The "Vision" of an Insider: A Practitioner's View
If teachers appear to be another silent majority, it is not that they have nothing to say, but that they are mired in an unrewarding, denigrating workplace where no one listens.

It's astonishing to me that the voices of teachers and principals are not more audible in the current discussions and debates about school improvement. It's unthinkable that any other profession, undergoing the same scrutiny, would allow all the descriptions of practice, analyses of practice, and prescriptions for improving practice to come from outsiders looking in. Where are the voices of the insiders? Why can't we walk into a school and see and hear the mission of that school conveyed with clarity and conviction... What will allow teachers and administrators to take their own visions seriously—and act on them?

Roland Barth

For days after first encountering the above statement by Roland Barth, I conducted an intense interior monologue with him. In my imaginings, I told him precisely what I, a definite insider, with 16 years' experience as a classroom teacher in public schools, thought about his comments. Obviously, he had struck a raw nerve. His is a disturbing observation because it is such a blend of truth and ignorance. The truth lies in his realization that the voices of insiders are indeed not being heard and that this is an "astonishing" and critical omission. It is to Barth's credit that he even noticed this omission; most of those "describing, analyzing, and prescribing" for the classrooms of America do so with blithe disregard because we have learned to assume a flippant indifference or disdain for the classroom teacher. By rejecting or misunderstanding his offer of help, we have destroyed what was there. The paradox of education as a profession is that it attracts people who stand daily in the midst of those classrooms. Barth should be asking what doused that spark. The paradox of education as a profession is that it attracts people with visions into a system designed to frustrate those visions.

Most of the teachers in our public schools today have been teaching for over ten years—ample time to have acted upon their beliefs and goals and to have found out just what the system thinks about their visions. I would invite Barth to have a cup of coffee in any teachers' lounge or to walk a teachers' picket line sometime and interview some of us. Question a 40-year-old football coach with his clipboard and whistle, talk to the chemistry teacher still sporting a crew-cut and polyester pants, dialogue with the elementary teacher or the English teacher who leave school looking like bag ladies as they cart papers and materials back and forth. Ask these people why they became teachers, and he will hear nothing but vision. Love of subject and children impelled these people into the profession, and it is precisely what is driving them either out of it or underground.

Actually, the image of Barth dialoguing in the teachers' lounge or on the picket line is too fanciful to sustain. It is unlikely he would come and even more unlikely that teachers would open up to him if he did. Experienced teachers do not talk about visions; it is too painful. Like soldiers at the front, we have learned to assume a flippant and hardened attitude. Thus, we are in the current state that Professor Barth finds so distressing.

To a degree, I share his distress. Indeed, I am reminded of a scene from John Howard Griffin's Black Like Me, in which a northern college professor visiting a southern campus leaves in disgust because blacks keep rejecting or misunderstanding his offer of help. In similar fashion, teachers must exasperate those, like Barth, who have our best interests at heart. What is our problem? Why don't we get a little dignity, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, act on our own visions? Believe me, we have tried; but it has taken 20 years of struggle to attain salaries that are still only barely above poverty level in their beginning steps. Thus, our energy has been sapped by the attempt to climb the lowest of Maslow's rungs. So it is not that we are either shiftless or stupid that keeps us silent about visions. It is that we are tired—tired of being powerless pawns in a system that treats us either with indifference or disdain.

Take a look at the working world of the insider. You will find that it is not an atmosphere that nourishes visions. Though we teachers are numerous, we are virtually powerless. We affect none of the key elements in our working lives. For example, we have no control over class size or the length of the school day and class periods. We have almost no input into the form and content of report cards. We do not select our schedules, grade levels, or the buildings in which we teach. Indeed, we do not even control the time within our own classrooms, for we are slaves to the P.A., to notes from the nurse, from guidance, the librarian, the main office. We are often without the essentials, like paper and pencils and desks. In many buildings, janitors and secretaries control these. Acquiring a new pencil sharpener may involve stroking three separate egos and
We retain the aura of powerlessness. When individuals or groups lack the weight of power, it is easy to overlook them. They become, in Ralph Ellison's word, invisible. And so it is with teachers. Notice how nonexistent we are on the current rash of task forces, study teams, and commissions overrunning our workplaces. For instance, no practicing classroom teacher is listed among the 23 observers acknowledged at the end of Ernest Boyer's Carnegie Foundation study, which produced *High School*, nor among the "distinguished colleagues" cited in the forenotes. John Goodlad, in *A Place Called School*, thanks a score of staff members and colleagues at the conclusion of his important work, but all seem to be university professors, foundation administrators, or research assistants; none is identified as a classroom teacher. The inclusion of one teacher, a former national Teacher of the Year, on the 18-member National Commission on Excellence in Education smacks more of gracious tokenism than of serious regard for teachers' concerns. It is true that all of these studies are valuable and that they all surveyed, observed, and interviewed teachers, but until teachers are seen as critical members of the project team, we retain the aura of powerlessness and invisibility.

Outside experts are not the only ones who treat teachers with little respect. Since the students' rights legislation of the 1960s, teaching, even within the walls of the schoolhouse, has become a Rodney Dangerfield profession. After the Supreme Court extended civil rights protection to minors, fear of litigation paralyzed principals and school boards, and teachers soon learned that reporting students for violating school rules was an exercise in futility. Thus, teachers achieved a kind of invisibility even in their own buildings. In secondary schools, for instance, teachers in the halls are routinely bumped, jolted, and exposed to language that would make Serpico blush. In classrooms, students at their desks seem unaware of the teacher up front as they discuss sex, drugs, and drinking. Since students gained their civil rights, teachers have stopped insisting upon their own.

It is perhaps this condition of invisibility and powerlessness that to a degree explains the sticky issue of tenure and merit pay. Now, no one deplores the invulnerability of incompetent teachers more than those of us who long ago went beyond competence to mastery. Try knowing that you are taking home the same or a smaller paycheck as Mr. Jones down the hall who has been using one set of tests for ten years and spends most of his school day running football pools. Yet most of us are wary of abolishing tenure or agreeing to merit raises, for our experience has been with power figures more interested in their power than in our merit. We have seen repeatedly how they view "merit." Every building has its group of teachers judged as "meritorious" in the eyes of the principal. These good teachers smile a lot; they love to attend PTO meetings and chaperone student dances. They never cause trouble by failing too many students or suggesting new ideas. In return, they are rewarded with such perks as small classes and easy schedules. Bad teachers, in the eyes of many building administrators, are those who get uppity or act sulky. Bad teachers complain if there is no heat or no paper or no nurse on duty. They read and have ideas for change and sometimes even want the system to support these ideas. They ask questions at faculty meetings and file grievances. They sometimes even completely forget their place and go over the principal's head to a board member or central office administrator. Bad teachers end up with petty patrol, lunch room supervision, detention hall duty, the largest and the most "challenging" classes.

Not surprisingly, teachers have been quick to pick up some of the survival strategies historically favored by the powerless. We can shuck and jive with the best, and because we know there is no reward for, or even evaluation of, a job well done, we have learned to do just enough to keep everyone happy. Boyer accurately describes this as "an unspoken, unwritten contracting of work [to students] for cooperation in the classroom.

Susan Rosenschultz calls it "retiring while on the job." We know we can do this with impunity because once inside our classrooms we are largely ignored, not because we are trusted but because as long as we or our students don't cause trouble, no one really cares. The folks up at the big house don't mind what we do down here in the quarter, just as long as we look happy about it.

Needless to say, we are not happy. We don't like ourselves very much. Most of us don't even want to be us. We definitely don't want our children, especially our sons, to become us. A science teacher quoted in *High School* told his daughter that if she went into teaching, he would not pay for her education, and the history teacher featured on the ABC special, *To Save Our Children, To Save Our Schools,*
told his sons that if they ever contemplated teaching as a career, he would disown them. Many of the best of us, in terms of ability, can bear the life no longer and in increasing numbers are opting to walk out of the classroom, for it is common knowledge that the only way “to get ahead in teaching is to leave it.”

Given the conditions of the profession, it does not seem astonishing to me that Roland Barth hears no talk of “visions” in the halls of our public schools—like Langston Hughes with his “dream deferred,” most teachers have seen early visions wither and die “like a raisin in the sun.”

Yet, despite all this, many of us, behind a mask of cynicism, which is the best defense against repeated disappointment, have kept the ideals that lured us into the classroom in the first place. But we have gone underground with them, exposing them to only a few close colleagues and, of course, to our closest colleagues—our students—but never to the outsider like Barth whose insistent optimism is at odds with our reality. We know that the way to make our visions come true would mean, as it is so beautifully put in In Search of Excellence, “that those who implement the plans must make the plans.” Now there’s a vision worth pursuing. But this would mean acknowledging the existence of the invisible teacher as the major factor in the educational paradigm; this would mean, as Theodore Sizer states, “empowering Horace,” and Horace and I both know that this will never happen.


Boyer, p. 144.

Let’s have that cup of coffee in the teachers’ lounge. I look forward to talking about her personal vision of good schools, about the presence of visions among others who work in schools, and about the costs and benefits to teachers and administrators of revealing their visions. I’d also like to compare notes from my years as teacher and principal.

I’m delighted that my writing helped elicit hers. I agree. We need many good, strong, wise words in print coming from within schools. Even if scorched a bit by it. I celebrate the persistence under trying circumstances of this lively spark. Good news indeed.

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