

Myths about Teaching

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“Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them.” ~Thomas Gradgrind in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

In an article in *Educational Leadership*, Paulette Wasserstein⁽¹⁾ quotes Dickens' schoolmaster and questions whether we have really evolved much beyond the factory model schools of the nineteenth century. While today's classrooms may look very different from Dickens' dreary school, many of the assumptions under which the fictional Mr. Gradgrind taught are still present in our schools.

The Traditional Hierarchy

Classrooms involve complex interactions among information, students, and teachers. In traditional schools, that interaction is a hierarchy. The curriculum—*Knowledge*—is at the top of the hierarchy, while the student—the learner—is at the bottom of the pecking order. The focus in many reform efforts is the more efficient identification, packaging, and transmission of that knowledge *even when the supposed objective of the reform is the more effective education of students*. (See *Myths about Knowledge*).

While lip-service is paid to the individual differences and needs of the learner, the obsession with the possession of specific knowledge objects means that those differences and needs are effectively ignored. To paraphrase an old business maxim, “What gets tested, gets done!”

In other parts of society, professionals have recognized the need to shift their focus from inanimate objects and ideas to the *people* involved with those objects or ideas. Many medical professionals now treat people instead of just symptoms. By doing so, they have broadened and deepened their understanding of how and why people become ill and more important, how they remain well. Companies that have shifted their primary focus from selling their *product* to identifying the needs and desires of their *consumers* have seen remarkable increases in sales.

Once again, education remains at the trailing edge of this new wisdom. Traditional educators still focus on the product they are trying to sell—knowledge—rather than on their “consumer”—the learner. When consumers complain and refuse to buy the product, they are criticized for their “lack of motivation” and forced to buy even more—with no change in the product itself.

What might happen if schools began assessing the intellectual growth of individual students rather than the number of previously determined knowledge objects they possess? When the emphasis shifts to measuring the progress of individual children, teachers would be freed from the requirement of “transmitting” specific knowledge objects to everyone. Their focus could shift to students' individual differences and needs—to helping each student move progress. When the development of individual students “gets tested,” working toward that development “gets done.”

If you've read the articles on teacher thinking, you'll recognize that a teacher's behaviors are heavily influenced by fundamental beliefs about the purpose of education, the nature of knowledge, what learning means, and whether the focus in the classroom is on knowledge or students.

An Example

Mary's story is typical of the quandary in which many teachers find themselves. Realizing that her current math curriculum didn't interest her sixth-grade students, Mary actively sought out interesting activities, even when they weren't related to the existing curriculum. A mathematics

education professor suggested that Mary have her students calculate the batting averages of baseball players. She could have students work in small groups to discuss and analyze how these averages could be found by using available statistics such as the number of times a player had been at bat and his number of hits.

The professor suggested that Mary's role would be to ask appropriate questions to help the students "think through" the problem. However, Mary was obsessed with "finding a step-by-step computational rule that she could teach her students. 'It is important that I know exactly how to do it. I need to be able to show my students.'" (2)

Mary *believed* her students would be "learning" math if they knew how to perform such a step-by-step computation and arrive at the "right" answer. Even more fundamental, Mary *believed* that *teaching* mathematics involved providing students with a set of correct procedures rather than assisting them in engaging in "sense-making" activities that could be applied in many different contexts.

Mary's beliefs should not come as a surprise, given that many teachers were indoctrinated into just such a belief system when they were students. Why would we expect her to see mathematics as an *approach* to problem solving when the focus of her own education had been learning procedures and following those procedures to obtain single "correct" answers?

This is the dilemma teachers face today—a dilemma of which many teachers are unaware. Although ridding teachers of these old beliefs may be challenging, it will never occur unless reformers finally address the issue of individual teacher thinking and its influence on education. Until then, "conventional wisdom" will continue to hold both teachers and students captive.

What Makes an Outstanding Teacher

Walk into any school and ask the students, "Who are the best teachers in this school?" Then ask the teachers, the administrators, and the parents the same question. Chances are the same names will appear on many lists. As more local districts, states, and the nation have recognized "outstanding teachers," a number of research studies have sought to understand the characteristics that these teachers have in common.

It's important to note that these teachers are not selected because they are "easy" or "popular." Many exemplary teachers have a reputation for being *very* tough—for having extremely high expectations and demanding that students live up to those expectations. Educators underestimate students when they believe students only want "easy" teachers. What they do want is teachers who listen to their ideas and their questions, treat them with respect, and demonstrate honest caring. For such teachers, students will work to the limits of their ability.

There is little or no mention in these studies of the amount of knowledge that these teachers cram into their students and/or the subsequent test scores. How likely is it, however, that peers, students, administration, and parents would praise a teacher whose students weren't exhibiting a high level of learning? At some fundamental level, it appears both educators and the public recognize what is important in teaching. Yet both continue to cave in to claims that increasing the number of standards for which students are accountable and demanding that students "keep up" will ensure learning, as well as increase the expectations of teachers. These claims are questionable at best. (For a discussion of the relationship between standards and teacher expectations, see the articles on Standards & Expectations.)

Although their personalities vary widely, one study of exemplary teachers revealed typical beliefs that these teachers hold. These include the beliefs that:

1. all children can learn and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to try various techniques and approaches to find out what will work for each child;

2. children do not all learn in the same ways since each is a unique individual;
3. a holistic approach to teaching improves learning;
4. knowledge is constructed, so care is taken in uncovering prior knowledge and building on it;
5. children, as learners, are teachers; teachers must also be learners;
6. teachers need to know each child very well in order to assist their intellectual, social, and emotional development;...
7. genuine understanding ... or generative knowledge... is a high priority, so continuity and connections in learning are emphasized;
8. teaching is guided by the child's strengths and interests;
9. learning is a continuous process, a "continuum of growth";
10. self-reliance and independence of students is the ultimate goal;
11. time must be spent teaching children how to learn (learning about learning);
12. involvement of parents as teachers is crucial to learning;
13. learning requires risk taking and mistakes³

How does one integrate such beliefs with the demands for more and more externally selected standards and standardized testing?

Some reformers have observed exemplary teachers and attempted to create "checklists" of behaviors that other teachers can emulate. What they fail to recognize is that *the beliefs that motivate those behaviors are the key to the teacher's effectiveness*. Unless other teachers share those beliefs, they will not get the same results—even if they emulate the behaviors, which is unlikely.

Attempting to force teachers to adopt such beliefs through the imposition of tougher standards on students may appear less challenging, but it is doomed to failure. Working with teachers directly to encourage reflection and an updating of outdated "conventional wisdom" offers the promise of producing real change where it counts—in the relationship between teachers and their students.

For a continuation of this article, see chapter 11 in *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*.

References

- 1 Wasserstein, P. (2001). Putting Readers in the Driver's Seat. *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 74.
- 2 Battista, M. T. (1994, February). Teacher Beliefs and the Reform Movement in Mathematics Education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 462-470.
- 3 Collinson, V. (1994). *Teachers as Learners: Exemplary Teachers' Perceptions of Personal and Professional Renewal*. San Francisco and London: Austin & Winfield, 86

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