

EDUCATORS, YOU SAY YOU'RE TIRED? WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!

Joel C. Hall

One of the primary reasons for frustration and fatigue among educators is the perceived misalignment between policies and practices that stem from differing perspectives on the meaning of key words (Hall, 2014). Words are the instruments used to define a problem, and the medium that allow stakeholders to conceptualize and implement solutions. Until educational stakeholders can agree on how key words are to be defined, it is fallacious to think that productive dialogue can occur or that appropriate measures of success can be instituted. Once problematic words are identified, educational stakeholders are in a better position to articulate their ideas, eliminate confusion, and move toward collegial solutions that are energizing, instead of draining. As indications of how communication is hampered by the different meanings people attach to words and how far-reaching the effects of these differences become, I examine three words foundational to public education in Canada: *educate*, *teach*, and *accountability*.

What Does it Mean to Educate?

According to Merriam-Webster's (n.d.) online dictionary, *educate* comes from *educe*, which means "to bring out (as something latent)." Award winning teacher, John Gatto (2005) agreed. He proposed that education makes a person become a unique individual, not a conformist—anything else is merely schooling. What Gatto described as schooling was similar to a second definition of *educate*: "to teach (someone) especially in a school; to give (someone) information about something; to train (someone) to do something; to persuade or condition to feel, believe, or act in a desired way" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A person may have a completely different perspective on education, depending on which of these aforementioned definitions a person attributes to *educate*.

If an educator holds the belief that education fundamentally means *to bring out something that is latent*, he or she may be confused and frustrated by objective-based curricula, pre-determined outcomes, core competencies, and standardized achievement tests. In contrast, for someone who believes that education means *to train someone to act in a desired way*, these common practices make perfect sense. With the above examples, imagine the first person is a classroom teacher, and the second person is a ministerial policymaker, both of whom have a mandate to educate children. If people with these two divergent (and potentially opposing) beliefs about education do not recognize their fundamental differences in meaning, it should not be surprising that both get frustrated and wearied. Moreover, differing opinions on what it means to educate are not the only contributing factors to educator fatigue. Defining *teach* can be equally problematic.

What Does it Mean to Teach?

A teacher to a parent: “I have taught him multiplication! I taught him how to group, use manipulatives, memorize flashcards, and even to use his fingers! I have used charts, played games, sung songs, punished and rewarded. I have taught your son multiplication!”

The parent flatly replies, “My son cannot multiply. You have taught him nothing.”

Perhaps you can relate to this conversation. One can almost feel the energy being drained from both people. How one views this exchange depends on his or her definition of what it means to teach.

The first meaning for *teach* is “to cause or help (someone) to learn about a subject by giving lessons” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition indicates that teaching occurs only when learning takes place. In the above example, the parent seems to concur that the only evidence of teaching is learning. Similarly, Sir Ken Robinson (2013) emphasized that unless learning has taken place, no teaching has occurred. If, during the course of a school year, a child only progresses half a year, then, according to Robinson, the other half of the year the adult in the room was not teaching, he or she was simply providing childcare.

The second definition of *teach* focuses on the action of the teacher: “to give lessons . . . to a person or group” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the example above, the teacher likely felt that this characterization of teaching is how her performance should be evaluated. Some may view this teacher-centric perspective as too lax for educators, absolving them of the responsibility for student learning. If so, it may be argued that teachers are held to higher standards than other professionals such as doctors and lawyers who are responsible only for their own actions (Bull, 1990; Fenstermacher, 1990). This realization leads to another linguistic dilemma, the consequences of which may be arduous for educators and contribute to their mental and physical lassitude³/₄accountability.

What is Educational Accountability?

The definition of *accountability* is “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition specifies that one can only be accountable for one’s *own* actions. A teacher, therefore, may be held accountable for such things as his or her content knowledge, instructional strategies, and personal conduct, but *cannot* be held accountable for the actions of another person. Often, however, teachers are judged not on what they do, but on the actions or achievements of others.

For example, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012) indicated that those involved in public education would be held accountable for improving student

achievement. This burden of being accountable for the achievement of up to 150 children—over whose lives they have very little control—is a major factor in teacher frustration and lethargy (Hall, 2014). Conversely, accountability in the medical field is based on the conduct of the doctor, not the patient. A doctor may be held accountable for patient diagnosis and proper prescribing of medication, but is not ultimately responsible for patient recovery. Doctors are responsible for inputs, not for outcomes. Because educational accountability focuses on student outputs often determined by factors beyond the influence of the teacher, frustration increases and energy is drained from those individuals whose work is assessed by these inappropriate accountability standards.

What Does This Mean For Educational Stakeholders?

Formal debates and scholarly dissertations nearly always begin by defining key words. This practice is done because a clear understanding of pertinent language is necessary if productive dialogue is to occur. Similarly, when educational leaders and staff gather together for events, from formally determining school goals to organizing after-school events, all concerned parties must articulate how they, as a group, are choosing to define key terms. These definitions must be clearly and continually communicated to all stakeholders (Kotter, 1996). Next, they must ensure that their metrics for determining success align with how they are defining the goal. For example, if stakeholders desire teacher accountability, they will likely view teaching as an input and judge teachers accordingly. Rather than evaluations based solely on student outcomes, criteria for measuring teacher performance might include instructional strategies, use of technology, or other proven pedagogical approaches. By taking the time to clearly articulate key terms, all policies and practices are more likely to be aligned and accountability metrics will be better suited for the desired purpose.

Conclusion

Imprecise language and words with differing meanings have led to complex and confusing policies and practices in education. These incongruences have been imposed upon an already demanding field and added further frustrations and burdens for educators, contributing to many educators feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and on the verge of burning out. In this article, I have shown how differing perspectives on the meanings of *educate*, *teach*, and *accountability* have contributed to miscommunication and misunderstandings that lead to educator fatigue. Further research examining the defining and measuring of other words used in educational policies such as *success*, *appropriate*, and *potential* would also be enlightening. When a reoccurring issue does not get rectified and people are growing weary, stop and cooperatively examine the assumptions participants have about the words being used. If articulating common meanings of key terms proves to be challenging, one can be sure that the words themselves are contributing to the frustration and wearing down of stakeholders. Once meanings have been agreed upon, however, discussions will be revitalized, and stakeholders will be energized. It is worth the effort.

References

- Accountability. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accountability>
- Bull, B. L. (1990). The limits of teacher professionalism. In J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. A. Sirotnik (Eds.), *The moral dimensions of teaching* (pp. 87–129). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Educate. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/educate>
- Educe. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/educ>
- Fenstermacher, G. D. (1990). Some moral considerations on teaching as a profession. In J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. A. Sirotnik (Eds.), *The moral dimensions of teaching* (pp. 130–154). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gatto, J. T. (2005). *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society.
- Hall, J. C. (2014). *Exploring the use of the humanities: Towards transformative dialogue on educational issues* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change*. Retrieved from <http://common.books24x7.com.cyber.usask.ca/toc.aspx?bookid=3479>.
- Robinson, K. (2013). How to escape education's Death Valley. *TEDTalks*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX78iKhInsc>
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2012). *Ministry overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/ministry-overview/>
- Teach. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teach>