

Flying Sandwiches and Broken Glasses

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Abstract

The authors of the feature article provide a sound analysis of the shortcomings of the new teacher training model in preparing professional teachers rather than technicians, in getting them ready to teach in varied environments, and in helping teachers and students develop their skills of participation in a democratic society. In this response I outline an additional key issue related to apprenticeship-based teacher training models of the type that Match and Relay represent, namely, the matter of accountability.

This article is a response to:

Stitzlein, S. M., & West, C. K. New forms of teacher education: Connections to charter schools and their approaches. *Democracy & Education*, 22(2). Article 2. Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/2/>

IN HIS MEMOIR *Teacher Man* (2005), Frank McCourt recalled how on his first day on the job he was nearly fired because of a sandwich. “The problem of the sandwich,” he wrote, “started when a boy named Petey called out, ‘Anyone wan’ a baloney sandwich?’” This instigated a critical response from a classmate, and the baloney sandwich was thrown across the room in retaliation. The classroom students, high school juniors who were quick to discern that “Teach” was inexperienced, erupted into excited calls for a fight. “The teachers at New York University,” McCourt recalled, “never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child” but never about sandwiches (pp. 15–16).

What should the teacher have done? And moreover, what could he have been prepared to feel comfortable, professional, and in control of the classroom in this situation? McCourt picked up the brown bag containing the baloney sandwich from the floor by the blackboard where it had landed, unwrapped it, and ate the dripping, delicious sandwich, thus earning his students’ admiration and the ire of his principal.

“Practice, practice, practice,” demand the Match Teacher Residency (Match) document that Stitzlein and West (p. 2) cite. Perhaps apprenticeship in the classroom could have prepared McCourt to better respond to flying sandwiches. Clearly there is something about teaching that is similar to playing a sport: You

cannot really be ready to play, say, basketball if you learn about the game only by correspondence or by thinking about the game. You have to learn the moves by getting up and playing. In this way Match and Relay Graduate School of Education (Relay) provide a helpful environment. The teachers quoted in Stitzlein and West’s article celebrated the practicality of the teaching in these institutions. No more history, sociology, theory. Whatever they learned, they could apply in the classroom “the next day.” Any classroom teacher reflecting back on the first days and weeks of work could surely sympathize. Standing in front of the class, a brown bag thrown at your feet and the kids chanting, “Fight, fight,” would be difficult for any teacher, let alone for a novice. Having a toolkit of premade responses that the teacher could instantly implement could be comforting, could make the teacher feel more effective and in charge (or at least less silly than McCourt did as he declared, a moment too late, “Don’t throw sandwiches” [Mccourt, 2005, p. 16]). Teaching can be quite complex and stressful for beginners, and the relief and confidence that structured classroom practices offer should not be dismissed.

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However, as Stitzlein and West recognize, this temporary relief from the discomfort of a new and challenging situation cannot provide teachers with the capacity to develop a professional sense of their goals and skills, and it does not make them into good teachers. Teaching is not merely a technical undertaking, and like basketball, it requires a lot of practice as well as the development of creativity and improvisation that allow a professional to excel. The authors analyze the shortcomings of the new teacher training model in preparing professional teachers rather than technicians, in getting them ready to teach in varied environments, and in helping teachers and students develop their skills of participation in a democratic society. I outline the most salient issue related to apprenticeship-based teacher training models of the type that Match and Relay represent, namely, accountability.

Accountability has a bad reputation in progressive education circles, especially since the rise of standards-based reform. Teachers and scholars tend to equate the term with the high stakes tests that penalize teachers and are not useful for their practice; with a narrowed-down curriculum focused on rote drills; and with collateral damage in various forms, including cheating at all levels, lost budgets because of perceived failures, and a mechanistic vision of what education is about. Teacher training models like Match and Relay seem to represent the next step in a long process of narrowing down the meaning of education and the ways in which it is practiced in the name of accountability. While many of these critiques are sound and justified, they should not divert our attention from the importance of accountability in education. In other words, progressive scholars and educators should not cede accountability to market-based reformers. In significant—and growing—ways, neoliberal or market-based logic undermine the true accountability of educational institutions to their constituencies. I illustrate this claim by using the new teacher training model as a focal point.

The demand for teachers to be accountable, to live up to the varied public expectations of their profession, is expressed in multiple and pressing ways. The public can easily become frustrated with the quality of teachers, especially as we are repeatedly told that education is in a state of crisis and when we are presented with movies that characterize teachers and their unions as obstructionist, backward looking, and stale. The call for reform—maybe even a revolution!—or at least the call to “shake things up” (as in Steiner’s quote in Stitzlein and West, p. 5) seems not only reasonable but necessary in the face of such crisis. This demand to change at all cost, which has boosted school choice systems, including charter schools, is now reflected in changes to the process of preparing teachers. The critique from traditional education schools and professors seems to be self-serving, like a struggle to protect some special interests—of course schools of education would rally against nimble, innovative institutions like Relay and Match that stand to take some of their business away.

But in fact education is far from being in crisis, and the language of crisis is nothing but a hook to promote reform. This urgency in itself merits some scrutiny, as it in fact serves to undermine the process itself. Education, like parenting, is a frustratingly gradual process. It can be hard for adults, who feel

that they already know something, to observe and support the process of young people obtaining the same knowledge or habit. Teachers must learn the patience, the effort, and the variety of methods needed not only to transmit knowledge or foster understanding but also to motivate students to listen to them, to participate in this sometimes hard, sometimes boring, rarely exhilarating process of learning.

That is not to say that education should not continue improving. Schools still do not serve well children from low-income backgrounds and do not always implement existing knowledge about how we can best educate all children, including English language learners, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty. There are many ways in which not all children are well served by the current education system. But public schools today admit practically all students without discrimination based on race, immigration, ability, or any other criteria used in the past. They graduate a greater share of their students than ever before. The percentage of students attending college and those completing their degrees is not as high as the president of the United States would like it to be, but it is better than it has ever been (the President is mostly concerned with the fact that other countries have improved more rapidly in this regard).

Hence the introduction of standards- and market-based reforms is based on a false premise of crisis. That would not be a problem if these reforms were to spawn some significant improvement in dimensions of the current system that are lagging. After all, if to call the state of schools a crisis would drive further attention and investment in schools’ direction, this outcome would be welcomed even by those who are convinced that the crisis language is unwarranted. But this framing serves only to introduce institutions and practices that fail to abide by the most basic democratic principles of accountability.

Democratic accountability requires an ongoing feedback mechanism between the institution and the constituents it serves. In education, democratic accountability requires developing mechanisms that allow students, parents, and other community members to participate in decision-making processes or ones that would at minimum allow those stakeholders to respond effectively to decisions made by practitioners. The key mechanism in the public education system is the elected school board, which is well structured but usually draws minimal public participation both in election participation and in public participation. Some may see this lack of participation as a proof for the redundancy of the mechanism, but I suggest that it is rather the result of the fact that a vast majority of parents and community members are in fact satisfied with the functioning of their public school and have no particular feedback to offer. In context in which more contentious debates arise—as is seen in cases of mergers, school closings, and other controversial decisions—greater public mobilization efforts have been documented, indicating the importance of existing venues for public participation. In addition, the long-standing stability of public schools in their communities allows for the development of a variety of informal mechanisms of accountability, including direct feedback to practitioners (teachers, principals, and other actors), observational visits to the school, home-school

association meetings, etc. Moreover, multiple forms of oversight embody the accountability of the school to the public it serves, in less direct ways. While some of these have been misused in recent years to narrow the focus of education, they still represent an important structural mechanism that protects the integrity of the system as a whole and its responsibility to report its goals and its effects to the public. Hence, accountability in education remains an important aspect of the democratic structure of the public education system.

However, market-oriented reforms such as the new teacher training models are not expected to report to anyone other than the businesses and foundations that fund them. In the circle that Stitzlein and West described—a closed institutional pipeline that is built on a cohesive, and unfortunate, ideology organizing the training programs and the schools in which the teachers are placed—no external or public forms of accountability are developed. Even the Department of Education is joining the same circle, hiring both former CEOs of NewSchools for positions in the administration. To be clear, at issue here is not the pedagogic approach used in these teacher training models but their structure. Learning how to teach through an apprenticeship model is not a new idea—most traditional (university-based) teacher education programs do that (to varying degrees). But using a limited form of teaching, one that focuses on a narrow understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher and one that is committed to a limited type and context of teaching while neglecting the broad view on children, culture or society is bound to produce limited and narrow teachers. Moreover, these new forms of training teachers are being introduced based on the false sense of urgency that arises from the perpetuated crisis language. This proclaimed urgency is used to justify fast-paced changes, including the introduction of radically new and untested institutions without external oversight or public input into their functions and results.

By contrast, most teachers in the United States today have been trained and certified at a college or a university before they entered their own classrooms. As the authors recognized, there are many reasons to consider changes and improvements to the current model. The variation in teacher quality, preparation, and professional abilities is wide and often discouraging, and there are clearly teachers who have received their certifications and started teaching without being well prepared for their jobs. But colleges and universities that train teachers are accountable to the public in a variety of ways. They are regularly required to be certified by the state as well as by regional oversight bodies, and their practices as well as those who teach in their programs are subject to peer and external reviews. In addition, because they are funded or supported by public monies from various sources, they are indirectly accountable to the public through the oversight processes of their public funders. However, in the new closed system, teacher training programs are offered by the same institutions (that abide by the same ideologies) into which they will then be hired. The system offers little opportunity for transparency, public oversight, and improvement. The most problematic aspect of this closed circle is the utter lack of accountability by this system to the communities and the public it serves.

The response from advocates of market-based reforms focuses on the power of consumers to influence the market. They suggest that since charters generally tend to be choice schools, meaning that parents choose to register their children to the schools rather than their children being assigned based on address, accountability is structured into the system. Parents who do not like what a school offers can leave, thus expressing their disapproval with their feet. However, such limited accountability is unhelpful in the educational context, which is hardly a market—the decisionmakers (parents) are not the consumers (children), the set of choices is limited by geography and many other factors, and, significantly, the number of times a choice can be altered is limited by the costs of repeatedly changing one's choice. In other words, parents can only choose to move their children to a different school out of a very limited number of schools because of transportation and related limitations, and they can only move their children once or twice before the costs of repeatedly moving to a new school hamper the children's education and well-being.

In addition, the value of the choice itself is limited by the type of options offered by choice schools. This is true of both the teacher training programs and the charter movement more generally. Rather than being labs for innovations, as the charter movement is touted, they produce an air-tight structure based on a vision that the founders—and funders—see as proven. Maintaining a narrow vision of what success entails—namely, proficiency on standardized tests—their teachers are encouraged to “teach as if every second counts” and to prefer additional instruction time over any personal engagement with their students. The way to save the students from the cycle of poverty, they are told, is to drive them to succeed by using charter schools' longer days, weeks, and years to overcome the deficiencies that their personal backgrounds created.

Clearly, many of the students served by the charters, and educated by the teachers who are trained in these new ways, experience various hardships, from hunger to homelessness to parents who do not speak English and therefore cannot help with school work. But these are all cast as excuses in the no-excuses model. The model requires ignoring all issues outside the immediate goal of achieving proficiency status on the standardized test. While this is a worthwhile goal in itself—children should be expected and supported in learning to read and do math at grade level, or at least they should have the same opportunity to do that independent of where they live—it cannot suffice as an overall goal for education. Schools and teachers must commit also to the development of curiosity, creativity, and innovative and critical thinking, along with the development of the skills necessary to participate in the democratic process. Reducing students to their achievements on tests, and teachers to their students' scores on the same tests, flattens the educational process, empties it of much of what can make it more robustly successful and enjoyable, and produces both teachers and students who are discouraged from thinking independently about their plans, actions, contributions, and aspirations.

Relationships are the first casualties of the narrow models described in this essay, and for many new teachers, that is the reason they will not stay in teaching. If you think back of a teacher

that you loved, at any level of your education, what was it about that person that made a difference? Some of it was surely personality, something that is hard to train for or replicate. Some was probably also expertise—maybe the teacher had been working long enough to be able to not sweat the small stuff, to focus on something interesting or exciting or challenging, and to give you the time needed to reach the joyful point of understanding and caring about a subject. Keeping teachers longer in their jobs is a low priority for charters and for the institutions that prepare charter teachers. As I suggested, a stable and long-standing institution like the public school, one that employs a stable staff, develops a set of informal accountability mechanisms based on its ties to the community. Parents know the teachers from one child to the next child, from neighbors and friends; they know how to respond to the traditions at the school and who they can talk to when they would like to see some practice changed. This is true at the community level as well as at the personal level. A good teacher can make a difference in a child's life through relationship, an ongoing connection that was nurtured in the shared time and space, and the opportunity to for meaningful personal expression. This opportunity is lost when the lesson is scripted to fit the test and children's behavior is managed using ready-made tools rather than listening and trying to understand the other. A former Knowledge Is Power Program teacher I interviewed recently told me the following story:

I was being observed by my principal during a fifth-grade language arts class. As the students were taking their notebooks out, I detected a little commotion at the back of the room—one boy's glasses dropped to the floor and their arm broke off. He started crying, worrying that his "mom will kill" him. I gave the class an assignment and went over to see if I [could] settle him down and maybe fix the broken piece. I promised him I would talk to his mom after school and continued working with the class on the assignment. After class my principal reprimanded me, saying I should have sent the student to the dean of culture [who is in charge of student behavior]. She recommended me for classroom management professional development. That's when I knew I was at the wrong place. This is not why I went into teaching. (personal communication, April 12, 2012)

It is very hard to express a caring attitude about children or even about the subject matter taught when the focus of a teacher's work is solely on the completion of a plan from which he or she cannot divert, using only tools that teacher did not develop and cannot adapt to his or her own personality, to the children in the classroom, to the human circumstances that arise in the classroom. Being allowed to adjust the plan to the circumstances should be seen as a professional act rather than as a disruption of the flow of urgent, no-excuses teaching toward the test.

Caring about children's learning and future opportunities means caring about the adults in their lives, or at least about these adults' capacity to serve the academic, social, and emotional needs of children. Can teacher training programs like Match and Relay, and their predecessors like Teach for America, "save" the teaching

profession by infusing teachers' ranks with young, motivated, successful college graduates who are enthusiastic about the causes they come to serve? As Stitzlein and West indicate, these programs prepare technicians rather than professionals. Moreover, they create two tiers in the schools that these teachers join. If the school is comprised only of teachers trained in this new model, they will have few opportunities to question their practices, to expand or adapt them, and to remain critical and professional as they evolve professionally. Significantly, they will have a very limited career incline, as their opportunities to stay in the profession, develop further skills, and broaden their capacities are limited by their preparation and by the visions endorsed in the schools in which they serve.

Much like the need for patience and commitment to process in the work of teaching, the public must learn the patience of slowly stirring this large system, gradually changing course through legislative and administrative action, analyzing the impact of implementation, and improving again in transparent ways. The pretense of a magic fix through entrepreneurial intervention and "shaking things up" does nothing but disguise the need for continued hard work, a broad and long view, and commitment to public accountability. For teachers to be able to teach children well, they need to know something about child development (what and how can they learn at this age?), about social contexts (how does this book reflect what happens in this child's life, in a way that would engage this child?), and about ethics (am I punishing this child for doing something that child cannot control?). Many of these can be solved by scripting a teacher's every word. But that is a very limited solution. In any teacher's day there are some surprises, some flying sandwiches or broken glasses. Teachers must be prepared in a way that allows them to understand and to respond effectively, and mostly they must be trusted to be able to do that using both broad-based knowledge and practical experience. Teachers—like other professionals—loathe staying in a context that circumvents their professional knowledge as it evolves, for the sake of uniformity and a narrow vision of achievement. The constant churn of teachers requires schools to reach deeper into their candidate pools as they recruit and train an endless stream of youth who are headed elsewhere after a short stint in the classroom. Any institutional memory, learning curve, mentorship will be replaced by ready-made curricula and behavior management practices. As parents, do we want to send our children to schools that have such a high turnover rate of teachers, to always send our children to the classroom with the new teacher? As a nation, do we really want teachers who are encouraged to pass papers in class in a dizzyingly efficient way but are encouraged to never ask why?

References

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