THE FUTURE OF PRIMARY-SECONDARY EDUCATION

THOMAS R. ROSEBROUGH

The past is a window through which we can see the future—even though the vision may be through glass darkly. Think of your favorite school teacher. There are likely many reasons why you would choose her or him: academic rigor, interpersonal qualities, and more. Question: Would she or he thrive in today's public schools? Success as a teacher or as a student can be rather time-bound as we find ourselves in a very different era of schooling. As a recent book on the American public school teacher (Drury & Baer, 2011) contextualizes, the United States has been enormously successful in extensively educating its citizenry toward a democratic, strong, and prosperous nation. Currently, however, the authors point to signs that the U.S. has stalled in its efforts to remain preeminent in world affairs: (1) High school graduation rates continue to be around 75%; (2) Achievement gaps remain stubbornly resistant to current standardized efforts to close them across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds; (3) The U.S. does not compare favorably to international counterparts in reading, mathematics, and science assessment.

And, anecdotal evidence persists that may be even more telling. Heather Wilson (2011) in a Washington Post article questions current students' ability to think across disciplines and grapple with difficult issues. As a member of Rhodes Scholarship selection

committees the last two decades, the author fears she sees a trend toward education redefining what an exceptional student is. Her conclusion is that current college students are rather incapable of broader, more purposeful reflection: "This narrowing has resulted in a curiously unprepared and superficial pre-professionalism" (p. 1). But, these same students are unquestionably succeeding in the achievement-oriented, standardized Information Age schooling found in U.S. schools. They believe (and can validate their belief on ACTs and SATs) that they are superbly educated.

Such a context begs some questions: What schooling practices have been successful in our past? What is so different now? What will education look like in the future? And, what matters in education? Change is the watchword. As Ralph Leverett and I (2011) have cautioned, it is too easy to be myopic, to exaggerate change and become fixated on the present as though this world has never experienced change before. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of information is increasing at an unprecedented pace primarily due to technological innovation; and, unfortunately, many teachers (and policy-makers) still believe they are in the information-giving business.

Schooling practice has always centered on three salient factors: curriculum, teachers, and students. Success in the past most assuredly has included synergistic vitality among these three components in education. We must continue to ask critical questions about:

Curriculum: Is the content transferable to everyday life? Is it worth knowing? Does it inspire and challenge?

Teachers: What roles are vital for success in teaching? In *Transformational Teaching* (2011), we decipher three roles: scholar, practitioner, and relater. Teachers must know, be able to engage with appropriate methodology, and must connect to the individual lives of students.

Students: What motivations do they bring to the classroom? Are they demonstrating the ability to self-direct their learning? What learning qualities are they developing which will last a lifetime?

What is so different today can be summed up by two words: diversity and testing. Drury and Baer (2011) say that:

> a confluence of major demographic, policy, economic, and social changes have raised the overall complexity of teaching to a level unimaginable a half century ago. An erosion of student discipline and dramatic incidents of school violence; classrooms in which one in five students suffer emotional, attention, or behavioral difficulties; and recent upsurge in poverty that has left nearly six million school-age children surviving on less than seven or eight dollars a day all contribute to the new reality that teachers currently face (pp. 8-9).

In addition, a significant surge of Hispanic immigration in the last 30 years rivals the European influx in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1980, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 9% of children under age 18 were Hispanic; today the number is 23%. By 2050 the number is projected to be 39%. Other countries and geographic areas and ethnicities are represented, too, from the Far East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Asian subcontinent. Nearly 21% of school-age children today use English as a second language as compared to just 8% in 1979 (Drury and Baer, 2011).

Another difference is the inclusion of students with disabilities in public school classrooms. Disabled (including severely and profoundly disabled) children are currently educated in regular classrooms through the IDEA program, a great victory for democratic ideals. But, it also creates great challenges for teachers seeking to meet a wide range of abilities and difficulties.

Perhaps an even more significant difference in schools is that standardized testing has morphed into an accountability nightmare for teachers. High-stakes testing has ushered in an era where test scores have served as not only evidence of learning but learning itself. Higher-level thinking skills have been de-prioritized and knowledge of Jeopardy Game-like disconnected facts and information has been memorialized.

Informational teaching and learning may be dulling many students' perceptions and understandings of their world. The concern is that students are becoming overly self-absorbed in the digital culture, that they are misusing and overusing (Bauerlein, 2008) the Internet as they crowd out vital knowledge and values of citizenship. When we put all this together—diversity, rigid accountability measures, misuse of technology—we have a perfect storm of frustration and challenge for teachers.

By any measure or perspective, American schools are in the throes of crisis. Eli Broad (2012) is an American business entrepreneur who decries the lack of change in U. S. schools: "Technological advances have personalized every arena of our lives, but very little has been done to harness the same power to personalize learning for students with different needs" (p. 28). Here is a fundamental principle in pedagogy: Students must feel or perceive a personal connection between their ability and motivation to learn and their teacher's presentation of curriculum. American schools in the past, despite their problems, have achieved, excelled, and met that principle.

Times have changed. Schools in Asia and in Finland, representing very different cultures between them and as compared to the U.S., are advancing by leaps and bounds. Much of what they are doing they have learned from American models and research. Can American schools take stock, re-learn, and re-tool? Our schools have always been a reflection of society, and our country will demand an educational product that matches perceived wants and needs.

The current national common core standards movement likely will have staying power. Many states, including my own state of Tennessee, have adopted the standards and are busy developing pedagogy and assessment methods to match. Indeed, the force of commonality is strong, especially if the standards and their matching instructional modes demand depth as well as breadth. The caveat is this, however. Children of different experiences cannot be expected to learn through lock-step procedures. And, the best teachers will not be attracted to work in rigid learning environments.

In addition, the working world outside of school environments has changed to a degree that will force schools to adapt. The

question of change is not *if* but *when*, and U.S. schools historically have been slow to move toward this new world. An analogy here might be accurate: U.S. schools have been trying to repair a car that is 150 years old (public education) instead of simply junking the old one and buying a new one. The repair bills for fixing up the old vehicle with more accountability and higher expectations, while well-intended, are staggering and the measures are ineffective. Broad (2012) asks how did we get here, and then he says, "I suspect the reason is because too few dared to ask the right 'why not' question: Why not redesign these districts? It's a simple matter of reframing basic assumptions" (p.24).

American schools in fifty years will look very different if we reframe assumptions. The role of teacher will truly be one of facilitation of the process of learning through digital access and inquiry. Teacher pay will be reinvented in the U.S. more in line with not just the challenge and stress of the job, but also with teachers' demonstrated success in the classroom. The curriculum will be electronic and much more highly accessible. Students will expect quick and easy access and enjoy using the digital tools to do so, but their minds must still be challenged by great teachers asking great questions.

Those great teachers may take on new roles (Quillen, 2012) such as "intervention experts" when students experience frustration with computerized instruction. The medical model is trending strongly in education currently. With health care moving toward physicians supervising teams of nurse practitioners, it is likely that school systems will use cost-saving models of expert teachers teaming with para-professionals in the future. The "flip model" of asynchronous electronic access to lecture and instruction, coupled with synchronous face-to-face follow-up interaction and intervention is likely to be popular. The future-shock is that 1-5 years currently is like 10-50 years in the recent past because of rapid change in the world of technology and of economics. Thus, futurism is not what it used to be!

In an increasingly impersonal world, the greatest challenge of schools and teachers will be to personalize learning and connect

it to modern society, not just in an academic sense, but socially and spiritually. American individualism at the most basic level, the personal level, will be at risk. But, the power of *vocatio*, of godly summons to the ideals of teaching, will draw the best and brightest who realize that their students are spiritual beings in their essence.

In confronting rapid change, the inferred question is, What matters in the education of our children? Why do we teach? We must ask the question WHY before we move to HOW. The answer to the question of why is WHO. Playing the two roles of scholar and practitioner is not sufficient; teachers also must be relaters. Teachers who relate are practicing the compassion of connecting to students' true identities, inspiring individual hope and persistence.

We live in narrow and shallow educational times in the U.S. The principle is that raising student achievement is the floor, not the ceiling. Higher achievement is a by-product of seeking a broader and deeper mission for our schools: enabling a new generation of "favorite teachers" to teach to a holism of goals and to a depth of understanding. American schools hopefully will rediscover who their students are as well as what they need. We can have it all if we seek it.

References

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Thomas R. Rosebrough, Ph.D., serves as Executive Dean of the College of Education and Human Studies at Union University and is lead author of Transformational Teaching.