

Metaphors of Mindful Engagement and a Vision of Better Schools

Principals who foster a meaningful vision of their schools—as *firms*, *families*, *fairs*, or *forums*, to name a few possibilities—can promote the commitment from staff and students that leads to exceptional results.

A central question confronts educational leaders who work on the complex task of school improvement: how do school leaders articulate a meaningful vision of schools that can generate authentic interest in educational change? I have been examining this question by studying several extraordinary schools where students are engaged in thoughtful work.

I propose four metaphors for schools that can promote school improvement through *mindful engagement*. Students can activate their minds in a school envisioned as:

Firm—a disciplined production system where all students are organized as high-performance workers;

Family—a caring and supporting social system of concerned adults and respectful students;

Fair—a celebrating community of joy and excitement where students and teachers show off their good work;

Forum—a public meeting place of open dialogue and inquiry.

These four metaphors represent crucial structures, processes, and cultural configurations found in all schools. In extraordinary schools they take on special importance as students, teachers, and administrators

Photograph by Phil Surman



Photograph by Lucinda Surman

pursue their work with energy, self-discipline, collaboration, and a keen sense of purpose (fig. 1). Each metaphor represents only one aspect of a complex system. They co-mingle with varying degrees of harmony; yet each is indispensable to the larger goals of schooling in our society.

School-as-Firm

School-as-firm is no new metaphor. From the progressive era (Bobbitt 1913) to the present (Kearns and Doyle 1989), educational critics have argued that the work performed by students must be closely aligned to the labor demands of our economy. The central focus of this metaphor is to see the student as worker (Schlechty 1990).

James Monasmith and his colleagues at Colville High School (Colville, Washington) have developed a distinctive image of students as high-performing workers. The school established a set of core work attitudes

and behaviors that all students are expected to adopt in all classes. Students receive a "Work Habits/Work Attitude" grade in all classes, which is part of the official transcript and reported on all letters written on behalf of graduating students to employers and colleges.

At Colville High the students are workers, but they are also young men and women who enjoy a sense of belonging in their workplace. Their small building is crowded with 580 students, but order is not coercive. There are no bells, no hall passes, no assignments of teachers or other staff to "hall duty," "cafeteria duty," or "study hall duty." Students are expected to act as adult workers would

be expected to act in any firm.

This sense of order without regimentation is illustrated in the daily "coffee break" for *all* school workers. From 9:48 to 10:03 everyone enjoys a morning break. Teachers and staff go to the teachers' lounge, and students assemble in the cafeteria-auditorium area for refreshments and music. The only adults present are the cafeteria workers who sell the food. Then, just as suddenly as the students assemble for the break, they disperse to their classrooms, followed by the teachers to their work stations. This spontaneous shift from leisure to work—without any bells—is remarkable. By 10:04 everyone has returned to the tasks of teaching and learning.

Photograph by Harriet H. Sutherland



Photograph by Mary E. Huske



To develop an emotionally healthy social environment that fosters responsibility and mutual respect, to celebrate talent in its inexhaustible variety, to promote clarity in one's convictions and toleration of others' points of view, and to promote academic work—these are among the purposes of schooling that, through the metaphors family, fair, forum, and firm, (illustrated left to right) educators are able to foster. By designing activities representing constructive metaphors such as these, educators can encourage thoughtful participation by their students and, ultimately, create better schools.

Another extraordinary instance of mindful engagement is found in the 7th and 8th grade science classes of Pam Riss in Northlawn School in Streator, Illinois. Riss has an enthusiastic commitment to "hands-on, minds-on science" (1990a, 1990b). Sometimes her classroom resembles an engineering firm, where students are engaged in problem-solving tasks that require a plan of action, careful measurement, adherence to specified procedures, and critical awareness of meaningful outcomes. Like other science teachers who enjoy the "hands-on, minds-on" approach, she insists on giving students the opportunity to think like scientists by having them *act* like scientists.

School-as-Family

The vast majority of principals, teachers, and other school staff are caring people. I have witnessed thousands of minor episodes in schools that express this culture of caring: hugs, handshakes, pats on the back, words of encouragement, and moments of supporting counsel. In a rural Illinois school, I observed an elementary principal as he mingled among the students to see that they enjoyed their food. Later he explained that this lunch may be their only balanced meal of the day. Like any good parent, this principal was attentive to the nutritional needs of children.

The metaphor of school-as-family is fundamental to the institution of compulsory education. Societal mandates establish school people and parents as the key co-guardians of young children and youth. Parents and teachers are the chief protectors and nurturers of children. The fact that they sometimes see the child's needs and interests in differing terms does not diminish the power of the family metaphor. It simply indicates that the shaky alliance between teachers and parents rests on the unspoken assumption: that both have a legitimate claim to the nurturing role.

The strength of the family metaphor rests on two organizational strategies: (1) hiring teachers and staff who have authentic concern for the welfare of children and (2) designing a support system in which all adults in the school actively participate as a team

(Comer 1980). Once again, Colville High School exemplifies both principles. All staff there share responsibility for developing healthy interpersonal relationships: cooks, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, counselors, teachers, librarians, aides, the disciplinary officer, and the principal. They work together as colleagues who share a common commitment to the needs of young people. This is illustrated most clearly in weekly staff meetings in which everyone shares vital information about students who need attention. Support teams are formed to see that appropriate action is taken as quickly as possible. Every student is surrounded by adults with meaningful authority and genuine concern.

School-as-Fair

Schools are places where students are given a chance to show off their good work. Typically there is much evidence of the "fair spirit" in the early years of elementary schools. Any casual observer on Parent's Night, for example, will enjoy a panoramic view of children's work in the classrooms and hallways. In a small town in Mississippi (Pontotoc) and a suburban school in San Francisco (Washington Elementary School, Burlingame), the walls in the classrooms and hallways are covered with students' work. In both schools, teachers display as much student work as the wall will hold.

Opportunities for students to display their talent vary with subject area, age, and the focus of the school. Young musicians, thespians, and graphic artists naturally enjoy sharing their artistic inclinations. Some schools promote science fairs, and others encourage students to take the products of their vocational courses to local county fairs.

Curiously, in academics and athletics, an interesting case of role reversal occurs in the organizational culture of primary and secondary schools. In the early years of schooling, all children are encouraged to display their academic achievements, while minimum attention is given to displaying success in athletic events. Toward the end of the school cycle, the emphasis is reversed: little attention is given to the display of academic work, but the en-

tire community is aware of the achievements of the athletes.

An exemplary case of school-as-fair has been developed in the Wilmington Schools (Wilmington, Illinois), where teachers have organized a major evening event to "show our stuff" (SOS) to the community. Their Gallery Night takes place in the high school gymnasium, where booths showcase all kinds of school products and activities: artwork, a cooperative learning demonstration, science exhibits, literary works, computer programming, videotapes of classroom activities, and athletic events. Onstage in the auditorium numerous performances also take place: skits, jazz band, one-act plays, scholastic bowl, book talk. The SOS event is a public celebration of student achievements during the past year.

School-as-Forum

A forum refers to a public meeting place of open discussion and inquiry. Since the days of Socrates, many have thought of schools as places of vigorous debate guided by reason and authoritative knowledge. School-as-forum accentuates an open spirit of learning and inquiry. I have witnessed such moments in classes taught by teachers of literature, history, and social studies. Teachers who are skilled in the Socratic method pose issues that force students to take a position and then defend it against the opposing views of their peers (Paul et al. 1989). The teacher orchestrates this lively exchange of views with timely questions that require students to clarify assumptions, avoid non sequiturs, and provide supporting evidence.

The cultivation of the spirit of forum is exemplified in schools with speech teams, debate teams, mock performances of parliamentary procedure, and role-playing of judicial proceedings and legislative deliberations. The spirit of forum is also part of the leadership opportunities of student government and the publication of a school paper. Unfortunately, in many schools only a vocal minority become involved in the various occasions of public discourse.

Numerous writing projects in Washington Elementary School (Burlingame, California) offer ample occasions

Fig 1. Metaphors of Mindful Engagement

Metaphors of School	Metaphors of Student Roles	Metaphors of Teacher Roles	Primary Purpose of Metaphor	Vision of Improvement
Firm	Worker	Supervisor	Promote academic achievement and work habits	Opportunity for all students to succeed as potential employees
Family	Young kinsman and kinswoman	Guardian	Promote interpersonal relationships	Establishing healthy emotional environment and high self-esteem
Fair	Performer	Coach	Celebrate the many expressions of student talent	Opportunity for all students to develop and display their talents
Forum	Young citizen	Adult citizen	Promote authentic voice for expressing private and public ideas	Opportunity for all students to acquire the capacity to articulate ideas

for all students to express their views on topics important to them inside and outside the school. Students are encouraged to develop their own voices as concerned citizens of the school and community. One noteworthy opportunity is the weekly radio program for KCAT (Kids Create And Think), which introduces students to the excitement and the hard work of public discourse. Under the guidance of a teacher, participating students collect news and opinions for the Friday program, writing and editing their own scripts. The scripts include such items as a quiz show for teachers, interviews with students, news about school affairs, sensational citizen-of-the-week awards, and a special moment for geography. During the planning and production of the program, which takes place in a special studio, students assume the positions of producer, director, reporter, and disc jockey. All of their diligent preparation results in the special moment when they go on the air (via the school's public announcement system).

Metaphors and the Articulation of Purpose

The central value of metaphors is to

articulate purpose. Each image we've discussed, then, should provide a central focus for interpreting the meaning of schooling:

- The *firm* metaphor sees the student as a worker who is preparing for a life of productive employment. The purpose of school is to promote academic work.

- The *family* metaphor sees each person (student and staff) as a unique individual worthy of respect and dignity in a setting that is emotionally secure and coherent. Accordingly, the purpose of school is to create an emotionally healthy social environment that fosters responsibility and mutual respect.

- The *fair* metaphor sees each student as a creative and talented person capable of creating products and performances that adults and peers can enjoy. The purpose is to celebrate talent in its inexhaustible variety.

- The *forum* metaphor calls attention to the urgent need for public dialogue in an open and free society sustained by democratic institutions. Each student should have the opportunity to practice the essential skills of thoughtful conversation and public debate. School is where one learns in

numerous settings to agree to disagree by being clear in one's convictions and tolerant of the other's point of view.

These four metaphors provide a critical examination of schooling as mindful engagement. They allow new opportunities for active and thoughtful participation by all students who have a vital stake in the life of the school. By no means do these four exhaust the list of appropriate images which sharpen a vision of excellence in schools. My intent is not to present a definitive model for understanding and improving educational practices but, rather, to suggest a complex and meaningful vision of schools as institutions worthy of staff commitment, student loyalty, parent trust, and public support. By using metaphors, we can expand our imaginations to grasp connections between the actual affairs at hand and the ideal arrangements we strive ultimately to attain. □

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