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Why a Comprehensive Approach to Educational Reform is Necessary Children learn what they live outside of, as well as inside of schools

by Dean Corrigan

Introduction

This paper focuses on (1) the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Race to the Top (2009) legislation on America's most vulnerable children, (2) the dilemmas teachers face in implementing top down mandates, (3) how the current legislation bypasses the "no reject principle" established by Public Law 94-142, (4) the role of parents as partners in future educational reform strategies, and (5) the development of a comprehensive integrated education, health and social services approach that recognizes that children learn what they live outside of as well as inside of schools.

No Child Left Behind has produced just the opposite of what it promised. It has made the drop out situation worse for America's most vulnerable children and their families.

State and Federal Mandates

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) established by Congress under President Bush, and continued under President Obama with Race to the Top (2009), require that all public schools receiving federal funding must administer state wide standardized tests annually to all students. Also, schools that receive Title I funding through the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) must make adequate yearly progress in test scores (i.e. each year, its fifth graders must do better on standardized tests than the previous year's fifth graders). The tests for Title I recipients in reading and mathematics are given in third and eighth grade.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) produced just the opposite of what it promised. It is a misnomer. It has made the drop out situation worse for America's most vulnerable children and their families. Deeply imbedded in the No Child Left Behind strategy is the notion that failure is necessary to maintain standards. As an unintended consequence of these mandated standardized tests everyone in the school is threatened with failure. The scores on

the tests are used to rank, label, categorize and compare students in schools, school districts and across states. This is happening even though schools have wide variability between the students who attend from one year to the next. In some inner city schools the transition rate is over fifty per cent and the fact that many schools vary in the number of children who cannot speak English and the number of children with special needs is also disregarded. All students are compared with grade level norms, based on some preconceived average student.

The ratings of schools are published widely. The assumption is that repeating the test year after year and the threat of failure will be the prime motivator for improving individual student learning and school wide performance. In some school districts teachers and principals are being hired and fired based on the standardized test results and the amount of state and federal aid is influenced by test results.

As a consequence NCLB and Race to the Top have narrowed the definition of the purposes of education. Passing the test has become the primary purpose of education. Under increasing pressure schools "teach to the test" while other important educational outcomes are neglected.

Teacher's Dilemma

The main reason the NCLB and Race to the Top approach has not succeeded is that they are based on a false premise. They assume that children of a given age and grade level are the same. Teachers know there are standardized tests but they also know there are no standardized children. All children are as unique as their fingerprints. Teachers are reminded every moment "one size does not fit all." There is no such thing as a grade level that is fully representative. Students at a given age do not learn at the same rate and their level of understanding is different from one subject area to another.

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It is no wonder that teachers are frustrated by NCLB and Race to the Top. False assumptions, labeling, and threats are not helpful to teachers who face the challenge every day of reaching and teaching an increasingly diverse student population. Considering their classroom experience and study of human growth and development, professionally prepared teachers know that each child has different learning needs therefore instruction must be differentiated, not standardized. They know that the best tests are those that are constructed by teachers as instructional tools to get feedback from their students on whether their students have learned the content and skills the teacher intended to teach.

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Teachers understand that students are different in what they know about a particular subject, how they approach learning, how they feel about what they know and need to know, and how they feel about their teachers and themselves. Along with being different in what they know and how they feel, each child has a different learning style. Some students can keep several ideas in mind at the same time. Others can only keep one idea in mind. Some students jump into problem solving and respond right off, others want to take more time to reflect before jumping in. Some students learn better through reading while others learn better through listening or manipulating a variety of visual images on computer or iPad.

Since students differ in how they feel about their teachers and their school, what is reflected back in the eyes of their teacher and how other students treat them has a lot to do with a student’s opportunity to learn in that setting. Since students may have different perceptions of themselves and their abilities, self-pride and self-esteem are very important considerations in creating the conditions for teaching and learning. Teachers do not teach groups, they teach individuals within groups. That is what makes teaching such a complex endeavor.

For further examination of issues related to labeling I recommend three important books: (1) John Goodlad and Donald Anderson’s The Non Graded Classroom (1987) in which they document how children vary within each class and within each field of study, (2) Nicholas Hobb’s The Futures of Children (1975) in which he documents the damage done to children when they are labeled and categorized (the Pygmalion effect) and (3) John Gardner’s Excellence 1962) in which he points out the many ways to define excellence.

In his longitudinal study, Fulfilling Lives: Paths to Maturity and Success, Douglas Heath (1991) has recorded the factors that correlate with success in later life. During his forty years of research on this topic he found that the most important factor was not test scores. The most important factor for success in later life was whether individuals in early life had the opportunity to take on a variety of self-sustaining activities and see them through to completion. To learn to persist--to learn to continue to learn and make choices when their teacher was no longer around was the most important factor. “Persistence” and critical thinking are not skills that are assessed in the federally mandated No Child Left Behind package.

Consequences of Labeling

In the Race to the Top strategy schools are being forced into a “winners” or “losers” dichotomy. What is most dangerous about the labeling and categorization of children required by the No Child Left Behind Act is that it has become a way to get around the “no reject principle,” established in Public Law 94-142, the Education of Handicapped Children’s Act (1975). The rejection and segregation just takes place over a longer time and is subtler.

The principle of no rejects established in Public Law 94-142, was based on the firm assumption that every child has an inalienable right to a free “appropriate” education. This Act made it clear that the purpose of American education is to help all the children of all the people to become all they are capable of becoming. Public Law 94-142 not only stated that children could no longer be denied access, it also required that their school develop educational plans for them based on their learning needs, referred to as an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). It stipulated that the IEP must include a diagnosis of the child’s special learning needs, and a description of the type and length of the services to be provided to respond to those needs. “Appropriate” is the key word in the legislation. It recognized that each child has different learning needs therefore instruction must be differentiated. Another most important component of

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the Act insured parents would be involved in all aspects of the process. Parents could call for a due process hearing with school officials if they were not satisfied (Corrigan, 1978).

The most visible evidence of the ineffectiveness of the NCLB and Race to the Top approach and its disregard of the principle of “no rejects” established in Public Law 94-142 can be seen in the number of push outs from low income families. When children’s

schools label them as failures children blame themselves and they begin to lose respect for the system that has categorized them. Many give up.

The national report from Education Week (Swanson, 2010) indicated that drop-outs come disproportionately from communities challenged by severe poverty and economic hardship. The drop out problem is particularly acute for African American and Hispanic students who will soon comprise the majority of America's children. Almost half do not graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Fifty percent of school drop-outs in our major cities are unemployed. Nationally, the students who drop out make up half the heads of households on welfare, and they constitute about half the prison population. The United States has a rapidly growing disadvantaged youth population that is out of school and out of work with no skills to get and keep a job (Levin, 2012). Many economists call the drop out situation a "ticking time bomb."

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Repeatedly threatening students and rating schools based on mandated standardized tests will not solve the problem of poverty and education, it will exacerbate it. We have a national crisis. America morally and financially cannot continue to waste its children and youth. If 50 percent of the lights went out in our major cities the results would be catastrophic and somebody would do something about it fast.

America's schools must be humane centers of intellectual inquiry, where everybody is somebody. As envisioned in Public Law 94-142, the schoolhouse must be a place where every child has the opportunity to succeed, the opportunity to reach his or her potential. As a Civil Rights Act, the rationale in support of Public Law 94-142 (Corrigan, 1978) was based on the premise that exclusion of one individual or group by another is as harmful to the group that does the excluding as it is to the individuals being excluded. In a democracy, what is or is not done for those most in need will determine the effectiveness of the whole system. That premise applies to the push out situation in our schools today.

Parents as Partners

What parents want most from their schools is a personal accountability system that provides progress reports on how their particular child is doing. They want their children to be treated as human beings, not objects, or categories in a student grouping structure or a number on a chart. Direct contact with parents is the best form of accountability. The NCLB rating system and the illegitimate comparisons it makes should be

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replaced with a "continuous progress" reporting system.

A key element in this kind of child and family centered accountability system is a portfolio that includes exhibits of their child's work. The results of teacher made tests and daily recordings of progress provide the most valid forms of evaluation because they are directly connected to an individual educational plan (IEP) designed for their child. Parents are able to discuss samples of their child's work and progress on tests before and after instruction.

Along with basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, science and reasoning the portfolio also includes progress reports on other performance indicators that are at the top of the list that employers say are most important in the work setting as reported in the US Department of Labor SCANS Report: *What Work Requires of Schools* (1990 & 2000). These include (1) the ability to take on specific responsibilities and see them through to completion on time, (2) the ability to work with people of all ages, colors and creeds, (3) the ability to be a good citizen of the school and community and (4) the ability to protect the rights of others. The portfolios have many uses. They can serve as a record of ones intellectual history and they can be used in presentations to potential employers or college admissions offices. In this accountability system parents are treated as partners. We should never forget that parents are their child's first teacher.

Collaboration: Key to Building the Future

What the country needs right now is a comprehensive reform strategy to replace No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. This strategy must be built on the fundamental idea that "children learn what they live" outside as well as inside of schools.

It is essential to keep in mind that "schooling" and "education" are two different things. Schooling is just one part of a broader system of education. In my discussions about education with social workers, doctors and nurses over the last twenty years they always start the conversation by talking about prenatal care, good nutrition, the rapidity of brain development in the first few years of life, and conditions in the home environment affecting learning potential. They talk about "opportunity standards" as well as "academic achievement standards" and they are very knowledgeable regarding the relationship between the two. They know you can't have one without the other.

Social workers, doctors and nurses, just as teachers, see first hand the ways poverty affects learning outcomes. Charles M. Blow in an op-ed piece in the New York Times on August 24, 2012, titled Starving the Future cited a survey of kindergarten through eighth-grade teachers by Share Our Strength (2012). It found that six in 10 of those teachers surveyed said students regularly came to school hungry because they were not getting enough to eat at home, and a majority of teachers who saw hunger as a problem believe the problem to be growing. One teacher is quoted as saying, “The saddest are the children who cry when we get out early for a snow day because they won’t get lunch.”

Human service workers know that receiving a livable wage and providing employer health care plans can contribute to the improvement of reading and mathematics scores just as much as what happens in school. The community can surely see that a parent who earns a decent wage with one job is more likely to have the quality time and resources to provide a healthy learning environment compared to another parent holding two minimum wage jobs with very little time and resources to raise a family.

What is needed is a new integrated family centered, community based, culturally competent, collaboratively developed, education, health and social service system. The great challenge is that changes in policy, practice and professional preparation must take place simultaneously.

The more meaningful a child’s experiences outside of school the more relevant learning experiences become in school.

Interprofessional/interagency collaboration is the key concept in meeting the education, health and social service needs of children and families today. No single profession can take on the full responsibility for solving the problems of poverty and education. We need to think outside the boxes that exist. Currently education, health and human services are organized in separate silos with very little collaboration across education, health and social services agencies and professions.

What is needed is a new integrated family centered, community based, culturally competent, collaboratively developed education, health and social service system. The great challenge in creating this new integrated services system is that changes in policy, practice and professional preparation must take place simultaneously. Reform of one sector without reform of the others will not work. First, new policies and principles to link by are essential as guides in the development of family centered, community based, culturally competent collaboratively developed integrated education, health and human services. Second, the training arm of each of the professional partners

must be restructured to produce interprofessional teams who know how to work effectively with service providers and the children and families they serve. Third, to be relevant the content, skills and values to be learned in interprofessional preparation programs must emerge from studies of the real conditions and problems that children and their families face today. Fourth, to be accountable, the quality of interprofessional development programs should be judged by how well the programs meet the needs of children and youth outside as well as inside of schools.

Interprofessional Leadership

To solve the problem of poverty and its impact on educational opportunity outside as well as inside of schools we need a new generation of visionary, interprofessionally oriented leaders who will place the future of all the children of all the people at the top of America’s agenda where it belongs.

United, the education, health and social service professions would constitute the largest work force in the world. Under girded by a new interprofessional ethic and driven by a common mission, child advocacy, such a force could accomplish whatever it set out to do. The potential of such a coalition to influence the various forces that develop policies and programs designed to serve America’s most vulnerable children is unequaled. The time for this interprofessional/interagency coalition to organize and act is now.

End Notes

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Dean Corrigan is Professor and Dean Emeritus and First Holder of the Harrington Endowed Chair in Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University. Before Texas A&M he was Dean of the College of Education at the University of Maryland, and served as Dean of the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont. He has had experience as a teacher and principal and also worked in the US Department of Education Bureau of Personnel Development. His vita lists over 100 publications and presentations. For ten years he co-chaired the National Commission on Leadership in Interprofessional Education and Practice initiated by former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and sponsored by the US Bureau of Maternal and Child Health. All 55 members of the Commission were engaged in developing integrated service systems and interprofessional preparation programs as policy makers, practitioners, trainers, administrators or family partners. Dean Corrigan has returned to Vermont in retirement where he continues to work with colleagues interested in designing, implementing and studying integrated services and interprofessional leadership.



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