Educational Reform and the Treatment of Students in Schools

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The literature on educational administration contains many recommendations regarding changed approaches to the organization of teachers' work in schools. Many of these changes rest on the notion that teachers are most effective and satisfied when treated as reasonable, capable, and autonomous persons who can work collaboratively, yet with personal autonomy. While these principles should be transferable to the way in which the work of students is organized, there seems little interest in doing so. Examination of three specific areas — participation in decision-making, learning for improved practice, and evaluation — shows clearly that current arguments about what is good for teachers are not being extended to what might be good for students. Some suggestions for change are proposed.

Les écrits sur l'administration scolaire contiennent plusieurs recommendations visant à changer les approches à l'organisation de la charge de travail du professeur à l'école. Plusieurs de ces changements reposent sur le fait que les professeurs sont le plus efficace et le plus satisfait lorsqu'ils sont traités comme des personnes raisonnables, capables, et autonomes et qui peuvent collaborer tout en conservant leur autonomie. Alors que ces principes devraient être transférés à la manière avec laquelle le travail des étudiants est organisé, il semble qu'il y ait très peu d'intérêt à le faire. En considérant trois domaines — la participation dans la prise ce décision, l'amélioration de l'apprentissage, l'évaluation — il apparaît clairement que ce qui est bon pour les professeurs n'est pas appliqué à ce qui pourrait être bon pour les étudiants. Des suggestions pour effectuer des changements sont faites.

In the last few years myriad efforts have been made to change the way schooling is conducted. Although the broad label of *restructuring* covers a multitude of different ideas and proposals (Barth, 1991; Timar, 1990), some common threads are evident. Among the most important of these are proposals to change the way teachers' work is organized.

Current proposals to change teachers' work often center around the concept of empowerment. Here it is assumed that teachers work most effectively when treated as valued, capable people. Instead of controlling the work of teachers more closely through course requirements, testing, and packaged curricula, it is preferable to build upon the concept of teacher as professional by giving teachers more authority and more control over what they do (Fullan, 1991). The concept of teacher as professional also includes an emphasis on continuous learning through professional development and an emphasis on greater collaboration and collegiality among teachers (Beare, Caldwell & Millikan, 1989; Duke, 1987; Lieberman & Miller, 1984; McNeil, 1988).

Many writers have expressed part or all of this agenda. For example, Rosenholtz (1985) writes about the importance of teacher commitment, the development of collegiality, and the importance of teacher participation in decision-making. Lieberman and Miller (1990a, 1990b) stress the importance of building a professional approach to teaching, in which important educational questions have a central place. Sergiovanni (1990) emphasizes the importance of empowering teachers in any school improvement effort. Fullan (1991) provides an excellent review and synthesis of much of this work.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by more radical critics of schooling. Many critical theorists set out an agenda which advocates much greater autonomy and authority for teachers (Apple, 1990; McNeil, 1988; Smyth, 1989).

Underlying most of this work is a set of assumptions about human action and efficacy. Among these assumptions are the following:

- People work most effectively when they have a personal stake in the activity.

- People need to understand why particular policies and practices are in place and why they are asked to do things.

• People need to have a real opportunity to participate in and influence decisions about their work setting; school administrators err when they make important decisions without taking careful account of the views of those teachers who will have to live with those decisions.

• People learn best by relating their learning to their actual situations, by having considerable control over what and how they learn, and by having opportunities to try new learning in supportive and non-threatening settings.

These arguments are made on the grounds of both efficacy and justice. Some argue for a stronger teacher role because this will produce better educational results. Others argue that teachers should have a stronger role because this is what is required in the treatment of people on moral grounds. Often both arguments are invoked.

The Parallel with Students

Many educators would subscribe to these four assumptions or to some quite similar set of beliefs. These beliefs are also in accord with much of the literature on management generally, in which the concept of empowering employees has become quite popular (even if it continues to be, in practice, "more honour'd in the breach than the observance"). In fact, the rationale for decentralization and professionalization in schools is now often linked to economic productivity rather than to issues of democratic rights (Canada, 1991; Economic Council, 1992).

One might expect that these assumptions about teaching, if widely seen as reasonable, might also be regarded as applicable to students in schools. After all, if teachers need to understand the reasons for particular policies and activities, might not the same be true of students? If teachers learn better when their learning is closely connected to their real situations, might not the same apply to students? If teachers deserve an important role in influencing the conditions under which they work, might not students?

Indeed, there are many parallels between the present treatment of teachers by administrators and other school authorities and the treatment of students by teachers and other school authorities. Both groups are assigned to their work relatively arbitrarily. Administrators give teachers their class assignments and timetables while teachers give students their work assignments and group partners (if any). Neither group has very much control over what it is they are to do, when they are to do it, and with whom they are to do it. Neither group has much freedom of movement nor much ability to criticize the prevailing order, and neither group has much ability to shape its working situation to its perceived needs.

Yet one looks in vain for a literature in educational administration which suggests that we might think about treating students as we might want to treat teachers. Even the critical theorists are largely silent on the issue of the authority of students, focusing instead on teachers as workers.

The gap between what we advocate for teachers and the way in which we actually treat students is apparent by looking at three specific areas: participation in decision-making, learning for improved practice, and evaluation.

Participation in Decision-Making

Greater participation of teachers in decision-making is emphasized in much of the literature on restructuring schools. For more than a decade, proponents of educational change have assumed that teachers must be key participants if change is to be effective (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Goodlad, 1984; Little, 1990). This has been stated in the literature so often that it has now reached the status of a truth no longer requiring validation; we have moved on to asking how such changes in teachers' roles can be put into practice.

However, students at all levels of our educational institutions are rarely given a significant role in decision-making. For example, students in Canada do not have a legal right to a so-called student government; even

when such organizations exist, they usually play no real role in influencing school policies and activities. In how many schools do students have a consistent, institutionalized voice in decisions about what is taught, how it is taught, when it is taught, or even about how students will be treated? Indeed, there is hardly any literature on the subject of the students' role in school decision-making (Robinson & Koehn, 1992).

The most frequent reply to these claims is that students lack the knowledge or ability to participate in the making of such choices and that they are not good judges of what is in their own best interests (Callan, 1988; Levin, 1993). However, there are at least three important weaknesses in this argument. First, there should be some onus on those making the case that students are ill-equipped to participate in decisions to provide evidence that this is so. The general approach to rights both in Canada and the United States is that restrictions on rights need to be justified by showing that without restriction they would be harmful in some important way (Magsino, 1990). Reasoning by analogy, until students are given a real opportunity to participate and to provide clear evidence that they are incapable of doing so, there are no grounds for depriving them of the opportunity. It is worth noting that over the last century the law has given increasing recognition to the ability and the right of young people to be protected from exploitation and abuse, to give evidence in criminal trials, and to have their views taken into account in child custody disputes. The distinction between the legal rights of children and adults, always essentially an arbitrary one, is becoming increasingly blurred.

Second, the argument for giving teachers opportunities to participate has not rested on a claim that teachers have the requisite skills and knowledge. In fact, in much of the literature, including many of the works already cited, the need to provide training and develop teachers' skills in these areas is explicitly noted (Duke, 1987; Fullan, 1991). Nor do we deprive adults of rights and responsibilities because some of us do not discharge them very well. Entitlements to rights accrue by virtue of one's status as a person, not by virtue of one's presumed or assessed ability to use them wisely.

Finally, it seems odd to say that we would deprive students of worthwhile experiences and opportunities because they do not have the skills to take advantage of them. We might make this claim about mathematics, or physical education, or any other school activity. Students may not be good at them when they start, but they learn to be better as they proceed. Surely this is just what education is about — expanding people's skills through the judicious use of experiences of various kinds. It is hard to see how schools can inculcate in young people respect for law, respect for the rights of others, and an understanding of democratic processes when these same principles are not embodied in their actual operation. If students are treated arbitrarily, are subject to rules which they do not support or understand, and have no opportunity to shape the nature of their work, then surely there is something educationally wrong.

Learning for Improved Practice

Another major area of proposed change in school organization has concerned the best way to promote teachers' learning. Here, a general consensus has emerged that teachers will develop their skills most effectively if they participate regularly in professional development activities which are relevant to their immediate needs, are linked clearly to teaching practice, and provide opportunities to use new skills in a supportive and nonthreatening environment (Lieberman & Miller, 1990a; Little, 1989). The case is also made that teachers should have an important role in determining the kind of professional development in which they participate (Fullan, 1991). Schön's work (1983) on the reflective practitioner has also had a major impact on these matters.

However, these features of learning have not always been applied to students (Fullan, 1991; Goodlad, 1984). Students are often required to learn material with little or no attempt to connect it either to their out-of-school lives or to other in-school learning. As well, students essentially have no role in determining what they will study or when they will study it. They cannot choose to study those aspects of a particular subject which are of most interest to them. Knowledge is typically demonstrated through paper and pencil exercises, with very little opportunity to apply learning to

real problems. Students usually do not have an opportunity to practice skills in a nonthreatening setting.

Fenstermacher (1992) has used the metaphor of a pizza to describe the way in which students are typically led to approach learning. The teacher hands out the pizza, but the students are forbidden to eat it, since in digesting or internalizing it they would alter the original material beyond recognition. Instead, they are told to keep the pizza exactly as it was given to them for later presentation to the teacher, with judgment of their ability resting on the extent to which the pizza is the same as it was when they received it.

It is particularly ironic that educational administrators, who are responsible for maintaining current school practices, are especially critical of formal training programs offered to them, finding these to be insufficiently practical and not related closely enough to their working situations. As Goldman (1991) notes, school administrators "are not very satisfied consumers of their own primary product," formal education (p. 8).

The kinds of practices which would be involved in an expanded student role are just those practices currently being advocated as necessary to economic and social change in Canada. Workers are being asked to move beyond their traditional role of obeying orders to be active participants in analyzing and improving organizational processes (Canada, 1991, 1992; Economic Council, 1992). An active role for students in influencing their learning situation would be consistent with these developments in the workplace.

These criticisms of schools are not new. Goodlad (1984) made them a decade ago, Holt (1964, 1967) made them 30 years ago, and Dewey (1938) made them 60 years ago. However, it does seem paradoxical that at a time when we are seeking to change dramatically the way teachers are asked to learn, we are not making similar attempts with students.

Evaluation

The systematic development of teacher evaluation policies and procedures occurred in Canada primarily in the 1960s and 1970s. (Lawton, Hickox, Leithwood & Musella, 1986). From the beginning there was an important concern about safeguarding the procedural rights of teachers during evaluation. Most evaluation policies placed considerable stress on the need for teachers to understand clearly what the evaluation would be about and to have an opportunity to respond to any comments made by the evaluator.

More recently there has been considerable dissatisfaction with standard approaches to teacher evaluation. Teacher evaluation practices often lack validity, or empirical support (Levin, 1979; Waxman, 1984). Moreover, they are seen to have had little impact on teaching, being mostly ritualistic exercises (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988; Lawton, Hickcox, Leithwood & Musella, 1986). Current thinking on teacher evaluation has moved away from an emphasis on checklists and from meeting predetermined standards toward being, except in cases of serious performance concerns, a process of professional growth through guided reflection with colleagues and supervisors (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1985).

Student evaluation, however, is quite another matter. We have known for some time that many student evaluation practices lack reliability and validity, yet these practices continue unabated (Archer & McCarthy, 1988; Goodlad, 1984; McLean, 1985; Natriello, 1984). Students are often denied the rudimentary guarantees of due process in regard to their evaluations, even when these evaluations have important consequences for them. Surprise tests are relatively common. Students may not be given second opportunities even where they can show good reason for poor performance on a first try. They may be penalized in their evaluations for matters having nothing to do with their ability to do the work (such as being late or missing classes or even being disrespectful of authority). The averaging of marks over a term may effectively penalize students who improve the most. It is still unusual to find settings in which students are asked to participate in determining how they are be evaluated or are given

opportunities to respond to negative evaluations before results are finalized. Further, teachers normally have professional organizations to support them when they are treated unfairly; students may, at best, have their parents to support them, and often not even that.

Again, these criticisms of evaluation practices are not new. In fact, a heartening effort is currently being made to develop alternative forms of assessment for students (Maeroff, 1991). However, work on alternative assessment is still much more theoretical than applied. Most of it focuses on tests and measurement instruments rather than on the organizational conditions in which student evaluation takes place. Alternative assessment is a positive development, but we must still ask why it is that such a well-documented and vitally important deficiency in educational practice has been allowed to continue.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Improving the working conditions of teachers is a laudable and important objective. Such improvement might well result in improved education for students. But I would support this even if the link were impossible to demonstrate (as it may well prove to be), because teachers, like other people, deserve to have a work environment where they are valued as persons and treated with dignity, and where the best is expected from them without constant inspection. Everyone deserves such treatment, regardless of its result in terms of output.

But I also believe that the same standards should be applied to the treatment of students. If certain practices are seen as desirable to assist teachers in learning, in building commitment, and in feeling part of something important, why should these practices not be equally applicable to students? Teachers cannot be truly empowered as educators unless students are also empowered as learners; one cannot speak about effective teaching without speaking also about effective learning.

How might we begin to apply some of these concerns to students? The essential elements would seem to be regard for students as people and

a vision of learning as something which people do, rather than something which people have done to them. If we take seriously the idea that students are people, we must respect their ideas, opinions, and desires; this in turn requires institutional structures which allow these ideas and opinions to be expressed in a meaningful way (Levin, 1993).

In regard to participative decision-making, opportunities abound to give students a role in school decisions and to use this as an important educational vehicle. Soliciting students' opinions about significant school practices and policies can be done in a variety of ways, both by teachers and by school administrators. Opinion surveys, group discussions, or open forums on school issues are among the possibilities. Other steps which can be taken within classrooms or schools include giving meaningful roles to student councils, involving students in debates about what is happening in the school, and giving students full or partial jurisdiction over certain kinds of decisions.

The same is true of improved practice. We can enter into real and sustained conversations with students about what learning is and how it can best be fostered in any particular setting. We can discuss with students what their interests are and how these interests might be accommodated within a given curriculum. We can ask students to reflect on their own learning styles and to advise us as to how we might be most helpful to them. We might well find that these conversations are as valuable for us as teachers as they are for students as learners. For example, I was struck by a story recently told to me by a principal who had turned her grade four health class over to the students, with the result that many students were taking home the provincial curriculum guide to see what it was they needed to know and to make suggestions on how best to learn.

Finally, we need to start to think about building into student evaluation the same sorts of protections that we wish to have when we ourselves are evaluated. Schools can develop student evaluation policies which provide that students be informed as to how they are to be evaluated, that they have opportunities to participate in determining evaluation practices, that they have opportunities to improve evaluation results which they find

unsatisfactory, and that evaluation is, at least some of the time, detached from grades so that it is truly formative.

Our schools are still organized largely on the basis of an industrial production model developed in the last century, in which students are thought of largely as passive recipients of the actions of others. Yet our current world is less and less industrial, so the model fits less and less well. In the workplace, in the political arena, and in community life there are calls for a more active citizenry, unwilling simply to take direction quietly but able and prepared to analyze problems and work cooperatively to address them. It would seem appropriate to change school practice in ways which are consistent with this emerging world. In one sense, none of these changes are difficult. We know how to do these things. They do not require expensive infrastructure or new organizational forms. Many teachers, especially in elementary schools, already employ some of these practices in their classrooms. However, to move beyond individual practice to institutional activities will be difficult. Implemented on a larger scale, these changes bring into question many of the most fundamental aspects of schooling. In particular we need to rethink the assumed difference between students and teachers not so much in terms of status (where unquestionably there is a difference) but in terms of worth. Changes in patterns of thinking are particularly difficult to make.

Why would the issue of treatment of students in schools be overlooked so frequently? Why, in the midst of the many calls for improving the situation of teachers, are there so few voices calling for improving the treatment of students? Perhaps it is simply oversight; we have failed to think about how what is good in one situation might also be good in other situations. Or, more depressingly, perhaps it is because students are young, relatively voiceless, and can safely be ignored, whatever the merits of the case. To treat others as we would ourselves be treated is one of humanity's oldest moral maxims; no institution should be more aware of it than the schools.

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