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ABSTRACT

Leaders of many reform and restructuring efforts in schools and in teacher education ignore or avoid serious self-study by not looking critically at themselves, their work, the assumptions from which they operate, and the successes and failures of their efforts. Nearly all school-university reform efforts exhibit weaknesses that can be tied directly to an absence of self-study. An approach to improving schools, teaching, and student learning that emphasizes self-study begins by examining how learning, teaching, schools, and teacher knowledge and competence guide rethinking of professional work, and how current school experiences of students and teachers, school contexts, and activities of teacher educators fit with these visions. Current scholarship provides information and guidance especially in relation to the following focuses: (1) learning as experience-based intellectual construction; (2) teaching as professional problem-identification and problem-solving; (3) schools as learning communities; (4) teacher knowledge and competence as developed from reflective practice; and (5) self-study as a medium for professional learning. (Contains 49 references.) (ND)

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The Absence of Self-Study in School-University Teacher Education Reform

American Educational Research Association

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The Absence of Self-Study in School--University Teacher Education Reform

Introduction

I present this paper as a discussion piece rather than as a report of specific research although the ideas I discuss come, I believe, from conclusions I have drawn from my research into education reform. I have talked about that research at previous AERA and S-STEP meetings, as well as at annual meetings of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. The paper addresses the problem of the absence of self-study in schools and teacher education and the implications of that problem for both schools and teacher education in the years ahead. The paper describes the nature of the absence problem, suggests causes, and proposes potential solutions.

As background, I should mention that I have been engaged in research of self-study as an element in university-school education reform, have actively pursued self-study in my own teaching, and have advocated self-study techniques in my teacher education leadership work and as a consultant with school restructuring and university-school partnerships. I have found a significant absence in the use of self-study in the reform endeavors in which I have participated and which I have studied and have found that this absence of self-study noticeably hampers the effectiveness of the reform endeavors. I think I have identified some of the possible causes and solutions for the problem.

Assumptions

Based on my study of education reform endeavors and my personal involvement in reform over the past ten years, I believe that leaders of many reform and restructuring efforts in schools and in teacher education ignore or avoid serious self-study by not looking critically at themselves, their work, the assumptions from which they operate, and the successes and failures of their efforts. They frequently seek changes in aspects of the educational enterprise that are outside of the areas to which they are most closely tied, while they are protective of the aspects to which they have become most closely attached. They are ready to analyze others and to propose how these others should change but are reluctant to look at themselves in the same way. This avoidance seriously hampers their reform work.

Reasons why this may be the case, I believe, include: many reformers do not know how to engage in useful self-study and they are not encouraged or supported in learning how to do so, they are so "buried" in the doing of reform that they have little time and energy for self-study to do so, they are doing what they are trained to do and have no incentive to change, they are threatened and fearful of the self-study process, and they see their genuine contribution to reform to be in the "passing down of information and wisdom" rather than in reflective self-analysis and inquiry.

I also believe that, if I am correct in making these assumptions, in the long run, little real change will occur in schools and universities, including in teacher education at both levels, unless self-study becomes a central feature of reform work. And, for this to happen, issues that will

need to be addressed are How can the cycle of self-study avoidance be broken? How can self-study be made an integral part of teacher preparation and teacher learning? How can teachers and teacher educators learn to be self-inquirers? How can the pattern of action and mind set of current teacher educators that perpetuate a top-down training model be challenged? How can self-study be injected into the doctoral education of prospective teacher educators so new teacher educators are more professionally inquiring?

The Problem

The problem that I see and want to address is that: nearly all school-university reform efforts exhibit weaknesses that can be tied directly to an absence of self-study. These weaknesses include the following:

1. Many leaders of reform and restructuring efforts tend to concentrate their energies on creating changes in schooling and teacher education in rather targeted directions: (a) toward parts of the educational enterprise that are beyond their own immediate area of responsibility and (b) toward individuals other than themselves. For example, school administrators focus on changing teachers, and university teacher educators focus on changing schools. They do not look at themselves and inquire, How can I learn, develop, and become better as an individual professional? They do not look at their own direct areas of responsibility and ask, How can I make my work better?
2. Reform leaders rarely engage in any continuing self-analysis of their own work in terms of how that work does or is likely to improve teaching and student learning--the results of what they do in relation to students and teaching practioners.
3. They propose to change structures, training, and processes rather than changing the current *conceptualizations* about teaching, teacher education, professional development, and schooling that underlie their current practice.
4. They tend to tinker around the edges of current practice, without challenging the core problems that need to be addressed, especially if such challenges might threaten their own current work.
5. They accept and perpetuate a view of schools as rational-technical, top-down, factory-oriented institutions and an image of teaching as a craft that is based more on previous, trial and error classroom teaching experiences for its knowledge base than constructed theory.

In essence, leaders of many reform and restructuring efforts in schools and in teacher education do not ask questions such as:

1. What should I do differently and why should I make such a change?
2. Which of my current philosophical assumptions about teaching and schools should be challenged and how should they be challenged?
3. How should teaching and teacher education be reconceptualized?
4. What should be the essence of teaching as professional practice?

Without engaging in this type of self-study, teacher education reform and school restructuring efforts tend:

1. to focus on only small elements of the education enterprise,
2. to be inhibited by dated conceptualizations, and
3. to produce changes that are too narrow to be of significance.

I believe that educational leaders who have engaged in self-study and have become comfortable with it as a means for professional improvement can avoid all these hindrances. And, I believe the professionals who have become the core of this Self-Study in Teacher Education Practices, Special Interest Group of AERA can and do illustrate the kind of inquiry that is in order.

A Possible Way of Improving Schools, Teaching and Teacher Education

In light of these conclusions, I suggest that a different approach to improving schools, teaching, and student learning be undertaken--an approach that emphasizes self-study. The approach involves two starting points, neither of which is typical of past and most present attempts at reform. Starting point one engages the question, What visions of the way learning, teaching, schools, and teacher knowledge and competence should guide us as we rethink our professional work? Starting point two asks, How do the current school experiences of our students, our work as teachers, the contexts of our schools, and our activities as teacher educators fit with these visions? Answers supplied in response to the two questions can provide first, goals to be sought--visions of what should be--and second, assessments of where things presently are--products of self-study. The subsequent and continuing tasks then become that of drawing the two sets of responses together with the realization, of course, that the visions will change as will current practice. Of course, asking the two questions are not one-time events. The questions must never stop. They both guide and assess progress.

Please note that I have formed both questions in the first person--"guide us as we rethink," "our students," "our work as teachers," "our schools," and "our activities as teacher educators." The approach I am recommending is that of a search into our thinking and of an analysis of our work. I think that is at the heart of self-study and of any sincere getting-better endeavor. It is not a suggested research agenda for scholars to study others' institutions and behavior. It is not a plan for the formulation of specifications of best practice under antiseptic research conditions to be delivered to lesser-informed practitioners. It is, instead, a call for a continuing inquiry into learning, teaching, schools, and teacher education--for a continuous inquiry by and for all professionals engaged in creating student learning, in the practice of teaching, in conducting school operations, and in educating teachers.

This approach is not as difficult to pursue as it might appear to be at first glance. Current scholarship on the nature of (1) learning as experience-based intellectual construction, (2) teaching as professional problem-identification and problem-solving, (3) schools as learning communities, (4) teacher knowledge and competence as developed from reflective practice, and (5) self-study as a medium for professional learning all provide visions to be pursued, platforms from which to begin, and guidance for the journey. My personal ideas of each of these five focuses are sketched below.

Learning as Experienced-based Intellectual Construction

Much recent scholarship conceptualizes learning as a three-part intellectual process by which learners (1) gain new ideas from new learning experiences; (2) match these ideas with what they have already learned; and (3) construct their own personal meaning, develop their own competence, and formulate their own values. The process occurs not only for students engaged in experiences provided by teachers, but also for everyone, all of the time. Every life experience provides new information for a person to construct and reconstruct his or her personal intellectual frameworks, and this, in effect, means everyone is always a learner.

This conceptualization of learning has direct implications for school students, teachers, and school leaders. It means that students do not absorb sets of ideas, skills, and value perspectives that their teachers give to them. Their learning involves much more and is more personally formulated than the old idea of a product received from teachers and schooling. The conceptualization also means that teachers and school leaders are also always learning professionally. Their professional learning is not something they do as preparation for becoming a teacher but is a continuous professional reconstruction of professional ideas and a building of professional competence from every experience on and off the job throughout a career. They learn from their participation in school experiences every bit as much as from gathering ideas, skills, or value perspectives that their teacher educators, colleagues, and reading provide for them.

Teaching as Professional Problem-Identification and Problem-Solving

With this conceptualization of learning, teaching can be conceptualized as a career-long process of professional problem-identification and problem-solving, a process that starts when future teachers are still classroom students and does not stop before retirement, if it stops then. The process can be thought of as consisting of two successive teacher tasks: (1) figuring out ways in which to educate the students for whom the teacher is responsible, and (2) trying in the classroom what he or she thinks will work. When the problem-identification and solving is successful, students learn. When it is not, teachers learn from the experience, reassess, and try to solve the problem again.

When teaching is thought of in this way, it becomes a professional intellectual investigation that includes constant personal construction of new professional knowledge, constant personal development of refined professional skills, and constant personal sorting out of professional value perspectives--it includes teacher learning as a key element. Teachers come to understand, more clearly than most now do, that they do not learn to teach by simply receiving information from others or by replicating the teaching that they experienced. They construct their own professional knowledge, skills, and value perspectives by drawing on all of their life experiences and formulating from them their own unique professional ways of understanding and doing things. They go beyond teaching the ways their teachers taught them or the ways their college professors told them to teach. They also look at their own practice; study, analyze, reflect upon what they do in their own classrooms; and build the ideas they develop from this self-study into their own professional theories. Then, they use these personally constructed theories for future practice--always revising and always building toward better teaching and better student learning. Because teaching is seen as problem-identification and solving, teachers draw from research-based theory, from what they read and hear, from the examples of others, and from their own trial-and-error efforts. In the process, they select ideas and examples from others' good practice for their classrooms, not as if the work of others serves as exemplars to be adopted uncritically, but as information from which to form their own personal professional judgements, to construct their own professional practice.

When teaching is conceived of in these ways, teachers think of their professional learning as being intertwined with every other aspect of their lives. They learn from all life experiences, including from every lesson they teach and from every interaction with colleagues, students, and classes; and they use that learning in their future work. The process continues for as long as they teach and is both guided and driven by their constantly asked question, How can I teach better? Similarly, the work of every other professional in the school community, including all those in administrative and supervisory positions, is guided by a parallel question, How can I help teachers

teach better? Both questions are synonymous with the question, How can I improve student learning?

Schools as Morally Based Communities of Learners

Recent scholarship also conceptualizes schools as cultural communities of inquiry rather than physical places, buildings, organizations, institutions, or clusters of employees who work together. As cultural communities, they have a mission and shared core values. All community members--students, teachers, school staff, and parents--possess a sincere commitment to achieving the mission and believe in the core values sincerely and deeply. They belong to the community and are wanted by all of its members. They possess a sense of loyalty, camaraderie, and collegiality that draws everyone into a common bond. Individual attachments to the community are so strong that they supersede individual personal desires so that everyone helps each other toward their common goals. In essence, a shared mission and a common belief in core community values permeate every aspect of school life and guide and drive every school decision and activity.

Professional Knowledge, Competence, and Value Perspectives as Developed from Reflective Practice

Similarly, recent scholarship conceptualizes the professional knowledge, competence, and value perspectives that teachers possess as knowledge that is personally constructed by teachers, competence that is personally developed by teachers, and value perspectives that are personally formulated by teachers in the context of their professional work. Some refer to it as the knowledge, competence, and values of professional practice--the conceptualization includes at least four intermingled elements.

One, the professional knowledge, skills, and values of teachers are constructed by teachers themselves rather than absorbed from elsewhere. Admittedly, teachers gather information from college professors, textbooks, their own experiences as students, cooperating teachers, consultants, research studies, the practices of colleagues, and so forth; but all of these are only sources of ideas, skills, and values that teachers turn to in order to construct and develop their own unique ways of knowing, doing things, and believing. They build this knowledge, develop this competence, and formulate these values based on their own background and experience.

Two, teachers construct and develop their knowledge, skills, and values in the context of how they use that new knowledge, and those new skills and values. They ask themselves, for example, how the information they are told in a lecture or the skill they see another teacher demonstrate will fit with their own ways of doing things and work with their own students and in their own classrooms. How they answer these types of questions, not only affects how and if they use the knowledge, but it also affects the very nature of that knowledge. And the same point also applies to skills and values. This happens because teachers determine the validity of ideas and the appropriateness of skills and value perspectives differently from the ways in which validity and appropriateness are assessed by college educators, administrators, and policy specialists. For teachers, the validation comes in terms of how well their own students learn. Because of the need for this type of validation, the value of any set of professional knowledge, skills, and value perspectives, as far as teachers are concerned, is determined by its utility in helping individual teachers teach rather than by its esoteric origin. The reputation of the developer of a recommended teaching procedure and the sophistication of the research project in which it was developed are less important than the teacher's belief, after trial in his or her classroom, that it helps students to learn.

Three, the places that teachers turn to as sources of knowledge, skills, and values are not all external to themselves and their classrooms. Teachers also generate their own educational theories from their personal teaching, reflection on that teaching, and self-analysis. Each day they teach, they learn from what they try, how it works, how students respond, the social context in which it takes place, how they assess all of this, and so forth. This learning from practice simply happens as a normal part of teaching. When it works well, teachers formulate their in-class learning into personal, practical theories that they use in subsequent teaching; they communicate these theories to other teachers, and, in turn, they use in their classrooms similar theories developed by their colleagues.

Four, because teachers are adults and continuously developing professionals, all the principles of both adult learning and evolutionary professional development apply to their learning and, in turn, to their evolving knowledge, skills, and value perspectives. At any given time in their individual careers, teachers possess ideas, competencies, and value perspectives that are different from those they possessed a short time earlier or will possess a short time in the future. They, like all humans, never stop thinking, learning, and changing. At times they even back-slide. They forget, lose proficiency, and narrow their perspective.

When teaching is thought of as professional practice, the knowledge, skills, and values that teachers possess and use in their professional work to create learning are not limited to pre-service professional education; to craft knowledge passed on by other master craft-persons; to that which is absorbed from books, lectures, workshops, and research reports; and to individual teacher trial and error guided by common sense. The knowledge, skills, and values are developed from all of the above and other sources as well. In that way of seeing things, teaching, studying teaching, and educating teachers are three facets of the same enterprise, not three separate endeavors to be conducted independently by teachers, researchers, and teacher educators.

Self-Study as a Medium for Professional Learning

When learning, teaching, schools, and teacher professional knowledge, competence, and values perspectives are conceptualized as I have sketched them, self-study, I believe, must be seen as the central core of all education reform. Reform, then can be seen as a self-questioning that asks, What do we become? Where are we now? How do we get from here to there? When this happens, most current school restructuring models (including many that have received great public notice) will be seen as ill-conceived efforts at manipulation that will fail, and most university-school partnerships will be seen as too narrow and too superficial to produce any meaningful improvement in either student learning or teacher learning.

Conclusion

I believe the alternate way of improving learning, schools, teaching, and teacher education (I actually prefer "teacher learning") that I have suggested would enable us to think about the entire education enterprise differently. We would be thinking about more than one shot improvements, casting blame, and saving face. We would be considering broader ideas and thinking more deeply than we now are. We would be looking to ideas about what we and our professional work can become. We would be looking ahead rather than over our collective shoulders. Most important of all, we would be reflecting, thinking, analyzing--letting ideas, images of what might be, and visions of new possibilities drive us instead of a desire to get rid of something we do but do not like. We would become--more that we are today--inquiring, investigative learners. The essence of

our work would be inquiry, the places where we work would be centers of learning. We would see ourselves, regardless of our professional role as educators, more clearly as learners.

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