Silence Is Complicity

A call to let teachers improve our schools through action research — not NCLB

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A T A TEACHERS’ conference in Oslo, Norway, held March 16–18, 2007, I was asked to give several keynote speeches on teacher research. I jumped at the opportunity, fully supported by Dr. Caruso, our new President at Antioch University New England, not only because of the chance to explore a new country, but also because I have long been an advocate for teacher research. Starting with our summer sequence program for experienced educators in 1992, I have taught regular courses at the university level that prepare teachers for Master-level projects and review research methodology. That led to the publication of a small pamphlet on research brought out by the Association of Waldorf Schools in 1995. With the confluence of that original piece going out of print and the exciting invitation to speak in Oslo, I decided it was time to edit and supplement the original work. With the permission of AWSNA and the continued support of everyone at SteinerBooks, I am able now to offer this new volume.

As I began to prepare for Oslo, I asked the organizers, “What prompted this conference on research and what are some of the current themes in independent Norwegian schools today?” What I heard really caught my attention. Apparently, the sixty Waldorf schools in that country have received government support for many years. Lately, the Norwegian government has
passed legislation calling for the “lifting of knowledge” in which the schools are being asked to clarify competencies and aims of each subject taught, with demonstrations and descriptions required for achievement at ages 9, 12, 16, 17, 18, and 19. Minimum standards needed to be articulated and much paper work was required. In addition, the government has been asking for descriptions of “quality care” in administrative matters, parent relations, decision making and other practical matters.

As I listened, I realized why they had asked an American to speak at their conference! Those of us in education on this side of the Atlantic, and even many who are not working with schools, have been debating our own set of standards, passed some years ago and known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). The Norwegian situation at once appeared, if not similar, at least the beginning of the same trend. But their response intrigued me! Rather than just comply, they called for a large conference to look at alternative ways to improve the quality of education. Rather than just follow the new regulations, they have suggested that teacher research might serve as an alternative pathway to standardization, especially if it were to be rigorously embraced, monitored and subject to peer review. This got me all fired up. Here were teachers willing to do the extra work to push back, so to speak, in the face of government regulation of education. Rather than complain and blog one another, these teachers, by attending such a conference and taking up action research, could make a difference in the whole tenor of the public debate. Here was an example for those of us who have been concerned and complaining about our own
problems with NCLB and unfunded state mandates in general.

This leads me then to make my basic case for teacher research:

1. When conducted according to accepted quantitative or qualitative methods, teacher research can help teachers learn, develop new curricula and stay enthusiastic about the discovery process. There are immediate, tangible benefits for both teachers and students in action research.

2. When successful, teacher research can serve to empower teachers in their advocacy for educational change. With firsthand experience and earned knowledge, teachers can more confidently speak out for the needs of their students. Those in other professions, such as medicine, engineering and business, are often afforded greater respect and compensation than teachers who have to endure countless commission reports and political debate about what others think should be happening in our schools. It would be great for a change if the voices of teachers were heard in our public discourse! They work with children everyday; they know what materials and curricula are needed, if only they were left alone to follow their instincts. Teacher research takes this beyond intuitive understanding to a level of documented inquiry that could be held up for public scrutiny, such as in publications,
news media, workshops and town meetings. Teachers need a greater voice in educational matters!

3. Given the enhanced curriculum and stronger advocacy on the part of teachers, we might achieve a third aim, which would be to get politicians to back off. No other professional field is so regulated and legislated as is education. Somehow, someone got the idea that in a democracy everyone has an equal say in educational matters. Yet when I go to the dentist or doctor, they are comparatively free to perform their work according to standards set by their professional organizations. I have yet to read a newspaper article describing legislation mandating a certain number of fillings per week before a dentist is publicly labeled as “failing.” Yet we seem to have no problem letting politicians set very specific standards and test scores for our children. Teacher research, if followed as described in the book, could create a counter movement that would be so dynamic that parents and community members might band together in a popular revolt that essentially said: Politicians, back off!

This will of course take time. But I sense that more and more people are willing to follow the lead of Jonathan Kozol (author of *Savage Inequalities* and other books) in challenging common mis-practices in funding, testing and legislating. Most social change happens when people start to speak out and others rally to
the cause. The time is right for such a surge in regard to educational reform.

So I introduce this modest booklet, which seeks to frame some of the key issues in the first two chapters and then take the reader in a step-by-step approach to making research a viable option for teachers. Having coached countless students over the past fifteen years with their Master-level projects and having served on doctoral committees at several universities, I have been able to hone the techniques described here based upon life experience. Repeatedly, students and teachers have said to me that the research experience has been transformational. They have not only learned to become better teachers and stronger advocates for what they believe, but they also feel their lives have changed as they follow a question that becomes a steady companion on the journey of teaching. Research, as indicated toward the end of this work, is not just about outcomes and school reform. It is an opportunity for awakening, for inner development. In this regard, there are truly no limits to knowledge—no boundaries around personal growth.
1. Standards Set By the Federal Government: Who Has Been Left Behind?

Sometimes during the 2007–2008 session, Congress must determine whether to renew or amend the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) or leave it to expire. As the public debate progresses, there will be opportunities not only to question specific provisions but also some of the fundamental premises built into the original resolution. With the benefit of several years of experience, thoughtful teachers, parents and administrators have already begun to offer their views. In this chapter I will offer some of the thinking from this group as well as some of the key ideas that prompted the legislation in the first place.

From the outset, the assumptions behind NCLB were controversial:

1. Virtually all children, even those living in poverty, have the capacity to achieve a preset level of proficiency in reading and math by the age of eighteen—and it is the teacher’s job to make sure they do.

2. Everyone benefits from having someone look over his shoulder, and that external pressure
from the government/accountability improves performance.

3. Good education is synonymous with good teaching, thus NCLB required tighter standards in teacher licensing such as “highly qualified teacher” designations.

4. Giving parents choices within the system has positive benefits as competitive pressures force educators to customize programs.

5. Improving education is a national imperative, and “the federal government can and should play a constructive role.”

Some studies have shown limited success in the narrow sense of occasional improvements in test scores, but the evidence is what one might call “underwhelming.” For example, the Education Policy Analysis Archives cites a two-year study of NCLB in southwestern Washington State based upon drop-in observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers and administrators. The data indicated that the policy had “partially yielded the intended standards-based reforms but at considerable local cost. While most participating administrators described efforts to use NCLB to leverage needed change, most teachers described struggles to sustain best practices and to avoid some negative consequences to their students and schools.” Administrators reported that some resistant teachers were being “nudged” out of the profession, and that the greatest attrition was at the fourth grade level where the tests were being administered.

Indeed, most of the teacher response I have surveyed has been neutral to negative. Some of the most frequently voiced objections are as follows:
1. There is increasing evidence that schools are turning into test-prep factories and the curriculum offered as a result is narrowing.

2. In the pursuit of reading and math scores, the overall breadth and depth of the curriculum has diminished. Learning is being sacrificed at the expense of skill development.

3. The parental choice aspect has not panned out. For example, NCLB cannot solve the problem that in some big cities there simply are too few good schools to choose from—the government is incapable of quickly conjuring up new, successful schools.

4. The federal government has always had a hard time forcing states and local governments to do things they don’t want to do, and even if they go through the motions, it’s nearly impossible to force them to do those things well. As with children, they have to want to succeed.

5. Speaking of children, many teachers have reported that over-reliance on testing has reinforced a student’s tendency to ask: Will this be on the test? Then they devalue anything that is not. Ironically, some studies have shown (Popham 2006) that most of the tests used under NCLB are “unable to detect any striking instructional improvements when such improvements occur.”

6. Poor students and students of color are not improving, and they are the ones most likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers.
7. By requiring that teachers demonstrate subject matter competence in each subject that they teach, NCLB not only recognizes the importance of subject matter knowledge, but is forcing out middle school teachers in rural schools who have to teach several subjects as part of full-time job requirements. Subject area expertise is being pushed at the expense of the overall generalist and a more integrated curriculum.

8. The notion of “failing schools” is a form of public ostracism harking back to the “scarlet letter” condemnations that used public opinion as a punitive weapon. Embarrassment and ridicule do not promote growth and change.

The most significant questioning in my view concerns the very role of government in setting standards in the first place. Even some of those who have been NCLB advocates in the past are making statements such as these by Mike Petrilli on what to do now: “In my opinion, the way forward starts with a more realistic assessment of what the federal government can reasonably hope to achieve in education. Using sticks and carrots to tug and prod states and districts in desired directions has proven unworkable.”

He suggests the federal government’s role should be restricted to distributing funds and collecting and publishing data, leaving everything else in the “don’t do it at all” bucket: “No more prescriptive ‘cascade of sanctions’ for failing schools. No more federal guarantee of school choice for children not being well served. The states would worry about how to define and achieve greater teacher quality (or better, teacher
effectiveness). The states would decide when and how to intervene in failing schools.”

So it seems that NCLB has resulted in some sincere questioning of the role of the federal government in education. Shifting responsibility to the states has the virtue of more local control (at least in states such as New Hampshire) but does not eliminate by any means the role of government in education, a premise I would like to more thoroughly question in chapter two. One has to wonder if the same arguments Petrilli uses to question the federal government forcing unwanted changes on states should not be applied to states doing the same to local districts. Can excellence in education be legislated at all?

One crucial issue is the notion of setting standards and forcing schools nationwide to achieve them. Government does not do this for business, for if it did, entrepreneurship would seriously suffer. Imagine legislation that would mandate five percent profit margins for shoe stores or fifteen percent for technology, and then publicly brand companies as failures if they did not achieve these preset standards. As a society, we tend to value free enterprise and individual creativity in business but not in education, and we do this at our peril.

One of the main problems is the setting of standards in the first place. In her book *One Size Fits Few*, Susan Ohanian asserts that the Standardistos have deprofessionalized teaching:

How else are teachers to feel except helpless in the face of being told to *deliver* a curriculum that is invented by external authorities? Nationwide, we have the lowest retention rate of teachers in history.... What few people realize is that there is
no reform in the Standardistos documents: Standardistos are trying to pass off macaroni and cheese skills as Ziti con Formaggio Velveeta di Alfa Romeo gourmet dining. They want to perpetuate the same old skill drill that kids have been resisting all this century.6

Teachers are caught in the bind between best practices known to most dedicated educators and the generalized arrogance of standards such as these issued by the Illinois State Board of Education:

Every elementary school child will be able to read at grade level, with fluency and comprehension.

Every elementary school teacher will be able to teach reading using comprehensive, research based methods.7

And these and other standards are to be applied to all students regardless of their experiential background, capabilities, developmental and learning differences, interests and ambitions. These standards are intended for students in districts with ample resources and those that cannot even afford school supplies and lab equipment. The brush of standards tends to paint all schools with an unexciting, oppressive hue of gray. Real people otherwise known as children and teachers become numbers and charts. Standards set outside of the teaching profession are detrimental to all learning and creativity.

It is amazing, as stated previously, that only in education do people feel it legitimate to have outsiders set predetermined standards of achievement. Does the government legislate how many operations a surgeon should perform per week? Does anyone outside
of the industry decide how many innovations a technology company should adopt in a given year? Did anyone require that Picasso produce a certain number of masterpieces a month demonstrating proficiency in certain techniques? The surgeon, painter or inventor relies upon the very human capacities that good teachers are trying to cultivate in our schools. These qualities include such things as imagination, critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal skills, creativity—most of which are not valued or measurable on any standardized test. In focusing primarily on preset skill levels determined by outside authorities, we are sacrificing the very development of capacities that will shape our future and move us forward as a society. We are forfeiting future human capital in the test mills of today’s classrooms.

Anyone who has ever worked in a classroom or has tried to understand child development knows that those who are closest to the children often have the best insights as to how to educate. Peggy Cooper, one of the participants in a Waldorf Teacher Education Program at Antioch New England summer sequence program for experienced educators has this to say:

For me, the real heart of the process of research manifests itself in my everyday work with children. The in-depth reading can then find support to my on-going process as a teacher. Life is a constant state of becoming. When we do not work with the principle of continuous growth, we lose an important dynamic in our work with children, and we also run the risk of materialization of the spirit (dogmatizing something that should be an on-going process of maturation). Everyday is a
new opportunity to learn from our work. What I discovered in my independent study research is that data gathered from a living process is a vital and valid way to sustain continuous research as a teacher.

Good teaching is a responsive activity; watching and observing the activities and interests of children leads to innovative lesson plans and creative group activities. Dedicated teachers are tired of being told what to do by people who do not understand the spirit of childhood. It is time to begin a new chapter in education by fighting for the emancipation of the teacher.
THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR WALDORF EDUCATION is an initiative working on behalf of the Waldorf school movement. The Institute was founded in 1996 in order to deepen and enhance the quality of Waldorf education, to engage in serious and sustained dialogue with the wider educational-cultural community, and to support research that would serve educators in all types of schools in their work with children and adolescents.

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