Transcript: Katherine Merseth, e-Lecture

My name is Katherine Merseth and I am delighted to be able to chat with you today. As I mentioned in my introduction, I want you to keep in mind a quote from the McKinsey Report, which I believe is fundamentally what we all need to focus on, and that is that the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of the teachers.

So I have three purposes for our e-Lecture today. The first one is to help you develop an understanding of the necessary systems and structures and strategies that you could use to improve instructional practice in your schools in your country. The second objective for this e-Lecture is to explore your role as an organizational leader in improving teaching and learning. What can you do from where you sit to impact what happens in classrooms across your country? And finally is an honest appraisal to prepare you for the inherent challenges of leading change in an educational system. So I'm very excited to have this opportunity to work with you today.

So today I want you to keep in mind four words – systems and structures, and flowing from systems, the word policies. What kind of policies can you put in place that will help create better learning opportunities for students in your schools? With structures, again I want you to be thinking about what kind of practices do you want to model, do you want to reinforce, do you want to show and help your teachers and principals understand so that they will be able to focus on the teaching and learning in classrooms. So these four words – systems and structures, policies and practices – are going to frame our work for today.

So let's get started with the systems, and in regard to systems, from your position as an educational leader, I want to emphasize the policies that you can put in place to create accountability systems. Now I asked you to read for this session a work by Professor Richard Elmore, who is a colleague of mine here at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. And Richard has written extensively about the role of accountability in education systems. And you may be familiar with external accountability, meaning we come from the outside and we require things of various peoples in our organization. But Richard makes a very important point, which is that for external accountability to work, the system, the organization needs to have internal accountability. And internal accountability for Richard and for us means the coherence and the alignment among the individuals' conceptions of what they are responsible for. In other words if I'm working in an organization, internally we all agree what it is I am responsible for and how I will be held accountable. As you think about this internal accountability, I think the most obvious person for you to think about is the school director or the principal. You have many schools under your direction all across your country, perhaps spanning enormous geographic

areas. So how do you create a system that helps principals create this internal accountability that then will work with the external accountability?

So I want to talk about the school director's role or the principal's role in your schools. First of all, the school director must exert strong leadership. This means having a sense of what needs to be done, when it needs to be done and who needs to do it. Secondly, the school director has knowledge and access to expertise about what good instruction looks like. Indeed, what is the teacher doing, what are the students doing, what are they working on? We need our school directors and our principals to have a good grasp of what they want in the classroom. Third, a leader fosters a positive school culture, and I will talk a little bit later in our session about the impact of culture and why culture is so important for leading educational change. Finally, the school director's role leads an organization that gives teachers and staff an opportunity to talk to each other, to work together, to talk, not just about social things or about the students, but what is the actual work that students are doing in classrooms. Now we can get the external accountability all correct, but if we don't focus on what happens inside the classrooms, you will not see much of an improvement in school performance. So what does this mean for you from your position? You must provide structures and systems to support your school leaders, to create these conditions that I just outlined in their role, and then you must develop systems to hold the principals accountable for these conditions.

Once these conditions are created, then you and your school leaders must focus on the work itself. And for me, the work itself is what we call the instructional core. And so here we have a new concept which you have read about in your pre-readings, but I want to stress that there is a structure, a way of thinking about the work of schools that focuses on the instructional core. Now the instructional core has three main important pieces. The first piece is the student. Obviously the student must be engaged, must be participating, must be attending school and must really want to learn. It's very difficult to get a student to learn who sits and says, "I won't learn from you." The second part of the triangle of the instructional core is the teacher, and we need to help teachers. We need to support teachers, we need to give them materials curriculum and training to help them deliver the content that we want the children to learn. And the third part of the instructional core is the actual content. If we ask students to work on minimal, low-level content, that will be the work that they will be able to do. However, if we provide content that challenges students, that asks them to think, that asks them to be creative, asks them to work together, asks them to be cooperative with each other and to collaborate, this is the kind of material that we want to see happening in schools. Now the instructional core has many principles but I think the most important one is that increases in student performance—which is what we all want, we want to see children learn more—depends on improvement in these three areas. The first area as I just said is the level of content. What are we asking the students to do? The second area where you can impact student learning is increasing teachers' knowledge of the content and their skill in delivering the content. And the third area that I mentioned before is the student. We must have students in schools well-fed with good nutrition, motivated, eager to

learn. And so these three aspects form a triangle – the content, the teachers' skill and knowledge and the student engagement.

Now once we think about those three areas, you may say to yourself, "Wow, that seems like a lot. How can I impact that from where I sit?" Well, I want to give you a very easy way to focus on the instructional core. And for me and for Richard Elmore from whom much of this material is from is the important focal point is the task, it's the interaction between the teacher, the content and the student. Focus within the classroom on the task that the students are asked to do. And so as part of your assignment that you'll be completing as part of this section of the module, I want you to try to visit a classroom, even if you can only visit for an hour. I very much want you to get into the real work to be able to see the work that occurs in the schools.

So if you can, I would like very much for you to attend a classroom, and ask yourself four basic questions. The first question as you watch a class is what is the teacher saying and doing? Is she lecturing? Is she working with students in small groups? What is she actually doing or he is actually doing? The second question that I want you to focus on is what are the students doing? Are they simply copying from the board? Are they reciting exactly what the teacher says or are they thinking, are they coming up with their own answers that are an application of the knowledge that they're trying to learn? The third question that I want you to focus on is the task, and by task I mean what are the students being asked to do? Are they doing a page of multiplication problems? Are they filling in the blank on a piece of paper? Are they reciting or reading from what they see on the board? This is what we call the task, and I want you to focus and to be able to tell us in your assignment what is the task the teacher has set for the students? And then finally, and this is a bit of a reflective question, after all is said and done, what do you think the students will have to carry with them when they walk out the door after the lesson is over? One way to say this is if the students did everything the teacher asked them to do, what would they, the students know and be able to do after the lesson is over?

So with these four questions, fundamentally the focus that I want you to consider and the place where I believe we can get the most leverage to improve teaching in classrooms, is on the instructional task. If the task is a relatively low-level task, a memory task—what is eight times five, what is the definition of a particular word—this is what we call low cognitive demand. It doesn't make your brain hurt much to think about the answers to that. However, we realize that if we increase the level of the task, the more challenging tasks for students, asking them to think what would happen if this and this and this were put together? That is the kind of learning we want. And why is the task so important? A very simple answer, the task that we ask students to complete predicts their performance. So if we continue to ask low-level tasks, students will only be able to perform low-level tasks. And we want to up the level. We want to challenge students. Cognitive demand is the degree of cognitive functioning, the degree of thinking that's required. It can be very low level, as I said memory, or it can be very high level, which can be an abstract or an evaluation of a particular task. So many of you may be familiar with something called

Bloom's Taxonomy, which is a way of categorizing different tasks in the classroom. And as I say, it ranges from low-level memory all the way up to analysis and evaluation. And we want our classroom teachers to push, push, push the student work up this particular taxonomy.

So because the task is so important, because the task predicts performance, the real accountability in the system is the task that the students are asked to do. So we want to ask students to think not to memorize. We want to ask students open-ended questions: what if, why, how do you think this works? We want to ask students to propose their own questions, to own their own learning. So what's your role? Once again, you may be saying, well, this sounds great but I'm 500 miles away from a local classroom. Your role is to create an awareness of the importance of the instructional core. Your role is to help teachers, principals, areas support individual's families, communities, to understand this importance of the instructional core, the triangle of the teacher, the student and the content. I want you to ask your leaders to focus on classrooms with those four questions in mind, and I want you to create both support and accountability systems to direct the work of those closest to the students.

So in this section of the e-lecture, I want to explore approaches to establish a productive school and organizational culture to prepare for challenges that you will face in your organizations and in your schools. Culture is an odd term actually. It's one that we really don't define terribly well. But I like to use a definition that was proposed by an organizational behaviorist at MIT. His name was Edgar Schein. He said that the deeper level of basic assumptions, culture is the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization that operate unconsciously. And that define in a basic taken for granted fashion the organization's view of itself and its environment. There are assumptions and beliefs that are learned responses in an organization. It's just the way we do things around here. OK? And the group who works in this organization, whether it's a school or a ministry or wherever, an NGO, the group uses these techniques and this sometimes unwritten-- not articulated--culture to do their work.

So the next aspect that I want to be talking with you about are the structures that focus on changing culture. How do you establish a productive culture in these schools when you're perhaps not in them every day and how do you create learning environments that foster student achievement?

And so in a very insidious important way, we want to think back to what is the culture of this organization? And how do we change it? And how do we make it a powerful learning community? A powerful, effective organization? So one thing that you need to be able to do is first to expose these unmentioned, these unarticulated views of how we do business here. And to talk about them. And then try to change them. And I want to caution you right now that everything that you try may not work. But if we never try, we know it won't change. But if do try slowly but surely, incrementally, I think you'll be able to see some progress.

So let me stop again for a moment and ask you to think about the organization in which you work, whether it's a school or a ministry or another education system. Write down three words or phrases that describe the culture of your organization. Just a word or two or three words. Take a moment and write down what you believe describes your organization. Second, I'd like you to offer two or three assumptions about how you work in this organization. And then finally, I'd like you to think and write down what are the values, both explicit and implicit, that ground this culture?

Now that you've had a chance to think about your own culture, let me possibly suggest some things that you may have said. You may have said this is a warm, supportive, engaging culture. Or some of you may have said this is not a friendly culture. This is a culture of competition. This is a culture that does not collaborate. This is a culture where individuals, it's very hierarchical and I only talk to the person who is above me or below me. But I don't want to talk to the people that are across from me. Assumptions that may be underlying some of your organizations may be efficiency. Everything we do has to do with making work more efficient. And a value might be that we really value attending to the standards, attending to the requirements of the ministry. Or some others of you may say what we really value are children and children's learning. So we will talk about this when we come together in our discussion session later after this e-lecture to really get down into what is the culture looks like?

Now why should I make such a big deal about culture? Cultures are everything. Everything you do swims and lives and breathes and dies in this soup or this marinade of culture. They tend to conserve what is. They can be shared explicitly or implicitly by a host of stakeholders. They're sometimes fragmented. Some set of people may think this is their culture. Another set of group may think this is their culture. And they're also very difficult to change because people, human beings, even myself included, tend to resist change.

So why should we focus on school and organizational culture? It's because cultures affect the behavior and the achievement of both students and employees. They don't fall from the sky. They can be manipulated. They can be changed. They can be moved toward the positive. Also, cultures are unique. Every one of you is sitting in a very different culture in your organization or in your school. And they can become, the culture can become the cohesion that bonds the school and the organization together as it goes about its work. But one important thing to remember - cultural change is a process, not a noun. So I want to pause on that just for a moment and say it again: cultural change and changing the culture of your organization is a process. It's not a done noun. It's not a firm thing that's done once.

So how do I change my culture? Well, first you have to decide what it is. You have to take a really long, hard, cold look at your organization and try to decide what the culture is. But how do I--what are some steps that I could use in leading change and changing culture? I'm going to walk you through eight steps and I've also asked you to do a reading about changing culture and

leading change from a professor at the Harvard Business School, John Cotter. But I'm going to talk about it here and then you will see this in your readings.

The first step is the most important. Isn't that always true and for all of us? And it is the following: you need to build urgency for the change. And keep in mind this wonderful statement that someone told to me that I keep on my desk, which is: "You will never change what you are willing to tolerate." So we need to build some urgency. And we need to not be tolerant of cultures that we think are not being productive.

So what are some topics around which you could develop a sense of shared urgency in your organization? Well, in the schools, you could look at student outcomes. Are they as high and as good as you'd like them to be? What about graduation rates? Are children leaving your schools before you want them to leave? And are they leaving with skills that will enable them to hold down strong jobs? Is there corruption in the bureaucracy? Are these some things that you could build a sense of people? Say that's not right. I want to change it. In the government ministries, you might find a shortage of qualified human capital. Are you able to find the right people for the right job at the right time when you need them? Or as true for all of us, are you facing a lack of funding? All of these topics that I've offered you as an example are areas in which you might, given your situation, be able to build a sense of urgency and a need for change.

The second step is to form, then, a guiding coalition. Assess who could contribute to the change? Whose voice is respected? Who might be a detractor and someone who might not really help you in your particular efforts to change the culture?

The third step is to create and communicate a vision and to empower others. What is your vision? How do you communicate it? Who participates in the determination of a vision? If we don't know what you as a leader think and what you want, we'll never get there.

So you need to articulate to yourself and with your closet advisors what is your vision. And then you need to communicate it. And we know from studies of leaders, of effective leaders, my colleague here, Howard Gardner, talks a lot in his book called Leading Minds about the ways that leaders communicate their vision. At every opportunity, they articulate what they believe and where the organization is going.

The next several steps are to consolidate any improvements that you have been able to garner in your organization. To celebrate short term wins. We often don't take time to say well, we've made some progress. We should celebrate that. It's really exciting. We've got more to do, but to, as a leader, celebrate what your individuals who are working with you do. This in turn will produce more change and it will then institutionalize new approaches. And we start the process over again.

So these are the eight steps that John Cotter articulates in his article that I've asked you to look at. And we will have a chance to talk about. But you know what? Changing culture is not easy. It's hard work. And in your experience I want you to think for a moment. Why do people resist changing culture? Why do people resist change?

Well, again, drawing on my math background, I'll give you a little equation. And it's the following one. Change equals loss. C equals L. People, human beings, don't like to lose anything good or bad. If I lose my purse, if gentlemen lose their wallets, if I can't find my eyeglasses, even if I've lost my teeth, I resist it. I don't like it. So any change, even a change of something that I know is probably not healthy, probably not good, probably not working. I'd rather not change it. So the first real level of resistance to any kind of a change that you try to implement, anything that you've learned in this seminar, realize that people will resist it.

The second reason that people resist change is that the costs are seen to be greater than the benefits. It's going to cost me more. It's going to be harder. It's whatever I get at the end, it's not going to be better. So I think that the costs exceed the benefits.

Other reasons that individuals resist change and you should keep this in mind when you're acting as a leader, as we want you to do, is they fear change. They're afraid. They don't know. They also can say to you it's just too hard. No, I don't want to change. It's just too hard. Or, quietly and perhaps not even telling you, they don't agree with the change. So quietly they just kind of keep their mouths shut and they say no. I'm not going to do that. They also might feel no ownership of the change. And so if I don't have any buy in, any ownership, I'm certainly not going to be willing to change. So individuals wonder what's in it for me? OK? Why should I do this? You need as a leader to be able to tell people why this is important.

And perhaps the most important resistance factor is that people don't know how. And you as a leader need to show people, to demonstrate, to support, to cajole, to give them techniques, to talk to them about how hard this change process might be. But also to make it very clear it's non-negotiable. You are going to lead change for the better in your organization.

So now as we come to the end of our lecture today, I would like for you to think about your takeaways. What have you learned? What have you heard? So I'd like you to take a moment and name three things that you learned today that perhaps you did not know before. Second, I'd like you to name two things that you promise you will do, actions you will take as a result of our conversation, our lecture today.

And then finally, and this brings us all full circle back, I'd like you to name one person who you think will help hold you accountable for what you've just promised to do. So those are our takeaways for today. I'm going to stop for a moment while you can think of the three things that

you've learned, the two things that you promise you will do and the one person who will hold you responsible for your promises.

And so in summary, the purposes of this particular module were to develop an understanding, to help you develop an understanding of the necessary systems and structures that are important to be able to improve instructional practice in schools across your country. Secondly, we talked about your role as an organizational leader in improving teaching and learning. Sometimes this can be difficult because you are at distance from many, many schools and many school directors and many teachers and for sure many students.

And then finally, we talked about the challenges, about the perils, about the difficulty of changing the mindsets, changing the culture, changing the beliefs of everyone involved in the education system about students' opportunities and abilities to learn. I want you to keep in mind an important factor which is that children are our future. They mean everything to us. Of course, if you're a parent, if you're an aunt or an uncle, you know the power of a child's imagination, of a child's ability, and we need to do everything, all of us together, you and your countries, and us here at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to empower children to be the best that they can be. Thanks so much. It's been wonderful talking with you.