# Creating Environments to Promote Innovation

*FINE Newsletter*, Volume II, Issue 2—Commentary

*For the May 2010 issue of the* FINE Newsletter*, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) consultant Margaret Caspe spoke with Heather Weiss, founder and director of HFRP; Sherry Cleary, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at City University of New York; and Jane Quinn, Assistant Executive Director for Community Schools at The Children's Aid Society in New York, about innovation in their respective disciplines. Caspe, who is also Associate Director of Early Childhood Programs at the Children's Aid Society, presents the central themes through a framework designed to help schools and organizations move beyond typical problem solving to discover new ways of thinking.*

The term "innovation" is used commonly across a variety of fields and discipline, but rarely do we have the opportunity to dissect what innovation truly means and how to foster it within education and social services.  Whether innovation is incremental (think of the gradual progression of faster and more fuel efficient cars over the past 60 years) or disruptive (the radical shift the introduction of the car had on society and social practices in comparison to transportation via the horse and buggy), it involves risk, creativity, determination, and change.

## A Design Thinking Framework

A "design thinking" framework is an approach that can help schools and organizations move beyond typical problem solving and come closer to new ideas and thinking.[i] Developed by IDEO, an innovation and design firm, the design thinking process involves three overlapping "spaces" that allow for innovation to emerge: inspiration, ideation, and implementation.

### Inspiration

Inspiration refers to the space necessary for those who bring about innovation to understand problems and opportunities that exist in their fields. Observation and research are integral to this process.

Sherry Cleary, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at City University of New York, instituted an innovative Leadership Speaker Series, in which professionals from different fields including business, technology, and publishing come to talk with early childhood professionals about leadership. As described on their website, the series is meant to "present the most

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current, innovative thinking from outside the field to challenge and inform the future strategic direction for early childhood."[ii]

Cleary's explains that her inspiration for the Leadership Series came from observing a prominent figure in the early childhood field lament at a meeting that little progress was being made despite the fact that field had been sending the same messages to practitioners for years. For Cleary this was an epiphany. She realized, "It's not that people aren't listening, but rather, that we have to change our message." The new messages in the Leadership Series focus on innovation, entrepreneurship, excellence, marketing, and creativity.

### Ideation

Ideation is the process of brainstorming, developing, and testing ideas to solve an identified problem. Breakthrough ideas call into question existing conditions. They are mostly likely to come when people from different disciplines and perspectives are brought together to dialogue. Below are two examples of ideation in education.

Jane Quinn, Assistant Executive Director for Community Schools at The Children's Aid Society in New York,[iii] explains how the innovative concept of community schools in the United States came from conversations with stakeholders from multiple disciplines as well as from different countries. In addition to academics, community schools provide health and social services and afterschool programming in the school building, which becomes the hub of the community. Quinn comments, "From our international contacts we've learned about what's possible and what it takes to build the capacity of educators and their partners to work in a comprehensive and integrative way.  For example, through following models developed in England we have been able to create infrastructure and strategic alliances to sustain and support the community school movement [here]."

Heather Weiss, Founder and Director of HFRP, had a similar experience while crafting education policy recommendations. Weiss recalls, "We were doing research on family involvement, early childhood, and afterschool and saw how these were siloed in policy, programs, and even within our own work. We got our staff together to talk about alignment across these areas and with school improvement, and arrived at the idea of complementary learning. We realized that we needed to reframe the definition of learning to encompass all of the contexts where children and youth learn— home, school, and community." Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach— which intentionally integrates both school and nonschool supports—can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed. This idea has had an impact: In February 2010, The Center on Education Policy (CEP) published its 10 recommendations for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.[iv] One of CEP's recommendations is to implement a complementary learning approach to education.

## Implementation

The final space in design thinking to bring about innovation is implementation. Unlike other fields in which innovation might be a technology or product, in social service sectors—such as education, out-of-school-time programming, or family engagement—innovations tend to take the form of creative usages and sharing of resources and opportunities to create new delivery systems and structures.

Quinn explains that solutions must come from "identifying resources in society, tapping into them, and connecting the resources with a need." In the Community Schools model, the innovative mechanism for closing the achievement gap and decreasing dropout rates is placing all resources and supports for students under one roof. By implementing a strategy in which schools belong to the community—not the principals or the educators—community schools embody innovative thinking.

Cleary adds, "We need to look at resources, where we implement programs, and how programs function within different settings." For example, in Pittsburgh universities and private organizations partnered to create a new model of professional development for early childhood teachers where the early childhood teachers piloted and provided workshops for other teachers in the community. The collaborative shares resources and creates an infrastructure for professionals from the ground up.

Weiss believes that it is essential to document "existence proof" of an innovation, which means illustrating that new practices and changes in systems can be achieved. A full-blown model of an innovation often takes time but there is much to

## Resources on Innovation

**Ed.gov Open Innovation Portal**
The US Department of Education has recently developed a new innovation portal to create an online education community where individuals across school districts, states and fields can come to connect, collaborate and exchange ideas with colleagues and potential funders. You can sign up and contribute your ideas online at: https://innovation.ed.gov/my-portal/

**Design Thinking for Social Innovation**
In this article from the Stanford Social Innovation Review, the authors define the idea of "design thinking" as a way of strategically solving problems, especially for organizations serving public purposes. It examines how design thinking can be implemented in a variety of different social enterprises to bring about innovation. Online at: www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation/

**Innovation Toolkit from IDEO**
This free downloadable toolkit provides concrete ideas for organizations to find innovative solutions to meet the needs of various communities. The kit is divided into sections including how to bolster listening skills, run workshops and implement ideas. Online at: www.ideo.com/work/item/human-centered-design-toolkit/

**The Education Innovator**
The US Department of Education now offers a monthly newsletter that provides subscribers with information about current events at the USDE's Office of Innovation and Improvement, and includes a section called "Innovation in the News," which details the latest innovations in the education sector. Online at: www2.ed.gov/news/newsletters/innovator/index.html

learn from implementation along the way, and these lessons can be used to avoid further pitfalls and improve practices.

Cleary offers a final reminder that "informed passion" is at the core of innovation. Determination, drive, and perseverance are essential elements. Similarly, she cautions that the risk of failure is inherent in innovation. "Failure is never an option," she explains. "It's a given that you will fail, but failure is not the goal. If it is an experiment and you are testing and you discard what you don't like, that's different from failing. One you are in charge of, and the other you are not."

*This article is part of the May 2010* FINE Newsletter. *The* FINE Newsletter *shares the newest and best family involvement research and resources from Harvard Family Research Project and other field leaders. To access the* FINE Newsletter *archive, visit www.hfrp.org/FINENewsletter.*

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[i] Brown, T., & Wyatt, J. (2010, Winter). Design thinking for social innovation. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *8*(1):30–35.

[ii] Online at: http://www.earlychildhoodnyc.org/leadership/

[iii] Online at: http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools

[iv] Kober, N., Jennings, J. & Peltason, J. (February, 2010). *Better federal policies leading to better schools.* Center on Education Policy. Available online at: http://hfrp.org/ceprecommendation

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