Notes and Comments

This issue contains major research articles from the USA, Canada, Australia and Israel.

In the lead article ‘Changing Schools for Good: A Study of School Culture’, Giberto Arriaza (California State University, San Jose) discusses leadership styles and strategies for changing schools. He explores the complex interplay between culture, institutions and social change. He uses Mission Middle School as his case study to examine the process of transforming school into a learning community. In his discussion, he makes a number of useful policy suggestions, including the idea that any educational innovation requires teachers to be collectively involved in the meaning-making process, actively reconstructing pedagogical approaches to the learning process in the classroom. This constructivist pedagogy also involves three key dimensions: culture, ownership and inquiry.

The article that follows focuses on gender issues relevant to women teachers in Israel. In ‘Women Teachers’ Emotional Commitment and Involvement: A Universal Professional Feature and Educational Policy’, Izhar Olitka (Ben Gurion University of the Negev) examines women teachers’ perceptions of their pedagogical roles, their subjectivities, and the degrees of their commitment and involvement to teaching. The author argues that feminist researchers have been challenging traditional and patriarchal methodology of social sciences. It is suggested that women teachers’ voices and their perceptions of work commitment may challenge ‘masculine’ concept maps of teaching as a profession.

Pedagogical paradoxes of poststructuralism are examined by Mary Klages (University of Colorado) in her article ‘The Dark Night of the Subject Position, or, the Pedagogical Paradoxes of Poststructuralism’. Her article is based on her teaching of the Introduction to Literary Theory to graduate students. She suggests that poststructuralist paradigms offer rich epistemological and ontological insights, which can result in different ways of ‘seeing’ and re-interpreting social theories.

Margaret McAllister and Jamie Hay (Griffith University) in ‘Transformative Teaching in Ancient History’ evaluate current cur-
riculum approaches to the teaching of Ancient History in the context of contemporary Queensland Secondary School Education. They suggest that the transformative pedagogy underpinning the model can reveal history's relevance for contemporary life. It also has the potential to transform and empower our learners in the classroom.

Nghi Tran (University of North Texas) in ‘Cultural Dimensions in Creativity: A Study of Creativity among the Vietnamese People in America’ examines the cross-cultural and multi-dimensional aspects of creativity. The author compares creative thinking among American and Vietnamese-American college students and concludes that both environmental and cognitive factors play a significant role in students' creative thinking.

Finally, Michael Kehler (University of Western Ontario) in ‘The Boys Interrupted: Images Constructed, Realities Translated’ in his ethnographic research discusses the identity politics confronting young high school boys in negotiating and renegotiating masculinities in the classroom.

Editor
Changing Schools for Good: A Study of School Culture and Systems
Gilberto Arriaza
California State University San Jose

Abstract
This article explores the unevenness of change between culture and organizational structures. When school leaders and teachers embrace new systems without enough attention paid to the nature of the conversation, and to the way knowledge is learned among the school's staff, then the sustaining of sound reforms diminishes drastically. By looking at the reforms Mission Middle School leadership and faculty implemented around assessment systems (e.g., portfolios), this article shows the pitfalls of reform efforts fixed on the implementation of systems that do not engage the very heart of a human organization – how things are done.

Keywords: leadership styles, school culture, education reforms, innovation, assessment

Introduction
Portfolios to me are a nice way of telling kids they're doing a good job. It's also a nice way to show parents how nice their little kids are, and how well they're doing at school. (Mr Tower, faculty-meeting field notes)

Thus spoke Mr Tower, an 8th grade language arts teacher at Mission Middle School during a school leadership team meeting. Teachers were deciding whether to have the first annual of the traditionally festive portfolio conference, or to postpone it. The rest of those present at the meeting remained expectantly silent for Mr Tower was widely known as someone who would not hesitate to openly express his opinions, and to be argumentative. There was something in his tone that indicated he was about to drop an ominous statement. And he did. "But for me, as a teacher, portfolios mean nothing. I don't use them, and don't see how I've learned from them. It's an extra job I have to do, and don't see how it helps me closing the achievement gap."
Educational leaders often realize that, sadly, changes they helped to enact did not pass the test of time. This article attempts to explore why that happens by shedding some light on the challenges and the promises that the implementation of sound instructional practices represent to changing schools' culture. The article, which is based on a two-year ethnographic study, focuses on the use of portfolios in an urban middle school, which were adopted and integrated into the school's evaluation systems over a period of five years as alternative assessment of students' academic performance, and as a way to gauge teacher's work. Throughout those years the use of portfolios at Mission Middle School had been (for the school district and other practitioners) a hallmark of creative, bold school reform, for which the school had been praised numerous times and was widely recognized in the state of California. While Mr. Tower's expressed dissent suggested that teachers in this school were able to express their opinions without fear of retaliation, I was intrigued by the implications of his open critique – that after so many years of practice, this assessment system remained juxtaposed to the school's lifeworld, and now openly rejected. This article summarizes a two-year ethnographic study that looked into the social and cultural details of this process. The article is divided into three sections: theoretical framework, the study, and lessons for a different practice.

**Theoretical Framework**

Deal and Peterson (1993) used the phrase 'inner reality' as a metaphor to characterize culture in human organizations. They argued that culture is 'the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems and confront challenges' (Deal & Peterson, 1998: 28). Thus, school culture can be understood as the ways teachers and administrators determine priorities, use material and economic resources, allocate time, schedule courses, and deploy teachers' talents; in sum, how things are done. The notion of culture as an organization's 'inner reality', evokes the image of circles where an intimate core of beliefs and values exists at the centre, interacting with a complex series of larger circles composed of systems established to carry out those beliefs and values.

Individuals prioritize issues and needs based upon what they believe is important, urgent, and vital. Over the last 15 years school reformers in the United States have gradually moved from considering access as a guiding principle to equity. In a hierarchical society equal access for all children to knowledge and information did not necessarily consider the uneven social, economic, linguistic, and cultural circumstances with which children enter school, while equity
does. Thus, equity of opportunity and outcomes has become more and more popular. For some, equity is defined as results measured by comparing the degrees of fairness between one group's academic performance and another. For others equity is about a codified belief system followed by concrete allocation of resources. For instance, when teachers believe that all students can learn and achieve high academic performance, it is expected that they will distribute their resources accordingly. It then follows that in an environment where a challenging and engaging education for all children, regardless of race, gender, social class and other key markers, sits at the centre of a school's daily life, then the most experienced educators will be assigned to work with the children most challenged, and material and monetary resources will logically follow.

Beliefs and the way things are done, as stated above, take place through language. It provides the vehicle and the glue that sustain social interaction. As Kramsch (1998) argues, culture indeed is transmitted, perpetuated, and contested through language. The author states that language can have three possible relationships to culture. First, it can express cultural reality, giving verbal shape to things, actions, and ideas that are part of the shared social space of schools; everything from objects like books and desks; to actions such as teaching history, to ideas like equity, race, and leadership. Second, language also shapes cultural reality; that is, language is used to create and constitute cultural practices such as emailing a teacher, facilitating a parent meeting, or arguing with a peer on the playground. Third, language also symbolizes cultural reality by standing for or representing social identities. Habermas (1987) offers the notion of lifeworld as the space where culture and language meet. In Habermas' view, people interact and carry out their activities through their own 'patterns of interpretation transmitted in language' (Habermas, 1987: 25).

Habermas (1987) also notes that what takes place in the lifeworld occurs within sets of systems. These systems, or the systemsworld in his words, refer to the set of structures, procedures, and regulations utilized to manage activities. Systems ought to be at the service of culture, not the other way around, the writer argues. When the latter happens, he claims, culture risks its own subordination to the needs of systems, and therefore, a culture ends up subjected to the dictates of systems, ergo colonized by them. According to Fairclough the relationship between culture and systems can only be understood if framed as 'the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations' (Fairclough, 1995: 94). The introduction of a system that brings in a different notion of work (e.g., changing teaching from an individual to
a collaborative practice) and reorganizes the existing structures (e.g.,
changing curriculum planning time from the private realm of the
classroom to school-wide grade level), constitute changes that, in
Fairclough's perspective, ultimately lead to the questioning of power
relations. These changes might bring a different kind of conversation,
new vocabularies, among teachers, and between them and students,
and parents,

The current school reform movement in the United States offers an
illustrative example of the intersection of culture and language. From
a reform movement throughout the 1980s and early 1990s focused on
systems (such as changing the decision-making processes, changing
scheduling patterns, creating new assessments, implementing and
using data, generating common planning time for teachers) also iden-
tified as restructuring (Little & Dorph, 1998), to one addressing both
systems and culture, represent a dramatic strategic shift. In this
country most of today's reform efforts indeed go beyond merely imple-
menting systems change to include the transformation of schools into
learning communities (Sizer, 1992; Newman & Wehlage, 1995;
Fullan, 1993). According to these authors, the act of teaching, above
all, signifies learning as a social act, and the process of building a
community of learners as an activity naturally leading to the creation
of peer close collaboration. In this sense a school becomes a space for
the public display of one's labour, an environment where the use of
inquiry and evidence to make decisions is common currency, and the
transformation of the form and content of the conversation is guided
by the concern of teaching children to use their mind and heart well.
This proposition, as creative as it might be, however; faces today the
challenge of an overall teaching force that does not necessarily posses
the skills, understandings, and/or the institutional support to grow
into and carry out the new job description.

Attempting to change systems and culture simultaneously, as the
notion of learning communities implicates, is one of the most daring
endeavours reformers have embraced. It is so because, among other
things, changing schools into learning communities has meant new
demands on the teaching and administrative labor force, from con-
ceptualizing the roles and functions of teachers and administrators
differently, to the development of new and different skills, habits, atti-
tudes, and knowledge expected from them (Darling-Hammond, 1997;
Parish & Aquila, 1996; Mier, 1995). Within this new context a principal,
for instance, is portrayed beyond the ordinary school manager,
and is instead defined as an agent who combines the understandings
and skills of a transformative and moral leader (Fullan, 2000; Barth,
1990; Sergiovanni, 2000; Evans, 2001) with those of a manager whose
central concern revolves around teaching and learning rather than on bureaucratic functions.

Transforming a school into a learning professional community in the last analysis hinges upon institutional capacity to simultaneously transform classroom experience, knowledge, and skills – the cultural component – into an on-going collaborative learningendeavour – the support systems – involving adults and youngsters (Little, 1990; McLaughlin, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997a). Darling-Hammond asserts that teacher preparation and skills ‘prove to be the single most important determinant of students achievement’, and their right to learn as ‘directly tied to their teachers’ opportunities to learn what they need to know to teach well’ (Darling-Hammond, 1997a: 6). For instance, focusing the entire school’s conversation on the exhibition of students’ work (e.g., portfolio conferences, project reports), while creating structures supporting teachers’ collaboration on an on-going basis (e.g., common planning time, collective portfolio reviews) are but two illustrations of change aimed at both structures and culture.

McMullen’s meta-analysis of research concurs with the idea that structural change needs to happen with an eye on culture. The researcher found that teachers and school leaders working in environments that exhibit strong support systems that have taken ‘collective responsibility for student learning’ (McMullen, 1996: 32-33) and forged an ethos of care throughout the school. Mier (1995) asserted, that teachers might certainly be the most caring people, yet without the structures allowing them to materialize such care, care as a value shared collectively becomes impractical. Some researchers have argued that understanding classroom practices ought to be the foundation of systemic change. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) note that school reform is only effective when focused on students’ engagement in constructing knowledge and disciplined inquiry that have value beyond schooling. As the narrative below shows, the adoption of portfolios as an assessment system led less to changing a school’s culture and more to modifying how these ‘things’ were done.

Case Study

Background

I was originally a social studies/language arts teacher at Mission Middle school and participated both in a school-wide committee dealing with leadership, and a grade level committee in charge of curriculum development. I left the school to pursue doctoral studies on education and returned later as an external support provider, coaching the school’s administrators on the promotion of key reform initiatives.
In my dual capacity as researcher and coach, I conducted an ethnographic study that would inform decisions, and illuminate the reform initiatives the school's leadership launched; the study would also serve pragmatic purposes such as keeping track of results, calibrate processes, and amend the work's direction. In other words, the study was an action research project that supported the school's change process; I fed the data back to the school's staff during planned study sessions.

I was a participant observer throughout the two years of the study. I examined dozens of portfolios in teachers' classrooms and in numerous portfolio conferences, and followed the grading process in terms of the official letter grades, and the more informal, private, formative grading teachers prepared for the students. I used the students' CUM (cumulative academic records) kept for each pupil, and the entry slips used to qualify a student's work against academic standards. I attended, documented, and at times facilitated, whole faculty, departmental, and team meetings. I also documented some portfolio conferences, where parents, students, teachers, administrators, and the school's general community participated.

While the whole faculty was indirectly involved in this study, I closely followed a focal group. These teachers were selected firstly because they expressed interest in understanding their own work, secondly they represented a good cross-section of the school's social organization that combined grade level, gender, race, and seniority. Lastly, these teachers kept a wide range of portfolios in their classrooms and some of them had participated in the initial planning, implementation, and review of portfolios as assessment system. The focal group was made up of three 8th grade, two 7th grade, and three 6th grade teachers, plus the school principal.

The question was: In what ways did teachers change the way they learn once portfolios were implemented at Mission Middle School? To respond to the research question data were organized into two themes: structural reform efforts, and portfolios as source of knowledge.

**Restructuring Efforts**

Mission Middle School's reform narrative clearly followed the path previously described in the framework above. It was a school composed of 6th to 8th grades, 500 students, and located in San Francisco, California. The school's Latino² and African American students made up about 70% of the entire school population, while 12% were white, 8% Other-Non White, and 10% Chinese and Filipino. Very few of these
students walked to the school – they were bused from the rapidly disapearing low-income, working class neighbourhoods of the city, Mission district and Hunters Point. The teaching staff was more than 60% white, 10% Latino, 5% Chinese, and 25% African American. The annual teacher turnover was not more than one teacher out of every five, which was within the school district’s expected average.

After the district office reconstituted Mission Middle School in 1989 (which meant firing the entire staff and closing the school), the newly hired leadership adopted throughout the first half of the 1990s, some organizational structures that had been successful in schools affiliated to the then emerging Coalition of Essential Schools national network (CES). Mission Middle School’s faculty implemented block schedules (ninety minutes class periods), core instruction (one teacher for math and science, one for language arts and history), and common planning time (organized by grade level teams, called families).

Restructuring the school’s governance went from changing the individualized decision-making structure to site-based management. Faculty participated on teams in charge of hiring, curriculum and instruction, and cultural events. A leadership team was created as a support and critical friend to the school’s administration. The principal and her two vice-principals ran the day-to-day operations. Teachers, however, usually in whole-faculty meetings, made decisions about more general school policy, either as a result of a committee’s recommendation, or as a need arose for the whole school to decide (e.g., discipline, dress code, professional development events). These discussions usually charged the administration or specific committees with the responsibility of executing such agreements.

Consensus, not voting, was the mechanism adopted for making these kind of decisions. During an interview Ms Robinson, an 8th grade math/science teacher, stated: “The principal always consulted with the whole faculty. She always asked our opinions. And although the process always seemed endless, there was some sense of ownership among us.” Indeed, this sense of ownership came at a cost – more time to make decisions, and more work for teachers in areas traditionally the responsibility of the school’s administration.

Mission Middle School teachers lived the reform experience in rather dramatic ways. Besides the new expectations as decision makers, transforming the school into a professional learning community demanded full cooperation from teachers, both around classroom practices and pedagogical approaches, as well as knowledge about students. The school was organized in horizontal families around
grade levels with a common planning time. Coring the curriculum resulted in a closer vertical collaboration around subject matter where teachers in charge of a core, like math and science, from all three (6th, 7th, and 8th) grades examined their instructional plans at least every two weeks in early morning meetings. External funding from reform initiatives (e.g., Ambassador Annenberg) provided extra time for the planning of whole academic units, and the coordination, calibration and development of assessment tools such as rubrics and portfolios.

The Assessment System

It was during those early days of the 1990s on the route to reform, that the faculty adopted portfolio assessment, which was conceived as a system to identify classroom practices, and to create a more authentic measurement of the students' academic progress. Portfolios were also envisioned as a structure of care, since they would presumably help teachers to track what students were considering their best work, and thus be aware of their challenges and needs.

Administration and staff efforts appeared to be headed in the right direction. From the start teachers seemed to have embraced the new assessment system even though it had been initiated by the school's administration. Portfolios were justly perceived as a solution to the lack of uniform, authentic measures, and also as a sound response to norm-based standardized testing quite popular in State policy. And yet, as I show later in this article, the initial buy-in hardly led to deeper implementation of changes, or to the actual transformation of old, dominant approaches to assessment. In other words, the quality of the conversation, and the ways students were evaluated and assessed continued to be predominantly haphazard, and private. Moreover, scores from standardized tests continued to be considered the bottom line.

Portfolios were adopted in stages, beginning in the school year 1993-94, when most teachers from the language arts and social studies took them as a physical place to file whatever students deemed exemplary work. At times, some teachers would suggest changes to students, and occasionally teachers would talk among themselves about what students were putting in their folders; however, such conversations were not guided by agreed upon standards, nor by common protocols. This was the case for most of the following three years. In the year 1997-98, for the first time portfolios were adopted across all core subjects, and the first portfolio conferences were held.
In a faculty meeting teachers came to the agreement that having a collection of a student's best work from previous years would help them understand their needs, challenges, and progress over time. It was clear, though, that they needed ample time to coordinate, design the procedures, work on common standards, and agree on the expectations for the assessment system to be authentic and therefore useful, "[so that teachers] would know what the meat was", as Mr Miller (a recently hired 6th grade Math/Science teacher) said in an interview.

The first faculty-lead institute to examine student work was held in the summer of 1998. As a result, teachers agreed to extend the use of portfolios to include the arts and physical education programs, along with introducing teachers' own standards, the organization of portfolios, and the actual rubrics measuring the quality of selected pieces of work for all subjects. For the first time teachers made explicit each standard by which each student would measure his or her skills and knowledge. Students were expected to have entry slips explaining the standard they were working towards, the reasons why they chose a particular piece of work, their self-evaluation (where they considered themselves to be at in a rubric continuum), and what challenges they perceived to lie ahead.

In addition, teachers believed that students in sixth grade would start the use of portfolios and continue building on in seventh and eighth grades. Therefore, at the end of every school year teachers would hand over their students' portfolios to inform the next year's teacher about every student's work, mastery of subject, and performance toward the academic standards. Moreover, the school would host two portfolio exhibitions (or conferences as they were called), one at the middle and another at the end of the school year. In these exhibitions students would share their best work before parents, the general community, teachers and peers who functioned some as audience and some as examiners.

Portfolios as Knowledge

Mr Tower's remarks kept coming back to my mind as a reminder that normalized behaviours do not always reflect true beliefs. His statement brought to the surface what seemed to have been a source of frustration running beneath a thin veneer of consensual conduct. According to him portfolios were "a nice way to show parents how nice their little kids are, and how well they're doing at school". In his view portfolios appeared to have no other value than being a communication device to satisfy parents' curiosity about their children's academic performance. In this section I look at the way teachers actually used
portfolios both as sources of data to examine practices and as tools to
gauge students' academic performance.

"Just tell me what you said to him" Ms Lee, a new 7th grade
Math/Science teacher, asked me after I had offered feedback to her
about pre-algebra skills of a student of hers at the end of an exhibition. Her response was not unusual. After several portfolio confer­
ences as participant observer I heard many teachers, like Ms Lee,
uninterested in requesting feedback from examiners, even when the
professional relationship between teacher and examiner was excel­
 lent. Teachers were eager only to hear that the latter had given posi­
 tive, affirming feedback to the students.

Over the two years of this study the following three patterns
emerged:

A. Students showed great handling of facts, and seemed fluent on
the topics under scrutiny, as well as being able to convey information
to the audience. Yet, it seemed as if students were more eager to
repeat information and facts than to engage their work critically. For
instance, students had a hard time explaining in their own words the
meaning of a standard they had just read, or, after they had clearly
explained how to resolve a problem, they could not answer when
asked to resolve the same problem within a different context.

B. Students, who chose the same theme, yet demonstrated varying
degrees of skill and knowledge, received identical scores. It was diffi­
cult to generate valid assessment since quality of work, grasp of
knowledge, and skills were not easy to compare. Teachers issued the
same letter grade to students showing quite different work quality.

C. The meaning of the standards was not clear across teachers. For
example, when comparing rigour and breadth of knowledge the exami­
ers concurred that Student A appeared to have a greater grasp,
more information, and better ability to make connections than
Student B. But then they would realize that their teachers, independ­
et from each other, had given these students the same high quality
marks. In spite of following the same rubrics teachers appeared to
operate from different expectations and indicators.

D. Clear and explicit expectations appeared to not be commonly
shared among teachers, and spaces created to calibrate their work
and to build coherence were not used for such purpose. When teach­
ers needed to gauge a student's performance and evenly apply the
standards the variance on work quality was too wide.
The above patterns might have influenced Ms. Lee when she showed no interest in feedback. Her refusal might have been prompted by the fact that teachers considered the assessment as simple instruments to show off their students' work, and their belief that exhibitions and portfolios, as a system, had little or nothing to do with their teaching and learning practices.

Ms. Thomas (a 7th-grade language arts/social studies teacher) expressed her dismay at the disparity of letter-grades teachers posted for student work, even in cases where the same exact assignment was assessed. "We need to standardize our standards" (field notes), she pleaded to the whole faculty in a rather contentious meeting. Her request stirred a debate that lasted nearly ten minutes. For the time being teachers felt there was no time to debate the merits of such concern. But, Ms. Thomas's statement somehow opened the gates for other teachers to raise their own questions and concerns regarding the validity of the assessment. At the end of that meeting, teachers agreed to include her concern on the agenda for the coming summer institute.

Moreover, portfolios as a data system were not linked to the school's data flow. As part of this study, and with the support of two reform organizations acting as technical support to the school's leadership, the entire school data system was mapped out. The purpose of this work was to understand the type of data the school generated, the physical places data were held (e.g., cabinet files, computers), who and how data were generated, and who used data on regular basis. With regard to portfolios as data, the study uncovered two main issues:

1. Portfolio assessment was not linked to the school's data system. Portfolios were lingering somewhere on the edges of the school's work and did not figure in the list of data priorities. Other than looking at portfolios during the summer institutes, making them available to students during the biannual exhibitions, and physically handing them over to the next teacher, student portfolios showed to have no other use.

2. Most if not the majority of teachers defined portfolios only as a collection of children's best work with little or no connection to instructional and pedagogical practices. The system seemed totally disassociated from other assessments and learning practices for students. Portfolio assessment was far from being a source of knowledge for teachers. Data generated by portfolios did not materialize as a component of the overall tracking of students' academic performance.
in the same way that, for instance, writing, and standardized tests did. The understanding and adoption of portfolios varied from teacher to teacher; some believing them to be useful, and others flatly rejecting them but still requesting their use.

Some teachers were inclined to voice their disagreements about the use of portfolios and standardized assessments in casual, parking-lot conversations, rather than at formal faculty meetings. Teachers' overall sentiment around portfolios was, in sum, a mixture of distrust about the effectiveness of the system, and of detachment from a structure some defined imposed by the "boss", (the principal who brought the initiative to the school in the early 1990s). Some teachers, particularly non-European Americans, believed portfolios to be a "white, middle class invention not necessarily useful for kids of colour", as Ms Thomas stated in an interview. In other cases, some teachers dismissed portfolios all together as sources of valid assessment, and as useful sources of knowledge for their own learning. "In the end", Mr Miller said in an interview, "all I have is a pile of folders that I just pass on to the next year's teachers".

End of the Story

Mr Tower's intervention during the leadership meeting, tipped a change; his critique in fact reversed an innovation widely celebrated. The meeting played a catalytic function of a dissent until then kept sotto voce. The silence that followed Mr Tower's intervention was broken by Ms Tribble (a 6th grade Math/Science teacher) who asserted: "In my class I follow the protocols, give the kids the standard they are supposed to work on, and I do acknowledge their work. The thing is, you see, I don't know what else I can do with the portfolios" (field notes). Another teacher questioned the group about what measurement they tended to trust the most. Ms Thomas stood up to address the group in an almost oratorical style, suggesting that it was not a matter of trust, but of practicality; in her view, she said, she trusted "whatever [tools that] assess students as a process", over "one shot, norm-based ones, but I don't know what to do with so many folders" (field notes). The meeting broke into several small conversations affirming her opinions. The group seemed to agree that standardized tests were clear and direct, therefore practical to use. Ms Arias, a 6th grade Language Arts/Social Studies teacher, closing Ms Thomas' thoughts said, "I hate standardized exams, but that's what I end up looking at" (field notes).

Almost at the end of the meeting Mr Perez, a 7th grade, Language Arts/Social Studies teacher, took his turn. He stated that it seemed strange to him that they had been using portfolios for so many years,
that the conferences were unanimously approved. Then he asked: “Is it the tool and the structure in place, or is it the will of some who have disagreed all along and until today expressed their disagreement?” (field notes). Mr Angel, the principal who came to Mission Middle School after portfolio assessment was introduced, visibly concerned by what teachers expressed, said that at this point he felt people were not ready for another portfolio conference. “I see no reason to hold the scheduled portfolio conference, coming up in just one month.” The meeting facilitator then asked if that was a proposal. Upon Mr Angel’s affirmative answer the whole group decided to postpone the coming conference. Although portfolios were still used in the classroom for the rest of the school year, the emphasis diminished and the conferences were postponed indefinitely. Portfolios faded out as a key assessment system over the next year.

Discussion

In what ways did teachers change the way they learn once portfolios were implemented at Mission Middle School? The answer is that the structural changes introduced by this new assessment system were partial at best, due, among other things, to unclear understandings as to how to link the system to the ways teachers saw the assessment of students’ work as data to examine their own practices. Undoubtedly, Mr Tower’s intervention reversed an innovation that had been there for a few years. He voiced a dissenting opinion of many teachers who like him, had formally applied the assessment system and adjusted their work to satisfy expected requirements, but who never truly used the system to engage both the way they worked, and the content of their conversation. Until that meeting the school culture appeared to have been serving the system and thus building a learning community appeared elusive.

The widening gap between a well-intentioned assessment system (termed “authentic” in the school reform jargon) and the school’s life-world came to a halt. Mr Tower’s initial statement, and the position taken by the rest of the teachers present at the meeting exposed how things were done at Mission Middle and still remained unchallenged. Until then, dissension had not been openly expressed because the system had been normalized, or in Habermas’ language, it had somehow colonized the culture. But, as the reform work progressed, teachers gained the courage to subvert, contest, and eventually reject the system. Had the implementation of the system taken into account the way teachers talked about their daily work, and the way they used the system as evidence of their own practices, subordinating the system to the needs of the school’s culture would have had a greater chance of success.
No procedures existed to allow continuing teachers to re-learn the virtues and limitations of the assessment system on an on-going basis, and to consistently input their own contributions. Additionally, given the turnover rates in social organizations such as schools, the lack of provisions on how to introduce new teachers to the assessment system proved to be fatal. For instance, the school did not allocate time and did not establish clear procedures to allow new teachers, like Ms Lee and Mr Miller, to understand how portfolios served teaching and learning. This assessment system was not simply a new tool, it was supposed to be a comprehensive approach that would redefine work. Indeed, teachers were supposed to open their practice to their peers and to the school community; they were expected to talk to each other about students’ academic performance, calibrate their assessment tools, share information about their students’ difficulties, needs, advances, and ultimately be learners themselves from this evidence.

The dissonance between systems and culture, nonetheless, runs as an inevitable tension in school reform. But it might well be that changing the way things are done must be purposefully addressed from the moment a new system is launched: For example, Mission Middle School’s leadership could have been more proactive and explicit about portfolios as a system designed to transform teaching from the traditional private, individual, artisan work into a public, collegial, collaborative, inquiry, and evidence-based profession. Indeed, assessing students via portfolios did not simply implicate the addition of a new chore to the work schedule. It meant a change in the nature of work.

To connect the systems world more closely to culture, reforming schools need to reverse the traditional process of juxtaposing the former to the latter. Instead, the introduction of a new system needs to start from collectively constructing the meanings of it, their link to teaching and learning, and dissecting the ramifications of language from vocabulary to tone.

Mission Middle school altered its organizational structure, functions, and procedures, which resulted in an environment that allowed adults and students to experience school differently, as an open, caring space. Block schedules, common planning time, and the use of a core curriculum provided opportunities for teachers’ collaboration. The use of portfolios, and the biannual conferences allowed children to talk to adults, bring their families to their classroom, show off some of their work and, in turn, be congratulated by the visiting examiners, making, in the meantime, their families proud. Yet, the reflective and transformative potential of the assessment system stayed untapped
all those years, and thus, building a learning community remained unattained as a cultural shift.

The knowledge vested in the system was never part of the texture of teachers' conversation. The faculty invested many years of hard reform work, but when it came to using portfolios as evidence to examine their own teaching practices, they simply appeared not to see the link. It seems that teachers clearly tended to view the portfolios system as a place to classify products and as an occasion to boost students' morale. They did not see portfolios as part of a rigorous curriculum to personalize instruction at the service of their own inquiry and professional growth.

**Conclusion**

Three thoughts clearly emerge from this study. They are offered here as suggestions to teachers, and educational leaders who might want to reduce the unevenness of systemic change and culture.

1. **Ownership.** Those who will be using a system must own it. Regardless of the widespread use of portfolios, the celebratory feeling throughout the school’s classrooms and halls during the portfolio conferences, and the students’ apparent delight showing their work, many teachers at Mission Middle School made portfolios only a formal part of their professional life. Portfolios in and of themselves – as a legitimate strategy to assess students’ learning – were not enough to make them part of the school culture. An idea, like portfolios, sticks when teachers appropriate and translate it into the ways things are ordinarily done.

2. **Culture.** The case of Mission Middle School suggests that a formal, structural change that runs on parallel paths to the culture is doomed. Changes in structures created a framework for adults to exercise some degree of inquiry into complex issues, and also helped teachers to embark on ongoing opportunities for collaboration. The faculty had successfully configured and implemented organizational structures, one of which was the logistics of portfolios. These changes seemed to have affected primarily general functions of the school’s organization, and created the ecology for adults and children to experience school as a caring organization. However, when structural change is implemented, and has limited connection to what teachers think, talk about, and do, deeply engrained practices change at the surface level, but stay unchallenged underneath. In order to alter culture, the leadership ought to constantly revisit the heart of it – the way things are done.
3. Inquiry. In a learning community the will to reflect and transform practices through data can be attained when the culture changes; an assessment system can indeed be a powerful anchoring resource for this to happen. Tying data systems to assessment (portfolios in this case) seems hard to do, as Mission Middle School's story shows. When teachers looked at portfolios as a source of data informing both teaching practices and the professional relations among them, they appeared not only uninterested but dismissive. Perhaps teachers did not consider portfolios as a fully reliable measures of skill and knowledge, and they probably never sought to develop their potential as source of shared knowledge for the transformation of the existing power relations.

Notes
1. With the exception of the location of this study (San Francisco, California) all other names are pseudonyms.
2. These racial categories are taken directly from the school district's demographic documents. “Other-Non-White” connotes those students of mixed race.

References


