

For the Love of Learning

Volume I: Mandate, Context, Issues

Chapter 6: What Is Teaching?

The central agent in the formal learning process and in the lives of students at school is the teacher. Well-educated and motivated teachers are the most vital component of high-quality education. Throughout their careers, teachers touch the lives of thousands of young people; without their commitment and participation, attempts to improve the school system are bound to fail.

"Learning is a full-blooded, human, social process, and so is teaching."

R.W. Connell, Schools and Social Justice

The quality of teaching is ultimately measured by its impact on students, in terms of what they learn and the degree to which they are engaged in the process: good teaching engages students in learning, and increases what they learn and what they achieve. Beyond helping students absorb the most easily measured learning, good teachers foster a love of learning and provide a supportive classroom atmosphere for all students. But what constitutes good teaching? What instructional approaches are effective? What are the characteristics needed in Ontario's teachers? Not only do people have different answers to these questions, they feel strongly about their views. A central issue in the current debates is what constitutes good teaching: there is no widespread agreement on what teachers should know and be able to do.

Teaching, unlike many other professions or occupations, has a long, informal tradition that sometimes seems at odds with what is happening in schools today. Most adults (and older children) have spent many years watching teachers at work, and often have unquestioned notions about teaching. When educators suggest, for instance, that learning is better understood as an "active construction of meaning" by the learner (as was done recently in the first version of *The Common Curriculum*), it is not surprising that the public may wonder if schools have been diverted from their proper focus. Powerful, traditional notions of teaching are then at odds with the "expert" notions.

Discussions about teaching are often framed as debates between opposing positions: child-centred versus teacher-directed, or student-centred versus subject-centred. According to the one position, teachers are to impart knowledge to students through direct, systematic instruction, focusing on skills and content. According to the other, teachers are to encourage children to take a more active role in developing their own knowledge, with less direct instruction on the part of the teacher. The educational pendulum seems to swing from one ideology to the other, with teachers, students - and, often, parents - getting hit as it sweeps by.

Such either/or choices, however, tend to misrepresent the complex nature of learning and teaching in the classroom: effective teachers use both approaches, as they direct student learning toward clear goals. Perhaps if accountability for results were to be more clearly established, much of the debate about

methods would be defused. The extent of student learning is surely the most relevant indicator of the worth of the teaching strategies used. Acceptance of reasonable, clearly stated standards, together with ongoing assessment of student learning, become important steps in this process.

Characteristics of good teaching

When people talk about teaching in schools, they are usually referring to intentional and specific teaching, although what is unintentional may be equally significant. In other words, the attitudes and values implicit in what teachers say and do are important, even if they are not articulated as part of the intended learning.

We see good teaching as characterized by five dimensions (with teachers displaying various strengths in each).⁽¹⁾ We are aware that listing the characteristics or factors required in good teaching risks sounding too clear-cut, when in fact teaching is complex, requiring judgment and sensitivity as well as knowledge and skill. We are also aware that not everyone may agree with our principles concerning what teachers should know and be able to do, and what personal qualities they should have.⁽²⁾

1. Teachers care about and are committed to students and their learning. They know enough about all their students to be able to decide how to teach them effectively.
2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach the material to students: in other words, they know how to make knowledge accessible to students.
3. Guided by clear goals, teachers manage and monitor student learning.
4. Teachers do not always work in isolation; they learn from and collaborate with others, including students, colleagues, parents, and the community.
5. Teachers critically examine their own practice, and continue to learn throughout their careers.

1. Teachers care about and are committed to students and their learning

This is the most fundamental characteristic of good teaching. Children and adolescents need to be cared for, in the sense of being understood, respected, and recognized. Students thrive in settings where they are treated fairly and empathetically.⁽³⁾ The teachers who make a difference, who are remembered by their students, are those who have made the commitment to students and to students' learning the basis of their professional lives. Such teachers know their students well, and celebrate the diverse capacities, interests, and ethno-cultural backgrounds that students bring to the classroom. They are committed to strong, humane values, and create classroom climates in which such values provide the foundation for students.

Academic goals, which are paramount for schools, are more likely to be achieved when students feel valued as persons. All students need care, and that is particularly true of those whose families, for whatever reasons, cannot provide sufficient support. It has been suggested that "caring is the very bedrock of all successful education."⁽⁴⁾

Being a teacher is not just a matter of having a body of knowledge and a capacity to control a classroom. That could be done by a computer with a cattle-prod. Just as important, being a teacher means being able to establish human relations with the people being taught.⁽⁵⁾

The commitment of teachers to their students' learning must also be emphasized: the teacher sets high expectations and tries a variety of methods to engage students in productive learning tasks. If students are not learning, good teachers do not blame them or look for scapegoats: they seek other approaches. In other words, they expect students to learn, and hold themselves and their students accountable. Caring, however fundamental it is, is not enough: what it provides is the underlying moral foundation on which to base professional practice.

2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach the material to students: in other words, they know how to make knowledge accessible to students

Everyone acknowledges that teachers must know and understand the material they are teaching. They must be able to approach issues from a variety of perspectives, and to plan several alternative paths to understanding basic concepts. It is not always clear, however, how much and what kind of subject knowledge is required. As one researcher noted:

The evidence that knowledge of a subject is not enough to make a teacher is plain to anyone who has ever seen a Ph.D. in mathematics thoroughly confuse a freshman calculus class.(6)

Skilled teachers not only appreciate how students' prior understanding or misconceptions interfere with their learning, but can also intervene to overcome those difficulties. For instance, they can explain and demonstrate concepts in several different ways, so that students who have trouble with one approach may be better able to understand another path to learning.

Teachers need to be competent in a range of teaching strategies and methodologies. Because no one approach can be guaranteed to work with all students, teachers use their professional judgment to draw from a repertoire of possibilities, taking into account such student differences as diverse backgrounds and different rates of readiness for learning new material. Teachers who make the effort to use different modes of presentation and curriculum delivery such as direct instruction, co-operative small group learning, guided practice, cross-age tutoring, simulations, and student contracts, and who use a variety of instructional materials including text, graphic images, video, and audio tapes, are likely to reach more students than those who depend heavily on only one or two techniques.

The question of teaching methods is at the heart of several educational controversies. For example, the issue of "phonics" versus "whole language" as methods for teaching children to read has been the subject of intense public debate. Researchers and educators, however, have increasingly found a constructive middle ground between the rock of "whole language" and the hard place of "phonics," drawing from both approaches: the challenge now is for teachers to use this knowledge to launch all children into literacy. "Becoming literate means expanding our language...and becoming able to read and write this expanded language as fluently as we speak and hear it."(7)

Teachers must believe that all students can learn, must communicate this belief to students, and then commit themselves to working to helping students achieve success, most crucially by providing a demanding and academically challenging program. Although it may seem obvious, teachers, no matter how well meaning, who sometimes "make allowances" for minority or disadvantaged students, and expect less of them, will not help them learn.

Teachers must also be aware of the way children's language competence affects learning and their ability to give evidence of it. This is particularly important for teachers whose classes include students with limited proficiency in English or in French: teachers need to use their understanding to help students

learn content, to think, and to communicate their knowledge to others.

Teachers can assist students from diverse backgrounds by providing connections that help them move from home to school. Such connections link students' life experiences to the kinds of instruction they receive in school, and thus help them make sense of their new learning. Teachers who understand and value what students bring to the classroom can build on students' prior knowledge: for instance, when the teacher is discussing farms or agriculture, students from Africa or Latin America may make little sense of the usual references to Canadian crops and animals. A skilful teacher uses examples of crops and animals with which these students are familiar. Not only do they better understand the ideas being taught, but Canadian-born students learn from the experience of students from other countries. Without such supportive bridges, students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have difficulty grasping and making use of what is being taught.

3. Guided by clear goals, teachers organize and monitor student learning

Good teachers can say clearly what their goals are for student learning. They gather resources and plan lessons with those goals in mind, and they have a variety of ways of judging whether the goals are met. They do not ask students to participate in classroom activities without a clear sense of how such activities will bring them closer to specific learning goals.

Organizing learning also involves managing time in the classroom. The key objectives are to prevent disruptions, increase the time actually available for learning, and keep students engaged in the learning activities. This does not mean that well-managed classrooms are highly controlled or "run with an iron hand." On the contrary, when routines are well thought out, consistently maintained, and understood by students, classrooms may seem, to an observer, to almost run themselves. Managing student learning also involves making work both challenging and interesting. Although basic skills are critical, advanced and higher-level thinking skills can and should be taught at the same time.

In whole-class teaching, maintaining interest and challenging students means pacing work appropriately. In dealing with small groups, it means ensuring that each student is assigned a particular responsibility for completing the group task, so that no student is left idle or marginalized.

As well, teachers do not leave to chance the development of the skills students need in the classroom, for instance, for working together in groups. Taking turns, disagreeing in an agreeable manner, asking for others' views, and other processes of interaction should be explicitly taught. Of course, some children come to school with some of these skills, and may even use them without explicit instruction, but it would be counterproductive to rely on that being the case.

Another important aspect of teaching is that of reinforcing learning and giving students feedback so they can learn from past performance and continue to improve.

Learning is enhanced when students understand what is expected of them, get recognition for their work, learn about their errors and receive guidance in improving their performance.(8)

Monitoring how well students are learning is vital for successful teaching. Teachers need to be well informed about various assessment practices, and must flexibly and appropriately employ a range of measures. Observations of students in class, portfolios of their work, class discussion, and paper-and-pencil tests - all these are tools for evaluating student learning. Good teachers know that the

point of testing students is to improve and focus instruction, so all students can do well.

Good teachers also report progress fully and accurately to students and their parents. In doing so, they value clarity, avoiding "edubabble." Teachers give feedback to students (and, ideally, to parents as well) on an on-going basis, often informally. They also provide more formal feedback to both students and parents through report cards and student/teacher or parent/teacher conferences. (Our position on assessment and reporting is developed more fully in Chapter 11.)

4. Teachers do not always work in isolation; they learn from and collaborate with others, including students, colleagues, parents, and the community

Although effective teachers have probably always been able to reach beyond themselves and their classrooms to draw on resources, working collaboratively is now crucial if schools are to meet the needs of all children. The traditional isolation of the teacher is no longer adequate. Teachers increasingly recognize that there are many viewpoints and that they can draw on various resources to meet student learning needs. Teachers who successfully involve parents in their children's learning will reap rewards in terms of increased student success.

Teachers may work with their colleagues in various ways: for example, by team teaching, collaborative planning, curriculum development, or supporting new teachers. Teachers can learn from their colleagues, as they share insights, questions, techniques, and suggestions, in person or through electronic networking. Teachers who collaborate with one another in planning and delivering the program are also modeling for their students the importance of working and learning together.

Schools must become more open to parents, students, and the community. Teachers can work more closely with parents, involve students in making suggestions and choices about learning activities, and draw on the community where appropriate.

5. Teachers critically examine their own practice, and continue to learn throughout their careers

If there ever was a time when teachers could rely on established routines and methods of teaching, they can do so no longer: now, they must be able to adapt to new demands and circumstances. Teachers look carefully at their own practices, learn about their students, and experiment with new ideas. With the rapid expansion of knowledge in many fields, teachers read widely and keep up with their profession.

At the same time, they recognize that they cannot look to research or to other practitioners for unambiguous prescriptions about how to teach: teaching is a complex and subtle activity, dependent on subject matter, student characteristics, and classroom context. The research on good or effective teaching can provide no more than general guidelines for real teachers in real classrooms. On-going judgments are called for as teachers "read" complex situations and improvise responses based on their knowledge and experience.

The availability of new technologies as vehicles for teaching and learning has also changed the nature of teaching. If they are to guide students effectively, teachers must become comfortable with this technology. All classrooms need computers, and all teachers and students need to become skilled at using them for a variety of tasks to reach a variety of goals.

We need teachers for whom the science and technology of teaching is continually developing and for whom the job is fundamentally an art which they study, reflect on, and refine throughout their careers.(9)

If teachers are expected to continue to develop their expertise, they must have systematic opportunities to reflect, to learn, and to discuss issues with others.

These five principles, or characteristics, can be seen as a framework for teachers who are continuing to learn throughout their careers. Whereas very experienced and expert teachers can be characterized as having a high level of development in each dimension, newer teachers will be at an earlier stage, particularly in terms of the skills involved in managing and monitoring student learning, and in being able to work collaboratively with others beyond the classroom.

Good teachers in their schools

Teachers increasingly work, not only directly with students in the classroom, but in the broader school community, with colleagues, administrators, and parents. Good teachers, no matter how outstanding, do not exist in a vacuum. In Chapter 4, we argued that responsibilities must be clarified so that schools can meet student needs and maintain public confidence. We believe that teachers must focus primarily (but not exclusively) on developing academic competence, which we interpret as involving a range of literacies and numeracies, and that teachers and schools must work with others in the community to help meet important non-academic needs.

Good teaching, as described here, means that we are expecting a great deal from teachers. Such expectations are realistic only if teachers receive strong support in their schools, and if professional preparation and on-going professional development focus on the skills and knowledge that are vital to success.

Teachers are not alone in schools: principals and vice-principals have a critical role to play, and, as we emphasize throughout our report, so do other community agencies and resources.

Conclusion

We have stressed that the Commission sees teaching as complex, difficult, and supremely important. The five principles provide a vision of good teaching that can guide policy and practice in Ontario schools.

The role of teachers has changed over the past ten years. Teachers not only work directly with students in the classroom, but also, as part of their role as education professionals, contribute to and draw from the world beyond the classroom door, in the school and in the broader community.⁽¹⁰⁾ As we argue in Chapter 12, a renewed commitment to teacher education and professional support will be necessary to ensure that teachers are able to play their pivotal roles in our restructured school system; and we look in more depth at the kind of working environment that best supports good teaching and how teachers can take more responsibility for their profession. We examine how teachers and school administrators should be prepared, and how to provide the on-going professional development that can ensure the career-long learning that is part and parcel of life as an education professional.

Endnotes (Chapter 6)

1. National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, "What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do," in *Toward High and Rigorous Standards for the Teaching Profession*, 3rd edition (Detroit and Washington, DC: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1991). In developing our principles, we drew extensively on work by the National Board.
2. Some sources for further reading include:
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 - John I. Goodlad, *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
 - John I. Goodlad, *Educational Renewal: Better Teachers, Better Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
 - David Pratt, *Curriculum Planning: A Handbook for Professionals* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994).
 - Robert Slavin, "Cooperative Learning," *Review of Educational Research* 50 (1980): 315-42.
3. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).
4. Noddings, *Challenge to Care in Schools*, p. 27.
5. R.W. Connell, *Schools and Social Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 63.
6. N.L. Gage, "What Do We Know about Teaching Effectiveness?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 6, no. 2 (1984): 87-93.
7. Andrew Biemiller and David Booth, "Towards Higher Levels of Literacy in Ontario," p. 10. Paper prepared for the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, 1994.
8. John Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984), p. 111.
9. Michael Fullan, Michael Connelly, and Nancy Watson, *Teacher Education in Ontario: Current Practice and Options for the Future* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education and Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 1990).
10. Dennis Thiessen and Ruth Pike, *Project 95+: The Image of the Teacher* (Toronto: Teacher Education Council, Ontario, 1992).

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