

April 2005

Challenges for the Future: Getting Our Story Out, and Helping Beginning Teachers

Mark W. Conley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Conley, Mark W. (2005) "Challenges for the Future: Getting Our Story Out, and Helping Beginning Teachers," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol37/iss3/23>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Rex, L.A., & Nelson, M.C. (2004). How teachers' professional identities position high stakes test preparation in their classrooms. *Teachers College Record*, 106 (6), 1288-1331.

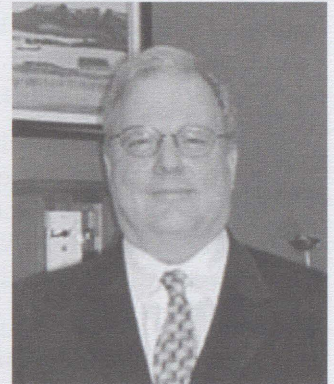
Schiller, L. (2000). Politics, pedagogy, and professional development in Michigan. In A.A. Glatthorn, & Fontana, J. (Eds.), *Coping with standards,*

tests, and accountability: Voices from the classroom (pp. 95-107). Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Shepard, L.L. (2000, April). *The role of assessment in a learning culture*. Presidential address presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Challenges for the Future: Getting Our Story Out, and Helping Beginning Teachers

BY MARK W. CONLEY
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



Right now, with such an emphasis on testing, it is difficult to forecast the future with any reliability. But here are the challenges that I see ahead, and what we need to do to meet them.

First, there are the political challenges. The politicians have done a skillful job of painting educators into a difficult corner. By focusing so much on testing as the answer to a myriad of problems, politicians have made it extremely difficult to get our message out about the complexities of literacy education in today's world. The rhetoric from No Child Left Behind provides a useful example. When asked about educators' concerns about testing, the President replied:

They [educators] talk about "teaching to the test." But let's put that logic to the test. If you test a child on basic math and reading skills, and you're "teaching to the test," you're teaching math and reading. And that's the whole idea. (Bush, 2001)

And that's that. Improvement in literacy is simplified to the goal of teaching to and passing tests.

But what happens when we try to explain ourselves and our students? What happens when we talk about the growing percentages of children and adolescents from poverty in Michigan's schools? What happens when we talk about new waves of English language learners impacting many of our schools? What happens when we talk about the complexities of forming partnerships between schools and families? For many outside the school building, the response is glazed, bored looks and accusations that, once again, the educators are muddying the waters without taking up the real challenge, getting kids to pass the tests!

Few outside the school building have a genuine understanding of what happens there. This past week, I assigned the teachers in my master's class the task of keeping track of all of the assessment decisions they make daily in their classrooms. To kick off the assignment, I asked for an example. One English teacher

Mark W. Conley teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in content literacy and classroom assessment. His research and writing are about connecting standards and assessments through literacy, content literacy and action research. He has lived and worked in Michigan for the past 20 years.

told the story of trying to figure out how to help one seventh-grade boy who just didn't seem to "get it." He couldn't figure out her assignments when nearly all of her other students experienced little difficulty. So, she did what good teachers do. She attempted to figure out where meaning broke down for him, she provided explanations, and she tried alternative approaches. Gradually, ever so gradually, she figured out what made this young man tick, and she got better at explaining things to him. He has a long way to go, but it has taken about four months of give and take between this teacher and her student to get on the right track. Last night, when teachers gave me their reports, here are some examples of what they said:

I think all of us do assessment every day—We just don't realize how much until we stop and think about it. How often do we change a lesson halfway through because the kids weren't getting it?

There is never a moment where we can zone out or not pay attention to the room and students around us. It's why we are all so tired when we get home. But it's also why we get up the next day and do it all over again. You never know what achievements or challenges the next day will hold, but we sure look forward to finding out.

As I listened to the teachers' stories, I was reminded once again about the complexities of classroom teaching and how little the public understands. I am concerned for the future—about getting the story out, so that we can move away from prevailing notions of "teachers as babysitters" or "teachers as test monitors" toward an appreciation of how *good* teaching is extremely challenging, hard work. I believe that the overly simplistic views of teaching are responsible for the teaching-to-the-test mentality that is pervasive in our government and our society. Providing a more complex view of students and our work in today's classrooms is a way to fight back against the simplistic thinking behind the current testing machine.

My second challenge for the future concerns our work with beginning teachers. The 20-year-old beginning teachers with whom I work are passionately naive in their convictions about education. One Michigan State instructor recently coined this phrase to describe our beginning teachers' understanding of teaching and learning: "With a song in my heart, a book in my hand, and a smile on my face, I'm good to go!" This

is an extremely apt description of our starting point with many of our future teachers.

More and more, I view my job as one of bringing beginning teachers to a more complex view of teaching and learning. And I have to do it in ways that help them develop the knowledge, tools, and dispositions necessary for thriving in today's classrooms. I can't do this without ongoing partnerships with committed and experienced classroom teachers and school administrators.

Recently, I sat down with a group of principals from the urban schools in which my students regularly tutor. We are starting a project in which our students will engage in action research on behalf of each of our partner schools. The principals provided a very complex view of changes in the schools, including ways that education gets lost in the larger picture of what society values. They confessed to struggling with changes in their students' lives that their own education and experiences did not prepare them to handle. Hopefully, as we embark on this project, we will create a win-win situation where our courses are infused with local knowledge about issues and concerns of the schools and we can give something back to the schools and the community. This is but one way to embrace the complexities of the current educational scene while preparing our future educators.

As I write this, I think about how many times we—professors and teachers—have stared at each other from across our workplace boundaries while launching accusations about not being in touch, not knowing, or not caring. Professors no longer have the luxury of shaking our disengaged heads as the policy-makers beat up on the schools. Given the fact that the current policies have us all squarely targeted by the assessment juggernaut, I can think of no better time to realize that we need each other now more than we ever have.

So, how can we get our story out, the more complex view of teaching and learning that goes on every day in Michigan's classrooms? Here is my naive dream. When surveyed about the schools, parents commonly say that the schools are in bad shape, but not their neighborhood schools. We need to consider all of the opportunities that we have to communicate with local parents in personal ways about the inside view, our goals for their children, how their children are growing in their learning, and what we are doing to help them. I know this is a pretty tall order. I have

heard the horror stories of the parent conferences, the parents who attack before you get two words out. But this is one of the few places we have to make some changes in perception, to persuade, to get the message out that we are doing a good job, often in the face of some horrendously difficult circumstances.

We need to stick together. We need to keep bonding over the mission of bringing young people into the profession. Their passion keeps me young. But as I regularly travel between their passion and the

complexities of schools, I am fearful about whether we are doing enough to prepare them well and keep them working in the profession. I know the simplistic faith in testing won't get us there. Embracing and thriving in the complexities of real classrooms will.

Reference

Bush, G. W. (Feb 27, 2001). *Message to Congress* (Budget outline). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

Poetry: The Magic Wand for Reading's Ills

BY LAURA APOL

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

In the movie *Miss Congeniality*, when the beauty pageant contestants are asked, "What is the one most important thing our society needs?" they each respond, in turn, "World Peace." However, when Gracie, the protagonist, herself a beauty contestant but really an undercover FBI agent, is asked, she responds, "That would be ... harsher punishment for parole violators." The pageant hall is silent, until Gracie adds, "And world peace!" at which point the crowd cheers enthusiastically.

So here I am, confronted with the question, "What would you change if you had a magic wand?" and I imagine around me a chorus of voices giving answers that center on standardized tests and the debilitating effects they're having on our teachers, schools, and students. Professional journals, politicians' promises, NCTE listservs, newspaper editorials, and a president's mantra all seem to circle around what standardized tests *can* do for our kids, what standardized tests *aren't* doing for our kids, and what standardized tests are doing *to* our kids. As professionals, we literacy educators are pretty clear that something needs to be done and it's not a small task. The magic wand answer, then, might look something like, "an intelligent plan (funding, education, classroom teacher support) that genuinely leaves no child behind."

In the middle of that chorus, imagine the respondent who, when asked "What would you change if you had a magic wand?" answers "Poetry—the reading of it. The writing of it. The teaching of it." The silence in the teacher's lounge would be deafening. Poetry is not in vogue these days; it's not a talking point among those concerned with teacher preparation or accountability. It is not a topic that propels us toward raising standards or measuring outcomes. Still, that probably says more about the current political and educational climate than it does about human souls and what they need. And outside the classroom, poetry is flourishing in the form of poetry slams, novels written in poetic form, poems posted on buses and subways, and rap music.

So why a magic wand wish used for poetry?



*Laura Apol is an associate professor at Michigan State University, where she teaches children's and adolescent literature. She is also a published poet; she has two full-length collections of her own poetry, **Falling into Grace and Crossing the Ladder of Sun** (winner of the 2004 Oklahoma Book Award), and she has edited an award-winning collection of poetry for children, **Learning to Live in the World: Earth Poems** by William Stafford.*