From the Desk of Miles Myers

Institutionalizing Inquiry

This year the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English had its largest number of applications for teacher-researcher grants, and publishers issued their longest list of books on K-12 teachers doing research. The trustees of the Foundation were all heartened by the growing number of small communities of teachers who are working together on teacher-research efforts, often with the support of such institutions as Bread Loaf and a few sites of the National Writing Project. In addition, we were struck by the substantial improvement in the quality of teacher-research proposals over the last several years. Despite these gains and despite the fact that some Writing Projects and some subject matter organizations have made K-12 teacher-research a key part of their programs, I am troubled by the fact that K-12 teacher-research is not one of the ideas guiding the school reform debate and is not institutionalized in even a dozen school districts.

One problem may be that teacher-research advocates have concentrated on only two purposes, either to add an interesting variation to summer programs or to "legitimize" the work of professional researchers. While I don't happen to believe the work of professional researchers in education needs "legitimizing," both of these purposes may be laudable as short-term goals. But the notion of teacher-research means more than that. K-12 teacher-research is part of a professionalization movement underway among K-12 teachers and cannot be separated from a range of professional goals including a new kind of school and district organization. The concept of teacher-researcher cannot be merely attached to educational institutions as they now exist. To do so is to invite another failed effort. A few clubs will form, organized out of the energy that any fad can generate, but the net result will be zero. There are numerous examples of previous failed efforts—the action research movement of the 1950's, Lawrence Stenhouse's efforts in England, Dewey's lab school at the University of Chicago. Not one of these efforts established a lasting institutional base in K-12 schools.

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What must be done to provide a secure foundation for a teacher-researcher movement? First, schools and school districts must have different patterns of organization. At present schools and school districts are organized like traditional factories, and traditional factories adopted their organizational model from the military's line and staff divisions, the line being the trenches or classrooms and the staff being headquarters. Elwood P. Cubberley, founder and first dean of Stanford's School of Education, was an early advocate of this pattern of organization:

"Our schools, in a sense, factories in which raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands for twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of schools to build its pupils to the specifications laid down. This demands good tools, specialized machinery, continuous measurement of production to see if it is according to specifications, the elimination of waste in manufacture, and a large variety in output." (Cubberley, Public School Administration, 1916:338)

In this model of school organization, curriculum authority is anchored in the executive power of a central administrator who knows the specifications for instructing all students, who knows how to measure the achievement of all of the specifications—for example, centralized, machine-scored tests—and who knows how to create a school assembly line without "waste in manufacture." This model is based on what David Tyack has called a belief in the "one best system" (David Tyack, The One Best System, Harvard University Press, 1974).

For two reasons, this model does not now work. First, it will not work because all of the students are not the same. This does not mean that tracking is required. In fact, the Title I remedial programs, over-packaged and over-administered, have proved that tracking does not lead to educational achievement for Black and Hispanic students. On the other hand, student diversity does mean that classroom teachers must be free to design their own lessons and to make on-the-spot adaptations in the classroom.

Second, one instructional model will not work because the nation is demanding a literacy standard which goes beyond "literal" meaning in reading and slot-filling in writing. In California since 1980, the tests for grades three and six show gains, but the tests for grades eight and twelve show losses or no gains. This pattern is repeated in the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in which the gains at the lower levels of reading are not matched by similar gains at the upper level (NAEP, The Reading Report Card, 1971-1984). In addition, although students are beginning to write more in school, students "are not producing well-organized and detailed informative, persuasive, or imaginative papers." Says NAEP, "...students need to learn...a wider range of levels of complexity" (Writing Trends Across the Decade, 1974-1984).

New Literacy Standard

This new standard of literacy requires a kind of teaching in which learners make connections for themselves, develop their interpretations in writing and in discussions with others, and use talk and writing to discover their own thinking processes, not just to communicate ideas to others. This kind of curriculum cannot be adequately assessed with the machine scored test of the central administration. Furthermore, the lesson plan for this kind of class can only be designed by the teacher who knows the students, and because discussions and writing can take unexpected turns, the teacher must be able to make lesson revisions on the spot.

Robert Schaeffer, a former Dean at Columbia's School of Education, observed twenty years ago that society has not expected schools to be systematically reflective about their work for the simple reason that "there seemed to be nothing of great complexity in the instructional task." Schaeffer urged that K-12 schools be organized as centers of inquiry (The School as a Center of Inquiry, Harper & Row, 1967), but he was not too hopeful that the public could accept his vision.

Dean Schaeffer's vision now seems a more probable reality because the public has begun to recognize in dozens of national reports that student diversity and new standards of literacy make the classroom task much more complex than it may have been in an age with the myths of population homogeneity and simpler standards of literacy. New social needs have created new instructional complexities which are so formidable that teachers must become students of learning in their classrooms, and schools must be reorganized as centers of inquiry.

How should such a school be organized? The norms of practice should be anchored in the faculty at the school site, not in the central office administrator. This means that the faculty, both teachers and administrators, should
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collaboratively decide their bell schedule, hire new teachers for the school, evaluate new teachers, explain the program to parents and students, select texts, and develop assessment measures for the school report. In such an organization, unions have to write side-letters of agreement allowing faculties to deviate from the central contract, and the district superintendents have to eliminate a number of central office mandates.

Gathering Data

Notice that the faculty at such a school site is now faced with a number of critical questions about norms for good teaching and about ways to assess student performance. These questions are not abstract speculations. In this new school, these questions are essential for carrying out the teacher's role--hiring teachers, evaluating teachers, deciding assessments, and so forth. The difficulty of these questions inevitably leads to questions about how students learn. At this point teachers need a method for gathering systematic data about student learning.

The students in a school organized as a center of inquiry should have a portfolio with all of their classwork included. In addition, in the school library there should be portfolios with the students' past work available for review. Finally, the faculty should practice assessing and diagnosing the contexts of student portfolios, attempting to develop some collective sense of the developmental patterns of the students in the school. For example, teachers should be asked to rank from 1 to 6 a set of portfolios for growth over the year, 1 representing little or no growth and 6 representing great growth. The result of this effort should be a set of exemplars of student development in the school.

In addition to portfolios, each student should have a learning log in each class. In this log, students should be asked to record reflections about their own learning. For example, each Friday the students in a school should be asked to record what they think they have learned during the week, identifying, if possible, those areas that seemed particularly difficult.

In addition, school site faculties or departments should do holistic scorings of writing samples from English, math worksheets, history reports, taped oral reports, small group discussions, and/or written lessons prepared by teachers. In these holistic scoring sessions, teachers learn the range of performance in the school, they learn that they can reach a consensus about most scores, and finally they develop a set of issues which the whole faculty labels "unresolved."

Next, twenty percent of the school district's testing and evaluation budget should be set aside for grants to classroom teachers to do research in their classrooms. In California last year, a bill requiring ten percent for this purpose passed both houses of the legislature, but was vetoed by the Governor. At least one grant should be awarded at each school site, and a regional committee of faculty shall review the applications for grants and make the awards.

Next, instead of writing goals and objectives, school faculties should be asked to identify up to five of their most interesting failures and five of their most interesting successes. What makes a success or failure interesting is that it is perplexing. These perplexities should become the focus of the faculty meetings, and at each faculty meeting, which should always be chaired by a classroom leader, a faculty member should explore the causes of school success and/or failure, illustrating various causes with the work of particular students in the school. The aim here is to begin to establish case studies which capture the hopes and problems of teachers at the school site. Over time, some cases should begin to stand out as especially representative, and it is these cases that should become the framework for future discussions of a problem. These faculty presentations should include some past history of the problem in the school, including references to other student cases and to other observations by other teachers. It is these student cases and these sagas of teacher experience that become not only the anchor of faculty norms, but also the cultural glue that binds a faculty together.

Question and Inquiry

This spirit of being interested in failure, not being demoralized by it, of examining actual cases at the school site, not focusing only on district trends, of learning, not just delivering information--all of these concerns should govern the way hiring is done (What books have you read lately?), the way teachers are evaluated (What did you learn in that lesson?), and the way students are assessed (Can you explain why you answered in that way?). In such a setting, teacher-research has established an institutional

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foundation which rationalizes that necessity for released time, reduced loads, and collegial decision making. In addition, these institutional changes in schools begin to put pressure on colleges and universities to change teacher preparation.

The argument here is that teacher-researchers should recognize that their long term goal must be a fundamental change in the way schools are organized. But the development of the teacher-researcher cannot wait for schools to change. The pioneers in New York (Carla Asher), Virginia (Marion Mohr), Los Angeles (Faye Peitzman) and Berkeley (James Hahn), to name a few, are helping to show the way. I would suggest that those sites which have not done so should set aside some time to read Robert Schaeffer's Schools as Centers of Inquiry and to review how teacher-research might be institutionalized in schools. In this way, a teacher-research project could add as one of its purposes a concern about school organization.

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