

## **What Happens when a Community Psychologist Becomes a High School Principal?**

**Stephen J. Fyson**

This was a question I was asking myself when the September 2003 edition of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* arrived at my home down under. There in the middle of that volume was a North American critique of psychology and schools, by none other than Seymour Sarason, himself (Sarason, 2003). I have read much of the work of this pioneer and provocative community psychologist. A good bit of what I have tried to do as a resident researcher in the community goes back to Sarason's initial work on community psychology. In this work, Sarason attempted to define and create a purpose statement for social action as a vehicle for learning and contributing to knowledge.

He contrasted "being at bat" to "quick and dirty research." The former was explained as follows:

... I refer to any instance in which an academic person takes on a socially responsible role - in government, politics, business, schools, or poverty agencies - which will allow him to experience the 'natural' functioning of that particular aspect of society. The role must be an operational one with responsibility and some decision making powers.... He is not a consultant with the luxury of giving advice without responsibility for implementation.... He assumes the new role to test the adequacy of ideas and theories, to see how they fit with social realities (Sarason, 1974, pp. 247-248).

While Sarason (1974) describes a potential role for professionals, Rappaport (2000) points to a major problem in schools. With reference to the potential for social change and with reference to schools in particular, Rappaport used the paradigm of a "narrative" to suggest that the work of community psychology is to help turn "tales of terror" into "tales of joy" (Rappaport, 2000). Rappaport commented that: [Teachers] have a serious preoccupation with order that may interfere with the capacity to experience the pleasure of joyful engagement in a learning environment.... [and] Students appropriate the settings' self-narrative... such that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rappaport, 2000, p. 20)

Rappaport agreed with the sentiment of an earlier Sarason book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (Sarason, 1990) that provided a pessimistic outlook as to whether the conditions for productive learning through engagement can indeed occur. Sarason (1990, p. 20) states "Can such tales of terror be replaced by tales of joy? Frankly, I do not know." Others point out that school reform simply doesn't last (e.g. Fink, 2000; Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996).

Sarason (2003) suggests that community psychologists should step up to the plate. Both Sarason (1990) and Rappaport (2000) seem pessimistic about traditional efforts to reform schools. Did this new article by Sarason give me any alternative hope? In terms of the state of the field (psychology in the schools), the answer was "no," For example, with reference to the Columbine high school tragedy, Sarason tested and found intact the prediction that "psychologists and sundry other mental health professionals... reveal a near total ignorance of the ecology, organization, and culture of high schools (and middle schools)..." (Sarason, 2003, p. 103).

However, Sarason (2003) makes five points that I believe present the core of the challenge for my work in my new role as high school principal. In an attempt to start a dialogue with others within community psychology who find themselves in resident researcher and practitioner roles in schools, I will summarise Sarason's five point challenge. I also include a series of questions that might guide the work of change agents (or principals like me) in the schools:

1. *Students move progressively into relationships of anonymity as they progress from elementary school into high school and teachers teach too many students to help each child realise his or her potential.* Some focus questions for me as a principal might be: 1) Who will own each student in each year of high school? 2) Who will own each class and year group in high school? 3) Can teachers' lives be simplified so that they can teach in more intimate structures? and 4) What defensiveness is to be expected when the answers to these questions start to change the social regularities of each person's life world?
2. *Classrooms in high schools reflect a most narrow, superficial, over simple conception of what makes for contexts of productive and unproductive learning.* This is most easily seen in the low number of questions asked by students in classroom environments. Thus, some focus questions might be: 1) How can teachers be freed to teach in more productive and engaging ways? 2) Are teachers, parents and students willing to redefine the central purposes of education in the classroom to allow this to happen? and 3) How is teaching of the whole person to be made compatible with the demands of increased standards and results accountability that is inherent in contemporary western society?
3. *Interest and motivation to learn decreases as students progress through high school, even for those who achieve high test scores.* Some focus questions might be: 1) Who will relate to students closely enough to know if they are increasing their love of learning? 2) What traditions can be put in place so that students are listened to routinely? and 3) How can teachers be trained differently so that they know students better as choice-makers?
4. *The school system is characterized by adversarialism.* Thus the school system is composed of antagonistic parties with often opposing interests, Some focus questions might be: 1) What needs to be done so that all members of the school community know that they can safely ask questions without resorting to adversarialism? 2) What needs to be done so that all members in the school community know that they are cared for, without the need for adversarialism? 3) What needs to be done so that all members want to be at school without the strains of compulsory attendance detracting from a growing commitment to the community? and 4) Will this be compatible with the purposes of those who fund schools?
5. *The selection and preparation of teachers and administrators are inexcusably inadequate.* Some focus questions might be: 1) Is my training adequate for the tasks implied by the questions above? 2) Can I help teachers and my fellow administrators be better equipped for their tasks? and 3) Can such tasks be undertaken with the spark of creativity that is assumed to be part of the teaching and learning process?

And so, the quote by Weinstein et al., 1992 that I have used to illustrate some school- based research that I have undertaken over the last few years still remains relevant (parentheses added by the author):

In truth, not one of us was (is) prepared for the time it would (will) take to systematically alter the instructional and school climate so that expectations and opportunities to learn were (are) consistent, positive and available, i.e., to undo a lifelong pattern of schooling (Weinstein, 1992, p. 361)

Will there be many of us who remain committed over the long run to help schools move to new, productive and life engaging traditions? What will be our relationship with the academic world and will our lessons learned contribute to the accumulated wisdom regarding educational reform? Time will tell. Will our journals also tell?

If you want to join in a dialogue with Stephen on these issues, he can be contacted at [syson@huntercs.org](mailto:syson@huntercs.org), or 33 Bulkara St., Wallsend, NSW, 2287, Australia.

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