

Teacher Vulnerability and “Resistance” to Reform

In current news rhetoric, it is popular to paint the picture of the lazy, entitled teacher, coasting through a quick and easy work day and then lounging all summer, free of worries or work.¹ The reality, of course, is not at all like that, with most teachers working long hours—well past the hours that school is open—and most teachers either teaching summer school or attending professional development during the summer. Despite this, there is an attitude that teachers are resistant to growing or developing in their profession and that they are resistant to change. I would assert that teachers are hesitant to act on change, though not for a lack of desire, but rather due to very reasonably developed self-defense instincts.

For starters, there is the obvious, and somewhat beaten-to-death issue of teachers being over-worked.² It seems to go without saying that “most teachers simply do not have the opportunities or energy to try something new, especially if it is a demanding something” (Cohen, 33). With everything that is already on the average teacher's plate, demanding that they completely tear down and revamp their curriculum and instructional methods is absurd. I suspect that this is one of the primary reasons why teaching remains so heavily teacher-centered, as Larry Cuban observed throughout *Inside the Black Box of Education* (Cuban, 2013, 8)—the requirements of replacing a teacher-centered, or at least teacher-orbiting, curricular framework would require enormous time and emotional bandwidth that many teachers do not have. Furthermore, it is a risk that may very well not pay off, making the stakes too high for such an investment.

The risk, of course, is that while fine-tuning and adjusting new curriculum over the several years that is generally required to get kinks out, test scores will drop for students who are trying to learn under this new framework; therefore, something may happen to the teacher, from disciplinary action through to being fired. Where is the motivation to invest oneself so deeply in attempting new methods of teaching when it might not only simply not work, but it might end your career? Teachers know that to develop new curriculum, let alone to learn new methods and completely change classroom structures, will come with “a period of chaos and uncertainty,” and so they are understandably concerned about “how [they will] be evaluated during this uncertain period,” whether or not there will be support, and how they and their students will be assessed during implementation. (Elmore/McLaughlin, 43). In *Inside the Black Box*, Larry Cuban observed that it was test-based teacher assessment that had the most significant impact on the classroom (though not in the way that it was intended, alas) (Cuban, 2013, 88). Teachers are scared for their jobs, especially as rhetoric continues to degrade them and place their value primarily in the test scores that their students achieve.³ The notion of taking huge risks with uncertain gains is not appealing.

This becomes even more anxiety-inducing when one takes into consideration what both Cohen and Cuban observe, which is that in the “helping professions,” or professions dedicated to human improvement, there is a co-dependence involved: the teacher cannot teach the student without the student going along with it. However, children are emotionally fragile and often fearful of failure, so the kind of ambiguity and open-ended challenges that would be presented in a more student-centered classroom can be terrifying. In order to improve student scores, teachers must reduce student risk in the act of learning in order to optimize buy-in (Cohen, 61). This is easier on the teacher—a fill-in-the-blank

1 The Kochs and their anti-union PAC being one example, pretty much anyone on Fox News (sorry to generalize), even occasionally CNN and the Huffington Post...

2 I say somewhat beaten-to-death because the fact that a great deal is demanded of teachers is not new, so I'm not going to waste your eyes on reading a whole lot more about it. Unless you are skimming.

3 This is not intended as an anti-testing smear campaign. While I have issues with testing, I can see value in at least what is being attempted, even if it is not being achieved perfectly successfully. That is a subject for another time, however!

worksheet can be quickly graded, and if it can be reduced to a Scantron bubble sheet, so much the more efficient! It's also easier on the student, as there is less mental effort or risk involved in rote memorization and regurgitation. It is straightforward enough to replicate what the teacher has told you, but to come up with your own independent thought is both more demanding and more scary. Cohen puts it in painfully precise terms when he states that “if they cannot master the skills and ideas...they risk not becoming the person they wish to be” (60). No student desires to be a failure, but as their vulnerability increases, so too does the likelihood that they will refuse to engage in order to protect themselves. Thus, the teacher is trapped in a position where he or she might wish to experiment and bring a more challenging, engaging, and ultimately rewarding method of learning into the classroom, but fear that students will not perform stops the experiment before it can start. Thus, the teacher's fear about the risks of experimenting with new instructional methods is two-fold—there is the fear that it will negatively impact their own career due to lowered test scores, but there is also the fear that it will negatively impact their students.

Teachers, by and large, are in their profession because of their love of learning and teaching, and they share a desire to see the lives of their students bettered, their minds lit up and excited. Therefore, experimenting on students in a way that may cause significant harm to their intellectual progression or emotional self, is not high on a teacher's to-do list. It is one thing to dabble around with different structures for class discussion—in my own classroom, I probably tried about twenty different formats in one year alone!--but to completely change the foundations of how the classroom is structured is quite different. Teachers are only willing to take a chance on something new if they have “the belief that students will learn predictably more as the result of it.” (Elmore/McLaughlin, 43). Just as teachers fear to experiment in ways that may damage their students emotionally, they also are unwilling to take chances on their students' learning. While the current strategies may not be ideal, they are working *enough* (or at least it seems/feels that way). Teachers recognize their limitations and failures, but sometimes the evil that one knows is better than the evil that one doesn't know and has no compelling reason to trust—the “early missionaries,” as Cohen puts it, speaking of vaunted theory in ivory towers may tell beautiful stories, but are they fairytales or not? And how can a teacher know?

Ultimately, teachers are trapped in a state of vulnerability, unable to take action on any true reform.⁴ Finding the time and energy to learn new instructional techniques and completely overhaul one's teaching would require taking time away from the work of being a teacher. Changing up how the classroom functions would leave students potentially less confident and afraid, thus potentially injuring both student sense of self and student learning. Since teachers are ultimately driven above all by the successes and thriving of their students (Elmore/McLaughlin, 42), embarking on risky campaigns of reform with a high chance of failure often inspires teachers to dig in their heels. Finally, one must remember how the successes and failures of students echo back to teachers—for many teachers, when their students struggle and fail, they feel that they have failed as well. With the way that education reform trends change seemingly with the seasons, what teacher, already deeply taxed by their work, will take on the potential of exhausting themselves emotionally?⁵

I believe that there are ways that teachers can be supported, engaged, and nurtured into continued growth that is meaningful and impactful to their practice. I don't know if they are viable or realistic, however, or if they have already been tried and discarded. Nonetheless, I believe that one issue at the heart of it all is that of teacher vulnerability.

4 I know I haven't even touched on bottom-up, teacher-driven reform, but I think that the way teachers interact with that kind of reform is yet again different, and I'm already very much over word count.

5 I am very, very biased. This was not an objective paragraph, but I stand by its importance.