

# Rethinking School and University Roles

Schools must do more than merely implement programs constructed by universities: they must become aware of their capacity for generating knowledge. By encouraging inquiry and reflection within schools, practicing educators can add to the professional knowledge base and construct their own programs.

Recently I was talking to a new acquaintance who asked of my work affiliations prior to joining a school district. I said that I had been with a State Department of Education and before that a university professor. He remarked that I'd "really been around and down the education ladder." He didn't say "down" with any tone of derision or contempt. Affiliated with a local district himself, he simply perceived a natural hierarchy in which more interesting, respected things were done in the groves of academe. I've had conversations since in which people expressed surprise at how much I write, strongly implying that authorship is a university enterprise, incompatible with school work.

And this is understandable. National conventions and professional journals are dominated by the professoriat, who also form national commissions and advisory boards to institutions or government agencies. Most school district people get swallowed up in the daily routine, do not publish, and do not communicate enough with other educators to avoid a creeping provincialism.

## A Persistent Paradox

Still, the perception of hierarchy is curious since most people in school buildings perceive the work of universities as irrelevant. The paradox rests, I think, on the false separation of knowing from doing and the equation of education with knowing. Universities

are the keepers of knowledge and must therefore be revered even as they are ignored. Whatever the source of the paradox, it reflects a deeply dysfunctional relationship among the various levels of education. On the one hand, we have practitioners busily practicing, and, on the other, "knowers" producing knowledge to be ignored. This leaves scholarship to drift along toward irrelevance and practice to drift along toward incompetence.

People at the school district level think scholarship resides at the university and the occasional think tank. Universities, in turn, take an imperialistic

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approach to the schools, seeing them as little more than sources of data or tools to carry out the universities' agenda. Even now, with a number of universities making more collaborative efforts with schools, the dominance of the universities in setting the agenda is easily seen. A 1989 two-day conference on literacy at the University of Colorado at Boulder featured only university speakers. Schoolteachers made up the bulk of the audience; a few served as moderators of sessions. Too often, the university defines the constructs and the agenda and then expects the schools to implement them.

Given this dichotomy, the talk of school restructuring is nonsense. Neither schools nor universities are sufficiently strong to accomplish it alone. And without substantial redefinition of roles, they cannot even accomplish it together.

## Too Busy to Do More

Elsewhere I have described (Bracey 1987, 1989) how the limitations of quantitative research and the universities' obsession with "knowledge production"—too often defined by counting articles that no one has read—drives academe's products into irrelevance. Here I wish to discuss the forces that keep teachers from reading professional journals and paying attention to what relevant knowledge there is.

Teachers perceive themselves as people who are too busy to do any-

thing other than what they are currently doing. When I address a group of teachers about "teachers as researchers" or "reflective practitioners," I find little initial enthusiasm for the idea. Most think of it as something more to do, and they don't know where they'll find the time.

The idea that teachers as researchers might produce knowledge strikes teachers as odd (the idea that *students* might produce knowledge is absolutely incredible). I once watched as a professor tried to get teachers to tell her what would constitute useful alternatives to standardized tests, thus allowing the teachers to define the important constructs of assessment. The teachers, unused to this role, found it terribly difficult. After two hours of mutual frustration, most of them fell into the posture of "Give us some new techniques and we'll use them—unless we reject them and then we'll keep on doing what we're doing."

I do not believe that great things will follow from restructuring or site-based management until teachers start seeing themselves as knowledge producers and until universities try to understand education from the school level. Schools and universities must realize they need each other. The university reveres the reflection so much needed in schools; the university needs the schools to help define the agenda and the constructs.

We must change how we perceive education. We must, as Schaefer (1967) argued, see schools as producers of knowledge as well as transmitters.<sup>1</sup> Policymakers and the public must come to assign some of the reflective characteristics of universities to schools. Rather than perceiving a teacher who likes to write as a candidate for a college position, administrators must encourage reflection and research and composition at the school level.

If we can accomplish such a slow-down-for-thought, everyone will benefit. Universities can engage in meaningful research. Children will be exposed to teachers actively solving problems. Teachers will get to work on problems meaningfully related to their own lives part of the day. How often does a child get to see a teacher doing real science—trying to solve a problem where the answer is not known in advance? Most

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of what teachers teach is of no real interest to the teacher, it is only what the teacher *thinks* might interest the children or what the teacher thinks kids *ought* to know.

### Getting Real

One teacher who became a teacher-researcher reported that his students treated him differently while he was engaged in research: this was a *serious* activity worthy of respect. I write two columns a week in a Denver newspaper, and a high school English teacher once suggested I visit his class so students could talk to someone who wrote "for real." Disturbing articles in recent journals (Bloome et al. 1989, Farrell 1988, Miller et al. 1988) imply that usually school isn't real, isn't worth taking seriously. The lack of reality about schools was captured beautifully by the late James Herndon in his 1971 book, *How to Survive in Your Native Land*.

Released from [school] to their private lives, teachers are marvelous gardeners, they work on ocean liners as engineers, they act in plays, win bets, go to art movies, build their own houses, they are opera fans, expert fishermen, oratorio singers, hunters, mechanics . . . all just as if they were smart people. Of course it is more difficult to build a house or sing Bach than it is to teach kids to read. Of course if they operated in their lives outside of [school] the way they do in it, their houses would fall down, their ships would sink, their flowers die, their cars blow up.

I do not believe I have seen one reform report or pamphlet, read one story about reform, or heard one speech about reform that did not allege that we need to develop "lifelong learners." But if learning in the classroom is not real or serious, how can love of learning develop? Teachers must start asking questions about real problems: How can I do this better? Why am I doing this in the first place? How can I change this situation? They have to learn to see themselves in the role of providing the answer, enlisting universities to assist. If they did this, the sense of thrill that learning can provide might be restored to the classroom. When and if it happens, schools will truly become centers of inquiry. □

<sup>1</sup>Schaefer's book was largely ignored when it put forth the idea of schools as producers of knowledge in 1967, probably because at the time America was in the midst of many large-scale curriculum projects, some of which included "teacher-proof" materials. Everything concerning innovation was thus being removed from the classroom.

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