

What Is Teaching in Context?

Why relationships really do make a difference

By Jen Thomas

Teaching in Context: *The Social Side of Education Reform* (Harvard Education Press 2017), brings together the work of several education scholars and practitioners. The book's nine chapters each align to one of three main themes: teacher collaboration, school and system leaders, and system-level partnerships. The chapters are written by scholars from a variety of fields, and together, they make the case that "school contexts characterized by strong and stable relationships among adults are more conducive to the learning and improvement of adults and

students and the system as a whole."

The research in this volume gives examples of how teacher effectiveness is strongly influenced by collaboration within a school, between schools, between schools and their central offices, and with the larger community. Editor Esther Quintero and colleagues make it clear that no one approach to collaboration is better than others; instead, broad suggestions are offered to the reader.

Matthew Ronfeldt's chapter, "Better Collaboration, Better

Teaching," discusses his research, which shows that collaboration around assessments and a range of instructional topics has the greatest impact on raising student achievement. Joshua Starr's chapter, "Organizing Adult Learning for Adaptive Change Management: A Systems Approach," suggests that professional learning communities (PLCs) can be effective forums for collaboration, given they include the content and structures necessary to build teachers' collective knowledge and skills.



Although this book primarily shares research about the importance of building social capital within individual schools, there are also chapters that speak to the role of the school district and community in influencing the social context of teaching. The quantity and quality of an educator's professional network, inside and outside of school, impacts that educator's social capital, access to and use of resources, job satisfaction, and career decisions.

Applying the Lessons of Teaching in Context

As I read this book, I began to wonder about the steps to take to build a more collaborative culture in my own school. For example, after reading Chapter 6, "The Social Cost of Leadership Churn: The Case of an Urban School District," I wondered about the school district's role in supporting teachers in developing collaborative relationships with their peers in other schools and with central office leaders. Is this my responsibility as a principal, or a shared responsibility I have with the district,

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especially given the turnover that occurs in central office personnel?

I also wondered whether a school would be better served by focusing on building a strong collaborative culture *within* the school before supporting teachers in developing their personal learning network (PLN) outside the school. The role of social media in building and supporting educators' social capital and PLNs was not addressed in this book, perhaps because there has not been a significant amount of research on this topic.

Lastly, I wondered about the role of principal supervisors in building the social capital of the principals they support. If you replace the word *students* with *teachers*, and *schools* with *districts* in the following quote, it can also apply to school leaders: "Too many educators continue to work in isolation, focusing on their own students, interacting only intermittently and often minimally with colleagues and supervisors, and stagnating in (or about to leave) schools that were never set up to support them or promote their professional growth."

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No one approach to collaboration is better than others.

There are many ways that school and district leaders can use the information in this book, as each contributor prompts the reader to reflect on the various social contexts found in schools and districts. For example, Ronfeldt makes the case that school leaders should seek out collaborative educators when making hiring decisions, pointing out that preservice teachers who trained in highly collaborative schools have been shown to be more effective in their

first year of teaching than those who trained in schools that did not have a strong collaborative culture. However, it can be challenging to learn about the collaborative culture of a school building, particularly if the school is in a different district or state.

This difficulty leads to another point discussed in the text: Because federal, state, and local accountability measures focus solely on academic assessments, schools are treated as “organizations of professional individuals” rather than professional organizations. This book makes a strong case for moving away from using only student academic assessment scores as indicators of a school’s quality. (ESSA allows states to use nonacademic indicators for school accountability metrics.) The research presented

in this volume seems to support incorporating data around adult collaboration into accountability measures—data that “reveals more about how schools *actually* work—work processes, social interactions, norms and beliefs, and especially *how all of this comes together.*”

This book issues a call to action to all educators and policymakers that I hope we will embrace: “Let’s lift our gaze above frameworks and solutions focused on assessing and augmenting the qualities of individuals and embrace an equal focus on attuning to and growing the value that can be created *among* them. This will not only benefit educators and the teaching profession, but also America’s students.” 

Jen Thomas is principal of Hearst Elementary School in Washington, D.C.



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