

Sisyphus and School Improvement: Fulfilling the Promise of Excellence

Excellence isn't a state of being but a process of becoming. Teachers become excellent by studying their students, creating tailored learning experiences, and evaluating the long-term effects of those experiences.

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According to myth, Sisyphus, King of ancient Corinth, was condemned to Hades for betraying Zeus. His punishment was to roll a boulder to the summit of a hill, only to have it forever roll back upon him before he reached the top.

I have been feeling like Sisyphus lately. In recent years I have joined most educators straining to move the boulders of school change—individualization, equity, accountability—over the top. The label on the current boulder reads *excellence*; and, this time up the hill, my hopes for reaching the summit have been raised higher than usual. We have marshaled extraordinary public forces to consider what is wrong in schools and to recommend action. Yet I am concerned that even the most sensible prescriptions will not create productive action where it is most critically needed: in the school. The boulder of the excellence movement is larger than most, so the potential disappointment, were our upward roll to cease, is immense. Our best chance to reach the summit hinges on our efforts at school improvement behind the classroom door rather than on program and policy revision.

The dangers in our current actions are threefold. First, we should caution ourselves that the insertion of new standards and new programs in and of

themselves will not cause children to learn excellently. Further, we should question the wisdom of promising to the public and ourselves that any educational practice will *be excellent*. Finally, in the interest of linguistic integrity, we should blanch at the overuse and misuse of such a potent notion as excellence. We must, instead, state clearly and honestly what we *can* improve and set out immediately to make improvements that will make a difference to children.

Excellence: A Victim of Inflation

The root of our problem in schools is mirrored in the changing meaning of excellent. The very word by which we attempt to measure our performance has been the unwitting victim of inflation, much as have grades, dollars, and diplomas. *Excellent* once clearly implied *superlative*; to excel was to go well beyond the good, to be better than practically all. Now Webster's definition reads "very good, eminently good, first-class"; the term has depreciated in value. The current excellence movement, with its loose application of the term and absence of standards by which we can judge excellence in learning, reinforces this inflation.

Consider, too, what it might mean to have a school that is not merely "very

good" but one superior to or better than anything commonly found. It is difficult to conceive of such a school as being "finally superior." That is, we can always imagine our schools as capable of becoming better. In this view, excellence is more a state of *becoming* than a state of *being*. A school does not hire staff, buy books and athletic equipment, and establish procedures all touted as excellent and therefore become an excellent school. Rather, the excellence of a school lies in how its internal processes work to constantly improve its performance.

We must avoid blurring such a critical distinction. Much of what we have learned about improving teaching involves the establishment of permanent monitoring, assessing, and redesigning processes for teachers (McLaughlin and Marsh, 1978). Many of these involve professional peer collaboration just as others involve the application of specific performance expectations by administrators. They all share a constancy of school environment, that makes honest self-assessment and creative professional development toward better performance *part of the school's status quo*.

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A Self-Improving Professional Staff

If excellence cannot be bought or imported, we must begin to focus on the only point in the school environment with the capability—nay, the obligation—to be ever self-improving: the professional staff (Lieberman and Miller, 1981). Rather than setting its sights on an excellent school, curriculum, or schedule, a community should work toward hiring and constantly motivating a professional staff that is both committed to providing excellent learning experiences for children and professionally equipped to act on that commitment.

What does such a staff look like and do? So much of our analysis of schools has focused on the artifacts of method that it is difficult to find a description of a staff process essential to excellent education. I sense the right measure of sensitivity, drive, and intellectual zest in the vantage points on schooling raised by the likes of Sarason (1971), Kohl (1984), and Lortie (1975). Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (1983) and Barth's *Run School Run* (1979) offer analytic handles for a staff-centered process that makes improvement in student learning a permanent fixture of school life. Purkey and Smith's (1983) extensive review of effectiveness studies and their impact on policy

elaborates these perspectives in a cultural approach that has great promise, as does the research of Little (1981).

These works suggest that teaching must be redesigned to focus on four functions: studying students, creating tailored learning experiences, evaluating long-term school effects, and advocating diversity. School administrators, faculties, and professional development resources can work in specific ways to assert these functions in daily teacher attitudes and behaviors. They are critical elements of a truly professional teaching culture that holds excellence in learning a foremost goal for both teachers and students.

Students of Students

Teachers must be students of students. They must be consumed with and

capable of gathering useful information about the children they teach. Their major emphasis must be to combine existing knowledge of children's learning with current information about the children they face daily. Teachers must view children from multiple perspectives: not only as developing intellectual beings but also as developing emotional, moral, and cultural beings. Most important, teachers must observe and record significant daily information about their students, which they can then use to enhance their instructional decisions.

Currently, we do a poor job of training prospective teachers and of supporting practicing teachers in the skills and conditions necessary for this kind of monitoring. Teachers-in-training do not undergo intensive skill-building in the observation of children and their differing means of approaching learning tasks, dealing with peers, responding to authority, or carrying out independent work. Nor do we provide teachers the time and opportunity to routinely use such skills to supply them insights into their students' learning. Instead, the press of the common school day and environment encourages quick judgments of students, which too frequently employ the damaging criteria of socioeconomic class, race, family, and sex.

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One element, then, of a staff equipped to pursue excellence is the professional ability to study children and remain current with emerging research. A school staff with these abilities will be constantly involved in adapting its work with children to produce *learning that can be documented*. What is more, staff and parents will know when learning is *not* occurring because that, too, will be carefully documented. And rather than creating defensiveness on the school's part, such data will be rich enough to provide multiple alternatives for action when learning does not occur. Currently, we are limited to working with piecemeal and inferential information about our students and popularized, gadgety techniques for teaching. We need more; we need it built into our daily teaching skills and practices.

Tailored Learning Experiences

A second aspect of staff competence necessary in the pursuit of improved teaching capitalizes on the teacher's ability to *synthesize* data about children and learning into *productive learning*. The teacher forges logical strategies for students' activities based on a diagnosis and an established theory of learning. Thus, teachers must be

able to both analyze concrete, empirical information about children and to connect this data faithfully with abstracted "lessons" about how children learn.

Under the best circumstances, such an activity is complex, time-consuming, and fraught with uncertainty. Teachers need time and room enough to ponder possibilities for "doing it better" in each classroom, each week. And, in that time and space, administrators and team leaders must both establish the expectation and provide the stimulation for divergent planning. Teachers need open encouragement to think beyond the routine and standard systems of teaching to ensure that students are learning.

For such a staff, the school environment has a distinctly professional air. Staff activities center on questions of learning. Teachers share problems and solutions. Learning and "making it better than ever before" are the staff's goals as a group. Such an environment maximizes creative options while providing the interpersonal support teachers so badly need.

Extensive Evaluation of Long-Term Effects

Teachers must be equipped and encouraged to seek long-term results in the children they teach. Currently, the longitudinal view of our function provides only excuses: the school's contribution can be washed out by so many other influences that what we do seems barely worth examining. Such defeatism must stop if we are to be even moderately convinced of our power to provide an "excellent" education. The logical way to stop it, as Goodlad (1983) notes, is to look much more carefully at long-term effects and to address those aspects of the child's growth we are most likely to positively influence.

To do this, we must begin modestly, locally. Every school system sits on a wealth of information on its own past performance: comparisons of teaching practices with student performance measures three, five, seven years later; comparisons of co-curricular activity participation and later civic involve-

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ment and leadership; comparisons of life skills curricula with the effectiveness of later practical decisions. Answers to such questions are not as difficult to generate as the questions are painful to ask; schools are simply not equipped to examine anything continuously. Teachers probably cannot be actively involved in such research; but auxiliary staff and leadership must be, for such data provide the only means of systematically evaluating the school's performance against its goals. Teaching goals, then, may be cast and recast in light of the staff's examination of its *own* past and current practices.

The broad-brush view of the school's purpose that accompanies such persistent longitudinal collection of results provides the essence of the excellence orientation. A teacher or staff cannot tell if Practice A excels Practice B without first identifying how any practice might be judged good or bad. Teachers must have established ends against which to judge best performances. These ends are the long-term goals of the school for children: states of being and becoming, which the profession, the school, and the community establish as the fundamental rationale for raising taxes and keeping school. Nobody involved with a school can tell whether the practices of that school are excellent without first acknowledging what those goals are and, second, evaluating data about the school's long-term performance in view of those goals.

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Given the immediacy of most teaching activities, the long-range perspective is extraordinarily difficult to maintain. Thus, it is left to the nonteaching staff to maintain and encourage it. Currently, we dabble at this activity, without substantive long-term data and in sporadic one-day workshops. Or we approach it cautiously in ad hoc reports to school boards, which eventually filter back to teaching staffs as offhand compliments or backhanded criticism. Teachers must be provided the time and space to grapple with longitudinal data on *their own* former students and to recast their functions with current students if necessary. To do this well, they will likely need professionally gathered, analyzed, and presented local data that are both accurate and specifically related to their teaching goals.

Diversity Amid Common Goals

The staff that pursues excellence in its own performance must possess a now uncommon ideology for its own practice: teachers must view their work in similar ways, but not in terms that encourage uniform practices. As Barth (1979) illustrates in *Run School Run*, a common view of the school's purpose is not antithetical to a commitment to diversifying teaching and learning practices to fit students and teachers. Stimulating a convergent view of the school alongside a divergent view of learning and teaching provides the only means of combatting the type of lowest-common-denominator conformity that now besets the excellence movement.

Developing such a perspective requires teachers to learn that diversified practices do not threaten their solidarity as a team. It also requires that they learn how this idea works in many small but significant daily ways. To live with the diversity that students and, fundamentally, teachers require is to welcome the questioning of practices that accompanies such learning. Staff members need to feel confident individually and as a group; factionalism and crossed classroom purposes are the tragic results if they do not.

Many factors in the school environment militate against divergent practices (see Chapter 1, Barth, 1979). Most important, the management and control concerns teachers and administrators carry into school every day lead to uniform policies, attitudes, and behaviors. Divergence in this arena is viewed as weakness or subversion; students must be presented with a consistent front, we insist. Curriculum and teaching methods follow close behind management in the press for uniformity. Similar teaching materials and activities, the reasoning goes, are the only way to ensure consistent learning across the board. And finally, management practices and their partner, union mentality, have spawned uniform behavior patterns and expectations of job performance. Procedures for evaluation and control as well as the negotiation of minimum satisfactory work conditions propagate uniform practices for teachers and principals.

We ignore the vast literature on children and learning through these practices. And in our advocacy for uniformity, we disregard both our sensibilities about what it means to be human and our sense of professionalism. Children *do* need consistency of treatment, but they do not need a daily menu of sameness that undermines their very sense of individuality and human worth. Curriculum *does* need to be coordinated in goals and skills; but teachers need not use the same materials, lessons, and methods to accomplish those ends. And schools *are* organizations of people that, to work peacefully, must have rules and systems. But these need not counteract the very purpose of the school by violating the learning needs of children and by reducing the richness of professional staff associations to a childish party game.

A Professional Teaching Culture

In the rush to action spawned by current school criticism, we must not sell ourselves short. If we develop these four functions in our teaching

staffs, we will put attention to excellence into daily practice. These functions require "instigating building-specific, whole-school improvement effects" that respect the premise that "it is the culture of the *whole* school that creates the effect" (Purkey and Smith, 1983, p. 25). If we are to boost the excellence boulder over the top, we must insist that *the action occur now* in the milieu of individual school staffs.

The profession of teaching and the search for excellence are infinite and frustrating. To have imposed on us the illusion of ultimate satisfaction by a movement created outside our profession taints the profession and our personal pride with the imagery of Sisyphus. Expect great things of our schools; but give our staffs the composition, technical expertise, time, and respect necessary to fulfill those expectations. The rewards for them and for students will return Sisyphus to our bookshelves, where he belongs. □

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