Challenging the Current Organization of Schools

By Nelda Cambron-McCabe

If the world is not a machine, then our assumptions cannot work.
But then, where are we? (Wheatley, 1999, p. 28)

As we contemplate a new worldview of leadership education, we must step back to reflect on what now shapes and constrains leaders in schools. Our understandings of traditional leadership are rooted in organizational theory that is focused on rationality, effectiveness, and efficiency of bureaucratic institutions, defining the education of leaders, for the most part, in terms of specific skills and performances that can be quantified. Without interrogating the fundamental ideas and beliefs underpinning existing school structures, we cannot respond to widespread calls for a different kind of school leader—one whose actions embody justice, respect, ethical values, care, spirituality, and equity (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). The leverage point for change is not to insert these qualities into existing school structures and leadership education programs but to transform the organizational structure of schools to one driven by a new set of assumptions epitomizing these ideals.

Since entrenched mental models of how organizations work dominate our thinking, the assumptions underlying these constructs restrict our ability to *see* other possibilities. This may be the most intractable impediment to preparing school leaders to transform existing institutions. Morgan (1997) identifies a number of metaphors that give us insight into these limitations. The machine metaphor, which heads his list and is most frequently used to characterize schools, involves highly mechanistic structures focused on hierarchy, control, predictability, accountability, rationality, and uniform outcomes. Senge (2000) cautions that the thinking behind this industrial structure stifles innovation and only leads to recreating the schools we now have. The result may be some improvement in the status quo but not the transformation we desire. Senge notes, “The challenge is not to come up with a simple set of fixes. Indeed, the machine-age concept of ‘fixes’ is part of the problem” (p. 51). Rather, he argues that schools are under stress and need to evolve as living systems do.

If schools are to evolve and we are to do more than tinker with the institution, we must go deeper to understand these prevailing structures that constrain our actions. We see what we expect to see when we look at schools. That is, reality is circumscribed by what we

have been *conditioned* to see. Breaking from that reality requires, first, recognition that our views of schools represent only partial knowledge; we must delve deeply with others to gain a more complete understanding of our circumstances and limitations. Second, suspension of our assumptions in order to *see our seeing* must occur (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004); new awareness comes about only when we can see our habitual ways of thinking. In both instances, we need others in order to reflect, learn, and initiate this intense work.

What would it mean if we shifted our thinking to considering schools, as well as other organizations, as living systems? Living systems evolve, grow, and renew themselves. They can be influenced but not controlled; they lack defined boundaries and predictability. They are non-linear, learning, and purpose-driven. They focus on wholes, not parts. At the core, these systems are self-organizing and governed by relationships and connectedness. Wheatley (1999) points out that quantum physics teaches us that the basic organizing principle of nature as well as social institutions is *relationships*. These ideas applied to schools and leadership would fundamentally alter the nature of schooling.

Since we have created the schools we inhabit; we can change them. Living systems require a new language, new questions, and a new way of being in the world. Through collective inquiry, we can interrogate accepted authority patterns, inequities, pedagogy, and structures and re-imagine roles and relationships at the school, district, community, and higher education levels. It is only through engagement and questioning with others that we can hope to accomplish this demanding work: What is the core purpose of schooling? How does the organizational structure support or limit that purpose? Whose interests does the present structure serve? Who counts? Who does not count? What is needed to realize our core purpose? How do we become who we want to be? Failure to raise critical questions regarding the assumptions underlying our worldview of schools will condemn us to continually react to conditions around us rather than allowing us to create new systems. Our challenge in higher education is to initiate tough conversations, nurture relationships, respect others' knowledge, listen carefully through collective inquiry, be open to what is emerging, and examine the implications of recreating schools as living systems. If, as Bateson (2004) says, a willingness to learn in a new place and a new time is essential for human evolution, it is indispensable for the evolution of our schools.

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Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership,
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA.