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**From Problem to Possibility:  
Leadership for Implementing and Deepening the Processes of Effective Schools**

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"The world we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far creates problems we cannot solve at the same level of thinking at which we created them."

- Albert Einstein

**Abstract**

*The literature of trust, self and collective efficacy, positive psychology, and positive organizational scholarship suggests a foundation for moving educational systems from deficit orientations to strengths-based approaches. This is especially critical in contemporary educational settings given the high systemic and individual stress levels due in part from No Child Left Behind. Individuals and systems under threat will often rigidly respond to stress, limiting the creative approaches necessary in these complex times. Therefore, an approach that creates resilience in the system to broaden its view and build its social, intellectual, and emotional capital is necessary. The authors offer in this conceptual piece the theoretical, the empirical, and the early stages of a developing, strengths-based, reflexive inquiry model necessary to support resilient organizations and facilitate leaders in implementing and deepening the processes of effective schools.*

The Coleman Report (1966) trumpeted to Congress that schools had very little impact on student achievement. Home experience, culture, and socio-economic factors (input factors) were found to be stronger predictors of school success when compared with school input factors such as teacher's experience, training, and educational resources. In the 1970s, researchers such as Weber, Brookover, Taylor, and Edmonds began investigating Coleman's assertions by turning attention to processes of schooling in order to better understand how some schools were *overcoming* external factors to effect student achievement. These Effective Schools scholars, among others, driven by concerns for social justice, used rigorous data to challenge institutional racism and the idea that success in school depended on skin color or bank balance. Nearly 35 years after the Coleman Report contended schools could make little difference for students,

Congress declared that schools must make a difference when it passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Equity and excellence, which were central to Effective Schools literature, are again front and center in the national education landscape. The equity and excellence agenda that is put forth in NCLB, however, is enacted in a manner that *prevents* rather than *enables* these Effective Schools goals from being fully realized.

The purpose of this conceptual essay is to offer a unique vision of leadership that supports structures and processes of effective schools that are critical in this time of increased accountability and achievement for all (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000). It is argued that the current, failure-oriented educational context creates threat conditions, which promote rigid, narrow responses and increase individual and collective stress (Staw,

Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981; Griffith, 2004). This high intensity environment is exacerbated by the way organizations use a deficit-based model to negotiate demands and improve performance. To move beyond negative contextual press and rigid systemic response, a paradigm shift is suggested that moves leaders away from deficit thinking to one of assets. A focus on identifying and expanding systemic strengths, organizational resilience, and supportive structures will build and sustain processes for implementing and sustaining Effective Schools Correlates.

This essay begins with a discussion of the current climate of individual and collective stress, and explores organizational responses to these conditions. A discussion follows regarding how Effective Schools Correlates offer a more positive approach to school change by focusing on strengths-based factors. A model is proposed that challenges current *problem-solution* orientation to school change and then unpacks four bodies of research literature—trust, self and collective efficacy, positive psychology, and positive organizational scholarship—that lends support to using a strengths-based model for Effective Schools development.

### **Climates of Failure**

Newspaper headlines capture and project an image of failure: *U. S. May Force California to Call More Schools Failing* (Los Angeles Times, California); *131 Stay on Maryland's List of Failing Schools* (The Sun, Baltimore, Maryland); *Most Schools Face Failing Grade* (The Greenville News, Greenville, South Carolina); and *Students Leave Failing Schools* (Chronicle-Tribune, Marion, Indiana) (Kernan-Schloss, 2004). A recent search of the Nexis database of major newspapers revealed a 33% increase in article headlines that included references to failing schools compared to the same period one year ago. A 53% increase was evident since the introduction of NCLB in 2002. Researchers and state departments project the rate for schools

failing to achieve the 2014 NCLB student proficiency standards. According to their studies, staggering numbers of schools will be labeled as failing under NCLB by 2014 (e.g., California, 97% [California Department of Education, 2004]; Connecticut, 90% [Moscovitch, 2004]; Kentucky 70% [Lee, 2004]; Maine, 90% [Lee, 2004]; and Minnesota, 82% [Office of Legislative Auditor, 2004]). Such *failure labeling* raises questions about the label utility and appropriateness of the measures.

Under NCLB, schools are mandated to accomplish a task that to date has not been achieved—the education of all students. The Effective Schools goals of equity and excellence require systems to be innovative and risk-taking. At the same time, these systems are experiencing increasing sanctions and threats, thus making real innovation difficult, if not dangerous (Orfield, Kim, Sunderman, & Greer, 2004). Pressed and driven by NCLB, state governments have turned to rigid curriculum content standards, a narrow range of texts designed to cover standards, increased standardized assessments, and sanctions as one way to educate all students. This *demand* for high, unsupported performance creates an unparalleled threat condition, increased levels of stress, and ultimately may reduce system ability to meet demands. The crisis of failure, set partially in motion by NCLB, is having an impact on stress levels in schools and an effect on the morale of the teaching force (Tolbert & Medway, 2005).

### *Stress*

Orfield et al. (2004) noted that the federal NCLB Act is built on several major assumptions. First, schools, by themselves, can achieve unprecedented levels of equal achievement for all subgroups of students in a short period of time. Second, there are known methods of reform that will accomplish the task. Third, a formal structure of testing, threat of sanctions, and loss of both fiscal and human resources are the strongest

incentives to produce improvement. These core premises, upon which the law is built, are also inconsistent and underfunded by the federal government. It is in this context of increasing demands, considerable pressure, and limited additional fiscal resources that contemporary schools operate. Although sanctions are purportedly meant to motivate districts to improve, the belief is that threats ironically constrain districts from taking bold flexible new approaches, and instead preserve often ineffective existing structures and practices. A report from the Office of the Legislative Auditor (2004) in Minnesota supported this assertion indicating that superintendents across the state find the law *punitive*. A recent poll of school administrators stated that NCLB is straining educational systems across the nation (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). It is of no surprise that individuals, and systems in which they work, may be under considerable stress.

Prior research investigating stress on individuals indicated a host of negative effects including: physical manifestations, decreased job satisfaction, inability to creatively problem solve, and intra/interpersonal conflict (Hutchinson, 1998; Hansen & Sullivan, 2003; Kyriacou, 2001; Wiley, 2000). Significant stress levels also accounted for lost productivity, cultures of isolation, and limited opportunities for professional learning (Bakkenes, Brabander, & Imants, 1999; Scribner, 1999). Although there is research about how educators respond to stress (Kyriacou, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), few studies have examined the direct impact of NCLB on teacher stress (Scott, 2003; Tolbert & Medway, 2005).

Tolbert and Medway (2005) noted that teachers were more likely to report higher levels of stress from the provisions of NCLB than from *expected* stress that accompanies teaching. Additionally, respondents felt the most stress around student

performance on standardized tests—the cornerstone of NCLB. In response to stress, teachers used poor coping responses such as isolating themselves, angry outbursts, and avoidance of interaction (Tolbert & Medway, 2005). School administrators and superintendents also reported an increase in stress related to demands of operating schools and districts in the current educational context (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Scott, 2003). Moreover, many school systems have found it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain school administrators given the accountability pressures for the positions (Winter & Morgenthal, 2002). While these studies (Kyriacou, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tolbert & Medway, 2005) were focused on the effects of stress on individuals, a key missing link in educational literature is the impact of individual stress on an entire system.

#### *Collective Stress*

Largely unexplored in the research literature is how entire school systems respond to stress and factors that could mediate these stressors (Griffith, 2004; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1997). To more fully understand organizations under stress, one must turn to the limited business literature (Lansisalmi, Peiro, & Kivimaki, 2000), which suggests that entire systems may experience collective stress from perceived threats (Lansisalmi et al., 2000; Mellahi, Jackson, & Sparks, 2002; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1997). Beyond the scope of organizations, *collective stress* has also been demonstrated in how large groups of individuals respond to catastrophes (Barton, 1969; Gill & Picou, 1991; Mann, 1979). The essence of both sets of studies is a suggestion that organizations or groups of individuals can experience a socially constructed sense of collective stress in response to a perceived threat condition. Moreover, organizations may also experience a collective coping when faced with ongoing stress. The social context of the

organization partially influences the collective response to a perception of threat-level and coping response (Lansisalmi et al., 2000).

The organizational or collective responses, such as closed boundaries, reliance on previous behavioral patterns, or limited creative problem solving, often mirror how individuals respond to stress. However, what is not clear is the interplay between individual stress and an organization's response in educational systems (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004). Building on business and organizational psychology literature, it is postulated that in educational contexts there exists a connection between individual and organizational stress. It is contended that the interaction between individual and systemic stress is analogous to the established interplay between self and collective efficacy.

Research on self and collective efficacy suggested reciprocal causality (Bandura, 1996), meaning self efficacy influences collective efficacy, and in turn an organization's collective efficacy shapes an individual's belief about self. Applying a similar lens to stress, it is suggested that an individual's reaction to stress impacts the organization's response and vice versa. In examining the influence of organizational context on teachers, Scribner (1999) suggested that teachers were *socialized* based on prevailing norms of their school to act in specific ways. This finding may also be applied to stressful climates, which, while socializing newcomers, perpetuate stress response behaviors for both the individual and ultimately the organization. Given the stress levels of individuals in response to NCLB and potential impact of individuals on the system, it is, therefore, important to look more deeply into how an organization copes or responds to stress.

### *Organizational Response*

Examining an entire school system's response to stress is relatively unexplored (Griffith, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1997).

The threat-rigidity thesis of Staw et al. (1981) postulated that when faced with significant stress, organizations, like individuals, may close down, limit information flow, react in ways that prevent problem solving, and limit divergent views. These authors along with Mellahi, Jackson, and Sparks (2002) illustrated their case with examples from government and business under a perceived threat/stress that often created rigid hierarchical systems, centralized decision-making to only a few at top levels, limited information access, enacted habituated/stereotyped responses, and limited divergent views. The threat-rigidity thesis, applied to schools in studies by Griffith (2004) and Rosenblatt (2004), generally supported this thesis and also found a lack of skill flexibility in systems under stress. Additionally, in hectic organizations, stress may be interpreted as signs of job involvement. Indicators of burnout may actually be viewed as a sign of a *dedicated professional*. Cultivating cultures of stress, therefore, may *normalize* negative responses and support the unhealthy status quo (Meyerson, 1994). Ironically, in the short run, a threat-rigidity response that often helps address immediate stress, ultimately undermines the long-term capacity of an organization to negotiate stressful conditions and thrive.

Lee and Wong (2004) wrote that most contemporary accountability legislation is "regulatory and not supportive, relying more on mandates and sanctions than on capacity building and reward" (p. 820). At the same time the federal government is requesting cooperation for unfunded mandates under NCLB, it simultaneously is applying threats for noncompliance or underperformance. Recent research in economics suggested that requests for cooperation, coupled with threats for compliance, reduces voluntary cooperation and, in fact, builds resistance (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). The phenomenon of resistance is evident in states like Utah, which is considering the refusal of Title One funds to eliminate the need to comply with NCLB

regulations (Davis, 2005). At a time when educational systems need to be responsive to new demands, they are hampered by deficit-oriented organizational development approaches.

The most common approaches to organizational development and change focus on a problem solution model that implies deficits within the system, a widely accepted view in many human organizations (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). Consider the general orientation of the medical community, which focuses on illness and its treatment, or a classroom where a teacher identifies areas in need of remediation, or even in the prison system where funding is primarily focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation. Consultants are routinely called into any one of these *broken* systems to conduct needs assessments, identify gaps, design fixes, and apply interventions. Even the name NCLB suggests a problem-based approach, indicating what is not wanted as opposed to affirming a desire to have all children learning at higher levels.

Current approaches have unintended consequences such as limiting the perspectives of those in the system, influencing contextual sense making, and potentially narrowing response options (Weick, 1984). When pressing situations are defined as deficits, this perspective often overrides an individual's perceived ability to effect change (Weick, 1984). Although more positive approaches have been used and documented, an over reliance on deficit-based outlooks pervades common organizational processes and structures (Cooperrider, 2001b). The same approaches are often employed by school systems in an effort to respond to demands and increase performance (Van Buskirk, 2002). It is this *perfect storm* of threat condition, rigid response, increased stress, and high stakes in deficit-oriented systems that now impact schools. Despite negative effects of stress on individuals and organizations, the situation need not be fait accompli. The processes of Effective Schools enacted through shared

leadership, which focuses on strengths inherent within a system, provides for the possibility of hope.

The literature of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), self and collective efficacy (Bandura, 1996, 1997), and positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmalyi, 2000; Fredrickson, 2003b) suggested a foundation for renewing systems under threat and promoting a strengths-based collaborative culture through positive organizational behavior, inquiry, and scholarship (Cameron, 2003; Cooperrider, 2001a; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; Luthans, 2002b) that can support the processes of Effective Schools. It is believed that this reframing of organizations represents the new work of leaders who want to build strong positive school cultures, increase effectiveness, and sustain high levels of student learning. The following sections are not meant to be an exhaustive review of related research; rather they represent essential theoretical and empirical scholarship around processes of Effective Schools, strengths-based resources, and positive organizational approaches.

## **Climates of Success**

### *Process of Effective Schools*

Edmonds (1979) in his seminal work identified five key Correlates or indicators of Effective Schools (strong leadership, high expectations, clear mission, safe and orderly environment, and opportunity to learn—time on task). As further research has been conducted nationally and internationally, the number and semantics used to describe the Correlates has varied from five to fifteen (Bosker & Scheerens, 1989; Chrispeels, 1992; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), with each list highlighting slightly different dimensions of the work of schools that were shown to correlate to student learning. Given the interactive and interdependent nature of the Correlates and the

increasing sophistication of Effective Schools studies over time and across contexts, Effective Schools scholars and practitioners proposed a second-generation of correlates (Lezotte & McKee, 2002), correlates for the 21st century (Chrispeels et al., 2000), and processes of school effectiveness (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). For the purposes of this essay, the terminology "processes of Effective Schools" a la Teddlie and Reynolds (2000, p. 144) were used:

- The Processes of Effective Leadership
- The Processes of Effective Teaching
- Developing and Maintaining a Pervasive Focus on Learning
- Producing a Positive School Culture
- Creating High (and appropriate) Expectations for All
- Emphasizing Student Responsibilities and Rights
- Monitoring Progress at All Levels
- Developing Staff Skills at the School Site
- Involving Parents in Productive and Appropriate Ways.

The Correlates, as a conceptual framework, and the body of related research are viewed as processes to engage the journey of moving to Effective Schools in the 21st Century.

In the current press for accountability and high achievement for all, it is critical to support processes of Effective Schools that draw on three decades of research on school effects. It is suggested that to enact all the processes in the current context, educational leaders need to refocus on strengths-based reflexive inquiry approaches and support positive organizational behavior. Each of these Effective Schools processes is stated in the affirmative; they are descriptors of what is wanted in contemporary effective school settings, yet all too often to bring these powerful affirmations to fruition, leadership begins by inquiring in the negative, in

other words into what processes are lacking. Needs assessments and gap analyses are conducted, focus groups held, and action plans devised in order to bring affirmations to life. Ironically, while schools crave affirmative existence of the Effective School processes, the focus is often on carefully inquiring and examining presence or absence of the Correlates. A radical departure from the more traditional approach to school leadership is suggested.

Instead of focusing solely on what the system lacks, it is suggested that leadership must first inquire about existing strengths, peak process moments, and experiences of excellence already present in the system. From that positive frame, the system can examine what it wants more of, not what it is lacking. As knowledge of strengths is carried forward, a vividly described future can be imagined. The work of distributed leadership, in enacting the affirmative processes of Effective Schools, involves building supportive structures, creating opportunities for positive inquiry, enhancing individual and collective capacity, and facilitating ongoing dialogue and application of strengths. The following section hypothesizes the need and potential outcomes for a paradigm shift in the current educational context.

#### *Strengths-Based Reflexive Inquiry Model*

Two systemic approaches are juxtaposed to enact the processes of Effective Schools: A more traditional problem-deficit orientation and a strengths-based reflexive inquiry approach. Early implementers of Effective School processes dedicated energy to *fixing the Correlates*, while the evolved approach being suggested involves a deliberate, systemic, and rigorous process of focusing on strengths. Both approaches have merit in enacting the processes of Effective Schools. It is hypothesized that in the current high stress context, orientations that focus on collaborative strengths-based reflexive

inquiry will more quickly and deeply enable the processes of Effective Schools to be implemented and sustained.

Deficit-based models require leadership to facilitate identification, documentation, and intervention around past failures in an effort to move the system to higher productivity. Actors in this system are required to examine their own beliefs and practices in an effort to create dissonance that is perceived as necessary to promote growth. Moderately high levels of trust and self and collective efficacy are essential to productive dialogues in *fault-finding* approaches (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Without the presence of trust and efficacy, problem solving often remains at a superficial level, focuses on external factors (e.g., families), and rarely enters the classroom door (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Successful implementation of the processes of Effective Schools through a deficit approach is indirect, slow, and often depletes trust (social capital), efficacy (intellectual capital), and positive emotions (emotional capital) as the system struggles to enact the Correlates and fix weak areas of implementation.

Although processes of Effective Schools have been successfully implemented in systems using a problem-solution orientation (Carter, 2000; Chrispeels, 1992; Bullard & Taylor, 1993), it is hypothesized that implementation of the processes could be enhanced, deepened, and sustained more quickly if leaders worked from a strengths-based reflexive inquiry model. A strengths-based model, by first inquiring into the system's strengths, moments of peak performance, and positive experiences builds trust and a sense of efficacy. Social, intellectual, and emotional capital are generated immediately in this way. That capital can then be parlayed into the momentum necessary to more fully implement the processes of Effective Schools. As actors inquire, reflect, and build on previous

successes, organizational trust and efficacy capacities are enhanced and positive stories become part of the system narrative. Broadening of possibilities and building trust (social capital) and efficacy (intellectual capital) creates upward spirals of performance in the organization (Fredrickson, 2003b). A strengths-based reflexive inquiry approach to the processes of Effective Schools is based on positive organizational scholarship and draws on previous research in three key disciplines: Trust, efficacy, and positive psychology.

### **Strengths-Based Resources**

#### *Trust*

Supportive relationships, participative leadership, and positional redesign often mediate stressful situations and allow for a more responsive organizational structure (Chen & Miller, 1997; Griffith, Steptoe, & Cropley, 1999; Hansen & Sullivan, 2003; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Wiley, 2000). In contrast, in organizations where there is a negative intensification of the work environment and poor social relations, there is an increase in stress levels and a decrease in trust (Troman, 2000). Recently, McCullough and Medway (under review) found that teachers who were under stress valued a combination of high emotional support such as listening, understanding feelings, and respect, all foundations of trust. These findings suggested the important nature of trust in developing positive organizations that enable leaders to enact the processes of Effective Schools.

Fukuyama (1995) argued that the need for social trust is critical for a nation's well-being and its ability to stay competitive; high trust environments make systems more innovative and reduce transaction costs. In an ever-changing system, the most powerful kind of social capital

is often not the ability to work under formal authority in established structures, but the capacity to create new associations and innovative organizational linkages (Fukuyama, 1995). Applying Fukuyama's thesis, NCLB as a regulatory apparatus, focuses on compliance to its rules, procedures, and sanctions, and increases transaction costs, thus creating a coercive environment that detracts from the educational system's ability to create spontaneous associations, innovate, and build trust.

Trust in educational settings, although understudied, is an important component in enacting the processes of Effective Schools. Pounder (1998) found that in restructuring schools "where trust is high, the need for monitoring is significantly reduced. Trust is the constant refrain" (p. 57). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) also suggested, "Trust is pivotal in the effort to improve education. And yet, trust seems ever more difficult to achieve and maintain" (p. 5). Scholars, such as Bryk and Schneider (2002); Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000); Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran (1998); Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999); and Daly (2004), reported the positive impact of trust on schools, including: Increased collaboration, engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors, promotion of risk-tolerant climates, and links to improvement in academic productivity. Absence of trust, moreover, has been demonstrated to lead to negative anxiety, estrangement, and isolation (Daly, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Trust is an interactive process with each party discerning trustworthiness of the other individual and is a critical aspect of productive social relations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Thus, it is argued that a strengths-based, reflexive-inquiry approach increases collective trust in an organization, while traditional problem-solving orientation requires higher levels of initial trust to affect changes. It is the reciprocal nature of trust that may become self-sustaining as individuals act cooperatively and impact the entire system

creating a sense of collective trust. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) stated, "Creating an organizational culture of cooperation rather than competition is likely to have a significant impact on the trusting and trustworthy behavior of participants" (p. 573). Moreover, the level of trust is related to the collective efficacy of the faculty, flexibility, and adaptability of the school (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) found schools with high trust levels were more likely to seek new ideas, reach out to community, and commit to organizational goals. Fullan (2003) identified parallel factors as related to organizational learning. In sharp contrast to Fukuyama's (1995) notion of low trust environments having high transaction cost and typically a proliferation of rules and regulations, Bryk and Schneider (2002) offered that

trust undergirds a highly efficient system of social control where extensive supervision of individual's work is not required and shirking behavior remains minimal. Given the privacy of classroom practice, successful change efforts depend on the voluntary initiative and goodwill of school staff. (p. 34)

They further suggested that "trust is important for organizations that operate in turbulent external environments that depend heavily on information sharing for success and whose work processes demand effective decentralized decision making" (p. 33). However, trust alone is not enough. Individual and collective beliefs of efficacy are also necessary strengths-based components for building processes for Effective Schools.

### *Self and Collective Efficacy*

Efficacy is future orientation about the belief of an individual or collective to successfully execute a course of action (Bandura, 1996; Goddard et al., 2004). These beliefs are about one's capacity to accomplish a goal, and do not neces-



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necessarily reflect an actual assessment of skills to accomplish the task (Bandura, 1997). This distinction underpins efficacy and is important as confidence in one's skills can either enhance execution or conversely disable existing skills.

In educational settings, a teacher's sense of efficacy has been well studied and documented, suggesting that self-efficacy is associated with positive effects such as trust, job satisfaction, and positive effects on student learning environment and achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Bandura, 1997; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Goddard et al., 2004; Nicholson, 2003). A higher sense of efficacy enables a teacher to overcome obstacles and develop resilience to external challenges (Goddard et al., 2004). Conversely, the lower the efficacy of a teacher, the more rigid, negative, and controlling classroom policies become (Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990). The balance of studies around efficacy suggests that "teachers' beliefs about personal efficacy affect their instructional activities and orientation toward educational processes" (Pajares, 1997, 31). Focus on instruction is central to achieving Effective Schools outcomes, and is more likely to occur in an environment rich in individual and collective efficacy.

Beyond an individual's sense of efficacy is the notion of collective efficacy, which represents the future belief of an entire social system to execute action (Goddard, Hoy, Woolfolk, & Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Applied to an educational system, it is the collective sense of educators' capacity in a district or school to be able to impact student achievement. Collective efficacy has its roots in socio-cognitive theory, which assumes that an individual has agency or can exert influence, over their own environment (Bandura, 2001). The relationship is multi-directional, however, with both environment and cognitive factors impacting an individual's sense of efficacy in a dance of reciprocity. One can, therefore,

influence efficacy and in turn be influenced by the environment. The notion of individual agency also applies to a collective (Bandura, 1996).

A group pursuing a course of action (e. g., student achievement) exhibits collective influence and is also subject to the interplay between collective agency and context. Research on collective efficacy and student achievement suggests that a school's efficacy is more strongly correlated with student achievement than socio-economic background of the students (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) stated, "The stronger the staff members' shared beliefs in their instructional efficacy, the better the schools performed academically" (p. 481). Similarly, Newmann, Rutter, and Smith (1989) found that schools that had developed a strong sense of collective efficacy and shared beliefs also experienced feelings of community and enhanced effectiveness. Therefore, creating a collective sense of efficacy, supported consistently throughout the social system, has potential to support organizations in meeting Effective Schools goals.

Goddard et al. (2004) wrote, "Organizations with strong beliefs in group capability can tolerate pressure and crisis and continue to function without debilitating consequences" (p. 6). In the current educational context, it may be even more important to create resilient organizations that can more effectively withstand negative press and shortsighted quick-fix solutions. School conditions such as shared goals, supportive structures, participative decision-making, and empowering leadership also impact collective efficacy (Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Gray, 2003). Given current individual stress in the system and contexts of failure, it appears to be a critical time to revisit efficacy as it is applied to interactions and structures of school settings. While many systems still cling to structures of isolation and deficit, what may be required to increase

collective efficacy are collaborative strengths-based approaches that create optimal learning environments (Chrispeels, 2004).

As has been established, individual and collective beliefs are among the most powerful predictors of future behaviors. When a group perceives its ability to influence its context is impeded, individuals within the group are more likely to perceive events as outside of their control. Increased agency and feelings of influence, therefore, come from involvement in meaningful decisions and interactions (Goddard, 2002). Leaders intent on enabling processes of effective schools must focus on new work—creating experiences and structures to expand efficacy through supportive collaborative structures. Bandura (1997) indicated that leaders, who recognize the importance of efficacy and wish to counter beliefs of low performance, must provide "explicit, compelling feedback that forcefully disputes . . . pre-existing notions" (p. 82). The authors suggested this feedback be a strengths-based reflexive inquiry process that is in the best tradition of socio-cognitive theory and efficacy.

### *Positive Psychology*

The field of positive psychology was started in 1998 under the leadership of Martin Seligman during his tenure as president of the American Psychological Association. The approach was in direct response to what had become of the field of psychology, post World War II, when resources dedicated to the study of mental illness, as opposed to mental health, exploded (Peterson & Seligman, 2003; Reisman, 1991). People were viewed as flawed; victims of their environment, experiences, or genes; or perhaps worse, in denial that they had these flaws (Seligman & Csikszentmalyi, 2000). Consider the following three examples: The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV), the standard classification tool of mental disorders, is seven times longer

than the DSM-II published in 1968 and has 176 more diagnosis categories (Scotti & Morris, 2000). There has been a two- to three-fold increase in the number of prescriptions for psychotropic medications for children (Reiff, 2002; Zito et al., 2003); and a recent search of articles in psychology journals yielded 375,000 related to negative emotions (fear, anger, depression, anxiety). Only 1000 articles focused on positive concepts (Luthans, 2002a). Seligman and Csikszentmalyi (2000) argued that years of study into mental illness have done little to prevent its reoccurrence. Psychology, similar to western medicine and organizational development, has only improved in its capacity to diagnose problem areas.

In sharp contrast, research in positive psychology questions disease-based assumptions that undergird traditional psychological approaches. Positive psychology does not suggest that one ignore psychological difficulties. Recognizing such difficulties must be attended to, yet there is more to the human experience than pain and misery (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Individuals are not empty vessels that merely respond to the environment; they possess agency, efficacy, and the ability to render decisions about the quality of life (Bandura, 1997; Seligman & Csikszentmalyi, 2000). As Maslow (1954) stated almost 50 years ago, "The behavior of the healthy person is less determined by anxiety, fear, insecurity, guilt, shame, and more by truth, logic, justice, reality, fairness, fitness, beauty, rightness, etc." (p. 377). The challenge in the current educational environment is how to shift focus from negative to more positive organizational psychology.

The Theory of Broaden and Build (Fredrickson, 1998) sets forth one approach for shaping leadership behaviors in a more positive orientation. The theory states, ". . . positive emotions broaden (rather than narrow) an individual's thought-action repertoire . . . . In turn, these broadened thought-action repertoires

can have the often incidental effect of building individual's personal resources, including physical resources, intellectual resources, and social resources" (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 315). Specifically, positive emotions may broaden the scope of attention, cognitions (including more unusual, flexible, creative, and receptive thinking), and action becomes more unusual and varied (Fredrickson, 1998, 2002, 2003a). The application of the theory is to broaden and build, which becomes especially important in countering the influence of stress that often results in very narrow and rigid responses. Such stress effectively limits options at the time of greatest need. A strengths-based reflexive inquiry model may broaden responses, build resources, and promote upward spirals toward optimal functioning (Fredrickson, 2003b).

Similar to the construct of efficacy, positive emotions move from individual to organization and back, emotions thereby become contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). In this sense, positive emotions can create a cascade of additional positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2003a). One colleague demonstrates compassion toward another, for example, and positive feelings are produced in both individuals. The positive feelings may then be spread throughout the organization. Research suggests, even witnesses to, positive interactions may also benefit and be more likely to replicate positive behaviors in the future (Haidt, 2002). The upward spiral of positive emotion, contagious nature of emotion, and vicarious experience are a potent trio in building psychological and social capital (trust and networking) necessary for countering effects of stress, as well as building momentum to enact processes of Effective Schools.

The field of positive organizational scholarship, which was recently identified by Harvard Business Review (2004) as one of the breakthrough ideas of 2004, is the latest application of

social science theory to organizations. Previous sections have described the current high-threat and stress context in contemporary education, as well as the need for a strengths-based approach to implementing processes for effective schools. It is also suggested that the literatures of trust, efficacy, and positive psychology are strengths-based resources upon which shared leadership can draw to maximize the processes. The next section lays out a brief overview of research in the area of positive organizational scholarship as it leads into suggested educational application of these approaches and how they support the Effective Schools Correlates and processes for school effectiveness.

### **Positive Organizational Scholarship**

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) represents the intersection of trust, efficacy, positive psychology, positive organizational behavior, and Appreciative Inquiry (Cameron, 2003; Cooperrider, 2001b; Luthans, 2002a, 2002c). POS scholars noted that traditional organizational development was entirely focused on problem areas of a system. POS is described as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's systems" (Luthans, 2003, p. 179).

Researchers began noticing that when they inquired into the problems of an organization, additional issues arose and efficacy in the system fell (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998). In addition, when systems were under threat from external pressure, they responded rigidly and seemed unable to move through crises (Staw et al., 1981). In contrast, resilient systems were able to broaden and build, drawing on trust, efficacy, optimism, and the social system to thrive under threat. It is these core findings that set POS

and Appreciative Inquiry as an organizational development tool in motion. The core view of POS is that organizations were created as solutions to problems, rather than problems that need to be solved (Cooperrider, 2001a).

Threads of trust, efficacy, and positive psychology weave together to form a strengths-based reflexive inquiry process. Rather than focus on surmounting obstacles, improving under-performance, problem identification, and remediation, a strengths-based approach systematically examines root causes of success to reenergize a system, rebuild collective efficacy, and mediate effects of stress. This positive process uses analytic tools and empirical research with the same rigor more traditional problem-solution orientations employ. POS embraces those approaches as necessary to understanding conditions that support excellence. Strengths-based analytical tools can be applied to the implementation of processes of Effective Schools.

A foundational concept to understanding POS is positive deviance. In general, organizations work to keep homeostasis and maintain order, efficiency, and effectiveness (Bernstein, 2003; Cameron, 2003). When negative deviance occurs, such as being ineffective, inefficient, error-prone, and rigid, systems marshal resources to eliminate the problem and return to a state of stasis. Most organizations are committed to remaining good or static, few are interested in moving to greatness (Collins, 2001; Park & Peterson, 2003). POS focuses on movement from good to great, changing systems to realign their focus on aspects of positive deviance in the organization. Positive deviance refers to aspects of the organization that are exhibiting excellence, generosity, honoring, benevolence, and are flourishing. POS suggests moving the foci to study and recreating positive deviance rather than focusing the majority of resources on negative deviance as most organizations do (Cameron, 2003; Park & Peterson, 2003).

Organizational virtuousness is associated with what organizations aspire to be when they are at peak performance; these are organizational conditions of vitality, excellence, and growth (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004). An empirical study of virtues in businesses, that were experiencing downsizing, by Cameron et al. (2004) suggested that even in systems under intense pressure, the presence of virtues enabled the organization to perform. In fact, businesses that had higher levels of virtue were able to innovate, increase quality, and retain employees, while buffering negative influences. These organizational responses are similar to Fredrickson's (2003b) Theory of Broaden and Build. The organization, rather than succumbing to threat and responding with rigid approaches, was able to use virtues and broaden responses, building upon existing social, intellectual, and emotional capital within an organization.

A focus on positive strengths is another key pillar of POS. On an individual level, controlled studies by Harter (1998) and Williamson (2002) had teachers providing strengths-based feedback to one group of students while the control group did not receive such feedback. Results included increases in attendance, grade point average, and self-confidence. On a group level, Mohr and Watkins (2002) cited a study in which bowlers were filmed and films then edited and shown back to the teams. One team's film had all successes highlighted over the course of competition. The other team, reviewed only the mistakes. Although both teams improved after viewing the film, the team watching only successes improved at a greater rate. These findings suggest that an initial focus on school strengths could achieve Effective Schools processes and goals much more quickly than by focusing only on negatives.

Losada and Heaphy (2004) examined sixty corporate teams to isolate key components of teams who were high-, mid-, and low-performing.

The first dimension aligned with the ratio between positive and negative comments. Higher performing teams had positive to negative ratios of 5:1. The ratio implies some criticism or skepticism is necessary to move action forward. It is also important to note the upper ratio of positive to negative was 10:1, at which point the positive comments actually detract from performance. In contrast, lower performing teams had an inverse ratio, with negative comments outweighing positive.

In addition, to positive and negative comments, Losada and Heaphy (2004) examined ratios of inquiry/advocacy and self/other. Findings suggest a balanced approach to asking questions (inquiry) and supporting personal ideas (advocacy), as well as referring to ideas from the speaker or immediate group (self) and those from outside the group (other) as hallmarks of highest performing teams. A low performance team was out of balance in both inquiry/advocacy and self/other ratios and was more likely to be focused on acts of advocacy and self. Therefore, creating encouraging environments supported emotional spaces necessary for opened possibilities and new solutions (Losada, 1999).

POS reframes problems into possibilities and draws on social, intellectual, and emotional capital within a system. Although the field is new, topical research is growing, and the few case studies of its application to educational settings illustrate how POS can foster organizational development and positive outcomes (Fry, Barrett, Seiling, & Whitney, 2002; Hinrichs, Rhodes-Yenowine, & Schiller, 2003). This review of research on trust, efficacy, positive psychology and POS suggests, in complex and stressful times, leaders may find it more efficacious to draw on a strengths-based approach to school change rather than persist with the traditional problem-deficit model.

### **Applying a Strengths-Based Reflexive Inquiry Model**

Based on trust, efficacy, positive psychology, and positive organizational scholarship literatures reviewed above, the Center for Educational Leadership is developing and testing a Strengths-Based Reflexive Inquiry (SBRI) process. In this process, district teams of multi-shareholders (consisting of superintendent, board president, classified and certificated union leaders, principals, central office core staff, teacher leaders, parent, community members, and student leaders) are engaged and a space and time for all members to engage in an introspective dialogic process is created. Through articulated partnerships with a county office of education and three school districts, where all the shareholders are committed to being at the table, core purpose and values around teaching and learning are identified (Collins & Porras, 1994).

Partners identify strengths and evidence of positive deviance (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003) through narrative, a strengths-based audit, and a data-driven fearless inventory that surfaces commitments (e.g. stated goals such as helping all students achieve high standards and become life-long learners) and counter-commitments (e.g., often unstated but equally important goals such as meeting needs of adult workers and protecting expert status). Participants then explore big assumptions that block enactment of their commitment (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Teams engage in designing safe experiments that draw on strengths and allow them to begin testing of big assumptions. They create vivid descriptions of desired teaching and learning designs that can guide achieving purpose. The SBRI process simultaneously creates opportunities for individual and organizational learning through continual feedback of data and introduction of knowledge that supports new visions and

redefinition of the organization based on positive assets.

Although only at beginning stages, the SBRI process has yielded an emergent model of distributed leadership to a multi-shareholder team that is redefining organizational decision-making and implementing processes of Effective Schools. Furthermore, teams are beginning to alter basic operating procedures such as building bridges between district office and school site leaders through establishing coaching and support systems, developing clear instructional focus to meet needs of English learners, and nurturing climates of high trust. Key mandates of the new field of positive organizational scholarship have been undertaken to work with systems in recreating positive deviance and collect quantitative and qualitative data on the process.

This radical paradigm shift will not be easy and will require schools, universities, and consultants to be intentional about their focus on the possible and to empower educational leaders from all parts of the system to renew their commitments to strengths-based approaches. Leaders will need to facilitate processes that examine the root causes of success that build the efficacy of all in the system, and create cultures of hope and limitless potential. Students deserve and await a strengths-based environment in every school.

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**MODULE 1: YOUR LEADERSHIP SIGNATURE** Investigate your leadership signature and choose an organizational challenge or opportunity that you want to address using the 4-CAPS+ Leadership Framework.

**MODULE 2: UNDERSTANDING YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT** Analyze the impact of sensemaking for effective leadership in various organizational contexts.

**MODULE 3: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AND ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS** Decide how to integrate sensemaking and relating into your leadership approach.

• Transforming Your Leadership Strategy. Understanding and Solving Complex Business Problems. Understanding Global Markets: Macroeconomics for Executives. Illustrates the processes and procedures used by effective school leaders to meet challenging school situations by presenting both historical and contemporary theories. Includes learning aids designed to help readers envision how to apply the principles of each chapter, including: Introductory sections.

• Chapter 5 Enhancing Leadership Effectiveness Through Communication 257. The Importance of Effective Communications 258. The Communications Process 260. The Flow of Communication in Schools 263. Reducing Barriers to Effective Communication 269. Interpersonal Relationships 271. Communication: The Rise and Fall of School Leaders 282.