

Teacher Quality

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Teacher quality has become a priority in both government and other educational reform efforts for several reasons.

- Reforms have often ignored teachers except as tools to carry out new mandates and programs. But evidence that teachers are the most important factor in the effectiveness of schools and the quality of a child's education is now too strong to ignore. Teachers are not constants in the educational equation. Instead, they are perhaps the most important variable. What are the characteristics of an effective teacher? How can more teachers acquire those characteristics?
- Some teachers' lack accredited training in subject matter, learning theory, and pedagogy. Critics suggest that these poorly prepared teachers are often assigned to disadvantaged or at-risk students, depriving them of equal opportunities for a sound education.
- More teachers are leaving the profession because they are burnt out, disillusioned, or have found better paying positions. Coupled with the retirement of many experienced teachers, schools are hard-pressed to find qualified candidates to fill those jobs. This issue is complex, so we will limit our discussion to the first two points.

Understanding Teacher Quality

In addressing the first point, let's use a metaphor that is so popular in education—school as factory/workplace. If a manufacturer is concerned about improving the efficiency of the assembly line and the quality of a product, there are several things he might do. First, he can bring in experts to analyze the process, break it into steps, make each step more efficient, and program the assembly line workers (human or machine) to perform those steps.

In the same way, many reformers have attempted to break down the complex process of education into observable, manageable components— curriculum, assessment, teaching methods, etc. They analyze each of the components and optimize it. Each component is then neatly packaged and “given” to teachers as a “better” way to educate students. Although this factory model may be effective in improving the efficiency of the manufacturing process and the quality of inanimate products, it has proven much less effective in education. Reform efforts are constantly underway to “fix” broken parts of the process.

What the factory model fails to recognize are the complex interactions that occur among the various “parts” of education. The raw material in an assembly line can't choose how it will behave. It can't choose what it will do or not do—what it will become. Students can. Nor are teachers assembly line robots—‘turning out’ standardized products through the same repetitive actions. They are human beings who make hundreds of decisions a day. Those decisions profoundly influence the educational experience and learning of their students.

A second way that a manufacturer can improve the manufacturing process is by addressing the work ethic of the workers themselves. Clearly, this is a more challenging problem. It isn't solved by creating a set of rules and regulations and “programming” them into individual workers. Something much deeper is involved here—the way those individuals perceive their work, their personal values, and the attitudes they have about their duties and responsibilities.

It's not surprising that dealing with inanimate processes and raw material is often the preferred approach.

There is a long history of attempts to reform education by fiat—creating new programs and mandates that are then handed to teachers to be carried out. Now, in addressing teacher quality, theorists have fallen into that same factory metaphor. In asking “What are the characteristics of an effective teacher?” they seek the answers in observable teacher characteristics. They document the *external* behaviors of effective teachers and the observable effects of those behaviors on students.

Theorists then categorize their observations, distilling them into a handful of “effective teaching” principles. Those principles are made available to other teachers in articles, books, websites, and professional development workshops. But simply telling people that they *should* “demonstrate high expectations” or “exhibit flexibility” is about as effective as telling people they *should* exercise more and eat healthier meals. Cognitively, people may accept the information. They may even think they are incorporating those principles into their practice. Yet ultimately, their behavior doesn't change. Why?

If you were to teach a hundred people to reproduce the exact brushstrokes and color composition used by Rembrandt, and if you provided them with the same quality of paints, brushes, and canvas as the master, would you really expect each of them to produce a masterpiece? What is missing in this approach is the “vision” of when and where to apply the techniques—the elusive spark that makes an artist unique. The talent and genius lie in the “mind of the maker.”

Teacher thinking is subjective, requiring a very different approach from the traditional factory approach of collecting hard data and assembling it into new programs. If the thinking of individual teachers is the key to effective teaching, categorizing behaviors and creating checklists is of little value. Reformers expend tremendous amounts of time and resources with only marginal returns because they don't reach to the core of teacher quality.

Certainly, having access to proven techniques and high quality teaching materials can contribute to a teacher's effectiveness. But the key to being an outstanding teacher lies elsewhere—outside the light of direct observation. It lies in the mind—in the largely unconscious thought processes that motivate and support a teacher's external behaviors. Without examining the beliefs, values, assumptions, and other thinking processes behind an outstanding teacher's behaviors, the behaviors themselves are relatively meaningless.

Characteristics of Outstanding Teachers

Outstanding teachers may have very different personalities and approaches, but research has discovered that they do share certain characteristics. These include:

- a belief that all children can learn, but not all in the same way
- a belief that teachers are learners and children are teachers
- a high level of respect for all students
- high expectations for all students, but not the same for all
- a humanistic rather than custodial approach to classroom control

Notice that these characteristics all arise in the *mind* of the teachers—in their beliefs, values, and attitudes. The behaviors in which they engage are the result of those internal processes. Yet a glance at the professional development calendar (Education Week, Spring 2002) affirms that present workshops focus almost exclusively on the externals of teaching—subject matter, delivery methods, discipline, standards, and assessment.

Recently, we've seen a proliferation of programs “that work..” Discipline that Works. Education Reform that Works. Classroom Instruction that Works. I have no doubt that the programs touted by these titles do work—for *the people who developed them*. They work because those people began with a foundation of beliefs about learning, teaching, knowledge, students, and other critical factors in the educational process. The program will work for anyone who shares that foundation.

However, those same programs may not work when transferred to a foundation of different beliefs and values. For example, a discipline program based on responsibility shared by teacher and students will not work if a teacher believes a good teacher is always in control of the class and values that control as a sign that he is “being a good teacher.”

A teacher who believes that her role is to “give” students a specified body of knowledge may cognitively accept a program based on student-generated knowledge, but she will modify that program “in her own image.” She will still find a way to “give” students what she *believes* they need before allowing them to engage in the more open-ended activities that are part of the program. Worse, she will still value and employ assessments of rote learning rather than higher level thinking processes that produce more diverse “answers” that may be outside the specified knowledge.

Teacher Qualifications

Programs that address the inadequate training of some teachers urge the adoption of higher standards and stringent tests for teacher certification. On the surface, it would appear that this would improve teacher quality. But will more and better training insure quality teachers?

If all teachers had PhDs in their subject area and Master's degrees in educational theory and pedagogy, would it follow that every teacher would then exhibit the quality and effectiveness reformers are seeking? Is there a direct correlation between accumulating knowledge about teaching and “being” an effective teacher?

There is no argument that all teachers should have a solid foundation in their subject area and training in learning theory and effective practices. But in and of itself, that training may not produce the results we seek. Unless the “mindset” of the teacher supports the behaviors demonstrated by outstanding teachers, the present approach may yield highly knowledgeable, but largely ineffective teachers.

What role, then, can reformers play in helping teachers become more reflective? What resources are needed for teachers to understand how their beliefs and attitudes influence their teaching practice—how they unconsciously make and break reform efforts?

A Shift of Roles

Looking for the key to teacher quality in the hidden corridors of teachers' minds need not be frightening if theorists recognize that they don't have to provide a set of pat answers that will apply to everyone as they have attempted in the past. Their role will be to provide teachers

with opportunities and incentives to reflect on and evaluate their own beliefs, values, and the metaphors they use to characterize their work.

Rather than telling teachers what they *should* be doing, it's time to begin encouraging teachers to examine *what they are already doing*—and more important, *why they are doing it*.

- Are the beliefs they hold about students, teaching, learning, and knowledge supported by research and/or experience?
- How do those beliefs influence their perceptions and decisions?
- What values are they unconsciously teaching?
- Does it matter if they describe their classroom as a zoo or a beehive—see themselves as gardeners or police officers?
- What kind of teaching/learning environment are they creating for themselves and their students?

“Telling” teachers to become more reflective is not sufficient. Creating a “standard” for self-reflection sets a goal, but provides no mechanism to reach that goal. The only ones who can make the fundamental changes necessary to increase their effectiveness are the teachers themselves, but they need both the support and encouragement of enlightened professional development programs. Continuing to focus professional development and reform on the observable and measurable externals of teaching because it is less challenging is no longer an acceptable alternative.

One of history's greatest scientists, Albert Einstein, reminds us, “*Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*” Teacher thinking counts! One can only hope that those interested in a true transformation of education will accept the challenge and seek the keys to quality teaching where they lie—in the minds of individual teachers.

[A more in-depth discussion of the role of thinking in teacher quality may be found in *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*, published by MindFlight Publishing, P.O. Box 1738, Hamilton, MT 59840. ISBN: 0-9711983-3-0. *Teaching in Mind* may be ordered online at <http://www.TeachersMind.com/order.htm>]

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