

2013

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Roger T. (2013) "Teacher Agency in America and Finland," *Colleagues*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol10/iss2/4>

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Teacher Agency in America and Finland

By Roger Wilson, GVSU Faculty



Teacher agency is typically viewed as a quality within educators, a matter of personal capacity to act (Priestly et al., 2012) usually in response to stimuli within their pedagogical environment. It describes an educator who has both the ability and opportunity to act upon a set of circumstances that presents itself within that individual's leadership, curricular or instructional roles. The educator described would then draw from acquired knowledge and experience to intercede appropriately and effectively. Agency is increasingly rare in the educational world of prescriptive improvement, and the term is too "often utilized as a slogan to support school-based reform"

(Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012, p. 3). Reformers conjure up images of willing teacher partnerships with other professional stakeholders that, in turn, conveys a message of equal input into decision-making and thus support for the initiatives. This is in contradiction to the reality that teachers have increasingly become deskilled instructional technicians whose knowledge and experience are not only undervalued, but also invariably dismissed by reformers far removed from the pedagogical fray and whose own agendas are too frequently undergirded by political ideology. This is not a respectful world where educators are valued for the competency associated with their expertise and insightful

contributions, but rather, a world of policy initiatives that depicts educators as inadequately prepared and underperforming employees in need of both standardization and greater oversight to ensure effectiveness. This is similar in many ways, to the development of regimented workplace processes in the much earlier era of industrialized labor.

How did the state of education arrive at this situation? Part of it was the evolution of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association within the development of the broader labor movement many decades ago (Tucker, 2012). However it is incorrect to simply blame the unions,

a deeper understanding is required. It is accurate that over those decades of negotiations between teacher unions and districts, the unions fared well. They gained in wages and benefits, and when those were not available to them, they substituted greater control over the schools and their various processes. All this was done within the context of legally negotiated contracts.

That school boards and management conducted their part in those negotiations rather poorly over that same timeframe, and perhaps gave away too much control (Tucker, 2012), is perceived as a problem ripe for remedy now, but the reality is that many of the remedies proposed by present day legislators, including their manner of implementation, may serve little more than to undermine that reformers seek to administer solutions that reformers seek to administer. Furthermore publicly demonizing unions and teachers, both of which are integral to the success of the reform agenda, seems short-sighted and far from any of the best practices evoked in Management 101. Employing a sports analogy, the state's education "coaches" may wish to radically revamp

the instructional offense, but placing more and more demands upon players absent adequate training and resources all the while publicly admonishing them for perceived deficiencies will only carry the coach and team performance so far. If veteran players remain skeptical and new recruits have difficulty with what they view as unreasonable expectations, the team is likely to flounder, and the quality of the game degrade. And pointing to the supposed success of alternative, for-profit teams (of choice) is a bit like pointing to the film "Moneyball" and the success of Oakland A's Billy Beane who has arguably done

more with less since the late 1990s (Miller, 2011). Keep in mind, though, that since he became GM in 1997, Oakland has made the playoffs only 6 times, losing in the League Divisional Series in all but one post-season appearance. The future of public education does not rest with the Billy Beanes of this world. Being cost effective but average is not a ringing endorsement.

Rather than the current zero-sum game of educational politics

with its fiscal and accountability regimes, and its seemingly expansive collection of alternative teacher preparation programs, the state might do well to recall that "teacher education matters" and that research over more than 30 years has consistently reported that notwithstanding perceived shortcomings within existing teacher preparation programs and state licensure procedures, "fully prepared and certified teachers are generally better rated and more successful with students than teachers without this preparation" (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 167). Furthermore, teachers from these alternative certification programs and their condensed "preparation" are invariably weaker in a wide array of instructional and professional capacities, not

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the least of which being that their students typically “learn less, especially in areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics, which are critical to later school success” (p. 167). That the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) reported that these same ill-prepared individuals are inevitably positioned to instruct “the least advantaged students in high-minority and low-income schools” (p. 168) would be deemed malpractice if applied to the medical profession.

The point to this discussion is that reform need not be an antagonistic decree with seemingly punitive overtones. Furthermore, teachers and unions are not the problem, except in the mind of ideologues. Rather, they represent part of the solution, and one that many European nations have embraced, including everyone’s educational darling, Finland. Finland’s successes on Program for International Student Assessment and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study over the past decade demonstrate that strong unions, enhanced teacher agency, and the absence of state-mandated standardized tests (Sahlberg, 2011) can co-exist and achieve everything that the current state legislature and “educrats” seek to impose through edict and enforcement, the latter twosome being more symptomatic of organizational paternalism from a bygone era.

Clearly, it is not just the existence of unions, greater teacher agency, and the elimination of standardized tests that speaks to Finland’s successes. It is largely their teacher preparation (OAJ, 2008). Finnish authorities are not seeking every conceivable alternative to existing university programs. America’s market ideology may embrace choice and competition, the more the merrier, but Finland has determined that less is better in this instance. From that smaller pool, the very best are chosen. Finnish teacher training programs are highly selective in their teacher recruitment. They are not “cash cows” for their respective universities (Levine, 2006), but rather are competitive, prestigious institutions that generate highly educated individuals whose expertise and professional accountability are not in question, and who are well regarded by Finnish society. Only 1 in 4 applicants nationally makes it into teacher preparation, and only 1 in 10 is accepted into pri-

mary education programs (Grades 1-6) (Sahlberg, 2011). The entrance requirements are rigorous, as is the program itself, and graduates exit five to seven years later with a master’s degree (required for teaching primary and secondary school) after studying subject content and pedagogy in depth and experiencing 15 to 25 per cent of their preparation time engaged in supervised field experiences. The programs are committed to research-based teacher education with every candidate completing a thesis. Theory and practice are investigated and experienced. “There are no alternative ways to receive a teacher’s credential in Finland” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 35).

In exchange for this extensive training and preparation, teachers are responsible for curricular design and assessment. Since state level standardized tests do not exist in Finland (e.g., MEAP, MME), faculty must exercise their professional judgment in applying the knowledge and skills they acquired during their preparation. Furthermore, along with the principal, they are also integral to the evaluation of their colleagues since Finnish schools do not have formal teacher evaluations. The quality of the candidates exiting the teacher preparation programs, and the high degree of professionalism in conjunction with the communal expectations regarding instructional practice, pave the way for the necessary interactions that lead to enhanced practice. Additionally, to become a principal, one must first be a qualified and experienced teacher.

Teachers and administrators, in conjunction with the school board, are usually responsible for hiring decisions, too. There are no probationary periods for recent hires and “no measures of teacher effectiveness or means for terminating a contract unless there is a violation of the ethical rules of teaching” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 36). Most teachers stay in their positions for life, and only 10 to 15 per cent drop out of the profession, whereas in America, more than 30 per cent of young teachers depart the profession during the first five years alone. In fact, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reported that in a 2007-08 survey, 50 per cent of teachers polled had fewer than 12 years’ experience (Carroll & Foster, 2010). The downward trend in years of experience has continued since 1994.

That level of departure from the profession, the instability

wrought upon neighborhood schools by such occupational “churning” including the implications for faculty and student morale, as well as its obvious economic impact, projected to cost the nation’s school districts some \$7.2B annually, is unsustainable and institutionally unhealthy. (Carroll & Foster, 2010)

Much of what passes for reform in American public education is marginally productive. Legislators and bureaucrats are attempting a grand experiment in educational micromanagement. The answers lie in the reform of teacher preparation (“Tomorrow’s Schools,” 1995) and increased not diminished teacher agency, not standardized curriculum or standardized testing throughout, not reduced funding or even competitive funding, not multiple training and certification routes, certainly not for-profit alternative schools with reduced wages and benefits, and not the demonizing and public admonishment of educators. States need to partner with teachers, not confront them. Confrontation remains a legislative option, of course and will inevitably lead to winners and losers. Teachers are still the folks being called upon to rollout the so-called “improvements”, and a disheartened and embittered workforce does seem like a counterintuitive strategy for effective implementation. Perhaps in the rarified air of the state capitols, that connotes smart politics. Unfortunately, such flexing fails to contribute in any truly meaningful way to an important social conversation.

As a final thought, before reformers consider revamping teacher preparation programs, they might also wish to talk to those with experience in these matters. Partnering with teacher educators rather than dictating their terms might prove more effective in the long term. But what do I know?

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