THE PROBLEM WITH SOLUTIONS

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When people care about an enterprise, such as education, they tend to seek solutions for all the problems they see. This is a natural urge. But when a lot of people care about an enterprise, and they all seek solutions, they can exacerbate the problems by introducing excessive noise into the system. That is what is happening in education today. School people are swamped by a deluge of solutions. They suffer from reform fatigue.

Six years ago, I conducted a study of teachers' on-the-spot reasoning about their practice (Kennedy, 2005). I was interested in how teachers perceived their situations, what kinds of problems they encountered, and how they made decisions about what to do next. I had thought that their problems would mostly be about student learning, and was not prepared for the number and variety of logistical problems they encountered largely because of interruptions that flowed from well-intentioned "reforms". Here's one example: A sixth-grade teacher participated in a National Geographic project that gave his students a chance to collect water samples from a local waterway and contribute them to a national data base on water quality. Sounds like a great idea, right? They got to participate in a national study about a socially significant issue and see how evidence is collected and aggregated. But the timing of the project caused the teacher to temporarily halt his on-going curriculum unit, and by the time the National Geographic project was finished, students had forgotten where they were in their regular curriculum. The teacher had to figure out how to recover all the material he had previously taught.

National Geographic is hardly alone in wanting to help educators. The number of associations, institutions, government agencies and volunteers of all kinds who want to solve educational problems has grown so large that teachers are surrounded by a cacophony of helpful voices and a plethora of ideas too numerous to attend to. Instead of strengthening teaching, this multitude of innovations and reforms distracts both teachers and students from their central tasks, making it difficult to concentrate, difficult to stay on task, and difficult to sustain a coherent direction.

Moreover, these improvements often contradict one another. Consider two ideas currently on the table for evaluating teaching practice. On one hand, we have lesson study, a highly structured event that requires months of collective effort and careful thought. On the other, we have "walk-throughs," brief visits that can be by one person in under five minutes! These ideas seem to make entirely different assumptions about what is required to understand what is going on inside classrooms, yet both are popular "solutions" right now.

There have always been zealous education reformers, of course. But the number and variety of helpful ideas is now so great that the solutions themselves have become a problem.

One problem with solutions is that they overlook the cleverness of the existing system. They try to fix one piece of the system without realizing how they might actually create a new problem in another part of the system. It is easy to generate new ideas, hard to anticipate their unintended consequences. Take, for instance, pull-out programs. These well-intentioned entitlement programs, introduced in the 1960s, pulled students out of their regular classrooms for special instruction. But the timing of the pullout had to fit the pullout teachers' schedule, so the original teacher had to adjust her instructional schedule to accommodate her students' movements. Moreover, since both the sending and the receiving teachers could be teaching similar content, they need to coordinate their instruction, something that takes up precious planning time. But that is not all: Every time a student is pulled from a regular classroom, and every time a student returns to the regular classroom, the on-going instruction is interrupted. Students are distracted by these comings and goings, and so is the teacher. Lessons lose their continuity and coherence and the general quality of education goes down.

Structural changes such as pull-out programs interfere with everyone's ability to concentrate on intellectual matters. Every change of schedule, from hourly to block scheduling and back to hourly, requires teachers to revise their routines and strategies. Every new policy, from zero tolerance to team teaching, pulls teachers' attention away from their teaching and toward a new logistical problem of how to accommodate this latest innovation. Instead of thinking about how to engage students with curriculum content, teachers must think about how to revise their procedures, schedules, and strategies to accommodate the newest helpful idea.

Remember when we decided teachers should have telephones in their rooms? The idea was to "professionalize" the job. Well, now that teachers have telephones, parents can call up at any time to leave messages for their children. So when children are struggling with the difference between ¼ and ½, or debating the merits of the Bill of Rights, the phone rings. And it is right there, in the middle of the classroom and in the middle of every lesson. I saw a lot of telephones during this study, but saw no answering machines.

The problem is, both teaching and learning require sustained attention. Not only do students need opportunities to think, but so do teachers. More than anything, teachers need time to compose their thoughts and to make sure that, when they approach a new unit or a new lesson, they have a clear idea of what they want to accomplish.

And students are even more vulnerable to distractions. In my conversations with teachers, I found that they care more about maintaining the momentum of the lesson than anything else. The central challenge of teaching is finding enough uninterrupted time to get students minds wrapped around an idea, and keeping it there until the idea makes sense to them. Disruptions do far greater damage than merely taking a few moments of time away; often teachers feel they need to rewind the entire lesson and begin anew after an interruption.

Sustained attention is difficult even in the best of circumstances—children are naturally restless and easily distracted--but well-intentioned helpers often make matters worse by further reducing opportunities for sustained attention. Every time we introduce a new solution for teachers, teachers have to stop thinking about how to wrap their students minds around a concept, and instead turn their attention toward accommodating our helpful innovation—the pull-out program, zero tolerance policy, assembly, formative assessment policy, quarterlies, lesson study, walk-through, block scheduling, team teaching, authentic teaching, reciprocal teaching, or constructivist teaching program; or the new computer lab, grading policy, parent council, grouping policy, school closing, layoff program or press to seek National Board Certification.

Even intentional diversions such as assemblies and field trips are more likely to disrupt learning than to reinforce it, in part because their content does not dovetail precisely with the on-going curriculum and in part because any kind of special event introduces substantial logistical problems. The complicated task of herding a large group of restless

and playful youngsters through a history museum introduces so many organizational challenges that there is little opportunity for students to connect the experience to the history unit they have been studying in school. Even if the ostensible topic is the same—say, the civil war—the likelihood that students will be able to link their museum experience to the particular things they have been studying is small. Anyone who has accompanied a group of students through a museum knows this is the case. At best, students may pick up a few random snippets of information or see a cool old canon. But these snippets are gained at the expense of sustained attention to a coherent curriculum.

Some of these innovations come and go, creating new disruptions with every switch. We switch from hourly scheduling to block scheduling, then abandon block scheduling and return to hourly. When we think about depth of learning, we switch from trimesters to semesters, but then we think about breadth of learning and switch back from semesters to trimesters. Each change requires teachers to revise their entire curricula to accommodate the new schedule. Each causes them to stop thinking about teaching while they think about scheduling.

Other innovations accumulate over time, adding more and more special requirements to teachers' lives. Pull-outs, for instance, have been here for some 40 years now. Assemblies are common practice. Certain holiday rituals become essentially requirements. Every test, every assembly, and every public address announcement is a helpful addition, intended to strengthen education in some way, but that ultimately disrupts instructional continuity. In a study of how time was spent in schools, Smith (2000) found that students experience 35 "special days"—about a fifth of the year—during which they would participate in Halloween parades, science fairs, testing programs, field trips or other non-curricular events. One teacher I met said she couldn't teach reading for about six weeks in late Fall because there were so many other things were required. Physical education classes were required, but not reading. A re-enactment of Thanksgiving was required, but not reading. And so forth. The irony is that all of these additions were required on the assumption that, somewhere in the background, the regular curriculum is still being taught. But each addition, attractive as it might be, does replace something, and very little thought goes into what is being removed when something else is added. The problem is further complicated because reforms and fads have become so commonplace that nowadays every new board member or superintendent feels a need to make a personal mark on his or her district by introducing something new. Innovations themselves have become the rule rather than the exception to the rule.

As these policymakers come and go, teachers are buffeted from one new idea to another. Consequently, routine turnovers among board members and administrators lead to a continuing series of new distractions, further and further reducing teachers' chances of maintaining a stable environment in which to focus on intellectual work.

No wonder, when the new superintendant comes to town, and the new professional development program is brought in, teachers go into their classrooms and quietly shut their doors.

Every American teacher feels some level of reform fatigue. If you think you are part of the solution, check again. You may be part of the problem.

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[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared in Education Week, July 28, 2009.

References

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