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Why Does Teaching Matter?

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.

—Henry Brooks Adams

A conversation between Sir Thomas More and Richard Rich, a younger associate, regarding Richard's future plans: More: "Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one." Rich: "And if I was, who would know it?" More: "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public at that . . ."

—Bolt (*A Man for All Seasons*, 1962)

Focus Questions

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word *teacher*?
 2. When did you first know you wanted to become a teacher?
 3. What impact can a teacher have on the life of a student?
 4. Why do you think teachers are undervalued members of society? Justify a position in which teaching is as *noble* as law or medicine.
 5. How can teaching serve as a spiritual endeavor or a calling?
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Life is a ceaseless journey. Who we are, what we decide to do, and how we do it are influenced by a multitude of factors. We are a composite of our genetic makeup, the influence of our parents, our environment, our experiences, and even social and political forces. Our personal strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, educational decisions, opportunities presented to us, help we receive from others along the

Teaching is personally and socially meaningful.

way, and the many personal choices we all make influence our thoughts, speech, and actions. Why does someone go into teaching? Dan Lortie (1977), in a classic sociological study of American

teachers, examined several primary reasons why people he interviewed became teachers. Aside from the more mundane explanations relating to material benefits and the desire to interact with people, Lortie and other researchers who came after him discovered that more fundamental and profound influences included the desire to engage in work that is personally and socially meaningful.

Recollection

I always wanted to become a teacher. I recall how I used to force my sister, four years my junior, to sit and take a test I prepared for her. Despite her protestations, I made her sit to take the exams. I'm not proud of what I did, but I do recall the intense joy I felt using my red pen to mark her answers wrong and to award a grade. The sense of power and authority I felt was uplifting. I regret, of course, coercing my sister in those days (happily, she has forgiven me). I've matured since then, fortunately, to realize that teaching is not a matter of serving as an authority figure but, rather, helping another human being to achieve new insights and potential. I've come to realize that helping someone else is both personally and socially important.

What are your first recollections about considering teaching as your career? Why have you decided to teach? Why does teaching matter?

Form 1.1 RESPOND—Is teaching for you?

RESPOND Is teaching for you?				
<i>SA = Strongly Agree ("For the most part, yes")</i> <i>A = Agree ("Yes, but . . . ")</i> <i>D = Disagree ("No, but . . . ")</i> <i>SD = Strongly Disagree ("For the most part, no")</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I get asked for help a lot, and I have a hard time saying no.				
2. When I meet a person, I'll give that individual the benefit of the doubt; in other words, I'll like him until he gives me a reason not to.				
3. People usually like me.				
4. I'm happiest interacting with people and aiding them in some way.				
5. People tell me I have a great sense of humor.				
6. I'm good at smoothing over others' conflicts and helping to mediate them.				
7. I believe that respect for authority is one of the cornerstones of good character.				
8. I feel I'm good at supervising a small group of people, and I enjoy doing so.				
9. I want my life to mean something.				
10. I am more spiritual than most of my friends.				

ANALYZING YOUR RESPONSES

Note that the items are drawn from one of my previous books (Glanz, 2002) *Finding Your Leadership Style: A Guide for Educators*, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. For a more detailed analysis, please refer to that work. Suffice it to say here that if you answered SA or A to the items in Form 1.1, you are well suited to teaching as a career. Don't allow any one survey to sway you one way or another, but effective teachers, generally, are naturally inclined to help others; are caring, sensitive individuals; and possess a strong desire to make a difference.

Education is much more than transmitting some set of prescribed cultural, societal, or institutional values or ideas. Education is an ongoing, spirited engagement of self-understanding and discovery. Etymologically, the word *education* comes from its Latin root *educare*, meaning to draw out or to lead. That is, in fact, our goal as educators—to draw out that unique latent potential within each student. As Smith (cited in Slattery, 1995, p. 73) poignantly explains, “education cannot simply tell us what we are, but what we hope to become.” When we teach our students, regardless of the subject, we serve as a catalyst for them to reach their potential. A fundamental human quest is the search for meaning. The process of education becomes a lifelong journey of self-exploration, discovery, and empowerment. Teachers play a vital role in helping students attain deep understanding. As Rachel Kessler (2000) concludes in her *The Soul of Education*,

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor our students’ search for what *they* believe gives meaning and integrity to their lives, and how they can connect to what is most precious for them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people can discover what is essential in their own lives and in life itself, and what allows them to bring their own gifts to the world. (p. 171)

As educators, we affirm the possibilities for human growth and understanding. Education embodies growth and possibility, while teachers translate these ideals into action by inspiring young minds, developing capacities to wonder and become, and facilitating an environment conducive for exploring the depths of one’s being. The capacity for heightened consciousness, the emphasis on human value and responsibility, and the quest of becoming are quintessential goals. Teaching thus becomes not only meaningful and important, but also exciting.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary teachers. We need teachers who can challenge others to excellence, and teachers who love what they do.

Teachers

- Challenge others to excellence
- Love what they do
- Help students achieve their potential
- Help students understand why and how to treat others with respect, dignity, and compassion

We need teachers who help students achieve their potential, and teachers who help students understand why and how to treat others with respect, dignity, and compassion.

Haim Ginott (1993) made the point that education is more than teaching knowledge and skills in dramatic fashion when he related a message sent by a principal to his teachers on the first day of school:

Dear Teacher:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by *learned* engineers.

Children poisoned by *educated* physicians.

Infants killed by *trained* nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by *high school* and *college* graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane. (p. 317)

The challenges of teaching are certainly awesome. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of student interest, absenteeism, lack of preparedness, high incidence of misbehavior, and lack of parental support, compounded by social problems such as drugs, unstable family life, teenage pregnancy, poverty, child abuse, violence, and crime, give pause to think. But think again. If not for these challenges, the rewards of teaching would not be so great. Our work matters. We make a difference. Listen to the words of praise this fourth grader has for her teacher:

Cherished Memories of Mrs. Siblo

As the flowers blossom

The weather gets warmer

And time is still passing.

June has approached quicker than ever.

Another school year is coming to an end;

And I won't have Mrs. Siblo as my teacher ever again.

I feel kind of sad to say goodbye

To the greatest teacher that once was mine.

Before I go to achieve another full year,

I want you to know that the memories
I have of you will be cherished
And remembered every year.
As we were passing through the halls of PS 42
We were, quiet and not talking,
For we knew better, Class 4–227.
You made me laugh, you made me feel bright,
You guided me to always do right.
You taught me math,
And led me down the right path.
You taught me to spell
And use vocabulary well.
You taught me punctuation and capitalization.
You taught me reading,
And that was a great feeling.
Your evil eye is sweet, and kept me on my feet.
You were not an artist,
But you sure tried your hardest.
All the good you have taught me,
All the hard work we've shared,
Mrs. Siblo, you are indeed the greatest teacher
I've once had
I sure am going to miss you, I cannot tell a lie.
I better end this poem now before I start to cry
With my heart filled with memories and gratitude,
I will always remember you.
You made an impression that will stick with me,
Even while I earn my master's degree.

Dana Criscuolo
PS 42, Eltingville
Staten Island, New York

Not convinced? Listen to Dov Brezak (2002) relate the tremendous power of expressing and showing we care, that we do make a difference:

One public school teacher in New York decided to give a tribute to all her students. She called them to the front of the class, one at a time, and told each one of them how he or she had made a difference to her and to the class. Then she presented each of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters that read, “Who I am makes a difference.”

Then, as a class project, she gave each student three more of the blue ribbons, and instructed the class to use the ribbons to show similar recognition to others. Students were to report back to the class on their experiences a week later.

One of the boys in the class went to a junior executive he knew and thanked him for his help in planning his career. The boy attached a blue ribbon to the executive’s shirt, and then gave him the two ribbons that were left. “We’re doing a class project on recognition,” he explained, “and we’d like you to find someone to honor. Present that person with a blue ribbon, and ask him or her to use the other ribbon to honor someone else as you honored him.”

Later that day, the junior executive went in to his boss, who was known as a grouchy fellow. He asked his boss to sit down, and he told him that he admired him deeply. He asked if he could place the blue ribbon on his jacket. Surprised, his boss said, “Well, sure!” Then the junior executive gave his boss the extra ribbon. “Would you take this ribbon and honor someone else with it?” And he explained about his young friend’s class project.

That night, the boss came home and sat with his 14-year-old son. “The most incredible thing happened to me today,” he told his son. “One of my junior executives came in, told me he admired me, and pinned this blue ribbon that says, ‘Who I am makes a difference,’ on my jacket. He gave me an extra ribbon, and told me to find someone else to honor.

“I want to honor you. My days are really hectic, and when I come home, I don’t pay a lot of attention to you. Sometimes I scream at you for not getting good enough grades in school, or for the mess in your bedroom. But somehow tonight I just wanted to sit here and tell you that you make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You’re a great kid, and I love you.”

The startled boy cried and cried, his whole body shaking. Finally he looked up at his father, and through his tears he said, “I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, Dad, because I didn’t think you loved me. Now I don’t need to.”

Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, for indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” It is up to each of us to change our world, touch a life, and to make a difference. We are involved in what Gary Zukav (2000) calls “sacred tasks.” In his words,

Teaching is a sacred task.

Your sacred task is part of the agreement that your soul made with the Universe before you were born. When you are doing it, you are happy and fulfilled. You know that you are in a special and wonderful place. . . . When you are not doing your sacred task, you are miserable. (p. 241)

People have different sacred tasks. For some, starting a business might serve as a path for fulfillment; for others, it might be to raise a family or cook. For us, it is teaching. Sharing, guiding, assisting, communicating, praising, encouraging . . . touching another’s soul. Moving them to realization and understanding. Recognize your sacred task. Never forget why you are a teacher. Each of us entered teaching to make a difference in the lives of our students. We see the uniqueness of each child and try our utmost to light that spark of potential that lies dormant within. We realize that our task also is not just to help our students do well in school, but, more important, to succeed in life. We encourage our children by teaching them to be caring, moral, and productive members of society.

In the end, our destination is to create a vision of possibilities for our students; a journey of self-discovery. I am reminded of Robert Browning’s observation that “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?” Browning gives us a moral message and serves as a moral compass. As we work against tough odds, we persevere. In doing so, we inspire our students to achieve excellence. We play a vital role. We shape lives. We touch the future. Christa McAuliffe was right.

The Boris Pasternak poem from *Dr. Zhivago* is a fitting conclusion to this chapter. Or shall I say a beginning—a beginning of hope and possibility, of responsibility and vision.

You in others—this is what you are.

Your soul, your immortality, your life in others.

Our legacy is the future.

Our students are the future.

And now what?

You have always been in others and you remain in others.

This will be you—the spirit that enters the future

And becomes a part of it.

Our legacy is the future, our students. And that's why teaching matters.

Follow-Up Questions/Activities

1. Interview an experienced teacher and ask why he or she has remained a teacher.
2. Read some biographies of great teachers such as Anne Sullivan Macy (teacher of Helen Keller), Jaime Escalante, and so forth.
3. How are teachers portrayed in movies and television? Are these portrayals realistic? Explain. (See Bolotin & Burnaford, 2001). Movies such as: *Lean on Me*, *Coach Carter*, *Freedom Riders*, *Akeelah and the Bee*, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, and *Matilda*
4. Describe a teacher you know who personifies the ideals espoused in this chapter. What sets him or her apart from others?
5. How can the ideas and ideals discussed in this chapter assist you in refining your educational philosophy?