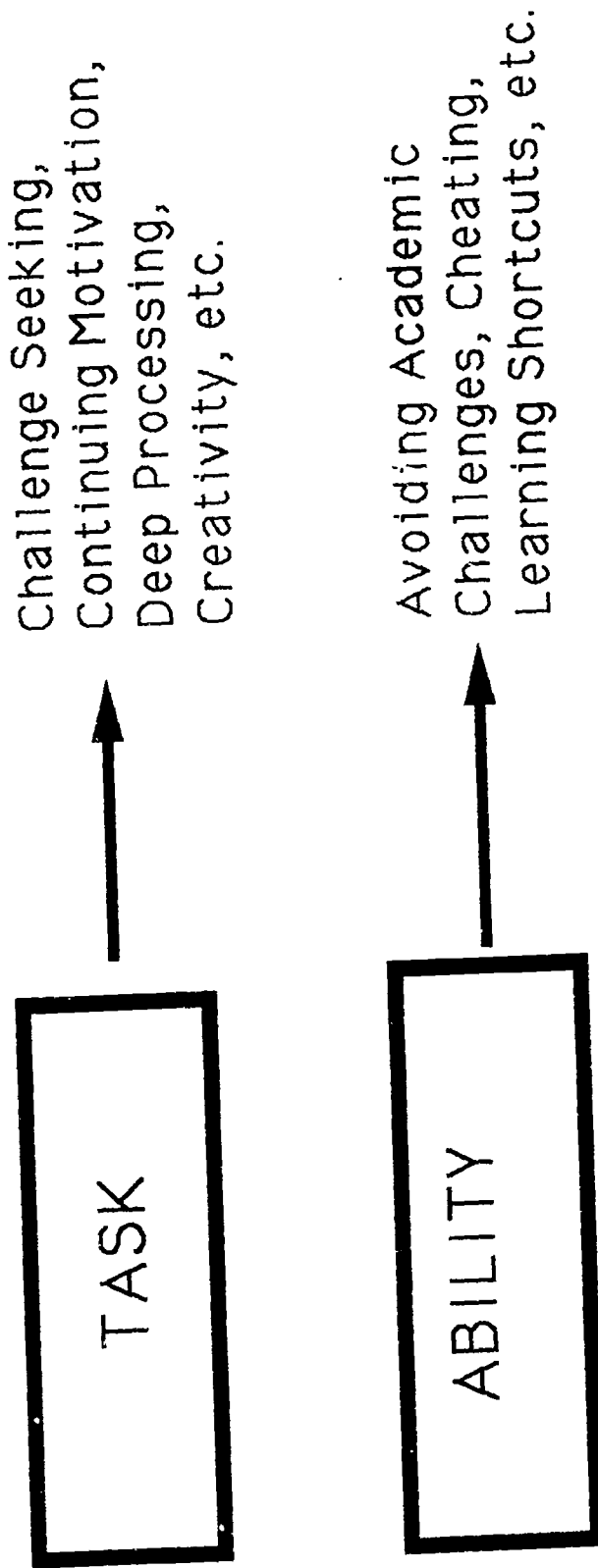
That students operate in these different ways when they hold task and ability definitions makes intuitive sense. If a student's view of the purpose of learning is to be judged more able than other students, then why should she bother to engage in deep processing strategies, which often are time consuming and do not lead to immediate results? Why should she strive for a deep level of understanding if the "bottom line" is the score on a test of definitions of terms? Why should a student be curious about why hydrogen and oxygen make up water molecules, when in order to succeed, she merely needs to report that water consists of such molecules?

Table 1: Two Definitions of Schooling

	<u>TASK</u>	<u>ABILITY</u>
Success defined as . . .	improvement, progress, mastery, innovation, creativity	high grades, high performance compared to others, relative achievement on standardized measures.
Value placed on . . .	effort, academic venturesomeness	demonstrating high performance relative to others
Basis for satisfaction . . .	progress, challenge, mastery	doing better than others, success relative to effort
School/classroom oriented toward . . .	how all students are learning, progressing	students' relative performance levels
Focus . . .	the student as a continual learner	periodic demonstration of achievements relative to others.
Reasons for effort . . .	learn something new	high grades, demonstrated ability
Evaluation criteria . . .	absolute criteria; evidence of progress	norms; social comparisons
Type of involvement . . .	all participate; high degree of choice	differential participation by ability; low choice
Errors viewed as . . .	part of the learning process, informational	failure, evidence of lack of ability
Ability viewed as . . .	developing through effort	fixed

FIGURE 1

DIFFERENT GOAL - DIFFERENT QUALITY OF MOTIVATION/LEARNING



In contrast, if a student's primary goal in learning is task-focused, then she probably won't be concerned with such comparisons of her relative ability. In this case, the main purpose of a task will be comprehension and understanding. A student is more likely to pursue an innovative path or explore a topic in-depth when she knows that she won't be penalized for curiosity. And students can't be expected to be academically venturesome if the name of the game is avoiding mistakes and failures at all costs.

Figure 2

Causes

Such definitions of learning and schooling emerge for a variety of reasons, including how the learning task is designed, set up and managed (Ames, in press). One can demonstrate this at different levels within a school setting: how a lesson is presented, the kind of materials used, and the classroom organized. I will focus on how the school through accident or choice can adopt one or the other definition. Thus to underscore the point that the school, consciously or not, promotes certain definitions of learning. This facet of the culture of the school can undermine, modify, encourage or stimulate whatever may happen in specific learning venues.

Early on in our program of research, we attempted specifically to determine whether schools could, first of all, be characterized by different beliefs related to defining the purpose of learning. Suffice it to say that we have convinced ourselves that the school as an entity is much more than a sum of the several classrooms and activity areas of which it is composed. Different schools stress different purposes, they define learning differently. They can be described along the two dimensions of learning we specified earlier. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that school definitions of learning relate to student motivation and learning (Maehr & Fyans, 1989; Maehr, 1991).

Table 2

A Portrayal of How Learning is Defined by Schools

Various threads of evidence can be drawn together to show how learning is defined by schools through policies, practices, and procedures that are acceded to or consciously put in place. Table 2 summarizes these issues in an acronym (TAR~~R~~GET) adapted from Epstein (1989).

Task. School policies affect what is to be done in order to learn and thereby contribute to a particular definition of learning. Taking classes outside school walls to study the quality of water in a local lake likely contributes to the idea that there is intensive work on learning and that school is related to the broader world. That it is "meaningful." Whether or how teachers can "contextualize" learning in this way is usually circumscribed by school and sometimes district policy. School policy, can effectively mandate the use of "teacher-proof" materials: preprogrammed learning routines, texts, packaged experiments or projects. But it can also encourage teachers to design and create learning tasks that flow from the interests and experiences of students (cf. Meece, 1991).

Autonomy. One of the more salient features of schools is the degree of autonomy, choice and responsibility given to students. Work with one school and you are struck by the ubiquitous posting of rules. Walk into another and you are hard-pressed to find an exhortation of consequence. This probably reflects different assumptions of what the business of students is. In the first case, it is obey and perhaps "repeat after me." In the second case it is, each is a

Figure 2: Origins of Definitions of Learning and Schooling

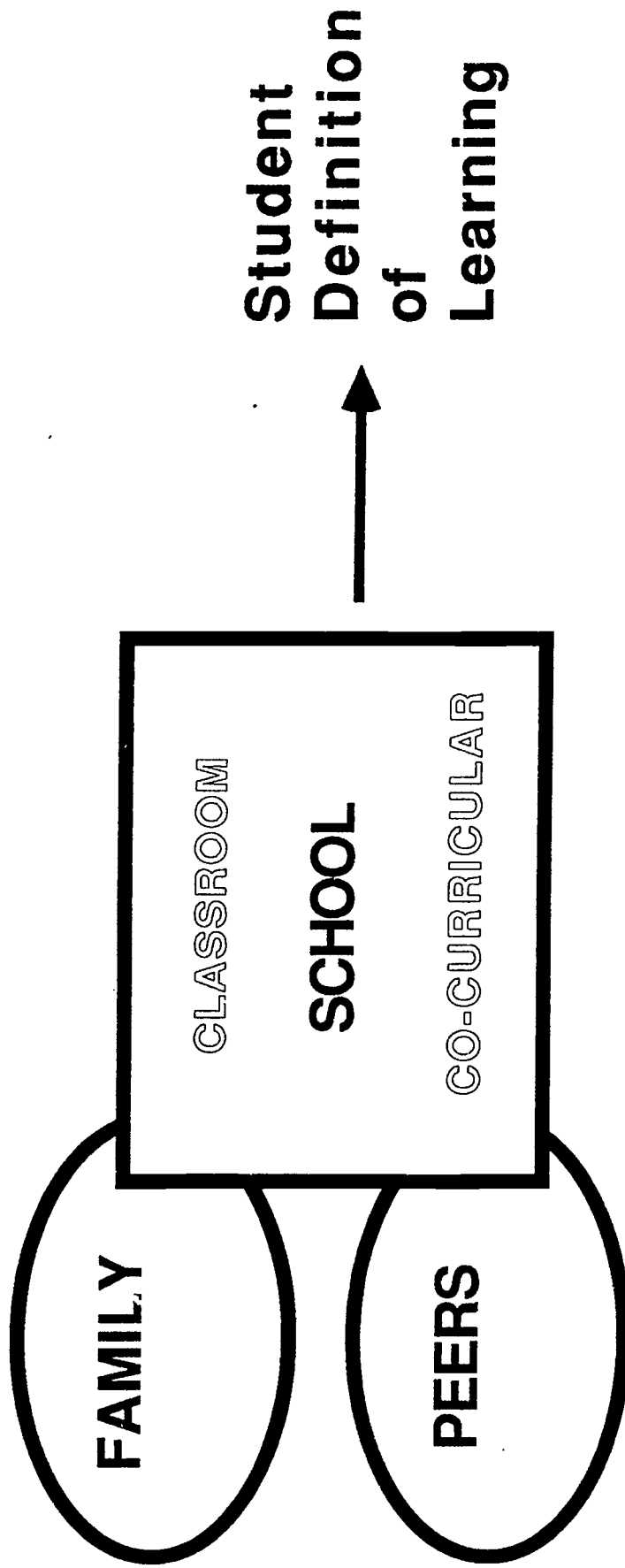


Table 2: General Framework Employed in Development of a School-Wide Stress on "Task" Goals in Learning

<u>TARGET Area</u>	<u>Focus</u>	<u>Objectives</u>	<u>Examples of Possible Strategies</u>
Task	How learning tasks are structured - what the student is asked to do	Enhance intrinsic attractiveness of learning tasks Make learning meaningful	Encourage instruction that relates to students' backgrounds and experience Avoid payment (monetary or other) for attendance, grades, or achievement Foster goal setting and self-regulation
Autonomy/ Responsibility	Student participation in learning/school decisions	Provide optimal freedom for students to make choices and take responsibility	Exploit relevant extra-classroom experiences relevant Give alternatives in making assignments Ask for student comments on school-life -- and take them seriously Encourage instructional programs that encourage students to take initiatives and evaluate their own learning Establish leadership opportunities for <u>all</u> students

Table 2 (cont.) 2

Recognition	The nature and use of recognition and reward in the school setting	Provide opportunities for <u>all</u> students to be recognized for learning	Foster "personal best" awards Reduce emphasis on "honor rolls"
		Recognize <u>progress</u> in goal attainment	Recognize and publicize a wide range of school-related activities of students
		Recognize challenging-seeking and innovation.	
Resources	Decisions that are made on the use of money, materials, equipment --- and the provision of opportunities of staff and students	Encourage the development and maintenance of strategies that enhance task goal emphases.	Underwrite action taken by staff which is in accord with a task goal emphasis
Grouping	The organization of school learning and experiences	Build an environment of acceptance and appreciation of all students	Provide opportunities for cooperative learning, problem solving, and decision-making
		Broaden the range of social interaction, particularly of at-risk students	Allow time and opportunity for peer interaction to occur
		Enhance social skills development	Foster the development of subgroups (teams, schools within schools, etc.) within which significant interaction can occur
			Encourage multiple group membership to increase range of peer interaction
			Elimination of ability-grouped classes.

Evaluation

The nature and use of evaluation and assessment procedures

Grading and reporting processes

Practices associated with use of standardized tests

Definition of goals and standards

Reduce emphasis on social comparisons of achievement by minimizing public reference to normative evaluation standards (e.g., grades, test scores)

Establish policies and procedures which give students opportunities to improve their performance (e.g., study skills, classes)

Establish grading/reporting practices that portray student progress in learning

Encourage student participation in the evaluation process

Time

The scheduling of the school day

Allow the learning task and student needs to dictate scheduling

Provide opportunities for extended and significant student involvement in learning tasks

Allow students to progress at their own rate whenever possible

Encourage flexibility in the scheduling of learning experiences

Give teachers greater control over time usage through, e.g., block scheduling

Adapted from Maehr & Anderman, in press.

responsible member of the community, school is about learning, exploration, and the fullest development of one's potential.

A wide set of policies, practices and procedures are associated with *Recognition* and *Evaluation*. When examined closely, what the school does in this regard is reflective of a definition of learning in task or ability focused terms. Are children recognized for trying hard, for progress, for attempting a challenging task even if they fail? Are evaluation procedures designed to maintain a hierarchy of winners and losers?

Time. What teacher hasn't heard: "the schedule won't permit that." Attempts to reconstruct the purpose of learning often falter on the hurdle of scheduling. Flexibility to pursue project-based instruction or provide special enrichment experiences are undercut by the rigidity of the 40 to 50 minute class hour. In actuality, there is considerable discretion over the use of time within the school if there is a will to change. Clearly, school bells put learning in time frames that can eventuate in adopting different learning goals. Classrooms don't easily become places to explore one's intellectual interests, predilections and concerns -- if they are locked into 40-50 minute time blocks.

Grouping practices send subtle -- and some not so subtle -- messages to students, teachers, and parents that the point of school is the sorting of the "able" from the "unable." The objective is not really learning, certainly not for all.

Resources. All organizations have *resources* that they use, distribute and manage. Most of the talk about schools seems to revolve around their lack of resources. Perhaps more attention ought to be devoted to *how* the available resources are used. Even in the most centralized districts, schools do have some discretion over their resources. Choices are made to support learning opportunities of one kind or another for one group or another. In doing so, the accepted definition of learning is symbolized and promoted.

In sum, implicit within everyday policies, practices and procedures are basic beliefs about the meaning and purposes of teaching and learning. These need to be examined. Attention needs to be given to how these facets of the culture of the school essentially define the purpose of learning for students and thereby determine motivation and achievement.

THE PROBLEM WITH SCHOOLS

The Misdefinition of Learning

Schools and classrooms differ from each other in a variety of ways. One of the ways that they differ is in the definition of schooling that they stress. A major problem as we see it is that far too many schools---perhaps most schools---give overwhelming stress to ability goals. While we do not have a national sample to undergird that assertion, our own research indicates that this is indeed true. Moreover, it seems to be increasingly true as the individual progresses through school (Eccles & Midgley, 1990). Further, we propose that unless the culture of the school shifts toward a task goal stress we will not solve the dilemma facing the nation's schools.

A Solvable Problem?

A significant question is, is this problem a solvable one? I don't know for sure . . .but I think so.

During the past couple of years, Carol Midgley, our students, and I have been working in an elementary school and a middle school to determine whether or not culture change, change in the definition of learning, can be brought about. The details of this venture have been discussed elsewhere (Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Maehr, Midgley & Urdan, in press; Maehr & Anderman, in press; Maehr & Buck, in press). Briefly, our results thus far are as follows.

1) We have identified policies, practices and procedures that are probably at the root of the school's definition of learning (cf. Table 2). Theoretically, these are open to modifications. In most cases they are not mandated by any external governing body, at least in a way that makes it impossible to change the learning definition they reflect. We hypothesize that as one changes these ways of operating so one influences the definition of learning adopted by students -- and the quality of their investment in schooling.

2) The obstacles to school transformation are less attributable to the various external bodies and groups than the organization itself. Policies, practices and procedures even when they are recognized as wrong are difficult to modify. A surprising number of staff members initially expressed general openness to the theoretical framework we brought to our culture change projects. Indeed they invited us into their midst for the specific purpose of making changes which they were duly informed would involve shifts to a task-focused definition of learning. Be that as it may, it has been difficult for some to forsake a policy or procedure even though they recognized that it is inconsistent with a task goal definition. Some have simply adapted to the status quo, however inappropriate. They don't want to go through the hassle of reforming the school as a whole. They prefer to close their classroom door and pretend that the surrounding school culture can't touch them. They find it difficult to argue that it isn't affecting their students and their parents. But when they they think about it they know it will inevitably get to them too.

So, like it or not: an all exclusive focus on classroom change will come up short. School transformation must also be addressed if children are to adopt a task-focused view of learning. And, we repeat with emphasis: there is an ever-growing body of evidence that only as children adopt a task-focused view of learning will they become effective learners.

3) But slowly, change does come. Without question, the change has come most easily and most rapidly in the elementary school where we have worked. Change has been less rapid in the middle school where we work. But in both cases, significant shifts in policy and practice have occurred.

Interestingly, in both cases organizational restructuring seems to have occasioned changes in practice and thinking. In the elementary school, the establishment of experimental multi-age classrooms was followed by intensive discussions ranging across the TARGET categories. Given a multi-age classroom, how do we design instruction? How do we group children? How do we evaluate and recognize, etc. Similarly, at the middle school level, it is the move toward the small house concept that has prompted a rethinking of current practices and a willingness to explore new possibilities.

While the organizational or structural change seems to have played a significant role, we caution that this type of change must be seen as at best preparatory. It is valuable only as it provides the occasion for re-thinking the purpose of learning and schooling. Moreover, only as purpose is rethought and schooling and learning redefined in Task goal terms are we satisfied that the transformation we seek is occurring.

CONCLUSION

With many we argue that drastic and comprehensive reform of schools is necessary. Changes in curriculum, modes of instruction and many other proposed reforms will not be sufficient. It is the culture of school that must change. Unlike many we have taken the risk of proposing specific kinds of changes that should occur. Riskier still, we have jumped into the fray and endeavored to demonstrate that these changes can be made and when made will result in the effects we predict. Risk-taking, of course, does not promise success. A conclusion is yet to be written.

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