

Teachers Also Count

by

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This is the Print Version of the Video "Teachers Also Count" that can be viewed by copying this, , going to the Internet, pasting it into the URL line at the top of your search engine page and clicking "GO".

Introduction

I am Ralph Massey, an economist, a retired banker and a long time resident of the Bahamas. This is the fourth in a set of videos on the Learning Crisis in the Bahamas. The first three were "Academic Failure and the Skills Gap", second, "Knowledge, Facts and Cognitive Skills" and third, "Culture Really Counts."

This video, **Teachers Also Count**, addresses the third "Fundamental" identified in **The Learning Crisis Essay** of April 2009 that is available in print or on-line.

Teachers are a special problem for the Bahamian interested in education reform since he knows less about the quality of the public school teachers and teaching instruction than about the students they have taught.

In the latter instance -

We have the annual BGCSE exams that do measure what the school leavers know and can do.

However, the annual report, as previously noted, is limited in detail and the report, in effect, masks the severity of the learning crisis. Needless-to-say, this practice should end.

We also have periodic newspaper articles on the failure rates in specific public high school graduating classes. Such information is not included in the annual public BGCSE report nor in the national education conferences periodically held by the Minister of Education. Nevertheless, they do provide some substance to the otherwise very faint picture of student academic failure.

In the case of the teachers, all we know is that they are reported as being "qualified"; but -

- One is left to wonder, for instance, "Who is teaching math?" ...and...
- How qualified are they?

Dumbing Down or Path Dependency

One of the most common explanations for the present learning crisis is the allegation that the Government 33-years ago intended to "dumb down" the public education system.

A more charitable and accurate explanation is that today the Bahamas is the victim of its "earlier institutional choices, albeit ones made in different circumstances and under different constraints."

In the social sciences this is called “path dependency.”¹ A situation where past choices, that are now viewed as strategic errors, have created today’s problem...in this case The Learning Crisis.

1. Thirty-three years ago the nation sought the speedy attainment of Universal Education which meant a significant expansion of the system and a sudden large need for new teachers. Such a rapid expansion could only be met with a lowering of standards for new teachers since quality teachers seemingly are always in short-supply. Nevertheless, in the Post-Colonial era that was the policy of the day; and even today, it is still a U.N. Millennium Objective.
2. The foreign worker permit system was used to increase the portion of Bahamian teachers employed in the system, the Bahamianization policy.
3. The qualifications of new teachers hired dropped precipitously; AND
4. The teacher training unfortunately did not offset its negative impact.
5. The “End Elitism” in teaching closed Government High, the premier public high school for learning. This eliminated equality of opportunity in the public system and promoted a lower and more uniform equality in educational outcomes.
6. *De Facto* Government employment-for-life policies and mandated trade unionism institutionalized the negative impacts of the above choices.

Thus the Department of Education has been deprived of its ability to manage its education enterprise.

U.S. Education Since 1960

For a perspective in determining what to do about the crisis I want to talk about the U.S. since 1960.

The objective of the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty of the 1960s was to eliminate discrimination and racial inequality; so, the Government spent \$125 Billion Dollars from 1965 to 2001 “to improve the quality of education in high-poverty schools and/or give extra help to struggling students.” This funding went to 13,081 separate school districts encompassing 46,656 schools.²

In 2001, 36 years later, legally mandated school segregation ended; the separate-but-not-equal educational facilities gap was virtually eliminated; but the overall test scores on academic achievement of students showed no significant improvement; and this produced the “No Child Left Behind Act”(NCLB act) of 2001.

But why didn’t \$125 billion produce positive learning results? What follows is a listing factors.

Accountability. The traditional educational culture of a highly decentralized school system resisted “high stakes testing”; but now the NCLB insists on it.”⁴

Order & Civility in the classroom declined disastrously...that is discipline, mutual respect and the authority of the teacher.

New teaching theories flourished and teaching became a battleground between the proponents of “traditional” and “progressive” teaching methods. It was a conflict between self-centered learning as opposed to the directed learning of “core knowledge.”⁵

Parents Disengaged from the schools and displaced their responsibility in child formation without a fear of the consequences.

Teacher Unions, however, represented the biggest change in education. The first union representation election occurred in 1961 when

public school unionization fell under the *de facto* mandated trade unionism already established in private industry. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers negotiated collective bargaining agreements coast-to-coast that impose inflexible work rules and regulations that deprive superintendents and principals of the ability to manage. ⁵

Teacher Unions have adversely affected educational productivity and this has been documented by a trio of economic studies: Sam Peltzman, a Professor of Economics at the Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago (1994), Caroline Minter Hoxby, Professor of Economics, Harvard University (1996), and Eric A. Hanushek, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Professor of Economics at Stanford University (1996). ⁶

Abigail & Stephan Thernstrom concluded -

“Teaching in a regular public school is a profession for saints, masochists, or low-aspiring civil servants. To do the job splendidly asks too much in the way of sacrifice; simply to meet minimum standards asks too little in terms of skills, knowledge, imagination and dedication.” ⁷

Education Reform Strategies

There a number of strategies being used in the U.S. that are being used to change the present teaching paradigm:

Alternative Certification Teacher Programs have been established in all 50 states in order to acquire more teachers because of the teacher shortage and and the need for more effective teachers. ⁸

Teach for America recruits outstanding recent college graduates from all backgrounds and career interests to commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools.

The objectivity is to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in the effort.

Charter Schools are the most dramatic device used by public schools to improve academic achievement. They are owned by the Government but retain private operating companies that are not bound by laws and regulations related to regular public schools and usually are non-unionized. The operating companies are held accountable for their output, namely what its students know and can do.

Educational Vouchers A school voucher, also called an education voucher, is a certificate issued by the government by which parents can pay for the education of their children at a school of their choice, rather than the public school to which they are assigned. ⁹

Vouchers have had a limited success in the United States because of the extreme opposition by the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Education Association.

In the Bahamas the Government supports private schools with direct grants to the schools. This program should be evaluated against the U. S. system.

Home Schooled Students in the U.S. increased from 850,000 students in 1999 (1.7 percent of the total student population) to 1.1 million students in 2003 (2.2 percent of the total student population). ¹¹

On-line enrollment by 9th to 12th graders in the college level programs grew from 45,000 in 2000 to 1,000,000 in 2007. High schools and even junior high schools are beginning to recognize these courses and count them toward graduation.

Revolutionary Research

Nevertheless, education has two dimensions:

1. The transmission of knowledge from one generation to another; and...
2. The indoctrination of youth to support a particular political or social objective.

What has changed in recent years is the quantity and quality of research done on the former. I will cite two of the most dramatic and relevant examples.

In November 1996 the University of Tennessee published a massive longitudinal study that measured the “Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement.”

It studied a group of students from the first through the eighth grade and related each student’s measured performance to specific teachers whose quality of instruction was measured on a five-point scale.

The study came up with two stunning conclusions:

1. Students who get more effective teachers have an extreme academic advantage versus those that do not.

In mathematics the advantage meant that, for comparable eighth grade students, those with effective teachers scored 50 points higher on a scale of zero to 100 and were ready for Advanced Math rather than Remedial Math.

The test results were described as AWESOME!

2. Students who get a series of poor teachers experience a “near-permanent retardation of academic achievement.”

Therefore principals were advised to schedule student class assignments to avoid creating such sequences.

The second example is one by McKinsey & Company and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the OECD) published in 2007. It studied the top 10 highest scoring countries on the TIMSS and PISA exams. They were evaluated against 15 other countries to determine what the **Top-10** did “right” rather than what they did wrong.

The main conclusion was -

“The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”

The study contained 4 major conclusions:

1. Recruit teachers from the top-third of each group of graduates.

The fundamental premise is that a teaching candidate has to be selected from the top college students. In the case of South Korea primary school candidates are drawn from the top 5%; whereas the U.S. draws its candidates from the bottom 30 percent.

2. Almost every top-school system requires the teaching candidate first to receive a degree in a subject other than education before teacher training begins.
3. Teacher training is practical with most occurring within the teacher’s classroom.
4. Starting salaries are in line with starting salaries for other professional programs.

Bahamian Teaching Clues

This is interesting background information but what about Bahamian teachers?

In the Bahamas there is a complete absence of publicly available data on what teachers know and can do. However, the high student failure and illiteracy rates strongly suggests that the average public school teacher is ineffective.

Even publicly available anecdotal evidence is scarce.

In a meeting with the Bahamas Union of Teachers the question was asked "Who is teaching Math?"

The answer was "Our teachers are qualified but are not comfortable teaching mathematics."

One can reasonably conclude that -

- There is a hidden critical skills shortage in the Public School teaching corps.
- The Bahamian system of teacher recruitment and training has to be changed.

The Bottom Line

Furthermore -

1. The Learning Crisis is real. The near-permanent academic retardation associated with academic failure and functional illiteracy threatens the nation's twin ambitions of economic growth and rising welfare for Bahamian workers.
2. Reform has to address the weaknesses in the fundamentals...the country's cognitive skills, its culture and the quality of teaching instruction.
3. The persistent low student scores strongly suggest that the education & teacher training paradigms must change.

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The Author

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He is a founding member of the Nassau Institute and worked as an Economist for the Coalition for Education Reform.

Endnotes

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- 2 "What is Title I?", <http://www.title1.com/whatis.htm>.
- 3 Graham, Hugh Davis Graham, *The Uncertain Triumph: Federal Education Policy in the Kennedy and Johnson Years*, University of North Carolina Press, 1984, page 79, and Thernstrom, page 6.
- 4 Hirsch, E. D., "Why Traditional Education is More Progressive", *The American Enterprise Online*, <http://taemag.com>.
- 5 Abigail Thernstrom & Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Simon & Schuster, 2003, page 260.
- 6 Hanushek, Eric A., "The Productivity Collapse in Schools," working paper no.8 (Rochester, NY: W. Allen Wallis Institute of Political Economy, University of Rochester, December 1996)
- 7 Thernstrom, page 251.
- 8 Rebecca Garcia & Jessica Huseman, "Alternative Certification Programs: Meeting the Demand for Effective Teachers", NCPA Brief Analysis No. 675
- 9 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_voucher
- 10 U. S. Department of Education Report NCES 2003-42, "Home Schooling in the United States".