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WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN TO DEMOCRATIZE SCHOOL REFORM?

Abstract

The goal of education is to prepare individuals for the new world of global connections, competition and the labor market by means of an educational process that works to get students ready for activity, responsibility and deliberation. Within these issues schools and teachers are the focus of much concern. Many reform efforts work to remove autonomy from the school. "Deskilling," viewing school improvement through the lens of packaged programs that work to script teachers, prescribe what they should do in their context, and pull more and more control to central authorities, is not a new phenomenon. Recently, however, teachers have been recognized as necessary leaders in school reform.

How might those based in universities proceed to work and change the situation we find in schools? Rather than one-shot, one-way school reform efforts and programs which are known to have little impact compared to long-term, collegial work, our work with schools should be based on building professional relationships. Democratic school reform is possible. By working (as it was mentioned) to link schools, universities and communities in engaged, reciprocal, networks of support we can strengthen the outcomes and the success of school reform in ways that lift up students, teachers, communities, universities and democratic societies themselves.

Abstrakt

Celem edukacji jest przygotowanie jednostek do życia w nowym świecie globalnych połączeń, konkurencji i rynku pracy za pomocą procesów edukacyjnych, które umożliwiają studentom bycie przygotowanymi do aktywności, odpowiedzialności i deliberacji. Z tego to powodu szkoły i nauczyciele są w centrum uwagi. Wiele reform polega na ograniczaniu autonomii szkół. Odbieranie nauczycielom prawa do decydowania, patrzenie na poprawę szkoły z perspektywy programów, które ograniczają nauczycieli do osób odczytujących polecenia i scenariusze oraz nakazują kolejne działania, a także w coraz większym stopniu przekazują kontrolę do urzędów centralnych, to nie nowe zjawiska. Ostatnio coraz silniej nauczyciele rozpoznawani są jako niezbędni liderzy szkolnych zmian. W jaki sposób osoby pracujące na uniwersytetach mogą podjąć wysiłek dla zmiany sytuacji w szkołach. Zamiast krótkich i prostych reform i programów, które

znane są z tego, że w porównaniu z programami długofalowymi mają niewielki wpływ, nasza praca ze szkołami powinna opierać się na relacjach profesjonalnych. Demokratyczna reforma szkoły jest możliwa. Pracując, aby połączyć szkoły, uniwersytety i społeczności w zaangażowane sieci wsparcia, możemy doprowadzić do wzmocnienia efektów i sukcesu reform w sposób, który umożliwi inspirowanie uczniów, nauczycieli, uniwersytetów i całych społeczeństw.

Contemporary Challenges as the Context for School Operation

The goal of education is to prepare individuals for the new world of global connections, competition and a labor market by means of an educational process that works to get students ready for activity, responsibility and deliberation. The ability to apply new technologies as a condition of participation in public life, as well as development of mental abilities that prepare individuals for group communication processes are on the list of essentials as well. Two other areas of skills are also necessary. These are the skills that are needed for cooperation in multicultural teams and skills that enable people to have a sense of mobility, mobility understood as the ability to actively design your own life. These designs should include answers such as: Where are you going? What will you do when you get 'there'? What conditions do you hope to create around you? How will you interact with the world? Students need openness, an understanding of other value systems, but also awareness of their own identity, autonomy and a willingness to take responsibility – all conditions that are officially declared, as or at least recommended, as priorities for education. It is possible that success in those areas will help determine the development of whole societies. So, what does it say about school? What does a 'good school' look like?

Working with Teachers and School Administrators

What is better way to work towards the development of "good schools" than to work with those who toil within them? However, "deskilling" teachers has had a long, well argued history.[1] "Deskilling," viewing school improvement through the lens of packaged programs that work to script teachers, prescribe what they should do in their context, and pull more and more control to central authorities, is not a new phenomenon. Recently, however, teachers have been recognized as necessary leaders in school reform. As previously described in Hamer, Fischer and Stewart[2] many of us have been working within what Kahne and Westheimer[3]

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[1] J. Spring, *Conflict of interest: The politics of American education*, 4th ed., McGraw-Hill, New York 2002.

[2] L. Hamer, J. Fischer and V. Stewart, *Teachers' experiences of longitudinal school reform: A phenomenological study with implications for reform efforts*, unpublished, 2007.

[3] J. Kahne & J. Westheimer, *A pedagogy of collective action and reflection: Preparing teachers for collective school leadership*, Journal of Teacher Education, 51(5), 2000, pp. 362–383.

named the "pedagogy of collective action," and have sought to create "professional development communities,"[4] with PDCs understood as groups of engaged educators who work over time to improve their pedagogy and context.

Trends in discussions about school in Europe, United States and other parts of the world, tend to focus on literacy and notions of knowledge competence. In Poland, for example, for several years, it has been claimed that school has demoralized children and teenagers, killed passion and creativity in young people, and is responsible for recreating the social injustice of the surroundings.[5] All the criticisms represent the visible condition, in which school is not able to fulfill the expectations of modern societies. Why is it that schools and society operate in this context, and what can be changed or improved?

It is not true that the crisis in education is caused by young people's deficits in the collection of appropriate information – they have information in sufficient quantities! It is also not true that young people are not able to communicate or to adapt to new conditions. The crisis is caused by something else and we will not fight it with manipulation of curricula or changes in the organization of school work. The crisis in education appears everywhere the crisis of engaged citizenship becomes a social problem; everywhere where there is a lack of social and historical awareness of the idea of democracy; everywhere where inequalities and injustice are ignored. The crisis in education is visible where democracy is in crisis. In the new school, a responsible school, that we seek to support, two concepts merge: community and learning. By working to bridge school and community, teachers and students are supported as they develop the ultimate democratic environment, a learning community.

Linking Schools and Universities: Cooperation, Engagement and Reciprocity

How might those based in universities proceed to work and change the situation we find in schools? Rather than one-shot, one-way school reform efforts and programs which are known to have little impact compared to long-term, collegial work,[6] our

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[4] L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1999; K. Wiburg & S. Brown, *Lesson Study Communities Increasing Achievement with Diverse Students*, CA: Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks 2007; A.D.M. Pomson, *One classroom at a time? Teacher isolation and community viewed through the prism of the particular*, retrieved through http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID+11820 on June 4, 2007.

[5] A. Kaczara, *O kryzysie szkoły raz jeszcze*, in: J. Kargul (ed.), *Z aktualnych problemów oświaty i kultury*, Prace Pedagogiczne, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1997.

[6] J. Hixson & M.B. Tinzmann, *What changes are generating new needs for professional development?*, retrieved March 26, 2002, from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl_esys/profdev..htm; D. Sparks & S. Hirsch, *A new vision for staff development*, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria 1997; J.H. Stronge, *Qualities of effective teachers*, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria 2002; F.H. Wood & S.R. Thompson, *Assumptions about staff development based on research and best practice*, Journal of Staff Development 14 (4), 1993, pp. 52–57.

work with schools should be based on building professional relationships. These relationships are designed to support the creation of what Goddard, Hoy and Hoy[7] have called "collective efficacy," an environment in which norms push all to excel, an environment that creates a sense of agency – individuals doing something to improve conditions and thereby the education provided to students in our schools and the conditions in which teachers and administrators work.

How do we proceed to work in conjunction with schools and communities to change the culture of buildings and educational environments? We seek to work in grassroots efforts[8] as those that work in and with schools identify issues worthy of attention. We understand teaching to be a cultural act[9] and understand that the unique context of buildings and communities needs to be represented in what is determined to be the direction of the work. By working to support researchers, who by their nature raise questions and seek answers, we are then faced with the challenge of dissemination. How might the work of researchers be placed into the hands, shared, with those in schools who must work to improve the educational environment on a daily basis? By building expectations on all sides, reciprocal expectations that shine light on and from multiple perspectives, we hope to build connections that provide space for teachers, school directors and others in schools to work with university-based researchers. We hope to provide those that work in and with schools an opportunity to both contribute through their research and learn from the work of researchers. At the same time we must build expectations that university-based researchers work in conjunction with school-based personnel to raise and develop questions worthy of inquiry, questions whose answers will improve the educational environment for all.

The University, as an institutional construct, has an obligation to help schools in the area of accountability and control. Accountability being defined as an awareness of expectations and the work of their students to meet those expectations. Control being defined as connections to the community, its needs and the common good. The university must seek to work with the school in the areas of teacher development, analysis of conditions, and real programs designed together to improve environments of both. Not just deliver test results and tell schools how bad they fail, how ill they are.

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[7] R.D. Goddard, W.K. Hoy and A.W. Hoy, *Collective Efficacy Beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, and future directions*, Educational Researcher, Vol. 33, no. 3, April 2004.

[8] M. Fine, *Not in our name: Reclaiming the democratic vision of small school reform*, Rethinking Schools, 4(19), 2005, pp. 15–17.

[9] J.W. Stigler & J. Hiebert, *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*, NY: Summit Books, New York 1999.

What Might this Work Look Like?

First, education should be focused on the future and on designing a reality different than today. In this future school should be an institution that invests in students and teachers offering a chance for full development and for the wise planning of future life. In this future teaching in this new school is not only transferring skills and the information necessary for surviving in school and in work. Teaching is a social mission that transforms the world and our lives. The key vehicle that makes this mission possible should be understanding and collaboration, not bureaucratic procedures.

Second, in a "good" school students and teachers are involved in meaningful dialogue and a research process what allows them to critically look at, not only the subject of the research or question, but also at themselves, their own assumptions, convictions and perspectives on reality. Teachers in that "good" school work with universities to learn how to develop and support a climate in which students feel welcomed to the process of cooperation and sharing, which inspires each to action and each to a reach outside of the school's walls. "Good" schools that develop into learning communities are able to recognize the needs of its members and are able to change and adopt accordingly to those needs.

Third, good teaching may have numerous different forms, but good teachers know one thing: you need to be honest towards your students and you need to be involved in what you are doing. It is impossible to reduce teaching only to the implementation of the "newest" and "best" techniques and strategies. Teaching is not a case of method, but it is connected with identity and integrity.

Finally, school should help people to communicate, both, on the basic level of the conversation and also on the level of ideology. To do it we need critical thinking and authentic dialogue. The school that creates space and conditions for open dialogue starts it with the formulation of the problem and communication of the clear expectation for students' involvement (with the assumption that it is possible and needed). Only honest teachers, teachers who show through classroom practice who they are in a real life, are able to participate in this kind of dialogue. It is worth it to encourage people involved in dialogue in school to really open communication between teachers and students. Both sides need to be sure that they want brave, interesting questions and real answers, not thoughtless ritual in which we only act a dialogue, but all answers are already given and attitudes of those acting are passive.

The possibilities of working towards common ends, what Ayers calls "teaching towards freedom," raises new questions. What roles might school play in democratic societies?

> With one eye on our students and another on ourselves, we attend to both the
> learning environment and the concentric circles of context in which our teaching is

enacted. We commit to striving for true awareness of the larger world, to feeling the weight of it as we attempt to lift it up[10].

We agree with those in the field of school reform that we must work in unique contexts to fight the "increasingly bureaucratized and regimented society..."[11]. Our efforts are aimed towards understanding teachers as transformative intellectuals "... by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle to define meaning and a struggle over power relations"[12] and that ultimately there is "no basis for education in a democracy outside of faith in the enduring capacity for growth in ordinary people..."[13]

Democratic school reform is possible. By working (as it was mentioned) to link schools, universities and communities in engaged, reciprocal, networks of support we can strengthen the outcomes and the success of school reform in ways that lift up students, teachers, communities, universities and democratic societies themselves.

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[10] W. Ayers, *Teaching toward freedom*, Beacon Press, Boston 2004.

[11] W. Ayers, M. Klonsky and G. Lyon, *A simple justice: the challenge of small schools*, Teachers College Press, New York and London 2000, p. 2.

[12] H.A. Giroux, *Teoria krytyczna i racjonalność w edukacji obywatelskiej*, in: T. Jaworska, R. Leppert (eds.), *Wprowadzenie do pedagogiki*, Oficyna Wydawnicza IMPULS, Kraków 1998.

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