

“I Used to Think . . . and Now I Think . . .”

Reflections on the work of school reform

By RICHARD F. ELMORE

At the end of a course or a professional development session, I frequently ask the learners I work with to reflect on how their thinking has changed as a consequence of our work together. This reflection takes the form of a simple two-column exercise. In one column, I ask them to complete the phrase, “I used to think . . .,” and in the other, “And now I think . . .” People often find this a useful way to summarize how our work together has changed their thinking and their habits of mind, and how we have influenced each other.

.. Recently, at a seminar on the future of school reform, I asked my colleagues—a group of people who have long been active in various strands of school reform—whether they would be interested in doing this exercise as part of our work together. My suggestion was greeted with nearly universal rejection. The possibility that one’s work might have changed one’s mind over a long period of time seemed just a bit over the edge for that group.

So I decided that I would take the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Harvard Education Letter* to try this exercise myself. I have been working in and around the broad area of school reform for nearly 40 years. This period has been the most active time of flux in the history of education in this country. How has my thinking changed?

1. I used to think that policy was the solution. And now I think that policy is the problem. I am a child of the 1960s—the New Frontier, the Great Society, the civil rights struggles, and the reframing of the role of the federal government in the education sector. I began my career working as a legislative affairs specialist at the cabinet level in a federal agency. I am the product of a public policy program. I taught for 11 years at a public policy school. And I have chaired the Consortium of Policy Research in Education, an association of universities engaged in research on state and local education policy.

Now I have to work hard not to show my active discomfort when graduate students come to me and say, as they often do, “I have worked in schools for a few years, and now I am ready to start to shape policy.” Every fiber of my being wants to say, “Use your time in graduate school to become a better practitioner and get back into schools as quickly as possible. You will have a much more profound effect on the education sector working in schools than you will ever have as a policy actor.”

What caused this shift? Every day, as I work with teachers and administrators in schools, I see the effects of a policy system that has run amok. There is no political discipline among elected officials and their advisers. To policy makers, every idea about what schools should be doing is as credible as every other idea, and any new idea that can command a political constituency can be used as an excuse for telling schools to do something. Elected officials—legislators, governors, mayors, school board members—generate electoral credit by initiating new ideas, not by making the kind of steady investments in people that are required to make the educator sector more effective. The result is an education sector that is overwhelmed with policy, conditioned to respond to the immediate demands of whoever controls the political agenda, and not invested in the long-term health of the sector and the people who work in it.

This condition seems to be a result of our particularly American form of political pluralism. It is not—I repeat *not*—the case in the other industrialized democracies in which I work, Canada and Australia. My own diagnosis is that this condition is a consequence of an extremely weak professional culture in American schools. Policy makers do not have to respect the expertise of educators, because there are no political consequences attached to that lack of respect.

For the future, I am putting my energy into building a stronger profession, not into trying to repair a desperately dysfunctional political system. For example, I am trying to build a practice that educators can use to observe instruction, in order to develop and strengthen the professional culture of schools. My work is increasingly focused on direct engagement with practitioners, rather than trying to “fix” schools with policy.

2. I used to think that people’s beliefs determined their practices. And now I think that people’s practices determine their beliefs. As a child of the 1960s, I believed in the power of ideas to shape people’s behavior. I believed, for example, as many in my generation did, that the problems of failing schools originated in the failure of educators to “believe” that all children were capable of learning or—to choose a more contemporary framing of the issue—that changing teachers’ attitudes about what children can learn would result in changing their practices in ways that would increase student learning.

The accumulated evidence, I regret to say, does not support this view. People's espoused beliefs—about race, and about how children learn, for example—are not very influential in determining how most people actually behave. The largest determinant of how people practice is how they have practiced in the past, and people demonstrate an amazingly resilient capacity to relabel their existing practices with whatever ideas are currently in vogue.

As practitioners, we are notoriously poor observers of our own practice and therefore not very good at judging the correspondence between our beliefs and our behavior. I know this about my own practice—as a teacher and as a consultant—which is why I rarely, if ever, practice solo any more.

Resilient, powerful new beliefs—the kinds of beliefs that transform the way we think about how children are treated in schools, for example—are shaped by people engaging in behaviors or practices that are deeply unfamiliar to them and that test the outer limits of their knowledge, their confidence in themselves as practitioners, and their competencies. For example, presenting students with learning challenges that adults think are “too hard” for their students often reveals to the adults that the problem lies less in children's abilities than it does in their own command of content and pedagogy. In many instances, our greatest successes in school improvement stem from scaffolding the adults' content knowledge and pedagogy up to the level of what we know students can handle. In these cases, adult beliefs about what children can learn are changed by watching students do things that the adults didn't believe that they—the students—could do.

You don't really know what your espoused beliefs mean until you experience them in practice. The more powerful the beliefs, the more difficult and seemingly unfamiliar the practices. I now care much less about what people say they believe, and much more about what I observe them to be doing and their willingness to engage in practices that are deeply unfamiliar to them.

3. *I used to think that public institutions embodied the collective values of society. And now I think that they embody the interests of the people who work in them.* I blanch visibly when I hear educators say, “We're in it for the kids.” This phrase is a monument to self-deception, and, if I could, I would eradicate it from the professional discourse of educators. Public schools, and the institutions that surround them, surely rank among the most self-interested institutions in American society. Local boards function as platforms and training beds for aspiring politicians. Superintendents jockey for their next job while they're barely ensconced in their current one. Unions defend personnel practices that work in a calculated and intentional way against the interests of children in classrooms. School administrators and teachers engage in practices that deliberately exclude students from access to learning in order to make their work more manageable and make their schools look good. All of these behaviors are engaged in by people who routinely say, “We're in it for the kids.” The explanation for these behaviors is not that the individuals are unusually immoral, corrupt, or venal; the explanation is that they are people acting according to their interests.

For 20 years, in my class on politics and public policy, I have tried to convince my students that the first step in acting consistently with what they believe to be “the public interest” is to disabuse themselves of the view that they, and the institutions they inhabit, somehow automatically represent interests broader than their own. In short, you have to know your own interests before you can pretend to represent someone else's interests, and then you have to respect the fact that their interests are not yours. To say that the adults in public institutions “represent” the interests of their clients—children and families—is self-deceptive and irresponsible. To say that you are aware of your own interests, and that you are respectful enough of the divergent interests of your clients to listen to them and respond to them as actual people, rather than as constructs of your own view of what's good for them, is to deal honestly and responsibly with your own role. The great leaders of social transformation—Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela—led by providing an opportunity for people to bring their voices and actions to a common endeavor—not by confusing their own interests with those of the people they hoped to help.

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These reflections remind me of what the poet Yeats said about himself as he approached old age. He increasingly saw the world, he said, with “a cold eye and a hot heart.” In many ways, I am still the 16-year-old who watched the inauguration of John F. Kennedy on a fuzzy black-and-white TV screen in the bitter cold of a bleak small town in central Washington state and saw a powerful new direction for my life. In other ways, I see the work with a colder eye.

This article has become the basis for a Harvard Education Press book, [*I Used to Think... And Now I Think...: Twenty Leading Educators Reflect on the Work of School Reform*](#) (Harvard Education Press, 2011)

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