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Thinking About School Improvement

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Abstract

Recent advances in our thinking about thinking are brought to bear here in our thinking about school improvement. Some ways in which our thinking hobbles education and educational leadership include: a results bias, a quantification bias, attribution of causality, substitution and intensity matching, predispositions, a confirmation bias, premature decision making, having agendas, the press of time, loss of interest, innovation fatigue, and more. Language processes such as deficit thinking, anthromorphisation, reification, collectivisation, and objectification are shown to interfere with schooling, and the actualization of children and of teachers as social actors. Tentative suggestions are offered to address these shortcomings of ours.

Keywords: school improvement, thinking, accountability, agency, educational leadership

Thinking is hard. It takes work. And good thinking takes time. Thinking is unobservable, difficult to measure, to manage and control – mainly because it can't be seen. It is phantasmic, ghost-like, and this may be to its detriment, as many of us – school leaders and the public alike, appear to favour action and results over thinking.

If we stop and think about school improvement for a minute, we quickly realise just how complicated it is. The trouble is that we, most of us anyway, do not stop to think about school improvement often enough, long enough or deeply enough. In this article, I make the case for thinking about school improvement. My contention is that more and better thinking about school improvement should make for better, more satisfying results. Another way to put it is that in order to improve schools, we need to improve our thinking. True, there are other factors which affect education and school improvement – factors such

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as finance, politics, cultural and religious beliefs, values, the news and news media, the market, and more – and we can't ignore these. But we are more likely to accomplish what we set out to do if better thinking or reasoning leads our efforts.

But what is education, if not fostering thinking? There are other critical aims of education, aims such as skill acquisition and socialisation (Biesta, 2010), but even these critical aims have thinking components. Is not learning thinking, at least in some sense? But thinking is much more than learning. Complicating matters, thinking is hard to teach (Waite, 2009a, 2009b). Given all this, how can we learn to think, and think better?

We have to allow for thinking; to make room for it. Though a good deal of our thinking is off-the-cuff, instinctual, or habitual, this is not necessarily our best thinking (Kahneman, 2011); in fact, though useful, fast thinking is error-prone and can get us into trouble. As educators, we tend to favour action. And leaders, especially school leaders, are more likely to be lauded for their actions (or the *results* of their actions), than they are for their thinking. This action bias can lead us to select take-charge types of leaders, those who 'come in with guns blazing.'

Also working against us and our decision-making capacity is our widespread results bias (Kahneman, 2011). Our action and results biases are often wedded with another human trait – that of seeing causality, and imposing it onto chains of events. That is to say that, when one event follows another in time, we see the first event as the cause of the second, when, in fact, their proximity in time could be coincidental. We imagine that if the result is a good one, the process preceding it must have been good as well; though felicitous outcomes are often due as much to luck and chance, as they are to leadership, planning or execution (Kahneman, 2011). Results-based decision making and pay-for-performance schemes all suffer these biases.

The Numbers Game, Gaming the Numbers

Humans count things. It is a deep-seated disposition of ours: it is primal (Kahneman, 2011). This fosters a quantification bias. We quantify and count even when it isn't appropriate. Kahneman noted how 'we often compute much more than we want or need' (p. 95) – part of the mental shotgun approach.

Let us be clear: Having a great deal of data is not the same as having high-quality data. Let us not mistake quantity for quality, just as shouting isn't a substitute for sound reasoning. Even so, having lots of high-quality data doesn't ensure that they are used well or analysed

appropriately: Most of us – leaders and others – are apt to cherry pick from the data available to support a decision that's already been made or a plan of action that's already been decided upon.

And a good analysis of quality data doesn't necessarily mean that they are brought to bear on the right question or issue. Decision making suffers when the shotgun approach combines with intensity matching and produces 'intuitive judgments about many things that we know little about' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 96). Put another way, we substitute much simpler questions for more complex ones (such as when we allow student achievement test score data to represent learning and teacher or school performance – and here we see causality and the results bias in operation again). We answer the simpler question thinking that we are answering the original, more complex one, when we are not.

Also, the shotgun approach (and substitution) can result from lazy thinking, what Kahneman (2011) calls the law of least effort. For example, here in Texas, many school administrators insist that classroom teachers remove *all* posters, artwork and displays from classrooms during high-stakes tests, when the regulations expressly stipulate that educators must remove or cover those materials which may aid a student on a particular exam. Never mind the burden that this extra work places on teachers at a particularly stressful time.

Another example of the shotgun approach and lazy thinking – this time, with severely negative consequences for students – is the practice some school administrators in Texas have of making high school students who fail the required high-stakes end-of-course exams to repeat the course, or a semester of it, when the state law requires only that those students get some remediation. Students who fail multiple end-of-course exams or fail the same exam repeatedly may go through high school *unable to take a single elective*, mainly because, for the administrator, it is easier to make the student(s) retake the course than it is to individualise remediation.

There are also deeper philosophical issues we do not spend a lot of time thinking about or discussing, in part, because of their complexity and difficulty. Some of these have to do with the aims of education (and schooling) (Biesta, 2010; Dewey, 1916) – and, by extension, school improvement.

A leadership quality that aids school improvement is that of seeking new information – regardless of whether it is confirming or disconfirming. Dispositions that may staunch data gathering and decision making include bias or prejudice; predisposition (what I term 'having a solution

looking for a problem'); confirmation bias; premature decision making; having some type of agenda (i.e., where the decision is influenced by, for example, conflict of interest, corruption and self-aggrandisement, dogmatic beliefs or some other); or the press of time, loss of interest, or innovation fatigue. Unfortunately, for many of us – some leaders included – having partial, inaccurate or even just bad data isn't seen as a problem: 'it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle. Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: an almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 201).

Believing that the explanation we have constructed explains past events or conditions fools many into believing that we can use this narrative to predict the future (such as regarding students' life chances, for example). But such predictions are shaky at best, and statistics are not predictive: they are, at best, explanatory. Even experts are poor predictors of the future: 'people who spend their time, and earn their living, studying a particular topic produce poorer predictions than dart-throwing monkeys' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 219). The problem lies in their certitude: 'those with the most knowledge are often less reliable . . . (because) the person who acquires more knowledge develops an enhanced illusion of her skill and becomes unrealistically overconfident' (p. 219).

Given the problems with our thinking generally and our thinking about schooling and school improvement more specifically, where might we look for help?

Some 'Thinking Tools' for Reflecting on School Improvement

One way to improve our thinking about school improvement is to borrow from those fields that deal with thinking and reasoning, but which are rarely mined for help. Philosophy is rife with applications for school improvement, as are its sister disciplines of linguistics and anthropology. The fields of business and psychology have strands that deal with the decision sciences too.

Language

What we say matters – so thinking about language, monitoring our language and, when appropriate, changing our language can contribute to school improvement. Talk is a kind of action and it has consequences in the material world. Language and thinking are in a reflexive relationship: what/how we think affects what we say and hear, and what we say and hear affects what/how we think. How we think about learning, education, schooling, and school improvement matters, as does how we talk about it and how we frame it.

One of my teachers used to say that language speaks us even as we speak it (Bowers, 1987). This is what the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) referred to as ventriloquation, or how it is that, like a ventriloquist's dummy, the voice and language of others, sometimes far removed from the present situation, speak through us, out of our mouths. And while rationalists may believe that through cognition alone we can change our behaviours (or those of others), recent thinking suggests that it may be, in part, the other way around: changes in our behaviour can change our thinking (Spiegel, 2012). Thinking and behaviour are mutually influential. If we consciously change our language and how we talk about things, this will help change our individual and collective thinking and framing of, for example, school improvement or student 'achievement' (and more), and will, in turn, likely affect our behaviour.

Negative, deficit language works the same, but in an opposite direction – that is, with negative consequences. Talk of failing schools, of school failure, of underachieving students, of achievement gaps, of ineffective (more recently inefficient) teachers, of 'throwing money at the problem' and more, does damage – both to the objects of such negative thinking and to those of us who use or otherwise come into contact with such language. Shorthand ways of talking can result from laziness or maliciousness, but their effects are never innocuous, neutral or harmless. For instance, use of the term *failing school*, is wrong on at least two levels. This mental laziness, in this case, starts with anthropomorphisation; that is, giving human qualities to something (an inanimate object or another species). Reification, collectivisation, and objectification combine with anthropromorphisation to gloss over or obscure the deeper processes in play that contribute to, in this case, less than desirable educational experiences for children. Unpacking such lazy language often allows us to make some desired changes to an unwelcome situation, which we cannot do when we obscure the dynamics and permit the responsible parties to hide behind anonymity. For example, some educators speak of 'administration' as though it were a person, as in "administration says that we must do such and such", when it is more accurate to say that *administrators* or *an administrator* did or said something, not some vague administration.

Passive sentence constructions (e.g., "the policy was put in place") likewise work to obscure the processes and persons responsible for certain states of affairs. Insisting we use more active constructions places responsibility for the action at issue on those responsible (the simplest and most immediate form of accountability), and makes who is responsible for what and how that comes about and why more readily apparent, and, possibly, remediable.

My problem with the phrase "failing school" is similar: first, it reifies and anthropomorphises a building, and it obscures and obfuscates all of the processes, the inputs and outputs, and the interdependent dynamics that lead to, in this case, an undesired result. Terms such as these allow the responsible parties at the national, state or local level to skirt accountability for the problems they and their policies create.

The damage or symbolic violence done to the other is perhaps the more obvious, but the damage done to us through our use of negative language and frames – the damage we do to ourselves, is less obvious. As with racist or homophobic jokes, we become complicit in perpetuating a cycle of symbolic violence whether we tell one or simply hear one without speaking up. Despite what we learned as children about sticks and stones, words do have consequences. We put another hurdle in their path, another brick in their backpack when we label others – other students, teachers, parents, administrators or schools, and we diminish ourselves in the process.

Storytelling and Narrative

Another way that language and thinking overlap is in the area of narrative. It is said that everyone loves a good story. Gardner and Laskin (2011) claimed that a fundamental leadership skill was that of providing a narrative, a story, and a vision for/of the organisation one leads. As meaning-makers, we humans spin narratives. Narrative and story are used as the glue to cohere pieces of information – in this way, narrative and theory are similar. Theory is a type of narrative that accounts for the facts. The trick is, as I noted earlier, is that 'it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 201). The danger is that a well-told narrative can mask our ignorance, and even contribute to it.

Language and Culture

Language, thought and culture all are closely related. Everyone has a language identity. The language we speak is fundamental to our self-image. And language and language identity are powerful, despite whatever issues surround one's relationship with the language one speaks (some are embarrassed, some prideful, some want their children to speak another) usually dominant language. Language attitude comes into play in school improvement, especially in how we think about the language we speak and our attitudes toward others and the language(s) they speak. The status of the language students bring to school, and our reaction to it, matters, and matters in ways we may not even be conscious of.

Another of my teachers used to say that culture is like a window pane – it works best when we do not notice it (Flinders, 1988). The linguist Noam Chomsky believed that language exhibits both a surface structure and a deep structure. Culture, too, can be said to have these surface and deep structures. As in regards to schools and school improvement, the surface culture is what we more commonly refer to as school climate – those more surface-level phenomena we can readily see and sense: Is the school brightly coloured? Are people cheery, friendly? Does the school feel warm and happy? As administrators and leaders, as teachers and school reformers, we cannot get to the deep culture unless we dig, and dig deep.

Culture is a difficult concept to grasp, to distinguish and to articulate. The concept of culture does a lot of work. In the hands of some, it is loosely defined and carelessly applied – each and every thing is attributable to or, in the worst case, caused by culture. It can become a grab-bag kind of category. In the hands of some well-meaning reformers or academics and their popularisers, certain conceptualisations of culture and their application can have debilitating consequences (see Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

Well-meaning colleagues have written of re-culturing schools as a way to improve them (e.g., Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Harris, 2002), but I think they are referring a more surface-level culture. Deep culture is difficult to get at, let alone change intentionally in a certain direction. Deep culture is not so easily harnessed to the leader's will, made to do his or her bidding. It is organic and emerges out of chaos and complexity. Analogously, deep culture is more like a rushing river or a tide – a dynamic force – than it is, say, a farm or a ranch – something that can be planned and managed. (But speaking of analogies, this is another type of language about which we should be cautious and reflective. Analogies can do as much harm as they can good. Analogies and clichés can form part of our prison house of impoverished language and thinking if we are not careful, if we let others do our thinking for us.)

We need to be more conscious (and conscientious) of culture, its complexities, and its influences, because, as a complex system, our interventions and attempts at culture change may have ramifications for some other parts of the system, something we might not be able to foresee, predict or control. (This is not to imply a fatalistic disposition toward culture: I only intend to raise some possible pitfalls.)

Thinking for Ourselves

Improving our thinking, especially our thinking about school improvement, is one way to improve schools and schooling. And, we are

more likely to improve our thinking when we think for ourselves – individually and in collaboration with others. However, we ought to recognise the positive and the negative sides to both individual and collective cognition, and mitigate the negative when we can. Collective thinking may suffer from, among other things, group think. This can result from social pressures and processes – the felt need to belong, to go along, or to attach oneself to a leader, father figure or other authority: to take one's place in a social hierarchy and possibly purchase a bit of safety and security. This is all well and good, so long as the hierarchies we attach ourselves to are healthy and functional, not dysfunctional, and when the leaders in such hierarchies – those on the rungs above us and those at the top – exercise soft power through the persuasion of their ideas, and not the brute force of coercion and fear.

Just as quantifying things is a human impulse, so too is a proclivity for status and status hierarchies (Fukuyama, 1999; Zink et al., 2008). Elsewhere (Waite, 2010), I've mentioned how we are all enmeshed in multiple webs of relationships, many structured by status hierarchies. These status and dominance hierarchies can be problematic in collective arrangements of all kinds.

One of the dynamics associated with social hierarchies is competition. And while competition has certain advantages (Bronson & Merryman, 2013), it manifests these advantages under certain circumstances, such as when the playing field is perceived to be a level. But in a kind of vicious circle, power begets status, which attracts power, and on and on. We give power, resources and the like to individuals, organisations and institutions we perceive to have status, and the status can be based on perception, with relatively no basis in reality. (*The Princeton Review* and *U.S. News and World Report* use perception as a factor in their university rankings.) And we grant authority to some people on topics outside their area of expertise owing to their status in other domains. But status has a cascading effect: resources flow to those with higher status – this is why executives get bigger salaries, more perks and are less accountable (Waite, in press). Such is the nature of status hierarchies, where those at the top get the lion's share of the spoils, whether legally, illegally or through questionable policies and practices (Waite, 2010; Waite & Allen, 2003).

Status and status hierarchies muddy our thinking and decision-making processes. When we go along, when we allow other individuals or society as a whole to decide who is important, who has status and, therefore, ought to be consulted or followed, we are not thinking for ourselves and we are not basing our decisions on the quality of ideas or information, but on the position or status of the source.

Sometimes the best course of action is going it alone. Or, as Nietzsche (1968) wrote: 'It is not a matter of going ahead (–for then one is at best a herdsman, i.e., the herd's chief requirement), but of being able *to go it alone*, of being able *to be different*' (p. 196, emphasis in original).

Concluding Thoughts

To improve schools – which are complex systems, we ought to continuously monitor the system's processes and outputs. How we think about the system and its processes, how we frame the issues or 'problems' will suggest an appropriate response, which should contribute to school improvement.

Relationships can help us grow in our thinking – especially relationships that both challenge and support us. Critical friends help. Other, more structured learning environments can help us grow, too. Graduate or continuing education classes, book study groups, professional learning communities, counselling and other, more individualised learning are but a few. Recognising, reflecting upon and working on our dispositions can help; in fact, this may be essential. It helps if we can temper our egos, our certainties, and our all-too-human disposition to recognise and use only those data which confirm our already-held beliefs, theories, plans and conclusions.

It would help if we could avoid distractions and noise – distractions from chasing answers to the wrong questions, vacuous and vexing individual people or crowds, and the distractions coming to us through our personal communication devices and our addiction to email, text messages and media over-stimulation. We need to remain open to what could be disconfirming information and be big enough to change our minds, and at a fundamental level. Our beliefs cannot be sacrosanct: we must be willing to revisit them in light of our experiences and other data that become available. Engaging with people different from us, people with different histories and those who have different ideas and ways of seeing the world enriches us.

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