PACE

COMMENTARY

The Current Deprofessionalization of Teachers and Teaching

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In California in 1985 a first-class stamp cost $0.20, a dozen eggs cost $1.19, and motorists gasped when the price of a gallon of gas hit $1.20. Three top-selling albums that year were Wham!, Phil Collins' No Jacket Required, and the Soundtrack to Miami Vice.

Educational debates about teaching and teachers were different too. Remember when the field hashed over whether teaching was an art, a science, or a craft? When researchers worked to codify the knowledge base for teaching, compare novices to experts, and study the best ways to prepare good teachers? When teaching was being considered for a spot at the table of full-professions, like doctoring, lawyering, or Japanese-style managing? I remember participating in conversations in the 1990s about whether it was alright to publicly acknowledge personal elements of quality teaching: personality, reflection, biography, emotions, diversity. My table-mates would nervously hush me, as if to suggest that anti-teacher-professionalists lurked nearby (or even in our midst), waiting for ammunition like this to use against the movement.

That all seems so quaint now.

The Present

It seems quaint for two reasons. One is that we now know that teaching is all those things. Educational scholarship in the 80s and 90s taught us that. It's an art and a science. Yes, it's an actual profession—with established (though contested) goals, knowledge requirements, best practices, and some proven technical procedures. And it's also a moral, aesthetic, personal enterprise in which forming trusting relationships with children and other adults—alongside technical, epistemological, and pedagogical demands—is key. One's personality and biography do matter, but that's not to say teachers are merely the sum of their personal parts: they are also professionally trained, knowledgeable pedagogues who influence (and are influenced by) the schools and society in which they work.

Perhaps we no longer argue the points about what teaching is much because they have mostly been settled (if not fully reconciled). Thank you Linda Darling-Hammond, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Ivor Goodson, James Greeno, Peter Grimmett, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Gaea Leinhardt, Lee Shulman, Peter Woods, and many others.

But the other reason we don't bicker over this topic much anymore is because we lost the larger debate. The details of what distinguishes high-quality teaching from mediocre instruction no longer seems to matter. We lost the trees for the forest. And we might soon lose the forest too.

Teacher advocates and teacher researchers no longer have much of a seat at the reform table: they've been crowded out by

politicians, private foundations, and neoliberalists. Though currently intensified, this is not necessarily new. Politics, dominant social interests, and economics have often drowned out the voices of teachers and progressivist researchers. But in the 1980s and 90s there were some exciting pushes toward teachers-as-professionals; whole-school restructuring; acknowledgement of the complexity of education; and a shared belief that we could improve education in part by preparing teachers well, supporting them in their classrooms, offering increased authority and added responsibility, and expecting excellence.

That period aligns with what Brian Rowan (1990) might call 'commitment over control': improving teaching by supporting and securing the COMMITMENT OF teachers as professionals rather than exerting top-down CONTROL OVER them. This approach was washed out, though, by subsequent moves toward centralizing education reform at state and federal levels and an increasing reliance on neoliberal rationality as the new way... Clinton's Goals 2000, Bush's No Child Left Behind, Obama's Race to the Top... Corporate school reform, governors undercutting teachers, mammoth spending cuts... High-stakes accountability tied to controversial student testing methods. (Our own Gov. Brown, by the way, seems to have thus far been able to draw a thoughtful—if razor-thin—line between balancing the state budget and preserving a commitment to teachers and teaching. I appreciate that.)

Though our country's educational system is still mostly decentralized and polls continually show that—while citizens may believe that the nation's schools are ineffective—parents usually love their own school, a broad, almost ubiquitous national rhetoric about the massive failure of schools, teachers, and local reforms currently carries the day. Maybe that's why nuanced, thick conversations about complexities of teaching, what makes a good teacher, and how to strengthen and support teaching as a proud profession are scarce today. Too bad, because that's where to find solutions to many of our education challenges.

The Future

Personally, I don't believe that deprofessionalizing teachers and putting all our eggs in the baskets of testing, efficiency, and standards will improve education. I would instead hope that we can move forward by respecting and understanding good teachers, acknowledging the messy complexity of education reform, and returning to a belief that schools will improve by preparing good teachers, supporting them in the classroom, and helping them to always teach well.

I don't pine for endless university and conference room debates defining and debating what teaching is, but I do miss the optimistic, collaborative sense that schools can be reformed—one by one—by talented educational leaders engaging the school community, making use of the research, including teachers in the reform process, and carefully implementing wise innovations together. Interested readers may wish to revisit the school restructuring movement (e.g., Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Fullan, 1991; Little, Dorph, & and the SB 1274 Research Team, 1998; Sarason, 1981).

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