Nurturing CHANGE Through Community and Connection

by Nora Krieger

This piece is a very personal essay based on ideas that have been swirling in my mind for a long time. I have been in the field of education for over 50 years, and a question that has been irking me for a long time is, "Why it is so hard to bring sustained change to education? Not just change to small pockets that come and go. What are the obstacles that make it so hard for new and even some good old ideas to be introduced or reintroduced in schools and classrooms? What can we do when the administration and the policymakers are not on the journey with us to reimagine our work? Where does the leader of a school fit, what role do they play? As a young teacher, is there anything one can do to facilitate change beyond small collaborations between teachers?"

In thinking about the above questions, I did two things. Throughout the pandemic, I have filled my time with researching, reading, and participating in Zoom sessions about change and leadership and why change is so ephemeral at its

worst, or not fully embraced in an effective way, thus ensuring that reimagined teaching and learning fail to fully take hold (Sarason, 1971, 1990; Payne, 2011; Jackson, 1968). In thinking about this issue, I thought back on my early teaching career and what I have seen in schools where my college students ended up student teaching and then teaching.

What I learned from thinking about the past and the future is that it is not enough for one or two teachers to collaborate and work to change their thinking and practice—although that is a positive move. We must take a much larger, ecological perspective to reimagine our schools and how learning takes place. All of this will take time, starting with sharing who we are, our assumptions about teaching, learning, and children, as well as our values, so that we can build a new culture. Everyone who works in the school must be included in these shared spaces. That is how a new culture and realization of our values will happen.

Using an ecological perspective helps us to see what we need to do for change to really take hold. When I was teaching at the college level, I introduced my students to an ecological model that I developed (Figure 1). My starting point was the "wild triangle of teaching" in Joe McDonald's book "Teaching: Making Sense of an Uncertain Craft" (1992). The model moves outward but the impact is both inward toward the wild triangle and outward with whatever is happening in the classroom affecting how laws and policies at the outer layer are structured. The innermost part includes the wild triangle of the teacher, students, and curriculum, which is impacted by the school structure and culture (including

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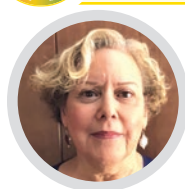
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school policies and practices. The next layer is made of up the families of the children, and then the community. The most outer layer is where you find policies and politics that impact teaching and learning even though far removed from the classroom. Although MacDonald was approaching his task by looking at teaching as complex and uncertain, the doubt that comes from this is helpful in overcoming the insularity of teaching. MacDonald points out that we should move away from private "introspection" toward group sharing of our stories of teaching, creating space outside each classroom where discussion can take place.

This will not happen spontaneously. To share who we are and what we are doing in our classrooms with children takes creating a space where risk is supported, where strong relationships have been developed among the teachers and the school leadership, and where trust is high. This is a tall order!

Figure 1:
Ecological Perspective of Education

I was reading sections of a book from the Harvard Business School by Clayton M. Christensen, "The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail," originally published in 1997. This book that I thought would have nothing to do with schools and reimagining our work had one chapter that I found very relevant for thinking about change in our field. Christensen described three factors that affect what innovations an organization can successfully implement: resources; the internal processes of the organization, both formal and informal (routines, patterns of interaction, coordination, communication, and decision making), and values, "the criteria by which decisions about priorities are made," which also define what an organization can and cannot do.

Why is this so important for a new way of thinking about our work as teachers? A lightbulb went off when I read about Christensen's ideas on how to deal with the critical factors
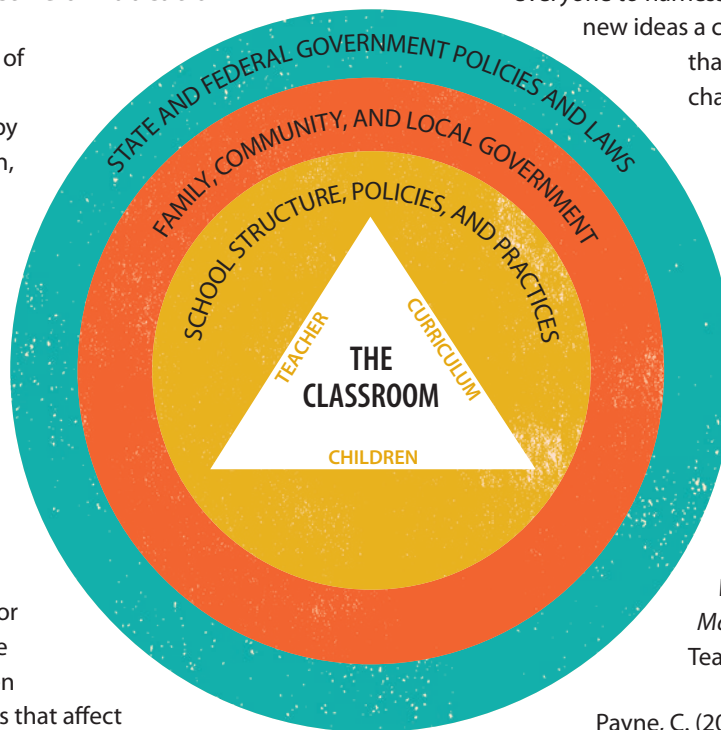
that affect innovation. Schools, like corporations, are embedded in a network of values, rules, and structures. If we examine each of the factors that affect innovation success, we can think through the changes necessary to create deep change. We might find that we need to review our values and review our mission and what that would look like in a reimagined educational environment. That might lead to rethinking the processes of our organizations. And ultimately, we may find that within the larger network of schools, we have to create a whole new organizational structure separate from how others might be operating—sometimes referred to as a "pilot" program.

It takes more than a couple of teachers collaborating to build lasting, effective innovation. For us to reimagine teaching and learning, all the participants with a stake in our schools need to collaborate in a risk-free, safe, and trusting environment, in which they can create an agreed-upon set of values and a mission that becomes the culture. This enables everyone to harness their individual talents, and allows new ideas a chance to flourish. That is something that all leaders must work toward for change to last.

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