

What Can A Teacher Do? Two Myths of Responsibility

Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.

—Cyril Northcote Parkinson

Parkinson's famous "Law"—a summarization of his observations on how British government employees functioned—may just underlie the incessant demands of educational "reformers" that teachers and schools do more and more.

Parkinson explains his thoughts:

General recognition of this fact is shown in the proverbial phrase 'It is the busiest man who has time to spare.' Thus, an elderly lady of leisure can spend the entire day in writing and dispatching a postcard to her niece at Bognor Regis. An hour will be spent finding the postcard, another in hunting for spectacles, half an hour in a search for the address, an hour and a quarter in composition, and twenty minutes in deciding whether or not to take an umbrella when going to the pillar box in the next street. The total effort that would occupy a busy man for three minutes all told may in this fashion leave another person prostrate after a day of doubt, anxiety, and toil. (<http://www.heretical.co.uk/miscella/parkinsl.html>)

This "law" does not seem appropriate to teachers. None of them think that they have too little to do, and therefore must work at looking

busy. Rather it is a similar and clearly false conception that sees our public school classrooms as akin to fast-food marts. *The Practical Myth of Infinitely Expandable Teacher Time*, coupled with *The Practical Myth of the Educator Soloist*, supports much, indeed most, of the attempts to make public school teachers accept more and more responsibility for a child's education and, alone, be held responsible for the outcomes.

By the terms "practical myth," I mean to indicate false beliefs underlying practices proposed or taken. The nature of these practical myths is that when they are put into so many words they are easily recognizable as false. Let's consider the first practical myth: Teacher Time Is Infinitely Expandable.

The Practical Myth of Infinitely Expandable Time

Let us, for the purposes of discussion, divide a teacher's daily activities into three (mutually exclusive) categories: Instruction, Organization, and Socialization.

Instruction covers such matters as presenting material, listening to students' recitations, and demonstrating a point: in general, engaging directly with students.

Organization activities include administration and preparation: collecting book slips, putting in grades, writing up pre-class work on the board—i.e., dealing with information needs of the school organization or "setting the scene" for instructional activities.

Socialization includes not only what people would recognize as "discipline"—scolding, remonstrating, correcting—but also acculturating students into the norms the school organization (purportedly) requires to effect mass education: standing in line, waiting one's turn, getting per-

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mission to go to the bathroom, or bringing in notes for absence.

Figure 1 demonstrates how these groups of teacher activities importantly interrelate.

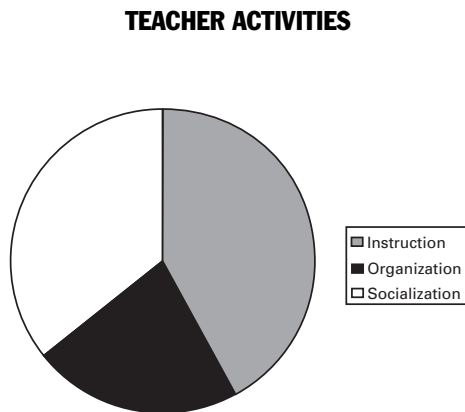


Figure 1

An obvious point often overlooked by many a would-be educational reformer: if one segment expands, one or both of the others must contract. One needs no Ph.D. in physics to see that expansion beyond 100 percent of total time is not possible.

The history of American schooling is a history of packing the curriculum with “more.” A seemingly endless list of “enhancements” has been proposed: “values education”; “multicultural education”; “abstinence education.” Such phrases are meant to address often-ephemeral concerns of vocal segments of the public. But ask any classroom teacher how many minutes a year he or she devotes to the latest fad and how deeply it can be explored.

Politically popular statewide testing programs, from the teacher’s perspective an organizational activity, inevitably reduce instructional time, because socialization needs do not shrink when such standardized testing are administered. Indeed, one might expect greater demands for socialization activities to develop—exerting, consequently, additional pressure for reduction of instructional activities.

Activity Interactions

Another point to be considered is this: experienced teachers know that activities in one segment can affect those in others. Good organization can enhance both instruction and socialization. However, teacher efficiency is achieved

through intelligent action, not by some magic that expands the time allotted. And organizational disruption can affect other activity segments negatively. Loudspeaker interruptions, for example, may distract from the lesson at hand. Added testing preparations expand the organizational segment of teacher activities without necessarily enhancing instruction or socialization.

We can expect a pie chart of teacher activities to vary depending upon the grade level, the teacher’s methods, the level of preparation of the students when they begin the semester, and their speed of development as they progress.

The more socially adapted a class is, on the average, to the organizational demands of its school, the less time required for this aspect. The teacher can focus instead on instruction. If we reformulate our pie chart into a stacked bar chart and plot it against a factor that I will call here “student socialization level,” we note another obvious fact.

TEACHER ACTIVITY VERSUS STUDENT SOCIALIZATION LEVEL



Figure 2

Classroom changes that affect the average level of student socialization will affect instructional activity. (In Figure 2, organizational activity is held constant.) Adding students who lower the average level of socialization in the class is likely to affect the instructional level. For example, indiscriminately prescribing inclusion for students with disabilities, ignoring whether this disability affects their level of socialization, hardly promotes fairness of educational opportunity.

Another truism: discipline problems impact instruction negatively. It would not be necessary to say the obvious were it not that administrators routinely tell teachers that they are the “first line” in dealing with discipline problems. For political (and nowadays legal) reasons, administrators dare not remove miscreants from the

classroom with the frequency their misbehavior might dictate: it is the teachers who must learn “classroom management.”

This is an abdication of responsibility. Organizationally, such a cop-out may be administratively necessary—even demanded by benighted board members. However, kids, particularly, recognize that administrators undermine their moral legitimacy when they shrink from enforcing the rules. It is reasonable to expect experienced teachers to deal with a lower level of misbehavior, much of which can be dealt with preemptively through appropriate organization and socialization activity. But in many schools seriously disruptive behavior is not addressed because administrators fear confrontation—either with the students, their parents, and the community; or with their own superiors, who themselves lack the spine or the interest to intervene for the sake of mere learning.

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The courts exacerbate the problem. Many judges act as if merely entering a schoolroom conferred a benefit upon a child, like the common cattle dip that at least kills ticks! So it is that the courts assign children to schools irrespective of whether their presence interferes with appropriate instructional activities. Educators become co-conspirators in this stupidity by holding their tongues lest they bring uncomfortable scrutiny upon themselves. Educators become co-conspirators in this stupidity by holding their tongues lest they bring uncomfortable scrutiny upon themselves. The guilty secret of teachers everywhere—and that of all highly specialized professionals—is that they take their own need for employment, or the pursuit of their own personal intellectual interests, as sufficient justification for disregarding the need to keep their students engaged. (Read “well-educated,” “job skills,” “citizenship education,” “character building,” “being well-rounded,” or “preparation for life” as hyperbole—i.e., curriculum theory—camouflaging this basic fact.)

At this point politicians are provoked into imposing the Standard Test Panacea—measuring “bang for the buck”—more likely, “pop for the

penny.” The perceived discrepancies in test results raise cries of Discrimination, which stimulate further Court Action, and the Cycle of Idiocy continues.

The Practical Myth of the Educator Soloist

The critics of the Great Drama of American Education see themselves as audience, rather than as participants, in the play. Theirs is the right to criticize. This is an audience that has spent many more hours before a TV than in a classroom—often its only qualification. It is an audience that would not imagine it has the know-how to produce a TV show, yet shows no reluctance in telling educators how to run the schools.

Students, like parents and Public Opinionators, generally see only what is “on stage”—in the classroom, halls, playground, and auditorium—rarely counting themselves among the actors. They know or care little about the necessities of “backstage” direction, or “offstage” production. But how dimwitted must a student be not to notice the following mixed messages?

- Shortening classes for state testing although untaught items are on the tests
- Interrupting instructional activities to sell school play, prom, or basketball tickets
- Preaching curriculum on good diet in a school where waxen “chocolate bars” are sold to promote “spirit”
- Hiring demanding and insistent sports coaches, contrasted with academic teachers who cajole, inveigle, and plead, yet reward nonperformance anyway

Student perceptions—and their consequent effect on motivation—are normally given little consideration by the “movers and shakers,” whose investment in the schooling enterprise is obliquely related (if at all) to student learning. Parent perceptions are likewise discounted. But it doesn’t matter, since the only serious expectations are directed at teachers.

School as Theatrical Production

The metaphor of a theatrical production is a good one to demonstrate the interlocking responsibilities of the many constituencies that influence student learning outcomes. Our first dimension, *Location*, divides into three parts:

1. “onstage”—in and around classroom or student-involved activities (playing field, lunchroom, and auditorium, as well as classroom)

2. “backstage”—anywhere classroom-support activities take place (teacher’s room, principal’s or counselor’s office, main office, school custodian’s office, etc.)
3. “offstage”—anywhere general school-support activities take place (board meetings, central administration, parent organizations, etc.)

We then ask of the *actors*—not just teachers—what we can reasonably expect them to contribute in each of these locations. We might get a table that looks like this:

The table illustrates what Rebecca Barr and Robert Dreeben presented years ago in *How Schools Work* (U. of Chicago Press, 1983): although teachers may be among the very few who can *positively* influence student achievement, many others can interfere with it. Onstage teachers are not soloists; with students they form a duet or more. And there are “hidden members” of the group who perform their roles best by securing non-interference, providing a buffer against pointless disruptions to the learning process.

Table 1

ACTOR	LOCATION		
	Onstage	Backstage	Offstage
Teacher	Act fairly, model good department, skill, engage, instruct, direct, review...	Prepare for class, organize materials...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Student	Pay attention, ask questions, be considerate of others...	Use library, study hall, get to class on time...	Do homework, get enough sleep, eat well...
Administrator	Minimize classroom interruptions, remove disruptive students...	Keep regular schedules, minimize “surprises,” obtain supplies...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Other staff	Support other teachers...	Avoid giving special privileges to students	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Parent	Avoid asking for special privileges, avoid public confrontation with other adults...	Avoid asking for special privileges, encourage student participation...	Participate in home and school activities, vote against “meddlers,”...
Board member	Don’t interrupt classes...	Don’t interrupt classes...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Political group	Don’t interrupt classes...	Don’t interrupt classes...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Legislator	Don’t interrupt classes...	Don’t interrupt classes...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...
Governor	Don’t interrupt classes...	Don’t interrupt classes...	Engage in professional activities that support student achievement...