10-26-2010

The Slow Death of the American Teacher

Debbie Tye
Santa Ana, California, Unified School District

Ken Tye
Chapman University

Barbara Tye
Chapman University

Follow this and additional works at: http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe

Part of the Education Commons

Opus Citation
Tye, Debbie; Tye, Ken; and Tye, Barbara (2010) "The Slow Death of the American Teacher," scholarlypartnershipsedu: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe/vol5/iss1/4
The Slow Death of the American Teacher

Debbie Tye, Santa Ana, California, Unified School District,
Ken Tye, Chapman University, &
Barbara Tye, Chapman University

The Reflective Teacher
A poem in two parts by Debbie Tye

AYP, AIP, CST, STAR
benchmark x 3 x 2
SCOE/fluency/writing
story assessment Fridays + spelling + unit test
math tests, CELDT, ADEPT x 3
test strategies prep…weekly — daily
ELD chapter tests, DRA
(As soon as we finish a test, the next step is to prepare for another one).
Action plans, Nemesis standards, colab meetings
Target students, bubble students
Graphs, charts on the data wall
Mind Institute, Accelerated Reading
There is no enjoyment in learning for the sake of learning — it’s all about
performance on tests.

Nothing is child-centered,
nothing is meaningful.
No science, no social studies, just an SRA reading card.
No field trips, no projects…no motivation
Teaching has become delivery of material to be tested. Not on the test? Don’t teach it.
And who are we testing? English language learners.
Tracking by test scores, “cluster GATE.”
I remember authentic assessment portfolios — children’s heartfelt and celebrated work, replaced now by tests.
We are failing the children.
Assessment for measuring progress and to create lessons to re-teach for improvement is necessary,
but
there is no time to re-teach: we move on to the next test.

Pacing charts prevent digging deep into a topic: scratch the surface, hurry up and move on, or you're failing as a teacher

(Blake the students and their parents).

One or two keep up — the brilliant, the lucky. The ones labeled GATE.

(How do the children feel?)

These words from the heart of a veteran elementary school teacher capture the agony that accompanies a teaching career today. People who don't spend their days in schools may think we're exaggerating, but in fact it is probably an understatement — especially in schools, like the one where Debbie teaches, that serve poor immigrant neighborhoods. The children in her classroom are struggling to learn English — as well as the other subjects; and their parents are struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. It is incredibly ironic that requirements ostensibly meant to improve the education of such children are, in fact, leaving more and more of them behind.

A number of powerful forces are at work to rob teaching and learning of both joy and effectiveness, and two of them are embedded in the poem above: the forces that combine to deskill teachers, and the forces that — in the name of “accountability” — blame the teacher for poor test results, poor discipline, and other problems of schooling that in fact are much more complex. Let's consider these two — accountability and deskilling — for a moment. When we do, Debbie's plea for limits to high-stakes testing will be seen as a completely understandable reaction to a long series of efforts to undermine public education that are grounded in a deeply rooted cultural preference for behaviorist and determinist solutions to complicated human problems.

**Accountability**

The roots of today's mania for standardized testing, and the pretence that it constitutes constructive “reform,” are deep, stretching back at least to the Industrial Revolution. The assembly line was the innovation that started it all: identical treatments applied to raw materials yielded identical products; improve the treatments and one could improve the products. Apply this mechanical notion to the human enterprise of teaching and learning, and *voila!* — the early 20th century saw age-grading, the platoon system, and the advent of IQ testing; by mid-century there was ability grouping (tracking); the consolidation of small schools into large ones, resembling factories and run in remarkably similar ways; and the addition of aptitude testing.

Finally, in the 1980s and 1990s, the curriculum was being hacked into incoherent pieces (“standards”), and the nation had moved from a commitment to equal opportunity to a belief that equal outcomes — *products* — were the goal. Earning a diploma now depended on the passage of an exit exam, which reinforced the idea that everyone would have to reach the same level of proficiency or be punished for falling short. Starting with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the Reagan administration in 1983, scare tactics have been used to create pervasive anxiety and to convince the American people that their schools are failing. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle exposed this fraud decisively 12 years later in *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (1995).

As the nation approached the millennium, national educational policy was increasingly being set not by educators, and not even by legislators with the needs of schooling in mind, but by *business leaders*, called into conferences by both GOP and Democratic presidents from 1988 to 2008. The market model is by now firmly entrenched, with its reductionist thinking and its language of efficiency, accountability, and standardized testing — as if the nation's children were, or should be made to become, more or less identical by the time they graduate. This notion lies at the heart of the *No Child Left Behind Act of*...
2002, which has done so much damage in the name of a good cause.

The damage to children, to teachers, and ultimately to the vibrancy of our nation, is due to the fact that, as implemented, NCLB is fundamentally punitive. It requires states to adopt a system of accountability in order to evaluate students, teachers, administrators, and schools annually. The results are published, and schools (and teachers) are identified as failures if the scores don’t go up year after year. This policy is grounded in three flawed assumptions: the first is that standardized tests really measure significant learning by students. The second is that punishing schools and teachers will result in improved learning. The third is that schools and teachers, alone, are accountable for the success or failure of their students. “NCLB was a punitive law based on erroneous assumptions about how to improve schools,” Diane Ravitch has said. “Good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools.” (2010, pp. 110-111).

Assessment expert James Popham (2004) observed that accountability tests tend to measure not what students are taught in school but rather what those students bring to school, including their inherited academic aptitudes and what they have learned outside of school. He went on to say:

It would be bad enough if such ill-conceived accountability systems merely failed to do a good school evaluation job. But it’s far worse than that: the use of inappropriate accountability tests frequently fosters classroom practices that harm children. For example, significant curricular content is often omitted, students are forced to take part in dreary “practice item” drills, and some teachers engage in score-boosting activities that are downright dishonest (p. 167).

In addition, educators have known for a long time that the greatest correlations with test scores are socioeconomic status and family background, including English language proficiency. In fact, it has been shown that the so-called accountability movement has not closed the achievement gap as it was intended to; and that the dropout rate for students from poorer families has risen (Orfield et al., 2004).

Additionally, the game is rigged: the bar is raised every year, so run as they might, teachers can’t catch up. NCLB mandates that every American child will perform at grade level by 2014; but, in fact, more and more schools are failing behind. Even some excellent schools have recently been labeled as “failing,” and according to a study by the Center on Education Policy released on March 11, 2010, “If the current AYP-based accountability system is not replaced, in some states nearly all schools could be labeled as failing by school year 2012–13.” (p. 2). But are they failing? Not necessarily. It’s all smoke and mirrors — but it does have consequences, some of which could produce a whole generation of people who hate school and hate learning. Let’s look at this more closely.

When test scores are all that matter and teachers can be publicly shamed and punished if their students do poorly, something pernicious happens to both what children are taught and how they are taught. A growing body of evidence reveals that the pressure connected to high-stakes testing has led, in many districts serving poor and working-class children, to a narrowing of the curriculum. (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Rothstein et al., 2008). One such district near where we live and work has suggested to its teachers that only language arts and math — and maybe, now, a smattering of science — are really important, since these will be tested. There is almost no history, civics, art, or music, unless a teacher can squeeze them in somehow — which is getting more and more difficult. There often is no PE, and in some schools, no recess. And this narrowing is by no means limited to Southern California (Kozol, 2005). What has happened to the ideal of the broadly educated American citizen — or does that ideal only apply to children from middle class or wealthy communities?

As for how children are taught — as Debbie says, “no field trips, no projects…scratch the surface, hurry up and move on, or you’re failing as a teacher.” Here, in 2010, is
the assembly line in full swing: every child is expected to be able to recite to a visitor what “standards” are being taught today; the use of learning centers and small-group differentiated instruction is forbidden in favor of frontal teaching to the whole group — often using scripted lessons prepared by faraway curriculum writers who know nothing about that school, let alone those particular children. Yes, it's a national assembly line, and although “teacher-proof” curriculum packages and scripted learning modules have been around for 40 years and more, in our view they are no more effective in producing learning now than they ever have been. The most effective and memorable teachers, in our experience, were the ones who taught with flair, imagination, and creativity: who brought intriguing artifacts to class, who invited interesting speakers, who dressed up as the historical character we were studying, who did magical science demonstrations, who encouraged us to write and to illustrate our own stories — but children today, particularly poor and working-class children, are likely to have little or none of that in school. And even the best-intentioned “reformers” have the nerve to say that this deadening of the teaching/learning experience is done in the name of excellence and accountability: honestly, if we didn’t laugh, we’d cry.

**Deskilling**

Over a quarter-century ago, Michael Apple (1982) explained the notion of “deskilling” in terms that could apply to any profession; then, he applied it to teaching:

Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children — such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people — are no longer necessary. With the large-scale influx of prepackaged material, planning is separated from execution… (p. 255).

The phrase “use it or lose it” is apt here: teachers who learn how to design and teach marvelous integrated thematic units in their preparation programs soon find that they would be reprimanded for actually using them in their first years on the job. Caution rules — in a time when jobs are scarce, and no new teacher wants to risk losing theirs. Eventually, they lose the knack for designing curriculum units and are quite happy to deliver curriculum packages provided by outside agencies such as textbook and test publishers. They have been deskilled by a system that values mass production and lockstep instruction in how to take tests.

Nichols and Berliner (2007) cite W. Edwards Deming, the father of Total Quality Management (TQM), who believed that the improvement of organizations — including schools — should focus on process rather than on outcomes. This approach would lead naturally to the use of formative evaluation, rather than the summative evaluations characterized by high-stakes testing. Formative evaluation, by definition, requires the involvement of teachers in ongoing daily and weekly decision-making about what goes on in their classrooms; and it means that teachers should feel respected for what they do rather than having to face blame and punishment for circumstances over which they have no control. They are not accountable for poverty, discrimination, and the other ills of society.

**Who is accountable?**

As long ago as 1956, John Goodlad set out what he called “the teacher’s span of control.” The dimensions of this span of control, somewhat updated, are (1) insight into and management of self in the instructional setting; (2) a sense of direction, including the setting of goals for the classroom; (3) knowledge of the children with whom the teacher works; (4) knowledge of the instructional content; (5) an understanding of human growth and development; and (6) the freedom to deploy learning resources, including space, time, and the materials of instruction, appropriately.

Yes, teachers are, and should be, accountable for those things that fall within their span of control; and by rights they should also have the authority that goes with that
responsibility. But education is a complex enterprise. Another force that contributes to the deskilling of teachers is the increasing centralization of decision-making at locations farther and farther from the classroom. Literally millions of decisions are made by voters, legislators, federal and state agencies, school boards, district staff, and school site administrators. Those who make these decisions are accountable for them — or they should be.

Education in the United States historically has been a state function although, as we have already noted, the federal government — aided by advisors from the business world — has played an increasingly active role since 1983. We shall return to this point shortly, but first let's take a moment to consider accountability as it applies at all levels of the institution because, although it may not be obvious at first glance, there is a clear connection between the power to make decisions, being held accountable for those decisions (and their consequences), and the deskilling of teachers.

First, state legislators, school boards, and departments of education are responsible for clarifying the role of the schools and the value base from which they operate. Likewise, they are responsible for providing teacher education guidelines and resources. When these state agencies do not do their job, they should be held accountable. If necessary, legislators and board members should be voted out of office and administrators should be sent packing. If they are not, citizens of the states need to be held accountable for the consequences of inaction.

A classic example of serious legislative wrongdoing with regard to the issues of clarifying values and providing the means of support for the operation of schools took place when, in 2006, the Texas House of Representatives passed a bill that would cut $400 million promised to Texas schoolchildren while at the same time providing a $400 million windfall to big oil, insurance, and utility industries (Nichols & Berliner 2007, p. 140). Other examples can be found in states around the country.

Second, at the local level, school boards serve as controlling agencies and are responsible for making policy decisions. In turn, school district officials are responsible for implementing them. In doing so (or not), they are accountable both to their local public and to state sanctioning bodies. District personnel have a significant amount of power through the decisions they make, and the punishments and rewards they mete out. An example of local district wrongdoing is the decision to mandate prescriptive “teacher-proof” curricula such as the Open Court reading program, which often comes with intrusive supervisory personnel often referred to by teachers as the “Open Court Police.” This inappropriately intrudes on the teacher's span of control. The district staff who make such decisions should be held accountable if such programs fail, and for the decline in reading test scores that follows when reading is robbed of its inherent excitement and potential for discovery and surprise because it has been reduced to a series of scripted lessons.

Third, school principals are accountable for the establishment of a climate of change, dealing with conflict, facilitating the efforts of others, and opening communication channels at the schools in which they lead. In short, the principal should act as a leader rather than behaving as a director who, in making teachers carry out decisions made by others, also contributes to their deskilling (Tye, 1973). K. M. Keith makes much the same point in his recent book, The Case for Servant Leadership (2008). Unfortunately, most current administrator training programs do not reflect such ideas, even though they have been with us for quite a long time.

Finally, President Obama and his secretary of education, Arne Duncan, should be held accountable as well. Unfortunately, in spite of recently proposed changes to NCLB, massive Race to the Top funding for states that agree to jump through the federally mandated hoops, and new rhetoric about students leaving school “college and career ready,” Duncan is on record as a supporter of the accountability aspects of NCLB, high-stakes testing in particular (www.examiner.com, July 7, 2009).

Even though Obama originally seemed to understand — “One of the failures of NCLB, a law that I think a lot of local and state officials have been troubled
by is that it is so narrowly focused on standardized tests that it has pushed out a lot of important learning that needs to take place.” (Barack Obama, during the Clinton-Obama debate of January 21, 2008) The President now seems to support Duncan. This is a shame, since the act still promotes many of the things that we know to be bad for our schools. It would be far better if they were to start at the level of the classroom and school to determine what needs to be done to improve schooling, since the history of American education shows quite clearly that mandates from above rarely, if ever, get the job done on more than a temporary basis (Tye, 2000). Listening, carefully and respectfully, and then reskilling teachers like Debbie — returning to them the professional status they deserve, using what Ravitch (2010) refers to as positive, rather than punitive, accountability strategies — now there’s a reform whose time has come.

Closing Thoughts

And by the way — don’t tell us that the only way to teach a child is to spend most of the year preparing him to fill in a few bubbles on a standardized test. Let’s finally help our teachers and principals [to] develop a curriculum and assessments that teach our kids to become more than just good test-takers. We need assessments that can improve achievement by including the kinds of research, scientific investigation, and problem-solving that our children will need to compete in a 21st-century knowledge economy. (Barack Obama, from a September 9, 2008, speech on education delivered in Dayton, Ohio)

We saw this campaign statement as very promising at the time but are disappointed in the direction that the Department of Education has taken since the inauguration. We call on the President and Arne Duncan to honor both the letter and the spirit of this statement, and to rethink the current policies that hamper fine teachers, place such strict limits on the curriculum, and leave so many children behind. There are literally thousands of teachers who would agree with these closing words from Debbie, and the nation cannot afford to lose these dedicated professionals:

As teachers, we’ve become numb.
We do what we’re told, and believe we have no choice.
Literacy coaches. “Reading police.” District administrators visit, to find fault.

Do it — or else.
We’re tired.
Getting burned out.
Lost our voice.

We older teachers who know what’s better have given in. Put our wonderful, exciting thematic lesson units away into cupboards.
Stopped voicing our concerns and ideas, since no one listens
— except a few at lunch who knew what it was like
when eyes sparkled and hearts glowed because learning was so real,
and there wasn’t a test lurking to steal their self-esteem nearly every single day.
References


Center on Education Policy (March 11, 2010). How many schools have not made adequate yearly progress under the *No Child Left Behind* law? Retrieved on March 12, 2010, from www.cep-dc.org/


