

If We *Should*, Why Don't We?

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Since the earliest days of organized education, teachers have asked questions such as: What should we teach? How should we teach? How should we organize knowledge? How should we assess learning? It is a rare educator who cannot supply a wealth of reasoned and reasonable answers to these questions. Why then, after so many years, are we still asking them? Why have their answers failed to create an educational process that builds on excellence rather than constantly recreating itself?

The word *should* conjures up thoughts of duty, responsibility, and proper behavior. Since childhood, people have been told how they *should* and *should not* act in various contexts. Yet even the most conscientious among us frequently behave in ways contrary to what we believe we *should* be doing. For example, we *should* exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet—yet, many of us do not.

Many teachers welcome ideas and theories that promise to improve their practice. Hundreds of books, magazine articles, and professional development opportunities provide answers to traditional questions about what teachers *should* do. Yet even while cognitively accepting those answers, teachers often fail to implement them in effective ways. Why?

One important reason is that these answers—these ideas—are neither understood nor applied in the same way by individual teachers. Each teacher has a unique mental representation of the world of education and the role he or she plays in that world. That representation is a tangled web of beliefs, values, metaphors, and thought processes.

This constitutes the individual's *worldview*—his or her “reality.” If a new idea or mandate fails to fit a teacher's inner reality, it is often rejected at the subconscious level. Even if the teacher consciously accepts the mandate and attempts to implement it, his belief that it is “wrong” will force him to perceive ways in which it fails to work. This, of course, validates his beliefs.

Even when new ideas fit a teacher's existing “inner world,” they may produce a variety of behaviors other than those expected. The idea/theory/ methodology may seem perfectly clear to the person proposing it. She may have had great success implementing her ideas *because they are completely consistent with her inner world*. However, assuming that they will be equally effective for all teachers fails to recognize the tremendous variability in those teachers' “worlds.” Even the *meanings* of such basic words as *teach*, *learn*, or *understand* vary enormously from one teacher to the next.

Many studies have shown that the individual beliefs and values of teachers play a vital role in shaping the objectives, goals, curriculum, and instructional methods of schools. Those same beliefs and values can spell success or failure for any reform efforts imposed by a school or district.⁽¹⁾ Even when there is surface agreement on what *should* be done, variations in the way teachers perceive the task create huge differences in implementation. Any teacher who has taken part in attempts to develop a “common” curriculum has experienced the kind of disagreement that can occur over what aspects of a subject *should* be included and how the subject *should* be taught. (See the example at the end of the article.)

Some teachers simply go along with what the group decides, but behind the classroom doors they continue to teach in the same way they have always taught. Now that standards have defined so much of a school's curriculum, the problems are compounded. Teachers have little input into the topics they are expected to teach. Their task is reduced to “aligning” their curriculum to the

standards. This does little to change the fundamental *beliefs* of teachers. Unconsciously, they will “adapt” whatever decisions have been made to conform with their own reality.

Despite increasing research-based recognition that “The most important factor that affects student learning is quality teaching”⁽²⁾, most educational improvement efforts continue to focus on the factors “out there”—the curriculum, instructional methods, discipline, school organization—rather than on that “most important factor”—teachers. The actual thought processes that underlie a teacher’s “quality” or effectiveness are largely ignored. Neglecting to take those thought processes into account—treating teachers as constants, rather than variables in the educational equation—all but assures the failure of many of the *shoulds* to significantly influence education. While it may be daunting to recognize the potential variability among teachers, ignoring it will not make it go away.

Here are just a few of the individual filters through which the *shoulds*—the answers provided by others—must pass.

1. Each teacher has a personal “definition” of education—a definition that shapes and limits what the teacher chooses to do and to not do. How would the emphasis a teacher places on content or process, student vs. teacher-centered lessons, discipline, group work, standards, or assessment shift if that teacher believed each of the following definitions?
 - Education is the accurate and efficient transmission of a body of knowledge that that the culture values and that has historically produced progress.
 - Education is the total development of a child.
 - Education is the process of providing a rich, complex, and varied environment within which students can, through experience, develop effective thinking processes.

How do you define education? Simply stated, *there is no consensus definition of education*. Is it any wonder that there are so many different approaches to what we should be doing when the primary purpose of education is still a matter of debate?

2. Each teacher possesses a set of beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how students learn. Those beliefs typically exist outside conscious awareness and are largely unexamined. They are, however, no less influential for their invisibility.

For a number of years, educators were tremendously excited about the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget’s theory of internally generated knowledge made excellent sense, addressing obvious problems with teaching and learning. What educators failed to take into account was the pervasive belief that unconsciously permeates the educational establishment. That belief is that there exists a body of knowledge— facts—truths—“out there” and that the goal of education involves teachers giving that objective knowledge to the students.

Without recognizing either the nature or the power of that underlying belief, educators tried to fit student-constructed knowledge into their existing practice. They were unaware that they were attempting to apply Piaget’s ideas *without also adopting his belief system*. How does one “internally generate” what is already “out there?” Consistent with their own beliefs, teachers would first *give* students the facts and then assign a pre-specified activity in which the students were supposed to “mess about” with those facts. Was this what Piaget meant? Where was the student given the opportunity to “internally generate” anything?

When Piaget's approach failed to bring about the expected changes in test scores—tests that were often the same as those used with the old paradigm—many teachers simply decided that the approach didn't work. Work to do what? What expectations did they have? Were those expectations valid in terms of the theory itself? How can any method based on the belief in internally constructed knowledge “work” if all knowledge is, ultimately, “out there?”

When teachers hold a fundamental belief that learning means accumulating knowledge objects, they may cognitively accept the wealth of research supporting internally generated knowledge, but it will not significantly affect their practice.

3. Each teacher has a personal set of values that determine the priorities operating in the classroom. Which is more important—content or process, discipline or self-expression, student respect for the teacher or mutual respect? How do those values shift from moment to moment?

Personal values also play an important role when teachers balance what they *should* do with other behaviors. For example, a teacher *says* he values higher level thinking skills, yet his tests require little more than simple recall or recognition. This doesn't mean he is lying. There is simply another value of which he is unaware—perhaps time available to spend with his family. Taking the time to grade essay tests that assess higher level thinking would cut into his family time. He fails to notice that he's not “walking his talk” because he believes a good teacher should value higher-level thinking skills and he perceives himself as a good teacher. ⁽³⁾

These are just a few examples of the complexity of the thought processes—the beliefs, values, metaphors and meanings—that shape the choices teachers make. Those largely unconscious processes both enable and limit a teacher's behavior. They also determine whether or not answers provided by others—*shoulds*—will be reflected in that behavior.

Having a set of absolutes—*shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* that can clearly be labeled “right or wrong”, effective or ineffective—contributes much to the comfort level of those who must assess teacher behavior and effectiveness. Such absolutes make supervision and assessment appear more “objective.” However, the quality—the effectiveness—of a teacher cannot be separated from that teacher's thought processes. *Teacher quality derives from those processes* rather than from adherence to some external set of “effective behaviors.”

Regardless of the weight of research supporting this or that program, teachers will continue to act in accordance with their fundamental values and beliefs. What might we gain by focusing on *what teachers already do and why they do it?* By reflecting on teacher thinking—by bringing it into consciousness and determining how it influences teaching—we can begin to understand why some teachers are more effective than others. By determining the values and beliefs that underlie teacher behavior, we can begin to comprehend why seemingly foolproof methods work for those who propose them, but may not work for others.

In the past several decades, the influence of beliefs and metaphors on teaching has been increasingly addressed. ⁽⁴⁾ However, many still see teacher thought processes as interesting artifacts rather than as the fundamental factor that shapes every behavior in a teacher's repertoire. Theorists such as Michael Fullan ⁽⁵⁾, Seymour Sarason ⁽⁶⁾, and Renate and Geoffrey Caine ⁽⁷⁾, have encouraged self-reflection among teachers. Yet organized professional development opportunities that assist teachers in that process are rare. Worse, as the pressures of accountability and

standards increase, teachers have less and less time to engage in what Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer⁽⁸⁾ calls “mindful” teaching.

If we hope to see the important *shoulds* effectively enacted, educational leaders must encourage teachers to explore their personal mental landscapes of education. They must support teachers in examining how their thinking influences not only their own behavior, but the experience of their students. They must design and offer more professional development opportunities to help teachers focus on their own beliefs, values, metaphors, and the meanings that they assign to words and actions.

Focusing on teacher thinking offers numerous insights into why the *shoulds* succeed or fail. It is also an important step toward returning the humanity to an institution that has become obsessed with numbers. 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.”

References

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An example of how “real teachers” make decisions about curriculum

Here's what happened when four teachers tried to collaborate on a unit dealing with the Great Depression.

One teacher wanted students to read *The Grapes of Wrath* in order to understand the profound impact of the Depression on people's lives.

The second teacher contended that material on dust storms and droughts must be included to illustrate the impact on the land.

A third was certain that economic and political issues were the most important aspects of the Depression for students to understand.

The fourth insisted that the other three had totally missed the point. Students needed to understand how the Great Depression was relevant to them personally—how it affected their lives.

All four of these teachers had master's degrees in education and secondary school teaching certificates in social studies. All agreed that the Great Depression should be taught. It was, however, their personal interests and values that determined the content they believed should be included.

Reference: Wilson, Suzanne M. and Wineburg, Samuel S. (1988, Summer) Peering at history through Different Lenses: The Role of disciplinary Perspectives in Teaching History, *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp 525-539

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