

Standards and Expectations

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According to government statistics, the federal government has spent nearly 200 billion dollars since 1965 in an attempt to improve the nation's public schools. Faced with the failure of those reforms to meet the needs of the nation's neediest children, President Bush has proposed the expenditure of another 50 billion dollars to ensure that no child is "left behind".

A government document ⁽¹⁾ describing the *No Child Left Behind* education plan makes it clear that higher standards are seen as a key factor in that effort. In a forward to the document, President Bush states, "*It's time to set high standards for what children should know and be able to do, to give our schools the tools they need to help children reach those high standards, and to demand that they reach them.*" He goes on to talk about "...how we can raise expectations for our children and reach those expectations in classrooms everywhere."

The plan promises to support teachers with high-quality training and an infusion of money. On the surface, this sounds very promising. But it is no longer sufficient to accept high-sounding rhetoric that appeals to our deep concern for children. We must first ask some hard questions. Is there a solid foundation for this approach? Have designers ignored any critical factors?

What Are Standards and Expectations?

In the *No Child Left Behind* document, President Bush is quoted as saying, "*Some say it is unfair to hold disadvantaged children to rigorous standards. I say it is discrimination to require anything else. It is the soft bigotry of low expectations.*" This is a powerful statement. A wealth of research supports the program's claims that children show great progress when their teachers hold high expectations for them. The document continually uses *standards* and *expectations* as if raising standards will automatically raise expectations. Is that the case? Let's take a closer look.

The word *standards* arises from the factory metaphor that is so prevalent in the language of education. In a 1985 article in *Educational Researcher*, D. Sawada and M.T. Caley stated, "*The dominant metaphor for today's education is the Newtonian Machine: The school is a more or less well oiled machine that processes (educates?) children. In this sense, the education system (school) comes complete with production goals (desired end states); objectives (precise intermediate end states); raw material (children); a physical plant (school building); a 13-stage assembly line (grades K-12); directives for each stage (curriculum guides); processes for each stage (instruction); managers for each stage (teachers); plant supervisors (principals) ...uniform criteria for all (standardized testing interpreted on the normal curve); and basic product available in several lines of trim (academic, vocational, business, general).*" ⁽²⁾

Standards are external criteria against which products are evaluated. According to the dictionary, a *standard* is "something established for use as a rule or basis of comparison in measuring quantity, quality, value, etc." In 1995, Diane Ravitch, author of *National Standards in American Education: A Citizens Guide* ⁽³⁾ stated:

"Americans...expect strict standards to govern construction of buildings, bridges, highways, and tunnels; shoddy work would put lives at risk. They expect stringent standards to protect their drinking water, the food they eat, and the air they breathe.... Standards are created because they improve the activity of life." (pp 8-9)

Ravitch asserts that just as such standards improve the daily lives of Americans, so too will they improve the effectiveness of American education: "*Standards can improve achievement by clearly defining what is to be taught and what kind of performance is expected*" (p 25).

Is that a valid assumption? As powerful as these words are, they overlook a very important distinction. The standards to which Ravitch refers refer to inanimate objects—buildings, bridges, drinking water, food, and air. Can one effectively apply the same type of standards to living, breathing, thinking organisms that are *inherently different* and may well resist being shaped into "standard" products? Inanimate materials have little choice about what they will become. Children do!

For a moment, let's stay with this factory metaphor and overlook the obvious problems of describing students as inanimate raw material. If a manufacturer finds that a substantial number of products coming off his assembly line don't meet specifications—standards or tolerances—how might he solve the problem? Certainly one place to look would be the production process itself. But if few problems are found in that area, the next logical place to look would be the quality of work done by the employees.

Does the manufacturer improve the quality of his employees' work by creating more specifications—finer tolerances—for the product? If the employees couldn't even produce to the original standards, how will tightening those standards change their attitudes? Isn't directly addressing the work ethic of the employees a more appropriate approach to improving their attitude and their work?

The *No Child Left Behind* plan purports to address the problem of teachers who hold low expectations for some students. It states, "*Well-crafted and thoughtful standards will explain in plain language what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of each grade.*" It goes on to say that these standards *will ensure the same high expectations* for all students. Let's look at that assumption.

Standards and *expectations* are two very different concepts. The dictionary defines *expectations* as "something a person looks for or anticipates." *Standards* represent *minimum criteria* for a "product" to be acceptable. What a person "expects" may be anything from below minimum standards to well above standard. *It is possible to have extremely high expectations without any standards whatsoever. Conversely, it is possible to have very low expectations—even when the external standards are extremely high.*

Unfortunately, all teachers don't share high expectations for their students. Studies have shown that the expectations of teachers may vary for students in different ability groups (so-called remedial, average, and honors) and different cultural or socioeconomic groups. Worse, some research studies have strengthened those teachers' beliefs, finding that disadvantaged students often demonstrate less progress than their more privileged classmates. But isn't this circular reasoning? Isn't it likely that one reason these students do poorly is those same low expectations?

The *No Child Left Behind* plan apparently assumes that, if all students are held to the same standards, teachers will be forced to work as hard (or harder) with students for whom they hold lower expectations as they do with their "good" students. According to this reasoning, these students will get equal opportunities they didn't previously have. This is, of course, an admirable goal. The plan's developers obviously believe that if a teacher's livelihood depends on how well

his students do on high-stakes tests, he may feel compelled to work more with students he believes to be less capable. While this may occur, *it is not the same thing as raising expectations.*

If you know that every student in your class will be held accountable for an externally generated list of facts and concepts, does that really change what you *believe* about a particular student's ability to learn those facts and concepts? Does it really raise your expectations about that student?

Another metaphor common in the standards movement—raising the bar—provokes a similar question. Before a jumper can clear that bar, she must possess and refine the fundamental skills involved in jumping. The coach assists the jumper in learning and improving those skills. If the coach begins with the belief that the jumper has little natural ability, how does raising the bar change the way the coach views the jumper?

I sincerely question whether there is a simple cause-and-effect relationship between the imposition of standards and a teacher's expectations. Equating *standards* with *expectations* fails to address the fundamental issue—the inappropriate and unfounded beliefs of teachers that create low expectations for some students. The belief that the imposition of rigorous standards will result in higher expectations is a fundamental, but seriously flawed, premise of the entire *No Child Left Behind* program. How then, do we address the issue of expectations?

The Forgotten Factor: The Thinking of Individual Teachers

Expectations arise from an individual teacher's beliefs and values—internal processes that are typically ignored by reformers. It's relatively simple to impose a set of standards on students in an attempt to “force” teachers to prepare them for the assessments on those standards. It's much more challenging to create a program that encourages individual teachers to examine the beliefs and values that result in low expectations and to accept the responsibility for the influence they have over the learning of our young people.

The *No Child Left Behind* program recognizes the primary role of teachers in the effective education of children. It promises those teachers “*access to high-quality training in order to help ...students meet and exceed the new tougher standards.*” However, in looking at examples of such high-quality training, it appears to focus mainly on subject matter and/or pedagogy—“*programs that work.*”

There's no doubt that a teacher's knowledge of subject matter, of theories of learning and effective pedagogy is important. Yet most of us are familiar with people who are experts in their field, but have little ability to “teach” that field—to help others share their understanding. Clearly, a teacher's knowledge of the subject—or even of the statistically most “effective” ways of teaching that subject—is not sufficient to create a quality teacher.

The foundation on which individual teachers base their practice can't be found in a few pages of notes from a weekend workshop. Until reformers, educators, and politicians recognize how teachers' beliefs limit or enable their behavior; how their beliefs and values create their expectations; and how the metaphors in which they describe their work can shape the environment of a classroom, their solutions to the present problems remain incomplete. Until programs are developed that actively encourage teachers to honestly reflect on why they make the choices they do, many children will not receive the education they need and deserve.

Most reform efforts in this country, including *No Child Left Behind*, focus primarily on the identification, packaging, transmission, and assessment of knowledge. *But teachers are not*

assembly line workers 'turning out' standardized products. They are human beings who make hundreds of decisions a day. Those decisions profoundly influence the educational experience and learning of their students. *The thinking processes that underlie those decisions are what separate effective teachers from those who are not.*

Teachers are the ones who make or break reform efforts. They actively support ideas that are consistent with their fundamental worldview and unconsciously undermine any efforts that aren't. Worse, most teachers remain unaware of the beliefs and values that drive their behavior. Reflective teachers are the key to meaningful changes in education.

The Challenge of Accountability

One other factor contributes to the failure of government-sponsored reform to accept the challenge of individual differences among children and the powerful influence of individual teachers. That factor is accountability.

Administration of a program that relies on hard data to demonstrate its effectiveness is easy. Administration of a program that works to achieve the greatest positive change in both students and teachers is extremely challenging. It will not result in the kinds of numbers that politicians want to decide whether a school is doing its job. That doesn't mean there is no accountability. But it must be measured in the progress of individual students over time rather than the standardized results of generic tests with groups of students.

Here is one sad example of how an obsession with standardized test scores reduces the effectiveness of a school. A story in *Teacher Magazine* ⁽⁴⁾ told of a Chicago inner-city school principal who was fired because his students had not scored sufficiently high on year-end mandated tests. The school board refused to consider that *almost every child in that school exhibited two years of improvement during one school year.* The principal who, with his teachers, inspired that improvement is now gone, another victim of a value system that places test scores above individual students and standards above expectations.

Fifty billion dollars is a tempting offer to teachers who are accustomed to getting by on a shoestring. But unless that money is spent, at least in part, on helping those teachers understand how profoundly their unconscious thinking influences their behavior and their students, it is unlikely to produce better results than the \$260 billion that preceded it. If programs such as *No Child Left Behind* fail to delve more deeply into the cause of low expectations—into the beliefs of individual teachers about students, teaching, learning, and knowledge—we will continue to see children who are “left behind.”

For a more extensive discussion of standards, expectations, and essential knowledge, see Chapter 12 in *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*.

References

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