

Testing, best practices, and the teacher intellectual

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When raising test scores becomes the aim of education, teachers' intellectual expertise is devalued.

While exploring the shifting place of intellectuals over time in American culture and what he described as a “downgrading of intellect,” historian Richard Hofstadter (1963) concluded that “[a]ll too often . . . in the history of the United States, the schoolteacher has been in no position to serve as a model for an introduction to the intellectual life” (pp. 308, 310).

Yet, Hofstadter argued, such models were sorely needed because most Americans had other things on their minds than the development of the mind, and they still do. But, if Hofstadter is correct that teachers are not modeling an intellectual life, what sort of life do they model? And how might the teaching profession be transformed to promote a more robust view of the life of the mind? Hofstadter gave an answer for his time; we must give one for ours. Let’s begin by looking at how teaching and schools are viewed in our time and how efforts to improve education have actually downgraded the role of the intellect among teachers.

Education in our time

In the spring of 1983, Japanese economic ascendancy had shaken American confidence, and schools and schooling were singled out for blame. *A Nation at Risk*, a call to action from the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE, 1983), sounded the alarm:

Our Nation is at risk . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. (p. 5)

A Nation at Risk asserted that if the United States was to successfully compete economically with Japan and its workforce, teachers and schools needed to shape up and fast become more academically focused and more demanding.

A few days ago, I heard a familiar echo in an article by Chester Finn (2019): “American education is stumbling, [in decline], and education reform is running on fumes,” as evidenced by U.S. students’ falling test scores and placement in international rankings (p. 44). China has replaced Japan as a rival, but schools and teachers are still widely believed to be major sources of the nation’s economic and social failings, while also being the fix. It is true that educators can and should be a part of the solution. As John Dewey (1927) wrote, “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (p. 207). However, many of the recent efforts to improve schools have not brought teachers — schools’ expert shoemakers — into the conversation.

Recent history of reform

Assuming education is the solution to societal and economic ills, policy makers have pushed a variety of reforms. In March 1994, for example, President Bill Clinton signed The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which was intended to support local and state reform. Each state and community were to develop and implement comprehensive standards-driven improvement plans for content learning and occupational skill development. A National Education Standards and Improvement Council was established to support the effort to develop rigorous yet voluntary national content and performance standards with accompanying valid, reliable, and nondiscriminatory assessments. The ambition was to revise virtually every aspect of schooling. Offering modest financial incentives to the states, the act’s goal was to ensure that, by 2000, all children in America would enter school ready to learn; high school graduation rates would reach at least 90%; all children would demonstrate proficiency in English, mathematics, science, and foreign languages, and every school would be free of illegal drugs and violence. A new utopia was to be born in just six magical years and at little financial cost but much educator effort.

Later, in 2002, then President George W. Bush signed into law the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that brought the federal government with all its heft and ham-handedness fully and directly into state educational policy making. Shoving educators aside, state legislators scrambled to get into the game — at least rhetorically. Under NCLB, all schools were to make adequate

yearly progress (AYP) by 2014, which required ever-increasing scores on standardized tests across several demographic groups, among them limited English speakers, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. At least 95% of students in these groups had to be tested, and any subgroup's failure to meet standards meant school failure and potentially closure.

To achieve these goals, every classroom in America was to be taught by a “highly qualified” teacher, a much-desired aspiration. But in a bait-and-switch ploy, Rodney Paige, then secretary of education, defined highly qualified as merely passing some sort of test of academic competence and demonstrated verbal ability. (See Borden-King et al., 2020; Phelps & Sykes, 2020, for discussion of the problems with standardized testing for teachers as currently practiced.) At the same time, the federal government actively supported alternative forms of teacher certification of varying quality and promoted school choice in the misguided belief that market forces and competition among providers would force reform and raise quality.



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Shortly after the passage of NCLB, I attended a meeting of state education officials, superintendents of a handful of school districts, and other education leaders. At this meeting, the superintendent of the largest district in one state reported that, by his calculation, NCLB would cost his 77,000-student district roughly \$104 million. Fearing loss of federal funding (mostly attached to special education), he was struggling to identify where to cut. His dilemma was not unusual. Across the nation, one clear result of NCLB was a pruning and narrowing of the curriculum that produced an “apartheid system of schooling” (Berliner, 2011, p. 292), in which a ruling class received one kind of education and the less privileged received another, with little interaction between the two. School time was often reallocated to intense remediation and test preparation, along with increases in direct instruction for everyone. Results from a survey of 350 school districts conducted by the Center on Education Policy provides some detail:

[A]bout 62 percent of those districts had increased the amount of time spent in elementary schools on English-language arts or math and . . . 44 percent [had] cut time on science, social studies, art and music, physical education, lunch, or recess. [Worse] 97 percent of the high-poverty districts (where more than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) had policies that restricted the curriculum offered to their students. (Berliner, 2009, p. 286)

School experiences designed to encourage and expand the development of the mind and the body — play; free but thoughtfully guided reading; exploration of ideas and the local community; production of arts, drama, dance, and music, and the planning and executing of issue-driven projects — were replaced by activities devoted to meeting AYP standards. Ironically, after an initial bump, test scores plateaued across the nation, and by 2013, the U.S. Department of Education was busy granting waivers to states that did not meet NCLB requirements (Hansen et al., 2018). Clearly, as expectations for schooling in America have expanded, disappointment followed.

Best practices and the messiness of education

Given the importance of testing, the quest for best practices as a means for raising scores has become a dominating concern of education and teacher education. Encouraged by NCLB's embrace of “scientifically based research” (the phrase appears dozens of times in the law) and supported strongly by the National Research Council (2010), the federal Department of Education, as well as accreditation agencies, have narrowed the scope of what counts as legitimate research data so that, as in medical research, randomized controlled trials now stand as the gold standard for establishing proof of an intervention's effectiveness, as determined by student test scores. Despite their high validity, qualitative studies have been marginalized for failing to deliver generalizable results. What was prized during the NCLB era continues to be valued under the Every Student Succeeds Act: These include

technologies and practices that promise guaranteed outcomes — do this, get that. Because this relies on such a simple view of the complexities of teaching, one result has been the diminishment of teachers as they have less and less control over their work and little say over the aims they serve.

Harm comes to teachers when test scores are assumed to be the best indicator of educational quality and those teachers who raise test scores are judged to be the best teachers. While widely criticized by teachers as a limited measure of teacher quality and value, the simplicity of tests as proxies for quality often prove compelling to policy makers. However, no teacher claims to have entered teaching to raise test scores. Rather, they teach because they value the work of teaching the young and of witnessing their learning and growth as human beings. These are the aims many teachers have in mind when they answer the call to teach (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011).

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Although teachers today have limited influence over educational aims, determining the means of education (i.e., the *how* but not the *what* or *why*) is still often thought to be the special purview of educators. But the dominance of standardized testing and the related quest for best practices as determined by external researchers raises doubts about this claim. Because fidelity to best practice is taken as an important indicator of teacher quality, it comes to occupy a prominent place in teacher evaluation. Yet fidelity to a practice experts tout as best may lead to a fixation and rigidity that actually undermines learning.

Here I am reminded of William James' famous statement, that "Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art: and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary *inventive mind* must make the application, by using its originality" (italics added. 1911/1899, pp. 7-8). Regardless of what some may claim, there are few, if any, *best* practices in education (Bullough, 2012). There are, however, many and diverse *better* practices — better for specific children in specific contexts and with specific abilities and limitations. The value of a practice to realize its educational potential wholly depends on the *inventive mind* of a skilled and knowledgeable teacher, one who knows content and his or her particular students and their families well.

The net effect of the press for best practice is the reduction of education to training and the teacher to a trainer, certainly not an intellectual. The distinction here is important. The distinguishing characteristic of training, a *product*, is that outcomes are known in advance. The promise is that certain predetermined actions, executed well, will produce the desired performance if students do as they are directed. Proof of success is direct and involves a specific demonstration that conforms to established standards. Clearly, training has a place in schooling, but it is a poor substitute for education.

Education, a *process*, is highly sensitive to context and person, indirect, and always messy. Outcomes are unpredictable, standards negotiable, and results often surprising. The responsibilities and the intellectual, ethical, and social demands that come with educating are radically different from those that flow from training. Hence, educators may be trainers, but trainers are not necessarily educators. Recognition of this distinction and of the institutional preference for training returns us to Hofstadter's concern with the intellectual life of teachers.

What does it mean to be an intellectual?

Hofstadter (1963) describes the intellect as "the critical, creative, contemplative side of mind." Intelligence, as Hofstadter argued, "seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order and adjust," while, in contrast, "intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines" (p. 25). This is what William James meant by the "inventive mind."

Technicians and trainers demonstrate instrumental reason, which focuses on achieving the best means to an end; therefore, they have intelligence. So do animals. But intellect is a "unique manifestation of human dignity" (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 25), representing what might best be thought of as a kind of "critical or philosophical-mindedness" (Bullough, Goldstein, & Holt, 1984, p. viii). As such, "we sometimes say that a mind of admittedly penetrating intelligence is relatively unintellectual; and . . . by the same token, we see among minds that are unmistakably intellectual a considerable range of intelligence" (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 25).

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The intellectual teacher doesn't just want to know what piece of literature students will respond to positively or which instructional strategy will work as desired; he or she wants to know *why* it works. Such teachers love ideas — and not just one idea, which brings with it the dangers of “zealotry” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 29). They treat ideas not as definitive solutions but as plans, hypotheses to be tried and tested — and based upon those tests, ideas are adjusted or perhaps rejected. It is for this reason that John Dewey (1929) argued that, “Theory is in the end . . . the most practical of all things.” Theory provides perspective — a “widening of the range of attention beyond nearby purpose and desire” (p. 17) — and opens up the possibility for new and fresh insights and understandings necessary for improved practice and better education.

Teacher intellectuals?

Hofstadter (1963) describes intellectuals as people apart who sometimes embrace a “cult of alienation” (p. 420). The common image of the intellectual is that of the bookish loner who feels unappreciated. Given such views, it's little wonder that the life of an intellectual, even if essential to quality education, is not inspiring to many teachers. Yet, there is no doubt that the preferred patterns of schooling today often prove alienating to teachers, especially those who resist being reduced to trainers or technicians and who resent exclusion from participation in policy making.

It is also readily apparent that large numbers of teachers are engaged in the study of their disciplines and are students of teaching (see, for example, Khachatryan & Parkerson, 2020). They likely do not think of themselves as intellectuals even as they possess many of the requisite qualities: They love and ponder ideas; they theorize, criticize, experiment, and reimagine their practice in relationship to educational aims that matter, like the quality of their relationships with students. To this end, they often seek advanced degrees, participate in book groups and critical friends groups, engage in peer coaching and lesson study, and conduct self-studies and action research projects (Bullough & Smith, 2016). Recognizing how their well-being is inextricably linked to students' well-being, such teachers are committed to their own learning and possess James' “inventive minds.” These intellectual teachers need to be encouraged to continue their work, making schools a place not of training, but of intellectual inquiry, for both students and teachers alike.

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