Teacher Stories: School Reform’s Missing Link

BY ART PETERSON

Joe Check, director of the Boston Writing Project, believes he knows a key ingredient that needs to be in the school reform mix if positive educational change is to take hold: Teachers must write about their classrooms.

Check quotes a question teacher-consultant Joanne Dowd asked him several years ago, "How come almost everyone who writes about school reform works some place other than a school?"

Check knows her question speaks to the concerns of thousands of teachers. It suggests an imbalance he would like to change.

"In our ongoing national dialogue on school reform, there are few voices from ‘the bottom’ that matter. We are missing the unmediated voice of practitioners who are actually attempting reform, achieving it, failing at it, or partially achieving it and wondering why they haven’t done better."

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Check, the author of Politics, Language, and Culture: A Critical Look at Urban School Reform, to be published by Bergin and Garvey this fall, recently addressed a general session at the National Writing Project Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., where he stressed the need to make teachers' voices heard.

For several years, this has been his goal. Working with his colleague Grace McEntee in a program sponsored by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Check has helped teachers in the northeastern United States publish writing about their classrooms.

Yet Check would grant that writing from the classroom still has a relatively low priority on the school reform agenda. That's because, he believes, of the continuing prevalence of several myths.

Myth One
Writing and reform are at odds because writing is an individual isolating act while reform requires team building.

But Check argues that writing need not be a solitary activity. He would not deny that there are likely, at any given moment, many hundreds of tortured artists locked away in garrets penning what they expect will be the "great American novel," but "twenty years of writing process research has given us a more accurate, though less romantic, picture of the way writers of all ages and types" actually work.

Check believes that there are many more writers working in communities of writers, "offering each other both supportive criticism and an immediate audience," than there are writers working away in isolation.

These communities of writers, he believes, should be the model for school reform. "As practitioner-writers listen actively to each other's work and offer critical response, they create a professional community unlike any they may have known."

Check argues that, in most schools making efforts at school reform, the structure for this professional community is already in place. "In these schools, we already have groups formed for a purpose—school inquiry groups, curriculum reform committees. Writing about classroom work can be an integral part of these groups—not just an add-on."

Myth Two
There is no connection between reflective writing and the leadership necessary to create change.

To Check, the connection is obvious. Those training for leadership in any field will benefit from a reality check. A steady diet of generalization and abstraction does not make for healthy practitioners. It is this understanding that led to the case study model advanced by the Harvard Business School and widely adopted in other graduate schools.

Check describes how some of those working in educational leadership programs have taken the next step. "People like Richard Ackerman at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, have their students write the cases. These are descriptions that spring from the potential leader's experience."

"Let's say this person works in a school that is trying, with mixed results, to do something to raise the low math scores of its fourth grade students. He or she writes, describing the school, the problem, the efforts to improve the situation, and the barriers that are getting in the way. The class then together goes to work on this real situation."

Myth Three
Teachers' narratives about their own classrooms are "just storytelling," a not-vigorous and possibly narcissistic endeavor.

Check believes that storytelling is not "just storytelling." He claims that well-written practitioner narratives about reform "create communities by compelling attention and response. They advance dialogue that makes change possible."

Consider, he says, a school that is attempting to move from a departmental structure to one...
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of small learning communities. "As with most schools attempting reform, the change in environment seems to be chaotic and disorientating. How can a school community come to grips with a situation such as this? One answer is to have teachers write about the effect of this change on them and their students. Then some pattern—some order—begins to emerge.

"Change is not just about curriculum, assessment, or pedagogy. It is also about individual people—individual students and their families, individual colleagues next door or down the hall, the new principal and how his personality and decisions affect me as a teacher."

Myth Four

Practitioner-writers represent a small handful of risk-taking, committed educators, heavily tilted toward "verbal" types such as English and social studies teachers.

If this were true, any potential connection between school reform and teachers' classroom stories would be irrelevant. If stories from the classroom are to have an impact, they must come from all kinds of classrooms.

Check describes his own transformation in this regard. "When Grace McEntee and I first started our work, I worried about this issue a great deal. Our first group was dominated by verbally proficient English and social studies teachers. In the second year of the project, we were challenged by colleagues to work with a group of teachers who were undertaking math and science curriculum reform in their schools. These teachers arrived full of misgivings, clearly seeing writing as the English teacher's domain. By the end of their year-long involvement, they had proved to be among the most productive and enthusiastic writers we had worked with, and they had also improved their responding skills. . . . After that, Grace and I always included all types of teachers in our work."

Myth Five

Writing about practice is too slow and indirect ever to reach the kind of scale necessary to really change schools.

The mythmakers may have a point if they are talking about endless storytelling in preparation for some top-down reform that might someday take place. But how about schools and districts that have, in fact, plunged into reform?

Check wonders. "How else will the world at large have a window into what change really looks like at the school level, from the point of view of the people who are actually doing the change? How else will teachers take on the necessary role of constructive critics of reform as it unfolds locally?"

Check cites an example of how "writing from the bottom" is crucial to making school change work. At the district level in Boston, there is a push to bring writing workshop into all the elementary schools. Through its Center for Leadership Development, the district has funded school-based inquiry groups, several of which are studying and writing about the implementation of writing workshop in the schools. The triumphs and the rough spots are documented and out there, ready to teach their lessons.

In the ongoing push to make teacher classroom stories part of the school reform movement, Check insists that writing projects have a key role to play: "We are the ones who insist that teachers should write, that teachers are the best teachers of teachers."

A writing project can provide the vehicle to make teachers' voices heard. "Reflective practitioner narratives about school-based change," Check says, "can help bridge the immense chasm separating well-meaning reform policies developed far from classrooms and the day-to-day reality of the teachers, students, and administrators who must live the policies at the school level."