

JSD

In search of heroes: Give educators a place on the pedestal

Interview with Roland Barth

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JSD: Some reformers believe accountability and competition are required to improve schools because teachers and principals lack the desire or skills to make things better.

In contrast, you have consistently emphasized over the years the value of spreading teachers' and principals' craft knowledge. In *Learning by Heart* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), you wrote: "When we value craft knowledge, we develop a school culture hospitable to learning. A central part of the work of the school-based reformer is to find ways to honor, reveal, exchange, and celebrate the craft knowledge that resides in every schoolhouse." Critics would argue that such craft knowledge isn't present in some schools, particularly those that require the most assistance because they are the most challenged by poverty and changing demographics.

Barth: I believe craft knowledge is present in different amounts in different schools, but I've never been in a school where if you asked the right question or pushed the right button that it wouldn't be forthcoming. The problem is that there is a taboo in the culture of many schools against disclosing craft

knowledge. Many teachers are unwilling to distinguish themselves from other teachers. So a teacher who stands up in a faculty meeting to share a new way of doing something may be met with silence or even condemnation.

Another problem is that schools place teachers and principals in the cruel position of being competitors for scarce resources and recognition. In a family where there's not enough bread on the table, individuals tend to hoard and compete. The same is true in schools. So on both the giving and receiving sides of this issue, there's lots of work to be done.

From the outside in?

JSD: Critics of your view say there's a professional body of knowledge that many teachers for various reasons do not possess, and it's the job of outsiders to infuse the school with that knowledge and skill. And I suppose they might also say it's the job of teachers and principals to accept it gracefully.

Barth: There are, of course, valid concerns about the quality of public education coming from the worlds of business, academia, and government. Those of us who work in and around schools do have a lot of work to do. To be sure, it is the responsibility of teachers and principals to attend to that body of knowledge and to incorporate it into what they do. But the more important accountability is to oneself and to the profession.

I don't think it's the job of others to instruct school people. In many ways, that's futile. People in our profession, like those in other professions, are gifted and talented at subverting attempts to "staff develop" them. Just as their students do, they recoil at the toxic message so prevalent at all levels of our profession: Learn or we will hurt you. Real learning and accountability will not come from others inflicting their knowledge on teachers but from conditions created in schools that cause teachers to hunger after greater knowledge. That's when the learning curves go off the chart.

Trust us as professionals

JSD: Here's what you wrote regarding the assumptions of some school reformers: "Behind the models, the rubrics, the principles, the analyses of the problems, and the prescriptions for improving them was a very chilling assumption: Schools are not capable of improving themselves. ... Sadly, our profession seems neither to trust nor to rely on the accumulated wisdom of its own practitioners."

Barth: Educators read about the heroes and heroines in other fields — the business heroes, the military heroes, the sports heroes — but where are the Katherine Grahams, the Colin Powells, the Lance Armstrongs in our field? They're out there, but we don't have access to the exemplars in our field, and we don't accord them the same place on the pedestal. Our profession enjoys neither the visibility nor the legitimacy of others. But if we want others to take us seriously, it's time we begin to take seriously our heroes, ourselves, and the important work we do.

Becoming a reformer

JSD: "Our profession desperately needs school-based reformers," you wrote in *Learning by Heart*. "A school-based reformer is an educator who works in the school and is seldom heard to say, 'They'll never let us,' and seldom asks, 'What am I supposed to do?'" The sense of empowerment you describe on the part of teachers and principals seems to be in short supply these days.

Barth: Policy makers and folks in state departments of education and central offices have developed

ever more stringent measures to punish noncompliance with their mandates. I see three ways educators are responding. One is to do whatever is necessary to prevent the negative consequences. They submit, comply.

A second response is to become a revolutionary. "This game is nuts, and I won't play it," some teachers and principals say. It's hard, and they often pay for it. Despite the fact that compelling research literature suggests that the best school leaders, for instance, are mavericks who march to their own drummers, most mavericks end up totally wasted or fired.

A third response is to keep what might be thought of as two sets of books. With the first set of books, educators comply with mandates they can accept or even agree with, enough to keep superordinates off their backs. They then earn the right to keep another set of books that focuses on doing things in which they really believe. Events of the past few years allow less and less room for that second set of books, so more and more school time and energy is going into compliance. This doesn't bother me if what school people are being asked to comply with is rational and sensible. An obsession with standardized testing, a preoccupation with external measures of accountability, and the emergence of impossible job descriptions are neither rational nor sensible.

Sublime conversation

JSD: Let's turn to a different subject, although it's closely linked to the sharing of craft knowledge. In *Learning by Heart*, you emphasize the importance of conversation in schools. "Conversations have the capacity to promote reflection, to create and exchange craft knowledge, and to help improve the organization," you wrote. "Schools, I'm afraid, deal more in meetings — in talking at and being talked at — than in conversation." What are the characteristics and content of such conversations, and how are they created and sustained in schools?

Barth: I agree with Goethe, who said, "Conversations are the most sublime of experiences." By conversations I mean a dialogue characterized by mutual respect, time to really talk and reflect, active and nonjudgmental listening, the development of shared meaning. But the work of people in schools doesn't lend itself to such conversations. I've likened the experience of an educator in a school to that of a tennis shoe in a laundry dryer. It is difficult to have contemplative conversations in a laundry dryer. But many schools have found ways to create cultures that enable educators to get out of their laundry dryers, at least periodically, so they can reflect on what's going on. A school that's hospitable to conversation has to slow down a bit.

Leaders as fenders

JSD: What can leaders do to slow things down for the purpose of conversation among the adults in schools?

Barth: Principals can serve as boat fenders between the pitching boat and the dock, insulating teachers from the demands that are coming at the school. That's a tough job, though. What leaders can do is help create a culture that places as high a value on our relationships with one another and what we can learn from one another as it does on getting youngsters to high performance. The two, of course, are related.

Don't talk, converse

JSD: What's the difference between the typical talk that occurs among adults in schools and what you

mean by conversation?

Barth: One precondition for a good conversation, of course, is having something to say. But a big part of conversation is listening, and I don't think we have very sophisticated listening skills in schools. When someone talks, we are too often waiting for him or her to run out of gas so that we can jump in and get our airtime. It's important that we be respectful of what each individual has to say.

I don't know too many principals and superintendents who are good listeners. They want others to listen to them, of course. Conversation is much more equitable and satisfying when people talk and listen in roughly equal amounts and there is little posturing regarding who is the superordinate and who is the subordinate.

Self-development is essential

JSD: In an interview I did with Robert Quinn for the last issue of the JSD, he used the term "slow death" to describe what can happen to people in organizations. In *Learning by Heart*, you wrote about something quite similar. "A major reason so many students are at risk as learners in our schools," you wrote, "is that they are surrounded by so many at-risk educators Tragically, schools are all too full of 'corpses' who faithfully, persistently, heroically each day place oxygen masks on youngsters' faces, while they themselves are anoxic."

Barth: A lot of people think schools should focus exclusively on the learning of youngsters and everything else is to be subordinate to that purpose. I think of something said by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an early 20th-century feminist, who observed, "Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice." Schools operate as if there's no higher duty than self-sacrifice. The cost to the adults of giving, giving, giving over time turns many educators into corpses. So the issue is, who will care for the caregivers? My view is that schools are there to promote the learning of all their inhabitants, whether they are called students, teachers, parents, or principals. A school must offer a culture that replenishes, as well as depletes, adults.

Nurture relationships

JSD: That provides a segue to your view that most relationships among adults within schools tend to be "independent and isolated, or adversarial and competitive." You also note "... the primitive quality of the relationships among teachers" and observe that "many teachers seem to lack the personal, interpersonal, and group skills essential to the successful exercise of leadership and to working together." At another place in *Learning by Heart*, you say, "The relationship among the adults in the schoolhouse has more impact on the quality and the character of the school — and on the accomplishment of youngsters — than any other factor. . . . Among adult relationships in schools, that between teacher and principal is decisive. I have found no characteristic of a good school more pervasive than healthy teacher-principal relationships. . . ." What are the qualities of such relationships and what can be done to create and nurture them?

Barth: It's important that both teachers and principals nurture these relationships. It's a reciprocal responsibility. Unfortunately, given their charge to monitor teachers' compliance with mandates, principals are more and more being placed in the role of adversaries to teachers.

When I was a teacher, and I suspect it is true for other teachers as well, I knew I wasn't able to do all the things I was supposed to be doing, let alone do them all well. As a result, when a principal or

superintendent walks in a classroom almost every teacher feels, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to be discovered as a fraud." No wonder teachers close their doors and cover the windows with artwork.

All of this wreaks havoc with relationships between principals and teachers. It's getting harder and harder to maintain a respectful, collegial relationship because principals are often caught between supporting teachers and acting as agents for those who are laying expectations on the teachers. That's a job that fewer and fewer educators are able to do or want to take on.

As a principal, I tried to change the first person pronoun I used from "I" to "we." When principals distribute leadership to many others within schools, then it becomes "we" who have a problem and "we" who are working on a solution. Teacher leadership is not only a huge part of the solution of relationship problems between principals and teachers, it's a huge part of the solution to the problem of improving public schools.

Perk up your passion

JSD: "Perhaps the most powerful asset of the school-based reformer is moral outrage," you wrote in *Learning by Heart*. Of principals, you wrote, "An influential principal has the courage to stand alone. She has a commitment, above all else, to doing what is best for children despite the dictates of others. She challenges assumptions and traditions and helps others do so as well. ... It's time for a new conception of the school principal, one based on a skilled, passionate, moral commitment to students' and teachers' learning — and to the leader's own learning." What are the sources of this commitment and how can it be nurtured and extended among more educators?

Barth: Schools that really transform themselves all seem to have two key elements. First, they have a vision of a better way, a preferable future that the stakeholders had a part in crafting and to which they are committed. Second, these schools are full of moral outrage. Educators are saying, "It's not right for so many African-American kids to be in the bottom ability group." "It's not right for a high school English teacher to be expected to correct 150 compositions every week." When you get this level of passion, this level of outrage, things start to move. I don't experience as much moral outrage as I'd like to see in schools. School cultures tend to grind us all down. We have to keep asking ourselves, "Is my job to help others accept the unacceptable? Or is it to change the unacceptable?" My own feeling is that it's to change the unacceptable, and that requires both a vision of a better way and abundant moral outrage.

We construct and run our schools for other people's children. One way of promoting moral outrage is to ask whether we would want our own children to have this experience — be subjected to this curriculum, be required to take these tests, or be assigned to this teacher. When you personalize it this way, lots of teachers would say, "Heck no! I wouldn't accept that for a minute!" Being responsible for crafting schools that we would want for our own children is a form of accountability of which I am very respectful.

Save yourself, save lives

JSD: Here's an expression, Roland, of your own moral outrage contained in the pages of your book. You wrote, "I wonder how many children's lives might be saved if we educators disclose what we know to each other." That's a powerful statement.

Barth: I had just read a study conducted at Dartmouth medical school in which surgeons observed one

another in the operating room to get better at what they do. The study found that 74 patients of those doctors who were expected to die did not die. The only intervening variable was the presence of their colleagues in the operating room. As one teacher said to me, "We live in our separate caves." The primitive nature of the relationships between teachers and between teachers and principals that we've talked about makes the classroom a sanctuary to which teachers retreat to find some measure of sanity. The cost of this is borne by children whose teachers are deprived of the rich interdependent resources of the entire faculty. My view is that everyone's job in schools is to interact with and promote the learning of everyone else — both adults and youngsters.

Create the future

JSD: "If you want to predict the future, create it!" you quoted Peter Drucker as saying in *Learning by Heart*. "This is precisely what school people now have the opportunity — and the imperative — to do," you went on to say. Many educational leaders, as you know, are resigned to the status quo and feel that they have little influence on what happens today, let alone in the future.

Barth: It's important to acknowledge the conflicting messages directed at the schoolhouse these days. One message says schools need to restructure: Let's stop tinkering, the message goes, we need systemic reform to really change things. Next September we have to do things significantly differently than we have in the past.

The other message insists that educators do more of the same for 220 days a year instead of 190, covering the same subject matter, testing every year instead of every four years. One definition of insanity, of course, is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

What are educators to do with these conflicting messages that are coming down on the schoolhouse? When I, as a teacher or principal, experienced inconsistent or conflicting demands from the superintendent or school board, I took that as an invitation to do what I thought was best. I wish more teachers and principals would view this confusion as an opportunity to figure out what they really believe in and to do it.

Examine life choices

JSD: Robert Fritz, who has written a number of books on management, asks leaders to clarify their fundamental choices, which are their basic orientations toward life from which their goals and strategies will flow. I'm curious about the fundamental choices you've made that cause you to continue to heavily invest yourself in writing and speaking.

Barth: We all have competing demands and possibilities in our lives. I'm about to turn 65, and more and more I've been asking myself the questions: How much is enough? How much contribution to society is enough? How much time in public schools is enough? How much writing is enough? How much sailing? How much gardening?

Writing *Learning by Heart* was very helpful to me in this regard. I decided I was going to download everything from my lifetime of experience, everything I wanted to say about schools, as a concluding statement in what will probably be the last book I write. I challenged myself to put out there everything about which I feel deeply and strongly.

I once worked in the admissions office at the Harvard Graduate School of Education interviewing people who wanted to come into the MAT program. Of course, I asked applicants why they wanted to

become teachers. About half of these folks said their K-12 education had been so wonderful that they wanted to make sure others had one equally as good. The other half said that their education was such a waste of time and so dreadful that they wanted to make sure that no other kids had it so bad. Paradoxically, our own bad schools seem to cause many good people to choose careers in education.

It is reported that when young Abe Lincoln first came to Washington as a freshman Congressman he was asked to fill out a government form. Under "education" he wrote "defective." My own experience in school was defective. It left a lot of scars. I am still repelled and propelled by those early experiences.

My years as a teacher and principal also had a profound and lasting impact on me. To live and work in a school is a life-altering event. Those experiences are still very much embedded in my soul. I can summon up moral outrage or hope just by allowing my mind to go back into those classrooms and corridors.

So my different lives in different schools continue to energize me as a writer and educator. I'll probably continue to keep my feet immersed in the muddy waters of public education for some time to come.

Bio of ROLAND S. BARTH

Position: A consultant to schools, school systems, state departments of education, universities, foundations, and businesses in the United States and abroad. Barth's interests include school leadership, school improvement from within, and the personal and professional development of educators. Central to his thinking is the concept of the school as a community of learners and leaders.

Education: Bachelor's degree in psychology from Princeton University, and master's and doctoral degrees in education from Harvard University.

Publications: Barth has written numerous articles and five books:

- Learning by Heart (Jossey-Bass, 2001).
- Cruising Rules (Head Tide Press, 1998).
- Improving Schools From Within (Jossey-Bass, 1990).
- Run School Run (Harvard University Press, 1980).
- Open Education and the American School (Schocken Books, 1972).

Professional history: Barth began his career as a public school teacher and principal for 15 years in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and California. He was a member of the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for 13 years, including positions as director of the Study on the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Schools. He was the founding director of the Harvard Principals' Center and the International Network of Principals' Centers, and senior lecturer on education at Harvard. He also served as an academic visitor at Oxford University, and was a member of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration.

Honors and awards: Barth received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1976 and later, an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Lewis and Clark College. He served as a trustee of Hurricane Island Outward

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Bound School and a member of the boards of Micro-Society Inc. and Partners in Education Inc. He is currently chairman of the board of the Aspiring Principals' Program, run by Dennis Litky in Providence, R.I., with centers in Boston and New York, and is a member of the board of Editorial Advisors of the Phi Delta Kappan.

Personal: He is the father of two accomplished daughters, Joanna and Carolyn, an avid sailor in Maine and Florida salt waters, and a dedicated farmer. He and his wife, Barbara, live in Maine, Florida, and Boston.