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Silver Linings

Gil Schmerler

Looking for rays of sunshine amidst an educational landscape that has taken a particularly horrific beating in the last decade or two is a difficult—maybe quixotic—undertaking.

It may have taken the political success of the most pernicious forces for over-simplification, quantification, privatization, and self-interest to get many of us thinking and communicating more clearly about the substance and structure of an education we hold to be meaningful. The most promising recent developments remain locked in a death struggle with the narrowest of “accountability” reforms and will emerge as common practice only if the will to resist or persevere is strong enough. Most of all, we need faith that the total dominance of testing in these years will—not quite yet, but soon!—begin to die under the weight of its own increasingly obvious inadequacies.

In fact, there are some transformative things happening that can lead to positive changes in the way daily business is conducted in schools. Some of these are practices many of us have promoted for years: peer collaboration, small schools, shared leadership, differentiation, and constructivist professional development. Others come with language of which we are instinctively wary: common core curriculum, learning outcomes, rubrics, and teacher evaluation.

These transformations appear in the midst of an unprecedented assault on the teaching profession, which has threatened job security, tenure, academic freedom, and effective working conditions. States and municipalities, with heavy-handed federal encouragement, have in many ways narrowed the scope and agency of teachers’ practice and made them more vulnerable to economic, political, and ideological currents.

Nevertheless, we are seeing small signs of change, including:

- teachers making their practice more public
- collaboration becoming the expectation for faculties
- schools understanding they must serve neglected sub-groups more vigorously
- principals’ involvement in instructional supervision increasing
- expectations for teacher practice, including differentiation and inquiry, heightening significantly.

Many of these approaches are being written directly into professional development and assessment frameworks. Moreover, major efforts are in motion to find ways to gauge student achievement and effectiveness of teachers that don’t rely on standardized tests.

Take, for example, the recent preoccupation with “frameworks” created by Charlotte Danielson and others to examine teaching. Many of us begin with grave concerns about checklists and rubrics - they

lead to quantification and narrow the possibilities of constructive analysis. Danielson herself has repeatedly warned that her approach is designed for professional development and not evaluation. The danger of these frameworks becoming one more tool in a punitive evaluation process is ever-present. Nevertheless, there is significant value in corresponding efforts—joined by unions and many progressive scholars - to identify the most enlightened components of teaching. These emphasize learner engagement, inquiry, and independent thought, broaden the categories of analysis to reduce the possibilities of facile quantification, and place the primary focus on self-assessment.

The boom in Common Core Standards might yield some virtue, as well. Progressives have historically been suspicious of anything that might lead to greater standardization of curriculum or teaching methods and deny the differentiation and individualization so critical for student learning. The Common Core needs to be carefully watched for just these tendencies. But it appears that many of the elements that seem to be surviving the political vetting process for the Common Core include the principles of active learning, experimentation, and inquiry central to progressive philosophy. In a country where much of education will undoubtedly remain in the hands of generally centralized systems, this focus on student-centered pedagogy might well be viewed as a step forward.

We worry a lot about the role of charter schools in a privatizing, anti-union, anti-public school agenda. We note with great caution that charters have been, in the eyes of many in the educational establishment, a singular hope for school “reform.” We worry about the proliferation of for-profit networks, and the privileged status charters so often are awarded by educational authorities at the expense of neighborhood schools. Less noticed in the clamor, however, but highly meaningful, is the significant shift in public acceptance of small schools as a prominent way to bring about real change in education.

Those of us associated with the alternative and small schools movement over the past four decades have never seen such a strong consensus that small is more effective, and that greater school-level autonomy is critical. Most charters do not have the dedication to student voice and independent thinking that characterized many alternative schools, but some do, and most charters accept it as critical that individual students get the attention they need from teachers who know them well. It is unlikely, as we emerge from this wave of “reform,” that there will be much stomach for a return to the large, impersonal, bureaucratized institutions of the past century.

Teacher evaluation—and tenure—may be more sensitive issues. A process designed for both professional development and quality control - and honored for generations more in the breach than in actual practice—evaluation has suddenly found itself in the eye of the storm. The overwhelming focus of the school reformers is, of course, to harness evaluation directly to student scores. At the same time, it is increasingly clear that the fragility of test data (narrowness of intellectual focus, unreliability from year to year, susceptibility to manipulation and cheating) will render it ultimately non-viable as a primary measure of teacher success.

Meanwhile, unions and school administrations are negotiating far more thorough processes of observations, broadening the pool of people involved in evaluation, and, for good measure, throwing more professional development, coaching, and peer support into the assessment mix. It is, one trusts, these latter processes that will survive at the end of this wave, when the dominance of test scores recede.

At the same time, and here is where someone with respect for the history of hard-won protections of job security and academic freedom wants to tread lightly, there is potential for positive movement in the quality control arena as well. Frankly, virtually every educator with open eyes and a conscience has spent time worrying about the treatment some children receive at the hands of teachers without the skill, sensitivity, or motivation to do them justice - and wondered why there was not a more sustained, professional supervisory effort to help these teachers improve their craft or find another field.

But, because we have seen the obvious damage to a faculty when administrators with biases and other questionable motives abuse or neglect their evaluation responsibilities, we have generally stood firmly behind whatever organization sets itself up to assure due process. The result is a system that can make it excessively challenging to remove even the most unsuccessful and harmful teachers, often requiring extraordinary persistence and courage (qualities not always possessed in abundance by administrators).

Now, as politicians look for scapegoats and with the nightmare scenario of Michelle Rhee-like purges of teachers, states and districts are beginning to legislate and negotiate tougher—but sometimes fairer and more consistent—evaluation processes, and unions are showing signs of a newfound readiness to engage and, possibly, to open up the dismissal process. This issue is far from settled, but prospects are increasing for both more supervision and support for teachers.

Pollyanna? I could be! I sat in on a public school faculty meeting the other day where teachers reflected bitterly about being “Danielson-ed,” New York City’s latest cold-hearted implementation of a well-meaning approach to formative classroom assessment. As I write, the Common Core is being worked over by textbook and testing companies to standardize approaches across the country. Meanwhile, toward very different ends, cells of progressive educators are extracting nuggets of authentic and flexible pedagogy from the Core to use as centerpieces in dynamic, child-centered classrooms. The potential for abuse is there—we see it all around us, all the time. But so, too, still hidden but slowly gaining traction, is the potential for creativity and renewal.

Addendum

In the 6 months between the writing of this desperately hopeful piece and its publication, New York City has publicly posted teacher ratings based exclusively on test scores; New York State has upped to 40% the portion of a teacher's evaluation based on students' standardized test results (making it impossible to "pass" if you cannot show formal value-added score improvement); and the federal Race to the Top

has made it virtually impossible for states and municipalities to use anything other than student test scores to determine the professional fates of teachers, principals, schools, and school systems.

In this context, my confident assertion that test-dominated accountability will die of its own increasingly obvious inadequacies "not yet, but soon!" seems not only Pollyanna-ish, as I anticipated, but, arguably, completely out of touch! The "soon" is undoubtedly now a number of years in the future, the indeterminacy of that number just one more monumental challenge to be overcome by anyone yearning for meaningful change in schools. It thus becomes ever more crucial that educators exploit these "silver linings" wherever they can in the schools. I know it will happen—it is happening!—but I also want to acknowledge here how sustained and difficult—and heroic—that struggle will be.