Book Review

Harbors of Hope: The Planning for School and Student Success Process

Wayne Hulley & Linda Dier. Bloomington, Indiana: National Education Service, 2005.

Reviewed by **Sonya Pancucci**, Brock University

Hope, schools, professional learning communities, and school improvement planning - what links these words? According to Hulley and Dier (2005), hope is the key to achieving successful and effective schools through reculturing with professional learning communities as the vehicle for change in the school improvement process. Wayne Hulley, president of Canadian Effective Schools Incorporated and senior consultant for the Franklin Covey Company, has 35 years of experience in North America working in the area of school improvement. Co-author Linda Dier has extensive knowledge having worked for 30 years in education systems in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Currently, she is senior consultant with Canadian Effective Schools Inc. and administrator of the Canadian Effective Schools League. Together, Hulley and Dier have written a text for educators and administrators at the district, board, and school levels, combining research theory with the practical knowledge gained in their joint 70+ years' experience in education to provide a comprehensive planning process for school improvement. This text presents a step-by-step process that notes the highs and lows or « implementation dips » of the school improvement cycle. The authors have utilized the learning community model of professional development as a vehicle to facilitate, guide, direct, and sustain change towards successful and effective schools.

Hulley and Dier divide the book into three parts, with a total of 12 chapters. In the introduction, they present an overview of the long history of school improvement and describe the failure of school reform to effect change. They attribute this failure to leaders and

policy makers who ignore the complexity of human interactions in education and focus upon theory, rationality, and the cognitive aspects, rather than the emotional component, of the change process. Experience has taught Hulley and Dier that the emotional component of school improvement is the key to the change process because it focuses on “hope” which is defined as “unwarranted optimism in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds” (Hulley & Dier, 2005, p. 200). Through reculturing and creating an atmosphere of “hope,” students come to know they are surrounded by individuals “who care passionately about them and are committed to doing whatever it takes to help them be successful” (p. 200). Hence these schools can effect change and improvement in student achievement. Effective schools research that spans 30 years supports this notion that effective schools actively plan for continuous school improvement and subscribe to the mission of “Learning for All – Whatever it Takes” (Lezotte & McKee, 2002).

The remainder of the text is divided into two main sections. The first provides several case study examples of schools described as “Harbors of Hope” which are defined as schools that are based on a culture of hope. These case studies offer an overview of the planning process necessary to build such cultures and thereby to create effective schools. In the second section the authors provide an in-depth discussion of the strategies and the implementation process as well as potential challenges and pitfalls. Together, the two sections represent a planning template for creating successful effective schools.

The book addresses important issues in the school improvement process such as the emphasis on hope, values, the emotional component of change process, with professional learning communities, and teacher collaboration to create schools where all students learn successfully. Hulley and Dier argue that the values protected by a school’s culture can be detected in what kinds of school decisions are made. To position a school as a professional learning community requires shifting the cultural values from teaching to learning; from command, control, and comply to collaborate; and from passing or failing to success for all. The authors contend that reculturing with hope as the underlying principle relies on the

correlates of effective schools as the framework for school improvement: planning; developing values, vision, and purpose that everyone understands and “buys into;” building professional learning communities; collaborating; and gathering critical data to assess change efforts and to plan for continuous school improvement. The descriptions of the “Harbor of Hope” schools are designed to inspire and motivate staff and community members who might use this text as a framework for their school improvement planning process. The text uses a narrative expository format for describing the case study examples carrying the correlates throughout the various chapters. The authors include the following issues and ideas:

1. The current and future shape of education, schools, teaching, and learning depends on and reflects our actions and inactions.
2. Hope is a key concept in the school improvement process.
3. Planning to plan where the idea is to promote change but no real change takes place is shifted to the idea planning to improve that moves towards purposeful hope.
4. Reculturing with collaboration as the key activity is important for change to take place at the school level.
5. Disaggregate data and relate attendance patterns to learning outcomes.
6. Change in behaviour is articulated through value, vision, and purpose statements.

The text follows in the footsteps of DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (1998) by providing a recipe for school improvement using the professional learning community model as the vehicle for effecting change and school improvement that produces enhanced student achievement. Many of the elements found within their text, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, are also featured in Hulley and Dier’s text. The issues discussed similarly in both texts are the failure of school reform; the professional learning community model; the complexity of the change process; the foundation of mission, vision, values, and goals; a sustainable school improvement process; change embedded within the school’s culture; focus on curriculum that plans

for learning; passion and persistence or hope; the importance of teachers and their competencies in effecting change; the role of principals as collaborative leaders creating the conditions for professional learning communities and parents; and staff development that focuses on teaching for learning and continuous school improvement where student achievement increases.

My experience as an educator confirms the authors' use of a purpose statement with a simple format. Often teachers and administrators get lost in the missioning and visioning process or, as Hulley and Dier have called it, "planning to plan," that is, the creation of statements that are posted on the walls like an advertisement but really have no impact on the behaviour of staff. In such cases, the culture remains at status quo and there is no impact on the school improvement change process. However, I do not agree with the authors' discounting of a tried-and-true process of creating a mission or purpose statement, then a vision statement, and finally values statements, all of which emerge from personal experience. A large body of research (e.g., Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Marzano, 2003), supports the importance of school improvement change planning following this ordered process, and I feel it may be problematic for school people to create value statements that are not based upon the school's mission and vision for their students and the school.

I do agree that, once mission or purpose, vision, and values have been identified, evidence should be obtained to monitor whether change is taking place, especially in the areas of value. Hulley and Dier suggest that critical reflection on the evidence creates a space for the formation of professional learning communities "that develop and implement plans to improve outcomes in areas that have been identified as crucial" (p. 87). Furthermore, I have found that when staff collaborate and work as a community with aligned efforts, they use their mission or purpose, vision, and values to focus their school improvement change initiatives, which ultimately should lead to improved student achievement and effective schools.

This book is significant in the current context of accountability, policy changes, and reform because of its focus on the Canadian school context and because of the current popularity of the professional learning community model to effect and sustain school

improvement and to enhance student achievement. It is especially appealing because it follows closely with several well-known texts (e.g., Barth et al., 2005 ; DuFour & Eaker, 1998 ; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002) already in use in many school boards and districts within Canada and the United States, providing a framework for creating school improvement through the use of professional learning communities. I recommend the purchase and use by a board or district interested in embarking on the implementation of the professional development strategy of professional learning communities to improve teaching and “learning for all” because the text provides a process and the steps to follow in a logical concise manner. The text is particularly useful with a community approach that involves school councils, parent groups, teachers, and administrators in the school improvement planning process because it helps everyone understand evidence-based planning. It is a “hopeful” and user-friendly book that is clearly written and easy to follow, with practical strategies and examples where one can expect to be filled with hope about a bright future where learning takes place for all students.

References

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Sonya Pancucci

Effective Schools Products, Ltd.

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