



Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership Occasional Papers

Volume 2

Article 1

1-11-2018

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Recommended Citation

Bullough, Robert V. Jr. (2018) "Thinking About Access: Five Propositions," *Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership Occasional Papers*: Vol. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byupsppapers/vol2/iss1/1>

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Thinking About Access: Five Propositions

Robert V. Bullough, Jr.

January 11, 2018

BYU-Public School Partnership Leaders Associates Meeting

Access is our focus. I won't say anything directly about our readings for these meetings. I thought I should take a different, but I think complimentary path, one that is less concerned with programs than with how we think about access.

Among the many responses to the question, Access to what?, is student access to really good people, sensitive—but not too sensitive—and morally centered people, who are also exemplary educators; access to quality teacher education programs and, once employed, for educators to have access to work conditions and people that are supportive of their desire to provide terrific learning experiences for those they teach. Within the university and the schools, we expend a lot of energy trying to achieve, sustain and improve the quality of the education offered the young. Every young person, we say, has a right to extraordinary teachers including exceptional university faculty. At BYU we say that we are so serious about teaching quality that we expect faculty members' research activities to directly support their instructional responsibilities. We also are constantly engaged in program and faculty evaluation almost to the point of distraction.

My intent for this hour is to share and to a degree explore 6 propositions related to these aspirations and that speak to the challenge of making teaching a more attractive profession. I hope what I have to say will prove stimulating and help us think more deeply and productively about some of the issues we face. Along with the propositions, I'll touch on a few research-driven frameworks that have helpfully informed my own thinking.

But first, to get us started, I invite your engagement in a little self-reflection and then comparison by way of recalling who we are as educators, including what motivated each of us to seek entry into vocational worlds that support the quest for knowledge and set the moral expectation that that quest is only fully successful when shared with others, most especially the young. At your tables there is a sheet of paper on which a couple of instruments are reproduced, the first is very brief and addresses the question of whether or not you were "called" to become an educator. The second is the trait subscale of the Hope Scale developed at the University of Kansas, that tries to get at temperament (see Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011, for instruments)

After you complete these forms, and please do so quickly, read the directions at the bottom of the Hope Scale and score your responses. I'll briefly share a bit about the scales and what Kendra Hall-Kenyon and I have found when using them supplemented by some conclusions from the wider research.

[By a show of hands, participants were asked: "How many of you felt called to education?" Then they were asked to raise their hands if their Hope Scale score indicated a strong sense of hope]

Kendra Hall-Kenyon and my studies indicate that overwhelmingly BYU teacher education students possess a strong sense of calling. They also are very hopeful people.

For teachers the signs of being “called” include: a vibrant service ethic. Playing school as a child. [Another show of hands] Enjoying helping others as they puzzle through problems. Eagerness to share the results of your learning with others. Being delighted when teaching to see a “light come on” in those taught.

Hope is an interesting and complex virtue. Often we think of hope as a matter of temperament something like optimism that we either have or do not have. Instead, I suggest we think of hope as something learned, a resource that, while possibly robust, can also be weakened and even lost.

The historian Christopher Lasch is helpful here. In *The True and Only Heaven*” (1991, p. 81), Lasch wrote:

“Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories—no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events—in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments.”

So, if we are lucky we learn to be hopeful and in hope we find a contributing source of many of the qualities displayed by extraordinary teachers including an inclination to be trusting, persistence with difficult tasks, determination, humor, responsiveness to the unexpected, flexibility and courage needed to venture into unfamiliar conceptual, intellectual, and social worlds with the faith that something of value will be found there. As I say, hopefulness is a resource, one that the young desperately need to find in their elders, and most especially in adults who have care responsibilities for them.

To teach hope one must be hopeful. Life can wear us down. The sort of life we live and are enabled to live by the social positions we inhabit as educators can erode hope. While under some conditions hope will fade, it can also be strengthened. When hope weakens, we talk about a loss of resilience expressed in a weakening of commitments; when hope is strengthened, we speak of increased resilience and a deepening of commitments.

Hopefulness is essential to the work of education and to doing it well. And institutions that inspire hope are essential to attracting and to keeping able teachers. From these insights flow the first proposition:

A. Proposition 1, To be energizing and positively productive educational policies and supporting practices must get motivation right.

It is remarkable that this proposition requires mention.

For almost three decades now the general view of how to achieve higher quality teaching and learning within public education has been driven by a view of social practice rooted in cybernetics, expressed as a deep and abiding faith in systems and organizations rather than in people to get the world's work done. Economists missed the boat when they reduced humankind to homo economicus, beings who are primarily driven by pleasure seeking and who are mostly motivated by external rewards and best controlled by threats and punishments. Such assumptions when transferred to education have supported a punishing psychology obsessed with identifying deficits and then remediating or fixing them and in the process everything educational as been turned upside down. As John Goodlad used to remind us, when the game played is institutional reform or restructuring, often forgotten is how positive change is foremost a problem of human growth and development, of learning or, using Goodlad's felicitous term, "renewal." The specter of behaviorism looms large over both metaphors—reform and restructuring—with its need to micro-manage humanity in what usually proves to be a futile quest for guaranteed and predictable performance outcomes. The result is what Stephen Ball calls "performativity" an induced mindset that celebrates sameness and reduces education to training, two terms often used interchangeably when, in fact, they point toward very different kinds of human activity and experience. One consequence is that children come to be viewed by policymakers primarily through a social capital lens—certainly not through the lens that each and every child is a child of God and a creature of the springtime. When systemics dominates efforts to change institutions, one outcome is that distrust grows even as formal structures that support predictability prove themselves to be merely ephemeral substitutes for friendship and collegiality, for the embeddedness of work in relationships, as a basis for getting things done and done well. No matter how well conceived, confidence in institutional procedures cannot quell the fundamental human need for trust and connectedness.

B. Proposition 2, Public (and also general) education is very unlike a business enterprise.

Despite the power of neoliberalism, the supposed promise of heightened competition and the so-called wonder of markets as essential to increased economic productivity have failed and will continue to fail as strategies for improving education (as well as work done in a wide range of other human endeavors outside of business). Competition for students and for dollars has fueled a vast and well-funded and, for public education, mostly negative marketing campaign that, by reducing schooling to a consumer good has fundamentally distorted the aims and intent of both public and general education, that education of most importance to informed citizenship.

In addition to public education and public school teachers, university-based teacher education, is one of the targets of this campaign. Within teacher education the talk of program quality and intellectual rigor takes place near the front door to certification even as the federal government has thrown wide open the backdoor to just about anyone who might for whatever reason wish to teach. There is not much we can do about this, but we can understand the issues and know the facts and become more effective advocates for the cause of teachers, education and for teacher education, which is to say for democracy since, as John Dewey argued, democracy is a theory of education. In this regard, thank goodness for our partnership.

If what I have said here seems a bit strained, I'd suggest a bit of reading, a short list of books I've shared with various public figures over the past several months, none of whom has acknowledge either my suggestion or my gifts. I'd read Mercedes Schneider's "School Choice," Diane Ravitch's, "The Reign of Error," Christopher and Sara Lubienski's, "The public school Advantage" and David Berliner and Gene Glass's "Myth & Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools."

Here I should share a little additional background: After an extended period of inability to reauthorize NCLB, on December 10, 2015 the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed by President Obama—do you remember him? The act significantly reduced the federal educational footprint of NCLB. On its part, the Trump administration is aggressively pursuing deregulation after having gutted significant parts of the ESSA in March of last year. This administration is committed to privatizing the public domain. The recently passed tax reform act actually makes it possible for better off citizens to gain significant tax deductions for paying private school tuition, a policy very much in line with Secretary of Education Betsy DeVoss' determined support of vouchers, this despite the failure of every state voucher initiative at the ballot box and, more damning still, the failure of research to support vouchers (see Carey, 2017, New York Times, Feb 23, A20). That vouchers is a good idea is one of many widely believed alternative facts.

For those of us who worry about the health of our society, it is important to recognize that unbridled competition does not unite people except in so far as enemies sometimes prove useful. Although easily manipulated, it is true that fear of and resentment felt toward others can be a powerful motivational force. One inevitable result is the reward of system gaming (think here of what happened in Atlanta Georgia when under the superintendent's leadership test scores were fixed). Another is discouragement of talent sharing, and, as we here know so well, without talent sharing there is no possibility of renewal. A third is that educators are encouraged to teach out of their fears, to teach defensively, and defensive teaching sucks the life out of educators.

C. Proposition 3, For the young to flourish, those who seek to educate them also must flourish.

Speaking more broadly: The well-being of the young is inextricably linked to the well-being of their teachers. And even more strongly: When thinking about and seeking to increase the well-being of students, success is dependent on what sort of investments are made in educator well-being.

One helpful framework for thinking about educator well-being is the research program driven by Self-Determination Theory. Self-determination theory posits three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence and relatedness—and theorizes that fulfillment of these needs is essential for psychological growth and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 146-7). As Ryan and Deci (2001) argue, "only self-endorsed goals will enhance well-being, so pursuit of heteronomous goals (goals that are externally imposed), even when done efficaciously, will not" (p. 157). On competence, they write: a "large body of research points clearly to the fact that feeling competent and confident with respect to valued goals is associated with enhanced well-being" (p. 156). The general argument is that satisfying the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness has the effect of strengthening positive commitment: "employees whose needs are satisfied and who feel autonomously regulated are more engaged in their work, perform more effectively, and experience greater psychological adjustment and well-being." (Meyer and Maltin, 2010, p. 329).

Autonomy builds trust; competence builds confidence; and relatedness supports and sustains resilience, commitment, and enables program continuity.

D. Proposition 4, Students witness a lot of teaching, and from their observations they draw conclusions about education and educators from which they generalize and that endure.

Think about this: What have young people been seeing in classrooms and, relatedly, what have they been hearing about teachers since release in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk* and the signing of the NCLB act in 2002?

Here a key idea is that offered by Daniel Lortie (1975) more than 40 years ago in his classic study, *Schoolteacher*. The concept is the “apprenticeship of observation.” When seeking to identify strategies for recruiting future teachers, we probably should ask: What have the young learned about teaching and schooling from having been students and schooled? What have they come to believe? Are their perceptions accurate? Obviously, attitudes toward the value of teachers and views of the importance of teaching and even of higher education develop over a long time. And such attitudes are not easily changed.

What do we learn from the precipitous decline of interest in teaching as a career as expressed by young people over the past three decades? In 2010, just 7 percent of ACT takers indicated interest in pursuing education as a major. In 2014 that number had fallen to 5 percent. One response is that women who make up the vast majority of educators including of teacher educators now have other and better vocational options. But this is not nearly a full explanation. Teaching has lost its luster in part because of what students have witnessed taking place in classrooms and in schools and also what they hear about schools and teachers at home and in the news.

For those of us who have family traditions in education, like mine, other realities also have shaped our views. For many years my father was a junior high school art teacher. For all of my early life along with teaching he worked one or two additional jobs including as a sweeper in his school. My father graduated with highest honors from the University of Utah. Observing what his life was like, how hard he worked, and missing him made me profoundly angry. For a long time I actually resented the fact that he was a teacher. At one point, after I mentioned I was considering becoming a teacher, apparently I was stupid, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, in effect, “You are too smart to become a teacher.” Given the social events taking place in our nation then, I didn’t listen, in part because I knew that some of my teachers clearly loved teaching. I should say here that despite my family’s serious financial struggles (I had a sister who was often ill), I do not recall my father ever complaining about teaching or about his students, many of whom were pretty tough characters, as I learned later. I also learned that dad was really a marvelous teacher. In time I came to see in teaching one of the few genuinely moral ways of making a life—and this was and is a very important idea. Consider in contrast: One of my friends retired as a partner from a powerful international accounting firm. He owns multiple houses and drives very fancy cars. But he also spent his life making it possible for people who had at least—and this is what he told me—\$5 million dollars to invest to avoid paying taxes.

Motivation, as I've already said, matters. Morale matters. And rather than withdrawing from conflict as educators tend to, putting forth counternarratives matters. And one of these narratives is moral.

I suspect that more than anything, including the blather that we often hear from self-possessed politicians who play to voter fears, that it is what is witnessed and experienced in classrooms and the relationships that are built with teachers that makes the longest lasting impression on how education is understood. Certainly rebranding teaching—along with fighting for increased funding—is important to recruiting talent but rebranding is not primarily a PR problem as much as it is an experiential one, a matter of recalling the good things one has experienced in school and in college—and there are a lot of good things that happen to the young in these settings—and it is a problem of providing fresh positive experiences. This is one reason why service learning is so very important for college students. Much is to be learned from the BYU emphasis on mentoring. For good and ill time spent in universities and with university faculty can and does play a significant role in this effort. Happily, most BYU faculty seem supportive of teacher education as is central administration. A life is a testimony, and for those of us who are educators it is important our testimonies be vibrant and powerful.

During my years at the University of Utah each fall incoming freshmen were surveyed to identify what in their educational experience they most valued and year after year the responses were always the same, everything in education is about the quality of human interaction and relationship. Mentoring is a unique pedagogical relationship. We all know this. We all believe this. But we live in a time when what we all know and what we all believe can easily be dismissed as self-serving. After all, and now thinking of Dewey's 1929 Kappa Delta Pi lecture, "Sources of a Science of Education," measuring relationships to prove their worth is probably as silly as it is potentially destructive of those relationships. As Dewey states, "That which can be measured is the specific, and that which is specific is that which can be isolated" (p. 64) which is another way of saying, measuring relationships in any meaningful way is impossible. The danger comes when we elevate in importance what can be measured and eventually come to believe that what we do measure is what matters most.

E. Proposition 5: The early 20th century conception of teaching as primarily content transferral or transmission is deeply embedded into the consciousness of Americans and even teachers but at the same time deeply misrepresents what educators do and enjoy and what young people and their parents most value.

It is increasingly understood that the test fetish that has come to dominate public education hurts children. It also hurts teachers. Teaching is only partially about content delivery. Even though there are signs of a weakening of the fetish, conceptual change of this sort takes time and determination and requires genuine compelling alternatives.

When transmission of content is the central concern, what Connell (2009) calls the "competent teacher model" of teacher education holds sway. This model of teaching dominates program accreditation. From this model flows belief in best practice (Bullough, 2012), that there is a set of specific skills, here thought of as rules or algorithms for solving virtually every and all educational problems. Such views assume the problems of education are comparatively simple and solvable when every thoughtful educator knows that most educational problems are mostly

managed or gotten over, not really solved, and then certainly not for long. My claim is this: There are no best practices but there are better practices and these must be learned in a way that enables their adjustment, transformation, and, ultimately even their rejection, in support of learning.

While it is certainly the case that providing access to theories, concepts and facts that have proven themselves useful is part of the charge of education and that for some teachers, and most certainly for a good many professors, these theories, concepts and facts are beloved, teaching involves ever so much more than such content, as I have suggested and as we here each recognize. A long list of best practices stated in the form of behavioral standards complete with rubrics—statements of the conditions for demonstration of mastery—is unlikely to inspire anyone to teach. Skills develop with coaching and practice within specific contexts and find their value in what they enable, in their potentiality and in the artistry of their expression and in the consequences of their use. We need to remember that tools are not value neutral; they define problems and set expected solutions—there is a best practice for screwdrivers, for example, that has only to do with screws of a certain kind and size. But tools may also be suggestive of new uses to the imaginative when faced with an uncertain situation or dynamic and shifting context, the sort of situations and contexts that we recognize as potentially educational. I have used screw drivers as fulcrums, pry bars, stakes and tent pegs, as chisels, scrapers, bits, doorstops, and some people, not me, have used them as deadly weapons. When possessed by the wise practitioner, tools evolve and their uses expand. What a so-called best practice for someone new to teaching offers is a place to begin problem framing. Nothing more.

When teaching is reduced to transmission, it's ability to inspire self-identification, and here I am drawing on the large body of research that grows out of the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) on possible selves theory, is highly limited. It is true that some people do, in fact, find the idea of becoming a sort of technician very appealing, as a motivating possibility to which they can and do direct their future energies. I would suggest, however, that on the whole such people are probably not the sort of people we want teaching our children except in very specific sorts of situations. They likely are, however, the kind of people we want training our students and training has a place in education at every level but it must not be confused with education—education and training have different aims, one narrow and focused, the later expansive and indeterminate; the first concerned with replication and application, the second with interpretation, association (see Broudy, 1988) and creation.

F. Proposition 6 is straightforward: Times may be tough, but we educators know what to do to build renewing and powerful institutional cultures, the sort of places where teaching can be life affirming and at times even joyous.

The attack on public education, teacher education, and higher education will continue. Given the political climate of our times it is easy to get discouraged and so we need to be careful about who we listen to and believe. We ought not listen too carefully to our critics. We must listen carefully to one another, and, to be sure, to those we serve and most certainly to those who share with us the responsibility to care for those we serve. It is imperative we do not listen so carefully to our critics that we will be tempted to sharply define our work and its value in terms set by those very critics who frequently see in criticism the possibility of power and gain. Often criticism is offered without expectation or even desire of improvement. Under such conditions, good news

about teachers and teaching is really bad news. By way of example, on December 5th, 2017, the *New York Times* reported with puzzlement that there are signs the much maligned Chicago public schools are doing remarkably well even when standardized test scores are used as the measure. The puzzlement is that this success seems to have nothing with the legacy of Arne Duncan or of NCLB but a lot to do with hard work and creative innovation. Now, there's a surprise!

While it is important to be attentive to criticism, looking outward needs to be complimented by attention directed inward, to the quality of our own and our colleague's and student's experience as we seek to value and find positive meaning in our work. This is one of the reasons why the BYU-Public School Partnership's history with the Moral Dimensions is so very important and needs often to be revisited and thereby reclaimed. The dimensions help us know who we are by reminding us where we have been and where and with whom we stand.

We need to remember that despite the failures of the past three decades caused by faulty federal and state policies, there has been and is a tremendous amount of good work being done at every level of education by smart, dedicated, committed, motivated but also inevitably flawed, but hopeful, human beings. Much of this work has been and is heroic even when it has at times necessarily been subtly subversive. That said, except in the short term, counting on heroism to keep any system running is foolish.

There is a good deal of relatively recent research that supports the proposition that we know what to do to build renewing cultures (see Whitworth & Chou, 2015). Consider, for example, just one body of relevant research, that related to professional development (see Whitworth & Chou, 2015). Over the past couple of decades this research has given overwhelming support to the following principles. Influential PD has a clear content focus (which is to say, something of importance is to be explored and learned), involves active learning among participants, offers program coherence, is extended in duration, includes collective participation within sites (which is to say, is context responsive) and, a point often neglected, engages school and district leadership. In such work, data can prove valuable but the data must be valued by teachers which suggests they should be much involved in data gathering as well as in analysis. You will notice that these findings support the view of motivation identified within Self-determination theory and its relationship to commitment. The principles suggest the need to replace deficit views of teachers with a different view, a more trusting and hopeful view, what I think of as representing a commitment to building to strength. These principles have clear implications, I think, for teachers at every level and for those who operate in supporting educational roles. Notice that, for the most part, these principles support the work being done in associates and more broadly in the partnership yet also suggest possible extensions. For one, the focus on duration underscores a conclusion reached in a study Assistant Dean Al Merkley of the McKay School (see Bullough & Rosenberg, in press, chapter 7) and I conducted of associates, that concluded the program probably should be extended to the building level, an idea embraced by some schools within Alpine district.

I firmly believe that every school and teacher education program has within itself the knowledge and expertise needed for renewal once identified and focused. Recently, Kendra Hall-Kenyon, in her role as chair of the teacher education department has been inviting faculty members to share their research at faculty meetings. Having long served on merit and retention, promotion and

tenure committees at every level from departmental to the university, I know something about talent pools as well as about how little is known about the work our colleagues are doing. The point is, these institutions are filled with talent awaiting discovery and recognition; there is much to be learned from our colleagues if we take seriously the challenge to build and renew our cultures. This, of course, is why we partner. As I have said, most everything having to do with education is about relationships and relationship building. May I remind you, that Goodlad once said that there is no better indication of a school's quality than that the students are happy when they are there. So it is with educators.

Speaking personally, I cannot adequately express my gratitude for our partnership. I feel honored to share in this work. For me our work has been renewing. I have been changed, better educated. I must say, Dean Robert Patterson, a dear friend and a great educator, rocked my world when he seduced me into coming to BYU. To him I shall be forever grateful. Thank you.

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