The Two Rhetorics of School Reform: Complex Theories vs. the Quick Fix

By Howard Gardner

Despite the plethora of reports and articles about school reform during the past decade, there has been distressingly little genuine dialogue between the two principal participants in the discussion. On the one hand are the educational researchers and policy experts, who are pleased that at last the nation has become interested in the plight of its schools. On the other side are arrayed the government, business, and community "opinion leaders" who are equally concerned about the schools, but whose analyses and recommendations are decidedly different from those of the educational leaders.

Unless the reasons for the lack of communication can be identified and dealt with satisfactorily, it is most unlikely that the critical problems of American pre-collegiate education can be dealt with effectively.

Among educators, a surprising degree of consensus exists about the nature of schools' problems and the kinds of solutions that are likely (and unlikely) to work. They believe schools' difficulties arise from a variety of sources, including the sharp rise in the incidence of broken homes, the lessening of respect for parents' and teachers' authority, the huge amount of time youths spend passively watching television, and the alarming decline of the quality of life in our cities. Over the decades, such factors have greatly complicated the process of delivering quality education; they cannot be alleviated by a "quick fix."

Nearly all educators also acknowledge the failure of the entrenched factory model of education, in which students are all served the same curriculum in the same assembly-line fashion and teachers are cogs in a massive bureaucratic apparatus. A "constructivist" approach, which involves children in active, hands-on learning, is widely admired; most educators believe that "less is more" and that it is better to know a few things well than to add on courses and requirements ad nauseam.

Short-answer, multiple-choice tests stifle students' and teachers' initiative, they believe, and should be replaced by more probing, open-ended forms of assessment. Voucher programs allowing families to transfer government funds to the school of their choice may work in limited contexts, but they are unlikely to address the severe educational problems in our big cities. If anything, such programs are a diversion from the problem. Genuine educational changes will take several years, if not decades, to achieve.

Of course, there are disputes about each of these topics, and skeptics can be detected on the left and the right. But at the very least, none of the assertions above would be seen as particularly contentious by most of my fellow educators.

However, the "opinion leaders" in business, politics, and the general public—

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whatever they identify as the cause of educational problems—dearly desire a quick fix. And so they look to solutions like merit pay, voucher systems, the enunciation of higher standards, a voluntary or required national examination for all students. These leaders do not know if such solutions can be put into effect, but, examined from a distance, they sound as if they might just work. Because our educational institutions are seen as inefficient and undemanding, schools—rather than the larger society—are seen as causing the problems.

Punitive attitudes and language abound when the schools are being castigated. The “first wave” of educational reform in the early 1980’s calling for skills and standards, has been aptly (if cruelly) summarized as “getting the little buggers to work harder.” The second, “restructuring wave” in the late 1980’s reflected a business-influenced belief that if schools could simply manage themselves properly, all would work out.

Over all, little appreciation exists among outside critics of the complexity of the problems of school failure, little appreciation of the many steps needed to place American schools on a strong footing. Again, there are admirable exceptions to the above characterization, particularly certain business leaders like David Kearns, formerly of Xerox and now Deputy Secretary of Education under Lamar Alexander, and certain governors like Roy Romer of Colorado. But they turn out to be as atypical as educators who enthusiastically endorse vouchers or a national examination for all students.

It may sound as though I, as an educator, have offered a stacked deck: a reasonable and penetrating analysis by school folks, a peremptory and ill-advised set of nostrums doled out by those who are ignorant of the facts of school life and the obstacles to school reform. But I have little difficulty in sympathizing with the rhetorical picture sketched by opinion leaders and co-director of Project Zero, a research institution that the most appropriate model for talking about school change is the idea of a new community. Many educators today are adopting the metaphor of a community to distinguish schools from older organizational models—for example, those based on factories and industrial organizations—albeit one devoid of realistic first and second steps and remote from American style pragmatism.

Opinion leaders know little of these deteriorating physical and social conditions first hand and are disinclined to probe, because such probing thwarts the possibility of quick solutions. Of necessity or choice, they espouse an economic, political, or organizational model, rather than one rooted in the social realities of school, the psychological processes of learning, or the social psychology of group change.

Not surprisingly, then, they argue for—and believe in—the same “moves” that have worked in the political and business realms with which they are familiar: incentives for pay, changing the chain of command at the work place, negative sanctions for poor performance, the adoption of standardized forms of evaluation. Opinion leaders propose “sound bite” solutions—a rhetoric of culprits and quick cures.

What, then, to do? I believe that it is imperative to create an effective new discourse of educational reform. Such a way of speaking must draw on analogies and stories that make sense to those who want to “do right” by American schools but who are not fully aware of the distressing range of problems that schools must overcome. So, for example, when it comes to assessment, educators need to make it clear that merely taking a temperature over and over again does not heal a patient and that a person who can only spit back facts cannot be expected to solve an unfamiliar problem or to create something new.

When it comes to site-based management, in which individual schools gain more autonomy, educators must point out that mere redistribution of money is of no help if the supply of money is too meager or if the teachers and administrators onsite have no experience in managing a complex facility or if they do not know how to achieve consensus on goals and means of reaching them.

No single comparison, metaphor, or argument can work for a phenomenon as complex as the school. That said, I believe that the most appropriate model for talking about school change is the idea of building a new community. Many educators today are adopting the metaphor of a community to distinguish schools from older organizational models—for example, those based on factories and industrial organizations—similar to London than of a developed nation.

For a community to be viable, its members must work together over time to develop reasonable goals and standards, work out the means for achieving such goals, have mechanisms to check whether progress is being made, and develop methods for changing course—sometimes dramatically—if progress is not being achieved. In a viable community, members recognize their differences and strive to be tolerant, while learning to talk constructively with one another and perennially searching for common ground.

If school reform is to progress, educators and opinion leaders must adopt a common vision—and a common metaphor or way of speaking—of the sort that I have sketched. Were such a vision to be adopted, it would represent a considerable stretch for both parties in the current debate. Educators would need to recognize the genuine differences about ideology and the learning process within their ranks but also about the nature of the problems. They would also have to commit themselves to the difficult tasks of setting, and maintaining locally relevant standards and altering strategies and personnel when progress is not being achieved.

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Leaders, for their part, would need to acknowledge that the various aspects of school reform are interconnected that changes require time, leadership, and guidance and that the atmosphere of schools is affected by that of their localities and the nation. From representing sentimental rhetoric, a commitment to community reveals a recognition of the hard realities required for effectiveness in today’s world.

In fact, the most effective current efforts in school reform have attempted to delineate some of the processes involved in creating such communities. These include identifying key staff members willing to dedicate themselves to a long-term process of change, discovering strengths and weaknesses, involving students and parents throughout the planning and evaluation process, cooperating with other schools involved in similar reform efforts, and developing advisers who can draw on their own experiences to aid in the bumpy process of community building and school change. Such promising experiments make it possible for all parties interested in school reform to move beyond rhetoric and to become actively involved in building more effective environments for learning.

But so long as the rhetorics about school reform remain widely divergent, little progress is likely. An important, if not decisive, step will have been taken when educational leaders and opinion leaders come to speak of—and think about—school reform in terms of the same images. Then perhaps they can forge solutions superior to those that either group could develop on its own.

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