One Step Forward, Two Steps Back:
The Choreography of Educational Reform

Editor’s Notes

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What is the purpose of schooling? Should schools be charged with shaping society, or do schools reflect the social, political, and economic frameworks that sustain them? These questions, which energized debates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, seem all but lost in the recent flurry of educational reform activity. When President George W. Bush signed the “No Child Left Behind Act” on January 8, 2002, Secretary of Education, Rod Paige (2002), hailed the legislation as the beginning of a “new era in American education” backed by “a set of unambiguous expectations, timelines, and resources” (p. 710).

As national policymakers continue their promotion of a business model for education, urging administrators to establish objectives and hold “employees accountable” for meeting them, the states have responded by becoming guarantors of high academic standards (Imig, 2002). More than half of the states in the U.S. have adopted accountability systems: school report cards, promotion and graduation linked to test scores, extra funding followed by sanctions for low performing schools and/or monetary rewards for high performing schools (Schwartz, 2002). Given increased political pressure to meet standards, some reformers believe the time has come for national accountability testing; but their critics argue that, given social trends and regional demographics, states need more, not less, latitude (Hodgkinson, 2002).

With the recent adoption of Section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the nature and scope of educational research is also being re-shaped as part of the reform agenda. Section 9101 ties funding for educational research more closely to the use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs (Cochran-Smith, 2002). Responding to this new legislation, Bobby Ann Starnes (2002), fifth-grade teacher on the Rocky Boy Reservation in Montana, observes that such research recommendations are not likely to address the unique needs of her Chippewa-Cree children.

Reflecting on his 45-year involvement in school reform, Professor of Psychology Emeritus at Yale University, Seymour Sarason (2002), is also concerned by the recent narrowing of reform policy in research, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Using the metaphor of reformer as choreographer, Sarason wonders why, unlike performing arts directors, reformers learn so little from each other’s experiences. Choreographers know that the design is not the performance. Dances have lives of their own. Audiences are unpredictable. Because mistakes are as invaluable as they are inevitable, failures are just as instructive as successes. Faulting reform literature that plays down or omits essential, irrational, mistaken, or difficult elements, he challenges educators to look beyond the design in order to learn from the dance itself.

The choreographers and dancers in this issue of Thresholds in Education offer personal views from unique spots on the dance floor. Authors include teachers, administrators, researchers, and consultants who have taken steps to envision, adapt, implement, and critique reform initiatives in the classroom, the school, the district, and the region. In their accounts,
they share their failures and concerns as well as their successes and hopes.

In the first article, Diann Musial, who has consulted with urban, rural, and suburban school districts over the past two decades, provides a “careful, reflective, critical look at standards-based education.” Musial cautions that much more debate about the “nature of standards” is needed; otherwise, the “noble intentions” that inspired the national call for reform will be lost.

In the next two articles, “Transforming Schools into Places of Learning” and “Assessing the Assessment Committee: Testing, Assessment, and District Policy-Making,” Doug Johnson and Julia Stearns Cloat offer insights into policy challenges related to assessment. Agreeing that formative, ongoing assessment is vital, Johnson and Cloat offer examples of the ways in which scope, tone, and even purpose may shift when policy moves from conceptualization to implementation.

In “The Accountability We Need” and “A Room with a View,” Moses Cheng and Jennifer Mackey examine the intersection of accountability, autonomy, and time. From administrative and pedagogical perspectives, Cheng and Mackey demonstrate the impact of policy mandates that impose rigid time frames, ignoring the complexities of the school and the classroom.

In “Teachers as Indigenous Peoples: A Commentary on the Shortcomings and Possibilities of Educational Research,” Darren Pascavage envisions a broader scope for educational research than the one delineated in Section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Using examples from his own practice as Director of Measurement and Evaluation, Pascavage explores dangers inherent in narrowing the definition of research and offers recommendations for bridging the researcher-practitioner divide.

In “Democratic Schooling and the Everyday: The Intersection of Theory and Practice,” Joe Wegwert argues that students, as well as teachers and administrators, should be viewed as active partners in reform initiatives. While documenting the difficulties accompanying attempts to deviate from established lines of power and authority, Wegwert affirms the need for democratic debate.

References


From Where Have All the Standards Come?

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Teachers, administrators, parents and students are steeped in a new educational maze of standards. The phenomenal growth of the standards-based education movement is incredible. Within two decades (since the release of the first national standards document by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989), members of other disciplines have raced to develop and promulgate their own sets of national standards. And as soon as one of these national groups releases a set of standards, state boards of education endorse them and make them a requirement for their educational constituents. Standards seem to be contagious. They act like a call to arms, and schools seem unwilling to question the call. It is possible that standards by their very name connote a type of sacred space that few are willing to question lest they be called heretics.

This article calls for a careful, reflective, critical look at standards-based education focused on a series of simple but urgent questions:

- What is a standard?
- Where do standards reside?
- Who sets standards?
- How should standards be assessed?

What is a standard?

For over twenty years Grant Wiggins (1989, 1991, 1998) has asked that we consider the different meanings and implications that the term “standard” connotes before rushing into the standards-based education arena. He and others (Hamerman & Musial, 1995) have suggested that a standard could be considered a vision of excellence. Such a notion calls for a reflective process wherein great minds and hearts clarify what is of most worth to a society, implying that standards would necessarily be noble ideas that motivate educators to make decisions about what they emphasize in their classrooms.

At first glance, one might conclude that this is precisely what standards-based education has done. Teachers across the country are provided lists of standards and are told to teach them. Yet, this is what demeans a noble goal or standard. Visions of excellence should never be easily achievable; by their nature, they need to be beyond the reach of the ordinary. Or else, how can such visions ennoble or provide a worthy goal? If standards are translated into reasonable competencies that all students should achieve by a certain grade level, they become nothing more than behavioral objectives of old. This does not imply that we should dismiss the importance of developing reasonable objectives to guide our daily routine; however, such objectives stand in sharp contrast to a noble goal that calls us to action.

A second, somewhat related meaning for the word “standard” is benchmark or discrete competency that can be measured as progress toward a worthy goal. Its importance rests on the legitimate and clear connection of the benchmark to the goal. Unless such connections are carefully developed, the discrete benchmarks can become ends unto themselves without necessarily leading to the broader standard. To date, I know of no research that has been carefully crafted and published that displays the connections between various benchmark statements and noble goals. A case in point is the version of national standards provided to us in science by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Benchmarks for Science Literacy (1993) lists nearly 200 benchmark statements that should be taught throughout grades 1-12. Although these benchmarks are carefully clustered by themes, there is little information about the legitimate connections between these discrete benchmark statements.
Yet, educators across the country have responded to this document and placed many of the benchmark statements into their own versions of state standards. Even more troubling, South Africa has developed a true-false test based on these benchmark statements, and this test is used to determine science achievement.

A third meaning for "standard" is a summative performance or worthy achievement. In this definition, the worthy, but unachievable goal is not simply an idea that motivates. Rather, the standard is encased in an empirical, real-world performance that has, in fact, been achieved. Examining Olympic champions or the works of great authors, musicians, dancers, scientists, and mathematicians brings birth to standards. Once again this meaning for standard implies a noble, but achievable goal that motivates all of us to learn and practice and develop.

These diverse conceptions of standards stem from differing expectations that different vested interest groups have for education. Business leaders tend to want high school graduates ready for work—able to read, write and compute. They expect schools to prepare a supply of future workers. Businesses are willing to provide specific job-training, but they do not want to teach what they consider basic skills. The underlying conception of a standard implied by this expectation is focused on competencies or benchmarks.

Policymakers usually focus on the larger, long-term needs of society. They tend to want more rigorous academic standards so as to maintain world-class status for the United States. They want students to know more science, history, mathematics, literature and geography than students in other countries. They expect schools to graduate students who have high-level, discipline-specific achievement and who can demonstrate world-class performances. Such a view tends to emphasize standards as noble goals or worthy performances in a competitive environment.

Parents tend to choose standards based on their own personal goals and family histories. Some parents want their children to go to prestigious colleges; others want their children to obtain a high-paying job immediately after high school; others want their children to join an established profession such as a medical doctor, lawyer, or engineer. These expectations tend to focus on summative performances that relate to specific careers.

I contend that these competing but related interests give rise to competing definitions for standards that account for much of the confusion surrounding the standards-based education movement. Standards may be viewed as noble and worthy goals, reasonable and achievable benchmarks, or summative tests or performances. If politicians, parents and educators keep changing the intended meaning for "standard," no consistent paradigm will emerge. Rather, given an elusive target, teachers will always be unsuccessful, students will always be failing, and business professionals will always be dissatisfied with graduates. More importantly, unless there is ongoing, legitimate debate about the noble ends that standards should connote, teachers and students will be left in an endless maze with no clear direction beyond simple mandates to accomplish "this or that."

Where do standards reside?

Another important question that contributes to the standards maze is, "Where do standards legitimately reside?" Some educators and policymakers think of standards as world-class goals based on the performances of outstanding individuals, such as successful mathematicians, scientists, authors and athletes. Such world-class standards are rigorous and generally out-of-reach for most individuals. Furthermore, such world-class standards cannot be met in an elementary and secondary school setting. Rather, these standards are statements of accomplishment to be used as models of excellence.

Standards in this context are meant to inspire students to do better over time—not to be met within a single school year. Educators who adopt world-class
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laws related to standards, it is assumed that such legislated standards have been democratically negotiated. Yet, this is an unsupported assumption. State legislators have only considered standards drawn from national groups. Some states have chosen to modify the wording of specific standards, but none have actually questioned whether the source is a legitimate one.

I contend that unless we tackle the proper location of standards, the standards maze will continue to become more convoluted. Students and teachers alike will continue to be bombarded by demands that are often at odds with one another. And more importantly, unless standards are returned to the people, there is no guarantee that we are moving in a direction that empowers all.

Who sets standards?

Conflict also surrounds the question, "Who sets standards—subject matter professionals, politicians, parents, business leaders, teachers, students?" Not only is there conflict concerning which of these groups should set standards, there is internal conflict within these different contingencies. Consider the conflict among professional groups in setting standards. For example, the National Council for Teachers of English, the International Reading Association and the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois received funding from the Department of Education (DOE) to draft curriculum standards in English. However, the DOE rejected the standards that this group proposed and terminated funding. According to Kenneth Gooding, a professor of language, reading and culture at the University of Arizona, the DOE claimed that the standards were excessively concerned with process and insufficiently concerned with products or outcomes.

Conflict surrounded the first set of proposed American History standards. Critics railed at the absence of certain American heroes in the secondary curriculum; and in January, 1995, these standards were the focus of a full-scale debate in the United States Congress. Some members objected to the absence of Robert E. Lee and the Wright Brothers. Others noted that Senator Joseph McCarthy was mentioned 19 times, but Albert Einstein was not mentioned at all. Such criticism led to a Senate resolution condemning the standards as they were proposed. The vote was 99 to 1.

Conflict over standards may also occur when two groups attempt to develop standards for the same area. The National Science Standards, developed through federal funds by the National Research Council, and Benchmarks for Science Literacy, developed by the Association for the Advancement of Science, both exist as independent sources for science teaching. Some argue that different sets of national standards provide a necessary dialectic for selecting standards. Such healthy conflict allows for change and guards against developing a rigid, inflexible set of standards. Others note that in the absence of a single set of national standards, schools are left to the precarious position of choosing their own sets of standards that will impact what their students will know and be able to do at the end of their public schooling experience.

In addition to conflicts among professional groups, conflicts arise across different states' standards frameworks. Politicians and state boards of education have consistently placed individual standards into a state framework that is intended to guide teachers in their interpretation of standards. In Illinois, a set of learning goals is written for each subject area. Then, standards are presented for each goal. In addition to these standards and goals, benchmarks are listed. In educational standards, benchmarks usually take the form of statements describing how the standard might look at a certain level of development—from a primary perspective, an elementary perspective, a middle school and high school perspective. Figure 2 is an example of a goal, related standards, and benchmarks drawn from the Illinois Standards Framework (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002).

While the standards framework seems to remove conflict and provide a cohesive connection between goals and individual benchmark statements, such is not the case. Instead, teachers have begun to focus on benchmarks rather than goals and standards. These benchmark statements act as placeholders for the standards because teachers are held accountable for the benchmarks rather than the standards. Over time, teachers in Illinois have begun to concentrate more and more on the minute benchmark statements that match the state tests. Even worse, the persons who now set the standards are not the politicians nor the professionals of various disciplines, but rather, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) test writers (from a for-profit corporation). Teachers in many states have been forced to place increased emphasis on the benchmarks for specific grade levels rather than on the
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the state level, have mandated that students be tested regularly. Currently, there is a movement at the federal level to mandate annual testing of all elementary, middle, and high school students. In many states, all students in specific grades, such as 3rd, 7th and 11th, are already required to take a state-designed test in subject areas such as writing, reading and mathematics. Student test results are regularly compiled by schools and reported to the public. Schools are often named and ranked in the newspaper raising sharp questions about “low performing” status. In a few states, “high performing” schools receive additional funds. In some districts, teachers and/or principals receive salary bonuses if the test scores improve. For example, in Maryland, schools that improve “high performing” schools receive additional funds. For example, in Kentucky, schools that are “in crisis” are assigned an experienced master teacher or principal who is responsible for helping the school improve. Principals can be reassigned and entire school staffs replaced. In other states, such as New Jersey, entire school districts designated “low performing” can be taken over by the state. Tests can be high-stakes for students as well. Twenty-eight states now use standardized exams to determine graduation from high school, and nineteen states use tests to decide student promotions (Johnson, et al., 2002).

Teaching for the Test: Another unintended outcome has to do with the time teachers spend on topics likely to be on the test rather than addressing the instructional needs of individual students. Any single test is bound to sample a very limited part of what students need. Some state tests have little overlap with what is specified in various sets of content standards and what is emphasized in the district curriculum materials. Time spent preparing for high-stakes tests reduces the time available to teach related material and other subjects (such as the performing arts) which are often not tested (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994).

One Size Fits All: Another critical issue related to the heavy focus on testing is the assumption that the same test is appropriate for all students, schools and states. In 1980, just about half of the states had mandatory testing programs. By 1998, all but two states had some sort of mandatory state assessment. Historically, in the American system of education, heavy emphasis has been placed on the importance of attending to individual and developmental differences. Now, policymakers are mandating that one test be given to all students at a certain grade level at a specified time; in other words, one size fits all. All students are required to take the same relatively narrow test. and major decisions about individual students and/or schools are often based on the test results.

The Threat of a National Exam: Some are concerned that the adoption of national curriculum standards and state tests will lead to a national exam and subsequent national curriculum (Pipho, 2000). This is the one size fits all nightmare taken to the extreme. Already the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) (1987), which is administered each year to students in a sample of schools in each state, makes it possible for policymakers and educators to view how well students are doing across the nation. Comparisons are made with student achievement in other countries, and most assuredly, from state to state in this country. NAEP is designed to make inferences about student achievement within states, not to make judgments about individual students or schools. Ironically, although NAEP has existed for several decades and its findings are very useful, school districts and schools are increasingly unwilling to participate due to the mounting pressure and time demands of the many other required tests.

How Do We Escape the Standards Maze?

The time has come to unpack the contagious siren-song of the standards-based education movement. Politicians, taxpayers, parents, and even professional educators have fallen under the spell of standards; we have all become dazzled by the promised wonders that can be achieved if we simply adhere to the common set of noble-sounding standards. I believe that there are serious problems surrounding the standards-based education movement, and these problems stem from a basic confusion about several underlying, unanswered questions. Serious debate needs to ensue regarding the nature, location, setting and assessment of standards. Such debate militates against the wisdom of setting national accountability measures that lead to a narrowing of noble intentions. Furthermore, when such discussions about the nature of standards are not continuous, standards become banal statements of out-dated intentions.
References

Diann Musial, a Presidential Teaching Professor at Northern Illinois University, has been deeply involved in the development of equitable and valid testing. She has written over twenty tests for school districts in Illinois, West Virginia, and Virginia and has coordinated the development of large test banks in the areas of reading, writing, science, and math.
Transforming Schools into Places of Learning

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There is little doubt that the American educational system is “adapting” to the injection of student learning standards, but is this bringing about the desired systemic changes to improve teaching and learning for all students? Our school communities, from pre-school to graduate schools, are indeed complex and expansive systems. As individuals, we often feel helpless in effecting any meaningful change in this huge, American educational machine. We cannot deny the feeling of anxiety many educators feel from the tidal wave of education “reform” that is washing over us. The word “reform” now carries a negative connotation that education is bad and broken and needs to be fixed. According to “The Top Ten Education Hot/Not” (Banach, 2002):

Most educational “reforms” aren’t coming from the educators who have to do the work. They’re being legislated from a distance by people who have little understanding of teaching and learning and the systems of support that are necessary to sustain improvement. (p. 1)

I would rather use the phrase transform education, implying that we can change our form and still retain our identity and honor our core beliefs. In the process, we need to recognize and celebrate the successful work of those who have come before us. We need to share our stories, in writing and in conversations, creating new metaphors that will guide us in “transforming schools into places of learning.”

American education has been and still is about educating all our citizens. While we have made great strides in providing all citizens access to education, we still have room for improvement. Several years ago, I chose to leave the classroom in an attempt to improve the larger educational system. I still believe that the work of dedicated individuals and small groups can create changes that will eventually impact every part of the system. And when I feel discouraged, a metaphor Dennis Sparks, now Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, once shared with me helps me keep the faith. Dennis compared our American educational system to a huge ocean liner. The great ships are so massive that once they start moving, they want to continue in a straight line. Attempting to turn an ocean liner by applying force on the pilot’s wheel would break something before the rudder would ever budge. We know that ocean liners do turn; so, how do they manage it?

At key leverage points along each side of the ship there are small jets or propellers called trim tabs. If you want the ship to go right, you engage the trim tabs on the left side of the ship. These trim tabs do not actually turn the ship, but they do create the tendency for the ship to go in the direction you desire when you turn the pilot’s wheel. In real life, we do not always have the advantage of knowing where the trim tabs are located, and we sometimes realize they should have been engaged long after an opportunity has passed. I try to create as many quality moments as I can and hope some of them will become trim tabs, eventually turning the larger educational system.

What Kinds of Standards Do We Need?

We have leadership standards for our school administrators, teaching standards for our teachers, learning standards for our students, staff development standards, and facility safety and health standards, to name but a few. It is of little wonder that people become anxious when standards are mentioned. The word has been used and overused in so many contexts that it has lost much of its meaning. When thinking about our students, I would ask you to go beyond the commonly held belief that learning standards are just
about content. To transform the schools into places of learning, we need to think about learning standards in new ways. To create and maintain a healthy learning system, people are as important as the stuff we want them to teach and learn. The work students and teachers are engaged in must be meaningful and personally relevant (Trafton, et al., 2001). Students' and teachers' voices need to be heard and respected (Cohen, 2002). Relationships that create climates and cultures of learning need to be supported and nurtured (Bambino, 2002; Strong, Silver & Perini, 2001).

We need to put students and what we know about how they learn at the center of education. Strong, Silver, and Perini (2001) refer to this emphasis on both students and standards as “double alignment.” While standards can help establish a common vision, they can also leave students with the feeling that only test scores, not the students nor their individual “differences, interests, struggles and successes” (p. 56) are important. Using conversation as an assessment tool demonstrates an interest in students, in how they think, and why they struggle (Bambino, 2002). Learning is much like having a conversation. As a recent high school student commented:

There is a difference between just talking and having a conversation. When you talk, it is “How are you?” or “I’ll pick you up around four o’clock.” But in a conversation, you walk away knowing something new and valuable.

The choice of the word valuable is revealing. The information or idea must be more than new; it must be useful to the anticipated success of the individual and worthy of storing in the brain while millions of other parcels of information are instantly discarded.

In conversation, students have told me that what they spend the majority of their time studying is not necessarily their hardest subject, biggest assignment, favorite subject, nor for the teacher they “like” the most. They spend the most time studying when teachers are clear about what will be assessed—whether as an assignment, quiz or test—and when teachers have consistently demonstrated that they will stick to the promised assessment in a fair manner. Students need useful, timely feedback to enhance their learning; they avoid wasting their time on things that will not be assessed fairly. Time is precious. We each have only so many minutes to live. The best teachers recognize and honor the fact that a minute in a student’s life is as important as a minute in their own lives. Each minute represents a choice. Great teachers create a sense of urgency. They imply that there is a great deal to learn in a small amount of time without creating the sense of panic (Cohen, 2002).

Robert Fried of Northeastern University in Boston advocates that teachers take the time to assess, not just content knowledge, but passion for learning as well. Noting that every child comes into the world with a passion for learning that is as natural as learning to walk and talk, Fried observes that this passion is often lost when learning is replaced by schooling. According to Fried (2001), assessment of “passionate learning” can provide a “level of shared responsiveness that goes against the traditional hierarchy of school” (p. 136) and helps energize both students and teachers. Rather than placing teachers in the “role of compliant technicians,” worthy standards combined with performance-based assessments have great potential for creating cultures where teachers can employ reason and passion to weave “teaching, learning, and assessment into a seamless web” (Falk, 2002, p. 620).

**Standards-Aligned Classrooms: Revisiting Assessment and Accountability**

The obvious place for improving teaching and learning is where it takes place—in the classroom with teachers and students. One of the ways to support learning is through formative assessment. For many educators though, assessment is just another word for testing. Improvements have been made in the primary levels where we may use assessment to help diagnose reading difficulties and plan for remediation, but most of the time we test kids. We test to see if students qualify for special education services. We test kids to see if we can place them in gifted programs. We test kids to see if they are college material. We test kids to put them in rank order so we can assign grades, ratings, and designations.

What this testing does not do is provide learners with the kind of feedback they need to improve or empower students to feel responsible for their own learning. At its worst, testing is used as a punitive classroom management tool. In such cases, teachers seem to believe that students have no right to ask why something is worth learning; they imply that it is...
arrogant and rude for students to question the relevance and importance of what they learn. Richard J. Stiggins describes the use of testing and grading to humiliate and control students as no less deadly than taking aim with a double-barreled shotgun at a student’s gut and firing. Is blowing away a student’s confidence and willingness to risk learning something new any less devastating? What can we expect a student’s motivation to be if this happens on a regular basis?

According to Stiggins (2002), our “assessment crisis” requires that we see assessment “through new eyes.” While we currently use standardized tests for assessments of learning, assessment for learning is also essential. Assessment of learning occurs when learning is viewed as “done” and we can report on it as a past event. Assessment for learning occurs as learning is still taking place and can be improved. Assessment for learning involves accurate, specific, timely feedback communicated in a non-threatening way for the purpose of enhancing learning. This feedback leaves the window of opportunity to learn open, instead of closing it with a large letter grade, a double-digit number, or a designation. Think of yourself as a learner. Imagine that you are learning to bowl for the first time and there is a large soundproof curtain hung halfway down the alley. Each time you send the ball down the alley you receive no feedback by vision or sound about what has just happened; but at the end of the week you do get to look at a letter grade posted outside the bowling instructor’s office.

Stiggins’ (2001) conviction that assessment should center on improving student learning is captured in his four guiding principles: (1) Students are the key assessment user; (2) Clear and appropriate targets are essential; (3) Accurate assessment is a must; and (4) Sound assessments must be accompanied by effective communication. All the principles are equally important, and internalizing what they mean is critical to transforming schools into places of learning. Communication and conversation between teachers and students enable students to understand what they are expected to know and be able to do. Students agree on why it is important and worth their time to learn, and feedback about their learning provides them with motivation and confidence to achieve!

In working to positively impact the teaching and learning of many Illinois schools as part of the Standards-Aligned Classroom Initiative, I feel strongly that our greatest hope for transforming schools into places of learning can be accomplished by following the ideas and work of Rick Stiggins and his associates. Stiggins shared a personal story to illustrate the relationship between feedback, standards, accountability, and learning. In his youth, Stiggins did not fit the mold and he didn’t do well in school. When he joined the military and became responsible for the maintenance of airplanes, his confidence in his ability to perform based on his formal schooling experience was low. But his instructors broke the job responsibilities into small, achievable tasks; provided lots of practice; and gave specific, immediate feedback about what he had done.

**Teachers continue to feel responsible for their students, hoping that they have become happy, successful, and productive citizens.**

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regard to their students' lives?

When positive principles and standards are accepted and internalized, I believe we can create contexts that will transform schools. Standards can provide clear expectations about what is most important to teach and what is most important to assess (Nelson, 2001; Raywid, 2002; Trafton et al., 2001). The challenge to classroom teachers is to determine how to offer a fair opportunity for students to show what they really understand and are able to do. For decades special interest groups, though well-intentioned, have been adding to our curriculum. Standards provide the opportunity for selective content abandonment. The current emphasis on standards provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon what is truly essential to teach and to learn. When we are able to create a culture that includes time for reflection and dialogue with students, teachers, and parents about why something is worth learning, schools can be transformed into special places of learning for all.

References

Doug Johnson has been an elementary school, middle school, and high school teacher as well as an elementary school and middle school principal. He is currently Assistant Regional Superintendent, Kane County Regional Office of Education, Geneva, Illinois.
A time of firsts: During the first few weeks of my first year as a classroom teacher, I had my first experience with assessment in the classroom. I had previous experience with testing and had administered dozens of standardized tests as director of a private learning center, but those tests were given to individuals. During my first month as a 3rd grade teacher, I was required to give the California Achievement Test (CAT) to my class. I had been teaching my students for just a few short weeks, yet I felt that the results of their performance would also be used as a measurement of my effectiveness as a teacher. The experience filled me with anxiety and my students with frustration; this early in the year they did not have the confidence that it takes to attack a task with a certain amount of failure literally written into it.

The Questions

Before beginning my work on the district committee, I decided to explore some fundamental questions related to assessment:

Why test?

As a classroom teacher I believe that everything that uses precious classroom time needs to have an objective and purpose. I wanted to know the objective and purpose of district mandated classroom assessment.

How do we improve testing?

If I were to be a part of a committee that had such potential to impact the district, I wanted to know how to go about improving assessment for our students so that the impact we did make would be a positive one. I knew by being directly involved, I would be able to learn more about the committee’s influence on school district policy and practice with respect to assessment.

Why do we test in the Kaneland School District?

The most frequent answer to the question, why test, is to ensure accountability. Accountability has become the fundamental justification for administering standardized tests (Fair Test Examiner, 1996), even though research shows the inadequacies of testing as a true measurement of individual student performance in school or teacher effectiveness. As guest editor for Phi Delta Kappan’s special section on assessment, Elliot Eisner (1999) states, “test scores are widely regarded as proxies for the quality of education. But they are utterly inadequate” (p. 660). Yet, “the use of test scores to index educational success or failure is almost never
questioned" (Haertel, 1999, p. 662). Standardized tests, as measurements of accountability with uncertain validity, are administered at immense costs with scant evidence of positive student impact.

Using standardized tests for high stakes accountability can be intimidating to teachers. Many of us feel that test scores are being used to measure our capability. This, in turn, creates a pressure to teach to the test. Even a well-meaning teacher will allow the examples of essays from the ISAT to guide the method by which writing is taught. Thus, the format and the limitations of this one-time exam are leading the instruction and curriculum. According to Fair Test Examiner (1996), "In the end, accountability testing undermines both quality education and genuine accountability" (p. 1). Since this is happening in schools, we need to take a hard look at what accountability is (and is not).

Accountability is usually considered the gathering of data from a standardized test. In the essay "Rethinking Assessment and Accountability" (Earl, 1997), it is argued that this practice is actually accounting. Accounting is the organizing and reporting of data from an event that has already passed. In accounting, there is no place for remediation, re-teaching, or planning for improving students' learning. In contrast, accountability uses assessment, along with other knowledge, to improve teaching. The current views of accountability and testing do nothing to improve students' learning. Unfortunately, accountability testing will not just go away as long as society feels that there is a need for educational accountability; but for true accountability, standardized testing is just not enough. How do we achieve the accountability that is in demand while improving the learning of our students?

How do we improve testing?

As several studies have shown (Eisner, 1999; Elliot, 1997; Fair Test Examiner, 1996; Mabry, 1999; Popham, 1999; Wiggins, 1997), there is strong support for assessment reform. There is growing evidence that standardized testing is not sufficient in assessing the complex and subtle ways of thinking required in the classroom. Many reformers propose assessments that can tell us more accurately how a student would accomplish tasks beyond the classroom. Eisner (1999) explains that this is what "psychometricians call concurrent or predictive validity" (p. 659). Since performance assessments have a more direct link to students' completion of real life tasks, performance-based tests have been proposed as replacements for the more traditional standardized assessments. But when the simple replacement of standardized testing with performance-based testing causes us to relive the same mistakes (Haertel, 1999), we must continue to seek another approach.

One type of assessment that is not nearly as widely discussed is formative assessment. Formative assessment actually adapts instruction to meet students' needs. This makes assessment indistinguishable from teaching and learning. The goals and the objectives of the assessment are clearly defined, and students are allowed to be part of the assessment process. They begin to self-assess and often become motivated to do well as a result. According to Burness (1997), "Helping students understand standards and the criteria for meeting them is now seen as an important part of the teaching process" (p. 45). Formative assessment can benefit the student in terms of remediation, review, or placement.

The Journey Begins

Having taken a hard look at my own beliefs regarding assessment, I was eager to participate in the district's assessment committee meetings. The Assessment Committee of the Kaneland School District 302 was charged with reviewing the assessment needs of students in the entire district. According to the 1999 Illinois School Report Card, of the 2,276 kindergarten through twelfth grade students, 95.9% were white. Only 1.3% of the students in the district were classified as low-income and 0% as limited-English-proficient. The committee consisted of 17 individuals including teachers, administrators, and parents. Represented were elementary, middle school, and high school teachers, as well as members of District programs and teachers other than the traditional classroom educator. Three administrators served on the team. Together we had 272 years of educational experience. I was thrilled to be sitting on a committee who I believed could make a monumental change in the assessment practices of our district.

The statement of purpose for this committee read as follows:

This committee will examine the current assessment program in Kaneland District #302.
This committee will set the direction for the future of our assessment program. Out of this committee will evolve an informational report to be presented to the Administrative Team, the District’s Curriculum Council and to the Board of Education.—We are on an important journey.

During the first meeting in December of 1998, committee members were given the following list of nine questions to address:

1. How can assessment in District 302 be improved?
2. What is an adequate and efficient assessment program?
3. Should we reorganize our curriculum and/or instruction to maximize the District’s score on the ISAT?
4. How much time should be spent on assessment, as opposed to teaching/learning?
5. Why are the various tests being given?
6. How are students, teachers, parents, and the public using assessment results?
7. Are teachers sufficiently trained in assessment techniques and uses?
8. Are teachers using assessment results for diagnostic purposes to guide classroom instruction?
9. Should we continue to administer the California Achievement Test? If so, why?

These questions reflected the set of aspirations that were part of the groundwork of the committee. With high ideals, the assessment committee had a very exciting outset. The first meeting of the Assessment Committee challenged us to examine the basic principles of testing. Committee members were asked to make no assumptions other than the inevitability of the ISAT and to evaluate many types of assessment including performance assessment. To support our effort, the Kaneland School District’s Curriculum Director compiled informative journal articles, books, and newspaper articles on assessment including “Standardized Testing is Child Abuse” and “Why Standardized Tests Don’t Measure Educational Quality.” These articles provided helpful information about alternative methods of assessment in general and performance assessment in particular, but they did not provide the committee with much insight about the benefits of continuing the administration of standardized tests.

The Path Narrows

The second meeting was dedicated to looking at the ISAT, and by the third meeting, the focus was on whom to test and when to test. By the April 1999 meeting, it became clear that there would be a standardized assessment administered in the district. I was amazed that the decision to continue administering standardized tests had already been made. From this point forward, it seemed that the committee’s sole purpose was to select a standardized test. The remaining seven meetings, which spanned a 13-month time period, focused not on why or how to test, but on which assessment tool to purchase.

Looking back at the meeting notes, it is extremely interesting to compare the nine, initial questions with the discussions held at the meetings. I was surprised to discover that the committee did not address the vital issue of teacher training. The committee seemed to accept the results of surveys indicating that teachers felt sufficiently trained in assessment. As a teacher, I thought that I knew much more about testing before I began my assessment journey than I believe I know now. This may seem contradictory, but I did not realize how much I had to learn about assessment. All teachers in the district would benefit greatly from assessment education, either as an introduction to concepts or as an opportunity to review and reflect on current practice.

Another fundamental question not completely addressed by the committee was how assessment in District 302 could be improved. Although the committee did reduce the amount of time spent on standardized assessment, as our Superintendent recommended, the impact of that accomplishment only affects .28% of the school year. What can we do to improve assessment during the other 1,256.5 hours that students spend in school every year?

Despite the unanswered questions, the assessment committee was disbanded. Its final written report is revealing. It includes the purpose of the committee in setting “the direction for the future of our [District 302’s] assessment program” with a basic assumption that “authentic assessment will be encouraged across
the district”; yet, authentic assessment was never discussed during the committee meetings. The absence of authentic assessment is conspicuous in the recommendation section of the report, which contains only suggestions related to ISAT and standardized testing. I was pleased that the report describes the role of assessment as an opportunity for “the professionals in this district to better serve our students” and in the reflection section of the final report which I was asked to write, I explored what we can do to accomplish this goal. In my reflections, I described my belief that the complete capabilities of the committee had not yet been realized. I also expressed my conviction that we had taken important steps toward a new attitude about testing.

A Journey’s End and New Beginnings

Although the committee’s work was considered done, I interviewed the two administrators who were actively involved with the assessment committee, seeking their opinions on the accomplishments of the assessment committee. These two administrators had contrary ideas about assessment, portfolios, and the results of the assessment committee. Because I was somewhat confused by these differing opinions, I decided also to interview the Superintendent and the Principal of my school. From these four interviews, I concluded that assessment reform is still an open issue in the district. This leads me to believe that the assessment committee has not yet succeeded in its initial mission to set the direction for the future of our assessment program.

As I stated in the final report, I still believe that in order to forge ahead in our assessment journey, we, as a district, need a willingness to change. We need to be willing to call up our professionalism and assert that we have the knowledge and the ability to assess our own students through authentic assessment measures (Harmin, 1994). While the initial influence of the assessment committee was the decision to administer a different standardized assessment, I believe the committee also prompted the decision-makers in the district to more fully understand that assessment is a continuing goal.

Soon after the assessment committee was disbanded, I learned about an assessment pilot program through a partnership with Northern Illinois University (NIU). In the pilot program, a few teachers worked with an NIU faculty member on an assessment team to improve assessment practices. This was part of an initiative throughout the state of Illinois based on Richard Stiggins’ (1998) model of assessment. In “Confronting the Barriers to Effective Assessment,” Stiggins states that “if classroom assessments are of poor quality, then instruction cannot be effective” (p. 7). He does not suggest that we do away with standardized testing, but that we find a balance between it and sound classroom assessment practices. Because I agreed with Stiggins’ beliefs about assessment and because I felt that there was much left undone with the Kaneland Assessment Committee, I was happy to be a part of the assessment team and its partnership with NIU.

The goal of the assessment team was for teachers to learn about assessment, put some of Stiggins’ theories into practice in their own classrooms, and then pass on their insights to their colleagues. While this assessment team succeeded in committing some “random acts of assessment reform” in their own classrooms, systematic reform in the way that the district assesses its students is still an unrealized goal.

As we wrap up the current school year and look toward the year ahead, another assessment committee is being formed. I remain hopeful that this newly formed committee will complete the assessment journey for our district that was started several years ago. The conclusion of the original Assessment Committee’s final report states, “Academic papers and reports should always end with tentative conclusions and continuing questions”—so I end this article with a question that remains in my mind: *Will it be possible for true assessment reform to occur in our school district?*

References


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The Accountability We Need: A Principal's Challenge

**Moses Cheng**

**Schneider Elementary School**

This is how it goes every year in the state of Illinois: With security appropriate for Area 51 documents, materials arrive under lock and key. Procedures are scrutinized and reviewed. Provisions are made for secure and proper conditions. Pencils are sharpened. Labels are checked are are checked and rechecked. Booklets are counted and recounted. Once the event begins, no talking is allowed. This is serious business. Brows are furrowed, questions are read and circles are filled-in. Third graders, barely able to sit through a 30-minute cartoon, sit through six blocks of 40-minute periods. Once the event is over, all papers are accounted for, materials are bound and shipped. Then everyone waits. Everyone waits for that magical day when the “truth” will be revealed. The time, sweat, energy, dedication and effectiveness of educators, day in and day out, will be boiled down to one event—this one test—this one score. With fanfare and bold print, newspapers publish the scores of each school in much the same way team rosters are posted after tryouts. Teachers and administrators alike scan past hundreds of schools to find their school and breathe a sigh of relief when they pass or begin wringing their hands when they fail. Passing means freedom from scrutiny for another 364 days. Failing means “do or die” for that school’s teachers and administrators. As simplistic as this description is, the pressures and emotions are all very real. This is what thousands of educators and students are subjected to each year in the name of high-stakes, accountability testing.

The high-stakes, accountability testing notion has gained considerable momentum and leverage within the last decade. Politicians have pushed this movement through with claims of dysfunctional schools and poorly educated students as described in *A Nation at Risk*. Despite the volumes that have been written disproving these claims, it appears that there will be no turning back. The battle cry has been sounded: our students are ill-prepared, and the inadequate public school system is to blame. With the recent approval of the “No Child Left Behind Act,” it also appears that there is no slowing down the practice of high-stakes, accountability testing.

Unfortunately, this movement has done much more harm than good. High-stakes testing has created low teacher morale in an already thankless occupation. It has forced many teachers and administrators to throw the essence of pedagogy out the window as they “teach to the test” in order to avoid sanctions and to get

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The high-stakes, accountability testing notion has gained considerable momentum and leverage within the last decade. Politicians have pushed this movement off “The List.” It has shifted the view of teaching and learning from a dynamic interaction between child, teacher, and information to a mechanical formula of inputs and outputs. It has created a false belief that the complex acts of teaching and learning are quantifiable—that the factors that impact learning can be reduced to a simple, controlled, and clean equation. In unprecedented ways, it has placed children in the middle of a turf war. They are the real victims of this high-stakes, accountability testing movement.

Teachers have long been taken for granted. Maybe that is to be expected in a country where every student, regardless of race, religion, or disability, has to go to school. It’s not a privilege; it’s the law. Most adults would not consider spending six hours each day for 186 days with 25 or more children a dream job. Yet, the strange anomaly in this country is that the teachers
upon whom other occupations depend, are themselves the least appreciated. Every employer seeking productive employees is counting on teachers to instill in every future adult at least the ability to read and write, regardless of the individual’s background and/or capability.

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**The current testing movement has forced teachers and administrators to choose between best practice in pedagogy and “teaching to the test.”**

Politicians argue that since *A Nation at Risk* has proven that our educational system is in a state of crisis and cannot get its act together, schools must be tested into compliance. After all, isn’t this the approach teachers use to determine if students are studying and learning? Why not turn the tables on teachers to achieve the same results? Test schools to see if teachers are teaching and students are learning. Thus, the strategy of choice is a high-stakes, accountability test. Politicians continue to ignore the possibility that schools could “get their acts together” if they were not hamstrung by political mandates and irrational expectations.

Unfortunately, this mentality, with all its distortions, is harming educators, students, and learning. Rather than “getting serious” about teaching (as if they weren’t serious already), teachers are losing heart. The implied message to teachers is “You are no longer to be trusted.” In a public and political forum with the attention of the entire nation, teachers have been branded as inept. The message from the media is clear: disregard teachers’ genuine intentions and efforts; tests have revealed the “true” results. The curtains have been pulled back, revealing teachers who are irresponsible and students who aren’t learning.

The political solution is to mandate an annual testing event. The results from a testing event that lasts about three hours are used to assess the effectiveness of the 1080 instructional hours that teachers invest in their students during the school year. Politicians seem to have forgotten that, when they were students, teachers never judged their abilities on just one test given once a year. They were much more fortunate. When they were students, their teachers used an abundance of formal and informal assessment tools each day to determine grades.

In addition to lowering teacher morale, the state legislature’s pressures on teaching and learning have impacted a whole generation of parents who are suddenly thrown into a frenzy over high-stakes test scores. With lists of scores, parents are now armed to compare one school to another and one district to another. With little background in assessment and sound testing practices, parents and other community members simply compare scores with little regard to standard deviation, validity, representation, and standard error. What seems to matter is that a score of 152 is better than a score of 153 and that is enough for bragging rights. Parents and community members now demand to know why local students are scoring below their counterparts. Why aren’t they “better” than the neighboring district? With the politicians endorsing comparisons and with logic thrown out the window, school districts had better score higher each year than the previous year or else. Forget the notion that each group of students brings a different level of needs and performance abilities. Forget the idea that students differ from year to year. The mantra for student learning has become the athlete’s creed at the recent Winter Olympics: “Faster. Stronger. Higher.”

Taking this analogy a step further, imagine that in the year 2003, the new political platform is “No Child Left Panting Behind.” This bold initiative mandates that the burgers-and-fries-eating students of the U.S. will no longer be overweight when compared to their non-burger-and-fries-eating counterparts in other countries. U.S. students will no longer be left clutching their sides in the one-mile run. U.S. students will no longer be left hanging on the chin-up bar. U.S. students will no longer remain prone on their backs, wondering what their feet look like in the sit-up competition. All students will be subjected to the same strict regimen of diet and exercise. A state standardized program for all students approved by state legislatures will be used in all classrooms. Every year in April, regardless of differences in physical stature, fitness, and conditions, all students will take the new Illinois Physical Achievement Test. Each school’s average score will be publicized and those schools not meeting the minimum will be subjected to sanctions because those schools obviously did not do their jobs in getting their students
into shape. This hypothetical policy clearly ignores research-based, best practice in diet and exercise, and would not provide an accurate measure of the work that teachers put into their fitness programs. Yet the objections, questions, and issues raised in this analogy apply directly to high-stakes, accountability testing practices in states across our nation.

The current testing movement has forced teachers and administrators to choose between best practice in pedagogy and "teaching to the test." Educational experts, corporations, and futurists all describe a need for 21st century pedagogy that encourages students to work cooperatively, solve problems, gather-analyze-synthesize information, and communicate findings. This type of learning requires teachers to serve as facilitators and guides who help students grow at their own rates and in their relative areas of intelligences. It requires that teachers structure curriculum, pedagogy, and time frames to fit the child, rather than trying to fit the child into a rigid system. The constant in best practice is achievement, not time. All students are expected to reach specified levels of competency, but within their own time frames. This is the defining difference between education and pedagogy in best practice versus education and pedagogy in the high-stakes, accountability world.

Educational needs have shifted dramatically. In the Industrial Age, a grade school education providing knowledge of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic was sufficient. The educational system was set up to sort students, identifying those who were "intellectually capable" of continuing "up the ladder" and weeding out "less capable students" for the abundant industrial or agricultural blue collar jobs that offered a measure of success and security. Fast forward to the year 2002, and things have changed dramatically. In the current Information/Technology Age, a grade school education is insufficient; a high school education, at the very least, is required for a "good life." Jobs have changed. Companies and positions never dreamed of in the Industrial Age have been created. Yet the current educational system maintains its Industrial Age mentality, holding time frames and achievement levels constant in order to weed out less capable students in an era when weeding is no longer acceptable. All children must learn a certain prescribed standard by the same day, month, and year, or else.

The high-stakes, accountability supporters, who insist on holding achievement levels and time frames constant, have created an educational pressure cooker. Best practice dictates that if time is held constant for all students, the level of achievement should be individualized or variable; conversely, if the level of achievement is held constant for all students, the time frame for accomplishing goals should be individualized. High-stakes, accountability testing does neither. It holds both time and achievement constant; thus, creating a "do or die" mentality. Coaches and athletes have long known that too much stress, like too little stress, can yield poor performance. Optimum outcomes require a balance of rigor and challenge. Yet those who support high-stakes, accountability testing believe that high pressure, standardized achievement and standardized time frames yield success. This pressure cooker mentality is better suited for making pot roast than for teaching students.

The notion of high-stakes, accountability testing short-changes the value of education and creates in students an acquired dislike for learning. Student views are shaped by the assumption that learning is quantifiable and justifiable by a score. They come to believe that if they don't get "The Score," they haven't learned. As educators, we know that learning is not an "all-or-nothing" concept. Rather, it is a process—an ongoing, life-long process—with many facets that are all interwoven.

There is a powerful transformation that occurs in individuals when they understand that everyone, and I mean everyone, can learn given the flexibility to develop and learn at their own pace. We see this process with children's developmental milestones. We would never expect all children to begin to walk, talk, and read at exactly the same age. Yet we expect millions of students in the state of Illinois to acquire skills at the same time in major content areas. These false expectations lead many children to wonder if there is something wrong with them if they are not catching on as quickly as others. Their confidence in themselves and their hopes of success are slowly
eroded. That's the real tragedy. It is very difficult to rebuild student hope and confidence after it has been destroyed year after year, high-stakes test after high-stakes test in the public schools. As politicians mandate more and more high-stakes, accountability testing, fear and frustration replace students' hope and curiosity.

High-stakes, accountability testing addresses a legitimate need for accountability. I am not against accountability or testing. Each provides information that can be useful to educators. However, I am against using measurement standards suitable for making watches and widgets on children and teachers, and branding an entire school as "successful" or "a failure" based upon the results of one, high-stakes, accountability test. If politicians want accountability, they need to talk to our students. They need to listen to them read. They need to sit with the parents and ask about the growth they've seen over the years. Children are all different. They have unique interests, strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and abilities. Contrary to the assumptions of high-stakes testers, learning is not a competition with winners and losers. Unfortunately, there are no winners in the high-stakes, accountability game. There are only losers—our children, our teachers, and our future.

High-stakes, accountability sacrifices children, teachers, and learning on the altar of politics and self-justification. For real accountability, come out to the schools. Talk with our students. Talk with our teachers. Talk with our parents. Are our students smarter in May than they were in September? Have our students experienced more and understood more? Have they been challenged more each year? Have the doors of learning been opened for them? The answer is a resounding "Yes," and that is all the accountability we need.

Reference

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A Room with a View: Reflections from a First Grade Teacher

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I have just completed my fifth year of teaching. My class this past year, like every other year, was comprised of a mosaic of personalities and abilities. Of this group of twenty-one students, one, lacking the readiness for first grade, returned to kindergarten within the first two weeks of school. Three had case studies done to discover why learning seemed difficult. Of these, one was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome, another with learning disabilities, and a third, already receiving the maximum speech services allowable, will be retained. A fifth student with severe learning disabilities returned to our school after a year in developmental first grade. These students comprised one fourth of my class. In addition to the children who needed modifications to the regular curriculum, I had several exceptional learners who needed to be challenged in both reading and math. As for first graders who might be considered to have an “average” profile, I had about nine.

This was not an unusual class; in fact, it is fairly typical. Both of my colleagues in first grade had similar dynamics in their classrooms. So, when I hear talk about standards and I see only a few students in each classroom who fit a standard profile, I am left wondering how the state and, in turn, individual school districts, plan to measure and celebrate the progress of the rest? I believe in developing consistent expectations for learning outcomes for all students, and I support the movement towards establishing standards in schools.

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As school districts scurry to meet state standards, they have adopted new curricula. Since I began teaching five years ago, I have taught three different math curricula and been introduced to the same number of alternatives for teaching reading. I have taught seven different units in science and a new social studies curriculum. In addition, I have been asked to meet new standards in computer science but have not been provided with adequate instructional tools. Instructional time in math has doubled, and our new science curriculum’s instructional time has increased by one third. In addition, we are required to spend the equivalent of one hour a week in the computer lab teaching skills which may or may not be integrated with other curricular areas. These increases have taken place without any change in the instructional requirements in other subjects, not to mention without extending the school day. In our district, there are an average 395 minutes in the school day. Of those 395 minutes, approximately 70 minutes are spent at lunch, recess, taking attendance, going to the bathroom and having a snack. That leaves 325 minutes for instruction. In order to teach the state-required curriculum, we need an average 340 minutes, an estimate that does not take into account assemblies, computer lab, library time, or even something as simple as transition time from one activity to another. As we continue to operate in a system where there is more and more to teach, we are constantly trying to maximize our time.

What is the result of this breakneck pace? I have the feeling on some days that I am dragging six-year-olds through a curriculum and that I am not focusing on children’s holistic needs. There is no time anymore for

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"show and tell" in first grade. Although I understand that brain research has told us that children are ready for more academic challenges earlier than we may have thought, I feel that some of the "push" has taken away from our students' time to be little children. I am devoted to helping children grow intellectually, emotionally and physically. That is why I became a teacher. But, I cringe when parents of an academically talented child want to know what I will do to challenge that child. I cringe, not because I do not want to provide the child with the best education possible, but because there is so much more to childhood, and indeed life itself, than academic challenge. I cringe because of the incredible pressure some people in my community feel for the making of an exceptional child.

There are many moments during the day when I would like to just let the children share their stories; but that takes away from the instructional time teachers and administrators are directed to maximize. I take my students out for a 15-20 minute recess every afternoon because I feel they need that time to recharge both their physical and intellectual engines. Yet, I feel guilty that this time takes away from classroom instruction, and I worry that administrators may feel it is frivolous. Many times during the day, I redirect children so they don't waste time telling me a little story. Often I have to cut short an enthusiastic discussion because we just don't have time. Little children could spend the day telling their stories or sharing their experiences. I hurry them all day long. Time to share and time to play are the casualties of the curriculum explosion brought on by high-stakes testing and the standards movement in education. Establishing standards is not the problem. Developing targets and assessing progress is a critical element of quality education. But the resulting curriculum explosion, a reaction to meeting the standards, is a problem. My students and I must cope with the treadmill-like atmosphere this explosion creates on a daily basis.

The manner in which children's progress is assessed in school is constantly under revision. It is not an exact science because there is no absolute, constant to choose as a measure in children's development. It is necessary, however, to establish criteria for measuring success towards attaining specific educational learning outcomes. The standards movement in education has made an attempt to achieve this goal. One outcome is unwieldy curricula; another, not quite so tangible, is the segmentation of developmental growth into a rigid, and potentially unforgiving framework. This framework becomes particularly unforgiving when it is attached to high-stakes tests which determine children's futures and govern their self-concepts. So far, first-graders in my district are not affected directly by this testing, but early primary teachers are responsible for preparing their students for later success none the less. We spend hours of time evaluating student work in math and writing during inservice days to make sure that we are teaching what children need to succeed on state tests.

What becomes apparent to teachers as they discuss student work and reflect on children in their classrooms is that success will depend, in large part, on students' stages of intellectual, emotional and physical development. All children have their own time-clocks which allow them to learn at individually appropriate rates. The developmental stages of pre-operational, concrete operations, and formal operations made famous by Jean Piaget encompass broad age ranges. Yet, state standards and testing pigeonhole cognitive development into narrow age brackets and then evaluate success in terms of meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet predetermined norms. This system does not take into consideration the vast diversity within any group of children of the same age. Instituting standards and implementing high-stakes testing will not begin to address fairly the significant differences in rates of development in childhood. Nor will these policies change the economic and social divisions that impact a child's ability to meet educational goals.

One alternative to this unforgiving, standardized framework would be the implementation of a developmental continuum that indicates children's development within particular disciplines. Targeted learning outcomes for each year and appropriate assessments would be used to determine students' locations on the continuum. The emphasis would be on each child's growth along the continuum, not on rankings based on national norms. This approach might also entail multi-age classrooms rather than classrooms comprised of all children the same age.

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For the last few years, some teachers and administrators in our school have toyed with the idea of multi-age groupings for math, assessed according to a continuum. Students would receive a beginning, developing, or secure rating on the various concepts that are taught each quarter. Children who are secure in most concepts in first grade would be able to progress to the next level, even though based on their age they should still be in first grade math. On the other end of the spectrum, children who are at beginning stages in math concepts taught in first grade would participate in the kindergarten math curriculum. Teaching children according to their abilities on a developmental continuum that theoretically extends into adulthood would demonstrate respect for the process of learning and help students to see education as a life-long endeavor.

The standards movement has had a positive impact in bringing to the forefront again the importance of continuity in expectations as well as the need to develop appropriate targets for learning and assessment. The debates and discussions resulting from such movements are always thought provoking and generally inspire change in America’s public schools. Yet, in my opinion, the standards movement at the state and federal level is attempting to promote uniformity in an educational system that is far from uniform. Not only are educational opportunities for children in America not uniform, but the talents and abilities of the children in our schools vary widely. State standards can help us formulate a developmental continuum in all curricular areas, but individual districts and schools should decide how to teach and how to assess achievement.

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Teachers as Indigenous Peoples: 
A Commentary on the Shortcomings and 
Possibilities of Educational Research

Darren Pascavage
ISC, Educational Consulting Firm

I hold a Ph.D. in social foundations of education from a large, urban university. My program of study focused on philosophy of education and quantitative methods of educational research. In my professional life, I am a consultant and secondary school administrator whose duties involve evaluation, measurement, and assessment,—in other words, practical inquiry carried out primarily via the techniques of educational research.1 The latter role generates many questions that the terminal degree is supposed to prepare me to answer. Often things go as planned, particularly when I am approached by teachers with questions regarding the ways in which they might inquire into what occurs in their classrooms. Typically, I am able to give the correct answer—correct inasmuch as concerns regarding appropriate experimental design, methods of data collection, and means of data analysis are properly addressed.

The quantitative tradition in educational research and the positivist approach to research, generally, stand in contrast to the more recent qualitative turn in educational research.2

Now, as I have already stated, my own background is in quantitative methods, and I am generally confident that a quantitative approach to inquiry can be useful in addressing many important questions in education. Nevertheless am troubled by concerns about the extent to which quantitative research adequately serves the needs of classroom practitioners. Foremost among these concerns is this: It seems to me that the dominant conversation about educational research is quantitative insofar as it is primarily concerned with measurement, generally, and measuring student achievement, specifically. Yet the classroom is not merely or even primarily quantitative, inasmuch as quantitative in a research sense follows from a positivist ontology.

I also teach graduate-level, educational research courses for practicing educators at the same university where I earned my doctorate. Students in these courses typically begin knowing little about methods of research but having firm convictions about the philosophical disposition that they expect to find in research. Briefly, their expectation is that research is (quite appropriately) positivistic, and they hold to this expectation rather strongly when asked to consider the possibility that non-positivist kinds of research might have something to offer as well. The distinction drawn here can be made more explicit by noting that the quantitative tradition in educational research and the positivist approach to research, generally, stand in contrast to the more recent qualitative turn in educational research.3

Teachers have personalities; teachers come to know students as individuals with unique identities; and the class itself may take on a kind of group personality, such that, for example, teachers speak of their fourth period class as being "interested" or "cranky" or "jovial." Furthermore, these concepts are dynamic: Teachers have good days and bad days, students can change identities, and classes can change personalities from year to year and even from day to day. Much of what goes on in classrooms is somewhat unpredictable and beyond the control of the teacher as researcher. This lack of control is fundamentally discordant with

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positivism.

I cannot help but wonder if the very nature of quantitative inquiry—with an emphasis on some degree of control of variables, assumptions about what one knows about the relationships between variables, and a predilection for models—fits the ways that students and teachers interact with each other, with the course content, and with the school environment broadly rendered. If teachers view research and researchers as driven by a positivist ontology while at the same time believing that education is decidedly non-positivist, it should not be surprising that research findings are viewed with a considerable amount of skepticism.

Graduate students who are practicing educators, when asked to characterize research, invariably and confidently offer a characterization that renders research in a positivistic light. When subsequently asked whether such research has proven useful to them as classroom practitioners, they will invariably and confidently answer no. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that a great many classroom teachers do not read current research, do not see much value in research, do not know as much about research as they think they do, and would be reluctant to engage in research if encouraged to do so. Each of these conclusions concerns me. If the belief (held by teachers) is that research cannot serve their needs and if this belief is in any way troublesome for those interested in the research/practice connection, two plausible means of remedy emerge. One can grant that these teachers are correct and re-examine what researchers can do to improve the situation. Alternatively, one can argue that these teachers are incorrect, and work to change their view of research and its appropriate use. This essay will presume the former and argue accordingly, suggesting one means of addressing this problem.

"Ask Questions that Matter, and Give Me Answers I Can Use": Considering the Limits of Research

If one admits that a positivist approach to research is fundamentally limited in what it can reasonably be expected to do, and if one is genuinely interested in helping others to improve their classroom practice, one ought to search for alternatives to overcome the limits of using any particular approach to inquiry (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996). These alternatives should yield results that are useful for practitioners and valued by administrators at all levels. This last point is important, for if the expectation is that such research is actually going to be carried out, it must be supported and/or funded by someone. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the willingness of federal agencies and independent foundations to fund research, and the tendency of school and district level bureaucrats to support research in schools, is strongly related to the degree to which such research is expected to serve some useful end.

Of course, the irony of utility in this case is that research that appears to have some practical import but is ignored by practitioners is, in the end, not useful at all. In other words, if researchers think that their research is useful for practitioners but said research is not read, used, or considered by practitioners, then it is not useful for practitioners. The existing research that identifies a growing chasm between what educational researchers do at the university and what classroom teachers do in the course of their professional practice confirms this as a problem facing researchers (Bracey, 1998; Bennett, 1994; Hallinan, 1996; Miller, 1999).

As I considered possible solutions to this problem, I had occasion to read Linda Tuhiwai Smith's Decolonizing Methodologies (1999). Smith argues persuasively that research on indigenous peoples has traditionally served to disconnect the subjects of research from the knowledge that such research is alleged to have produced. Following Smith's lead, I wish to introduce and then extend a metaphor whereby classroom teachers, as individuals located within a particular school culture and as a collective whole constituting and defining that culture, are likened to indigenous peoples. This rendering suggests that the failure of educational research to have much influence on the professional (cultural) practices of teachers stems, in part, from the failure of educational researchers to fully consider, respect, and understand the culture of the researched.

Smith highlights the failure of research to impact indigenous peoples in positive ways in the following comments. Here I would urge the reader to consider replacing indigenous peoples with teachers to understand the links between what Smith (1999) says about the Maori, as a particular example of indigenous people, and classroom teachers:

At a common-sense level, research was talked about both in terms of its absolute
worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs. "We are the most researched people in the world" is a comment I have heard frequently from several different indigenous communities. The truth of such a comment is unimportant: What does need to be taken seriously is the sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research that the message conveys. (p. 3)

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**What the inclusion of narrative research can do is link the objective, quantitative observations made by researchers with subjective, narrative observations made by teachers and students.**

What Smith identifies as a problem with researching the Maori and other indigenous peoples is, at its root, an issue of cultural (mis)understanding, which also plagues educational researchers. What I am suggesting is that notion of classroom culture is too often ignored by quantitative researchers who may view culture as a threat to validity rather than an integral part of a study. It is not necessary to know exactly what the culture of a particular school or classroom is in order to acknowledge that each school or classroom has a culture. This culture is informed, to varying degrees, by the outside community, by the students, by the administration, and by the classroom teacher (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995; Floro-Ruane, 2001). Integral parts of the school or classroom culture include, but are not limited to, expectations (writ large), attitudes towards written work, and social roles. Again, the goal here is not to explain exactly what the school culture might be in a given situation but to force a recognition that each school or classroom has a culture and that each school or classroom culture may be unique. It stands to reason that teachers, as members of the cultural group, can be seen as indigenous to their particular milieu. Educational researchers, then, can choose to acknowledge, consider, or ignore culture by degrees, but the consequences of this choice bear considerably on the way that members of the culture—namely, teachers—will likewise choose to receive, warily consider, or ignore the research.

**"You Don’t Know Me, and I Don’t Know You": Research Reconsidered**

In *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Smith challenges researchers to approach their work with indigenous peoples in ways that are "respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful" (p. 9). In the same way that teachers can be metaphorically rendered as indigenous, they can be considered colonized. Consider the degree to which classroom culture is shaped not by the social group that occupies the physical space of the classroom but, rather, by the imposition of behavioral norms and expectations, policy and curricular mandates, and bureaucratic pressure from outside and above. That these forces are often informed by the very research that teachers now currently reject only substantiates the claim.

What the inclusion of narrative research can do is link the (presumed) objective, quantitative observations made by researchers with (again, presumed) subjective, narrative observations made by teachers and students. The point would be to provide a more complete picture of what occurs in the classroom, and more importantly, a more authentic account that, I contend, would carry greater credibility with practitioners and perhaps "decolonize" the art and science of educational research.

Take, for example, the possibility that narrative research—a decidedly non-positivist approach to inquiry—might have something to offer even the most ardent positivist. Recognizing that the focus of much educational research is on the improvement of student achievement, consider the somewhat strange but nonetheless vital question, "How can narrative research improve student achievement?" I call this a strange question because student achievement is typically defined in narrow quantitative ways, while narrative research is considered far from quantitative. Despite this apparent incongruity, I believe the question has an answer that is not at all strange. That answer is to reconsider the culture of schools and of teachers, in
particular, in ways that permit narrative to serve two purposes. The first is as the means by which quantitative researchers would share their “findings” about classroom experiences—not just the numbers, or the observed behaviors, but their impressions of what meaning the numbers carry and what significance their observations should be understood to convey. This kind of meta-narrative by the researcher might serve to “depositivize” and contextualize both the findings and the means by which the findings were, for lack of a better word, found. The second purpose that narrative can serve is to relate the perspective of the researcher with the perspective of the researched—teachers, perhaps, or students, as appropriate.

After I had spent a few months examining and analyzing standardized test data for a lead administrator at a school, he observed a sharp difference between the performance of students in different classes within the same grade level. In no time at all, the question, “Does this indicate a problem?” moved toward “Should the teacher whose students scored lower be dismissed?” Rather than addressing the question directly, I asked what else was known about the teacher in question and her approach to students. “Oh, she is loved by her students,” said the administrator.

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**I am interested in replacing indoctrination with inclusion, making teachers a part of the research process in order for their accounting of events, outcomes, and results to be shared with other practitioners.**

“Her classroom is warm and inviting, and students enjoy being there. I’ve observed her many times myself and have never had any reason to think that she wasn’t competent. But now...” I observed that the non-quantitative evidence of the teacher’s adequacy seemed strong, especially given that the administrator had, prior to my analyses, no reason to question her ability as a teacher. This kind of evidence, I argued, had to count at least as much as test scores in evaluating the value of the teacher to the school. The administrator, apparently somewhat relieved, agreed, and later expressed some surprise that a statistician would place less emphasis on the data than on subjective evaluations of teacher quality. Lost in that comment is the possibility that data could mean more than mere numbers, that non-quantitative data could be helpful in answering important questions, or that a combined consideration of all of the available information might provide the most complete rendering of the situation at hand. To the extent that this administrator’s question about the effectiveness of a teacher is properly located in the realm of educational research, it seems absolutely necessary to find ways of making sense of both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of the educational milieu.

I am well aware that this suggestion complicates, rather than simplifies, the process of educational research, but I am not interested in mere simplification. Indeed, by complicating the research process, one arrives at a more complete picture of education—a phenomenon which itself is complicated. I envision an educational research report that includes the kind of well-defined, procedural methodology that is so often the norm with quantitative research along with an accompanying and parallel narrative that describes, explores, and critiques the research process from its formulation to its conclusion (See, for example, Lather & Smithies, 1997).

My notion of teacher inclusion in educational research is fundamentally different from some teacher-as-researcher programs that typically attempt to merely indoctrinate teachers into existing research paradigms. Instead, I am interested in replacing indoctrination with inclusion, making teachers a part of the research process in order for their accounting of events, outcomes, and results to be shared with other practitioners who might find their interpretation to be useful given their own situations. This kind of considered narrative—a kind of story-telling, to be sure—is but one way that the narrative form might be used to link practitioners with researchers, and with research as product.

Recalling my own research training, I can think of no course, textbook, or professor who even so far as intimated that the stories that researchers tell about research might be an important part of the process. Anyone who has spent some time in a faculty lounge or after-school meeting knows that stories are a means (some might say the primary means) by which teachers communicate (Bullard, 1998; Friedus, 1997; Raphael, 1997; Smithies, 1997).
1985; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000; Rummel & Quintero, 1997; Spouse, 1999; Zawacki, 1998). If researcher "stories"—that is, research narratives—were included as a part of what I still believe to be useful and important quantitative research, I suspect that the work I have been trained to do as a quantitative researcher would be more relevant, more accessible, more palatable, and ultimately more useful to my colleagues in schools. At the very least, the process of research would become less threatening as teachers gained familiarity with the work of researchers. The onus is thus placed on educational researchers to find ways of making this happen.

Conclusion

In this essay I have made two claims, both linked to the notion of narrative research as holding some promise for the improvement of research and both motivated by a sense that educational research does not impact the classroom practice of teachers. The first claim, predicated on the belief that narrative as a form of research has much to offer in exploring the phenomena that occur daily in schools, is that teachers naturally use a form of narrative in sharing experiences with each other. They might, therefore, find narrative research more palatable than other research types. The second claim is that narrative can be used to enhance quantitative research by helping to "lift the veil," exposing the thoughts and ruminations of the researcher, again making the process of research less threatening to teachers as consumers of research.

The quantitative-qualitative divide in research sets up a tension between the quantitative researcher as positivist and the classroom teacher as more of an interpretivist. Importantly, this tension, which is similar to the cultural and ontological divide that separates the researcher from the indigenous native in Smith's Decolonizing Methodologies (1999), weakens the impact of educational research on classroom practice. In endeavoring to make educational research more meaningful, one could argue in favor of colonizing the natives—training teachers to be researchers in the hope of developing an appreciation for research. I contend that such a solution would make it difficult to distinguish the poison from the cure. The challenge that I offer to aspiring researchers is to broaden the scope of what qualifies as good research, where good means not just paradigmatically or methodologically sound, but also practically useful and liable to result in improvements in education. This is, after all, what educational research is supposed to do. That it now falls short of its goal indicates that the colonizers need to reconsider their intentions with respect to, and their attitudes towards, the "indigenous peoples" that now populate American classrooms.

Endnotes

1 I assert that the terms evaluation, measurement, and assessment fall under the broader heading of research inasmuch as each concerns inquiry into both practical and theoretical considerations of education. Although distinctions are extant, for the duration of this essay the terms research and inquiry are understood to stand in place of the terms evaluation, measurement, and assessment.

2 Definitions of positivism as a research disposition abound. Lorraine Rumbel Gay and Peter Airasian have offered the following: "Underlying quantitative research methods is the belief or assumption that we inhabit a relatively stable, uniform, and coherent world that can be measured, understood, and generalized about. This view, which the field of education adopted from the natural sciences, holds that the world and the laws that govern it are relatively stable and predictable, and they can be understood by scientific examination. In this quantitative—also called positivist—perspective of research, claims about the world are not considered meaningful unless they can be verified through direct observation. This approach to research has been and continues to be the dominant one in education" (1996, p. 9).

3 For a hint of what such a parallel narrative might look like, see Patti Lather & Chris Smithies, Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS. Lather and Smithies literally divide their text horizontally across the page; the top of the page carrying the transcript of their sessions with HIV-positive women, and the bottom of the page carrying their reactions to the transcribed text. The effect is to permit the reader to gather a sense of the thoughts of the researcher as the researchers engage the subjects in interviews. It is a novel and compelling format.

References


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Democratic Schooling and the Everyday: The Intersection of Theory and Practice

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Analyses in this nation about the failure of schools and the failure of citizenship encompass a broad ideological range. Reformers on the Left and the Right, seeing a significant relationship between schools and citizenship, disagree not only about the purposes of schooling, but about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as well. Many debates about school reform tend to center around standards, accountability, and assessment while the role of democracy is lost, not just in our rhetoric but in our educational practice (Carlson & Apple, 1998; Kohn, 1999).

Walter Parker (1996a) writes that educating children for democracy “is central to the rationale for public education in the U.S.” (p. 3). Indeed, from its inception, public schooling has been wrapped in the mission and promise of democracy. This school mission of developing democratic citizens has been resilient and is one democratic societies take for granted at their own peril. In the American culture the rhetoric of democracy enjoys significant currency. Yet, in practice, this democratic purpose “has been tucked safely away in the rationale and mission statements of school-district curriculum guidelines” (p. 11). It is, however, a serious intellectual and political error to ignore or minimize the deeply conflicting, ideological assumptions about democracy embedded both in schools and in the broader culture. To assert, as Parker does, that “democratic educators of all stripes want schools that foster thoughtful citizens” fails to fully apply his own insightful critique which suggests that in the arena of citizenship education “the Right stresses socialization and the Left [stresses] critique” (p. 16). While Parker may be correct in his assertion that both socialization and critique are important, I would argue that students must be allowed, first and foremost, to explore, question, and challenge the assumptions and values upon which their society is based.

My own experiences as a student and, for over 20 years, as a teacher have led me to the belief that the goal of socialization has effectively suppressed the essential goal of critique in public education. Schools do not serve the interests of democratic citizenship. Rather, schools serve to strategically inhibit the skills and attributes required of citizens in a democratic society. This assertion flies in the face of our cultural mythology about the transformative power of education; yet it is borne out in the everyday experiences of students, parents, and teachers.

Democratic and Schooling: Critical Citizens

Democratic schools require the creation of a democratic pedagogy, beginning with an understanding of, and commitment to, the complexities of democratic citizenship. Henry Giroux (1999) writes that a “viable notion of critical agency, independent thought, and social responsibility” are essential citizenship skills (p. 52). Consequently, democratic pedagogy involves, first and foremost, skills in critical analysis—particularly, in a Freirean sense, skills in critically reading the “world” (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Democratic education engages students in inquiry that encourages them to critically interrogate rather than passively assimilate the established canon. Henry Giroux (1999) writes that a “viable notion of critical agency, independent thought, and social responsibility” are essential citizenship skills (p. 52). Consequently, democratic pedagogy involves, first and foremost, skills in critical analysis—particularly, in a Freirean sense, skills in critically reading the “world” (Apple & Beane, 1995).
bridge between the discourse of students and that of teacher-talk (Shor, 1992, p. 255). Democratic pedagogy, recognizing that “dominant” truths are produced within discourses that serve some interests over others, places teachers outside the official reading of texts and alongside students (Carlson, 1997, pp. 2-3).

Joe Kincheloe (1999) writes specifically about the teaching of social studies and points to the importance of providing opportunities for students to stand back from the social world they inhabit and to examine it from different perspectives. Schools in a democracy, writes Kincheloe, should “help children and young people gain the capacity for interpretation and critique by examining the beliefs which are imposed by their environment” (p. 61). Democratic schooling, then, does not presuppose core knowledge, nor does it prescribe the boundaries of thought.

**Democracy and Schooling: A Critical View**

The ideological characteristics embedded in schools provide significant barriers to the development of democratic pedagogy and processes. In the intersection between the workings of schools, the economy, and an increasingly commodified culture of consumption, I find three interrelated components that are particularly present and potent in schools.

The first of these components involves control over knowledge and the use of knowledge as an apparatus of power. The movement toward core knowledge is a movement toward a packaged, commodified, verifiable truth. Content-driven pedagogy places schools squarely in the role of maintaining and naturalizing dominant cultural views. Linda McNeil’s classic study, *Contradictions of Control* (1986), illustrates the ways in which teachers, when threatened with critical analysis within their own classrooms, often redirect discourse back to the “safe” knowledge embedded within textbooks and narrowly prescribed curriculum guides.

A second hegemonic element is the view that students are intellectually and ideologically vulnerable. The effort to control knowledge is connected to immediate issues of social and even physical control; reverting to “safer” content is often rationalized as developmentally appropriate. Henry Giroux (1999) links this factor to a larger cultural process he calls the “politics of innocence” (p. 30). Children, the argument goes, must be protected from ideas, perspectives, and even information that fall outside of the educational or societal mainstream. For schools, the effect of this “politics of innocence” is a “whitewashing” of culture and history.

Thirdly, when students, parents, or other teachers call for more equitable institutional practices, many administrators and teachers assume a professional identity that ignores power and denies the negotiated nature of democratic process. This response supports a pedagogy that suffocates critical inquiry. When educators position themselves as neutral and objective, they deny the very real power relations that are operating to support dominant political, economic, and ideological interests.

**Knowledge as an Apparatus of Power**

Donaldo P. Macedo (1999) examines the process by which our educational system utilizes an instrumentalist approach that results in “stupidification” (p. 39). The goal of education, given an instrumentalist approach grounded in economic rationality, is to increase access to jobs and enhance global competitiveness. This approach to education promotes Freire’s banking concept and results in the delivery of “predetermined bodies of knowledge...often disconnected from students’ social realities” (p. 39). “Banking” inhibits students’ capacity to “read the world” critically and to “understand the reasons and linkages behind the facts” (p. 37). This reproductive function of education serves to “anesthetize students’ critical abilities” (p. 39).

Henry Giroux (1999) suggests that corporate culture has served to “blur the distinction between public and private, entertainment and history, critical citizenship and consumption” (p. 79). Giroux points to the educational significance of reducing civic responsibilities to “acts of consuming” (p. 64). A civic culture that locates citizens as consumers/spectators represents a democratic minimalism consistent with a pedagogy of socialization over a pedagogy of critique (Parker 1996b, p. 189).

**Student Vulnerability, Teacher Neutrality, and the Politics of Innocence**

The belief in the ideological vulnerability of young people manifests itself in the media and in schools as a “politics of innocence” (Giroux, 1999, p. 30). “Innocence,” Giroux writes, “serves as a rhetorical device that cleanses the Disney image of the messiness of commerce, ideology, and power” (p. 30). The Disney Corporation’s use of innocence as a cultural metaphor...
has served to position childhood outside the domain of the political and has spawned a fantasy industry that rewrites history, removing conflict and oppression. School classrooms, much like the Disney Corporation, have become the “magic mirror” of the white, suburban middle class—reflecting back a version of America that is non-ideological and devoid of conflict (p. 64).

Already deeply embedded in America’s liberal democratic tradition of individualism is the “neutrality premise,” the idea that America is “difference blind” (Parker 1996b, 193). This blindness requires historical erasure. Schools serve a critical role in the ideological leveling of the playing field in American cultural memory as they engage in what Kincheloe (1999) terms the “depoliticization of perception” (p. 62) whereby “as the past is forgotten, its power over the present is obscured” (p. 69). Schools and other cultural outlets re-cast history as “nostalgic, sentimentalized, and conflict-free” (p. 69). “[T]he politics of innocence,” Giroux writes, “[serves] as a narrative for shaping public memory...that promote[s] a sanitized version of American history” (p. 30).

Many teachers, heavily socialized in professional neutrality, are seemingly incapable of conceiving education as ideological. Acting out of a professional sense of propriety, school personnel often attempt to preserve neutrality by avoiding controversy. Rather than embrace the heterogeneity of school communities, many educators “act against conflict, muffling or preventing it or rushing to put it out when it flames up, rather than seizing upon it to nurture diversity while working out the practices of democratic living” (Parker, 1996a, 12). School programs such as conflict resolution, diversity training, and multicultural education have become “discourses of avoidance” (Parker, 1996a, 12), draining rather than feeding the democratic lifeblood of community. A similar pattern occurs within classrooms as teachers, in an effort to create community while maintaining neutrality, steer students away from natural and democratically critical conflicts. The community that results is what M. Scott Peck (1987) calls “pseudocommunity,” characterized not by genuine respect for difference but by superficial politeness and an illusory group connectedness (p. 88). Peck reminds us that “Pseudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving” (p. 88).

**Good Citizens and Good Schools: An Educational Leader’s Perspective**

In the November 2001 issue of the National Education Association’s monthly newspaper, *NEA Today*, NEA President Bob Chase wrote that the tragic events of September 11 provided a “most important civics lesson”:

*America is not defined by its wealth and abundance, but by our freedom, our liberties, our commitment to an open, tolerant, democratic society—a society that refuses to live in fear.* (p. 1)

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**School programs such as conflict resolution, diversity training, and multicultural education have become “discourses of avoidance.”**

Chase saluted those New York City teachers and school staff members who shepherded students to safety following the terrorist attacks of September 11. Quite rightly, he lauded the efforts by teachers across the nation, who held onto little hands and provided comforting words to children whose sense of safety had been forever changed. Then Chase turned to President Bush’s call for national unity:

*As President Bush said, the terrorists attacked America because they despised our values. We will defeat this enemy by arms and law but also by holding fast to the values that define us as Americans.* (p. 2)

The schools, Chase asserts, will be on the “frontline,” pointing out to young Americans what is at stake in this effort: “freedom and American ideals”:

*For two centuries, [schools] have been the preservers and transmitters of America’s ideals; we are ‘culturally conservative’ in the*
literal, non-ideological sense. We have taught generation after generation of native-born and immigrant students to understand and respect America’s core values...the all-American values of honesty, responsibility, self-discipline, and love of country. (p. 2)

Chase provides a clear articulation of the traditional linkage between schooling and citizenship in America: Through the study of “American history, literature, and government, [students] are shaped into citizens” (p. 2). Here the goal of socialization takes precedence over the goal of analysis and critique. Chase offers no invitation to teachers and students to explore the events of September 11 from historical or cultural perspectives. Chase also implies that there is no perspective other than the one offered by President Bush. For Chase to suggest otherwise would be to violate his own identity as “professional neutral.” Is this example at all representative of how educators and schools approach the issues surrounding democratic citizenship? I would argue that the positioning of truth as non-ideological, students as ideologically vulnerable, and educators as ideologically neutral is characteristic of school curriculum and pedagogy.

**Good Citizens and Good Schools: A Case Study**

The assertions I am making here require some grounding in experience. The Cognitive Target Committee Incident below describes a series of meetings that occurred two years ago at the Midwest suburban high school where I had taught for 16 years. The analysis that follows illustrates ways in which notions of knowledge, student vulnerability, and professional neutrality combined to limit democratic practices within the context of one ill-fated, school-reform initiative.

**The Cognitive Target Committee Incident**

I began each class that eleventh day in May by pointing once again, as I had all week, to the announcement on the bulletin board. It called interested students and staff to attend an after school meeting designed to aid the efforts of the School Improvement Process Committee as it worked on the North Central Association’s (NCA) accreditation for the high school. I reminded students that the NCA Cognitive Target Committee was calling for student input in the school improvement process. Indeed, the announcement on the bulletin board referred to this as a *Learning—What’s the point?* meeting aimed specifically at eliciting student input.

An initial meeting with the same general purpose had been held several weeks earlier, but had been poorly advertised and poorly attended (8 out of 3200 students). At that meeting, students were presented with the Cognitive Target Goal developed by the faculty: Students will demonstrate an ability to apply previously acquired knowledge. The faculty facilitator asked students what the target goal meant to them. One student immediately responded with, “It makes no sense. What other kind of knowledge would you have except that which you have previously acquired?” This comment was quickly brushed aside as “off topic” because the question before the group was not whether the students agreed with the target goal but what they understood it to mean.

The nature of this response was not lost on the small group of students present at this meeting. For the next hour or so, faculty leaders found themselves having to handle a number of detailed examples of what many of these students characterized in their everyday experience as arbitrary and abusive use of assessment policies, ineffectual teaching techniques, irrelevant curricular choices, and disrespectful and demeaning teacher behavior. The students told the facilitators in no uncertain terms that they wanted an education that would focus on critical thinking skills and would allow them to encounter meaningful and significant information. Again, the facilitators deflected student points by making a list of complaints on the board and assuring students that these issues would be dealt with at subsequent meetings.

When the Cognitive Target Committee advertised for a second meeting several weeks later, a colleague of mine, Dave Matthews (Dave Matthews is a pseudonym) and I both saw an opportunity to encourage students to again raise the issues of democratic classrooms and meaningful curriculum reform that had been deflected in the earlier meeting. This time the Cognitive Target Committee engaged in a much more aggressive promotion of the meeting. There were announcements in the days preceding the meeting. Hallway bulletin boards were covered with posters that asked students *What do you think student learning should look like around here?* In the center of the poster was the same question that was advertised for the first meeting: *Learning—What’s the point?* The bottom of the poster...
informed students that refreshments would be provided, encouraged students to “Bring a friend,” and declared “We want lots of answers!” My colleague and I talked the meeting up and, as a result, attendance increased from eight students at the first meeting to 45-50 students at the second meeting.

The faculty facilitator began the meeting by presenting the cognitive target goal and announcing that the purpose of this meeting was to develop a student-generated version of this target goal. According to the agenda that was distributed as she spoke, this was to be done by dividing the students into groups. Each group would take one word of the target statement and then, using poster paper, markers, and dictionaries, rephrase the target statement—word for word. There was a noticeable murmur of dissatisfaction among the students. It was clear that the agenda presented was in stark contrast to the message of open dialogue advertised in the pre-meeting announcements.

The facilitators proceeded to divide students into groups, ushered the teaching staff into one part of the room so that we would not be working with the students, and handed out paper, markers and dictionaries. Many students moved to the middle of the room and continued to protest the process, arguing that staff members were not listening to what they were saying. The facilitator suggested that students could have input on this issue by engaging in the planned activity. One student who attempted to restate her position was told that she had already made her point and was cut off. When she began to cry out of sheer frustration, one student came forward and told the facilitator, “I know you are doing what it is you know how to do, but it is keeping you from hearing what we are saying.” In short, he was telling the facilitator she was demonstrating an ability to “apply previously acquired knowledge” but that skill was keeping her from learning from the situation at hand. The facilitator was clearly bothered by the student’s comment but made no effort to respond to his insight. At that point, many of the students left. Some poster papers did get taped to the chalkboard amid grumbles that this was a waste of time, and the meeting ended.

Once the staff had been directed to one side of the room, apart from the students, I found myself sitting next to a first-year teacher who had served on the target committee but had remained silent throughout the meeting. She seemed disturbed by the meeting and commented that it was too bad the kids were so negative. I told her it was probably the best meeting I had been to in 20 years! We spent the next hour discussing what had happened. I showed her one of the many meeting notifications posted by the committee and asked her if this flyer resembled in any way the agenda presented at the meeting. While she saw that it did not, she was reluctant to consider the possibility of a deliberate disconnect between what was “advertised” and what was planned.

She did acknowledge that several members of the Cognitive Target Committee were concerned that the committee was being “set up” for conflict. This concern may have stemmed in large part from the first meeting where students expressed their views on Learning—What’s the point? While my colleague and I were not particularly vocal at that meeting, the comments we did make served to validate a number of the concerns raised by students. Consequently, the committee saw a potential for significant conflict at the

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One student came forward and told the facilitator, “I know you are doing what it is you know how to do, but it is keeping you from hearing what we are saying.”

Sensing the discontent of the students, my colleague, Dave Matthews, raised his hand and asked if we could begin the project by working together to reword the phrase “previously acquired knowledge” because it made no sense to some students. A number of students began to complain that they had come to the meeting with the expectation that they would be able to express their views about learning within the whole group. The facilitator answered by referring to the presented agenda. When students became frustrated, the facilitator said, “We need to keep consensus here!” The use of the word “consensus” for what was clearly meant to be “order” is illustrative of the issues underlying the meeting. At that point the assistant principal for curriculum (also on the target goal committee) got up and explained to the students, once again, the task before the group and stated that the goal was already determined by the NCA process.

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second meeting. The response was a unilateral retreat from the offer of open and democratic dialogue. I would argue that this response was a comfortable one from educators whose commitment to democratic community extended only as far as the possibility of conflict.

While I was speaking with this first-year teacher, my colleague, Dave Matthews, left the meeting room in the company of several students. He later recalled that while some students seemed disillusioned with what had transpired, others were “energized” by the meeting. As he walked down the hall from the meeting room, talking with some students, one of the committee members stuck her head out of the meeting room and asked if he would join the committee’s debriefing session. On re-entering the room, Dave found himself facing the committee members who had positioned their chairs in a semi-circle facing the entrance. As he took a step or two into the room, he was accused of “setting the committee up” by sending students to the meeting with the purpose of subverting the process. The committee accused him of “orchestrating” student resistance. He had “manipulated” students into pursuing a “political” agenda and had “brainwashed” students into conflict with the committee.

Dave acknowledged that he had strongly encouraged students to attend the meeting. He argued that it was the committee and not he who had misled students about the meeting, that the flyers encouraging students to “bring answers” established an offer of open discussion that never materialized at the meeting. He argued that students did not have to be “manipulated” in order to demand that they be heard at a meeting advertised as an opportunity to be heard. As Dave left the room he encountered several of his students in the hallway. Apparently the door to the meeting room had not been closed, and the students in the hallway had heard the entire exchange.

The next day when Dave went to his mailbox he found a two-page, single-spaced letter of reprimand from the Assistant Principal, copied to the Principal. The letter raised a number of issues but focused on three central points. The first claimed:

You did not support your colleagues in a public meeting where a planned agenda was in place... You had ample opportunity to question the purpose of the agenda or the intended outcomes before the meeting took place (personal communication, May 12, 2000).

The letter cited the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development publication entitled “Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching” (Danielson, 1996). According to Rubric 4D, “Relationships with Colleagues,” a “Proficient” rating requires that “Support and cooperation characterize relationships with colleagues.” The “Unsatisfactory” rating states: “Teacher relationships with colleagues are negative or self-serving.”

The second point raised by the Assistant Principal claimed “a lack of cooperation to complete the outcomes of the meeting due to concerns that were being forwarded in the wrong place.” According to Rubric 4F, “Enhancing Professional Development” a “Proficient” rating in decision-making requires that the “teacher maintains an open mind and participates in team or departmental decision making.” The “Unsatisfactory” rating states, “Teacher makes decisions based on self-serving interests.” The third point raised by the Assistant Principal was not linked to ASCD standards, but provided a personal assessment: “I believe that there was a disservice to students because they were led to believe that they were going to participate in an activity that was never planned for” (personal communication, May 12, 2000).

Dave was called to meet with the principal and assistant principal within several days to discuss this letter of reprimand. Before that meeting took place, however, about a half dozen students arranged to meet with the Assistant Principal. These students challenged the Assistant Principal’s interpretation of what had transpired at the NCA Cognitive Target Committee’s invitational meeting and particularly the post-meeting
treatment of Dave Matthews. The assistant principal argued that this “personnel matter” was not open to discussion with students. In response, students pointed to the inconsistency between the advertised agenda of the Cognitive Target meeting and the agenda actually presented at the meeting and suggested, therefore, that the treatment of Dave Matthews overheard by students was entirely inappropriate. By the time Dave Matthews had his meeting with the Principal and Assistant Principal, the Assistant Principal did admit to issues of “miscommunication.” The administration continued to assert that Dave needed to access “proper” channels of participation in school decision-making. In other words, despite the open invitation to staff as well as students, Dave was told he should get involved with organized committees if he wished to propose and implement change in the school.

The Cognitive Target Committee: An Analysis

This episode illuminates three notions regarding knowledge, student vulnerability, and educator neutrality at work in schools. One might ask why the faculty and administrators reacted in this manner. Most of the faculty on the Target Committee were seasoned veterans. The half dozen or so committee members had, between them, over 100 years of teaching experience. These same teachers were largely assigned to teach honors level classes. They were accustomed to students who, aware of the arbitrary nature of grading, the importance of grade-point-average, and class rank, carefully monitored their interactions with faculty. The Target Committee members were accustomed to relying on structure over relationship and the use of knowledge as power over a practiced patience with process.

Why did the Committee members think they could shift the agenda from open communication to structured control? Again, one explanation rests in pedagogical practices and patterned, student responses. Retreat from conflict is a normalized response in most classrooms. By calling for consensus when faced with student resistance and the demand for more democratic processes, the faculty facilitator revealed her own and her colleagues’ discomfort with the process of dialogue and the natural conflict it engenders. The strategy of separating “activist” faculty from the students during the meeting revealed a concern about the vulnerability of the young people present. When separated from other faculty, the students could be more readily controlled: When mixed with politicized faculty, students were open to ideological contamination. I would offer that embedded in the dominant ideology of professional identity is the perceived obligation to restrict or, at least, filter controversial material. Important aspects of the ideology of professionalism act to block or submerge controversy. These aspects must be broken down if community-based dialogue is to take place in schools.

While many adults in the building concurred with the model of control associated with the target goals, this case demonstrates that many students were acting to hold the adults to an ethical standard of their own. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) suggest that in schools and outside of schools, young people are engaged in “a profound moral and ethical praxis” (p. 1). Whether recognized or not, it is still real and very much a part of the lives of young people. As democratic educators, we must continue to struggle to deconstruct the dominant narrative of democratic citizenship while we endeavor to construct counter-narratives that reveal the democratic possibilities embedded in the everyday life of schools.

Conclusion

This case study illuminates ways in which assumptions about content knowledge, student vulnerability, and teacher neutrality intersect in schools. Content knowledge serves as an apparatus of control promoting a uni-dimensional pedagogy—a pedagogy, as Noddings (1984) might say, without relatedness. When students are constructed as intellectually and ideologically vulnerable, dominant constructs of truth become pedagogically impermeable. Teachers who do not “naturalize” these constructs are viewed as “unprofessional” violators of the ethic of neutrality. Content-driven curricula thus marginalizes questions of power and resistance, normalizes existing relations, and blocks unchoreographed student inquiry.

An important step toward the democratization of society requires an interrogation of democracy in our schools. In the process of “working backwards” from schools to the larger society, we may be able to form more critical understandings of the role of dominant narratives in subverting democratic processes. We may also begin to construct counter-narratives to provide the creative and strategic insights we need to build democratic relations within and outside of schools. My experience suggests that students must not only be included but must be central to that effort.
References


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