
Preface

If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.

—Ignacio Estrada

The greatest sign of success for a teacher . . . is to be able to say, "The children are now working as if I did not exist."

—Maria Montessori

What Is a Teacher?

Parents are a child's first teachers, but somehow parents lose some of that notion as the child grows, especially after the child leaves elementary school. Slowly, the parents turn over the teaching to the schools. How do we help parents to retain that identity and role of teacher and stay involved? Try to widen your paradigm for what a teacher is, where and when learning takes place, and how the community, parents, and other caregivers can be empowered as teachers. It is the goal of this book to help teachers and schools in the K–12 paradigm continue to keep parents, families, and communities in the educational mix.

All of us, from the day we are born, learn within and from a huge range of life experiences that are lived and experienced formally and informally, sometimes intended and sometimes coincidental. Buddhist philosophy says that a teacher appears when the student is ready. Children learn a language before they are 5 years old, and most of it is learned without the help of a formal teacher. This bit of wisdom within the philosophy suggests that there are teachers around us all the time. The goal, then, is to do everything possible to develop a ready and willing student. What circumstances and set of experiences produce a ready and willing student?

Sometimes children are teachable because of simple curiosity. Curiosity is a gift from birth, and ambition is the sibling of curiosity. Let's think about what passes as a decent education and how students and teachers perform their respective roles, measure their contributions, and collaborate in the outcome of learning.

The way we teach in America doesn't guarantee anything. There are wonderful people with minimal formal education or specialized training who do wonderful things, and there are others with multiple degrees from very good schools who do little in life. In the American system of learning, within an open society operating in a marketplace culture, learning opportunities and professional participation are open to all. The downside to this availability is that universally accepted standards in teaching, learning, and success in this system are not always predictable or easily defined. People rarely agree on what we should teach, when and how we should teach it, and exactly what will lead to success outside the classroom.

So under what circumstances does our educational system produce ready and willing students? Students usually come to the classroom seeking mastery over materials, processes, and content. Early in a student's school career, teaching to these goals is enough. However, we serve our students best once we introduce the deeper, more complex, and very personal engagement that produces the greatest motivation and achievement over longer periods of time. Knowledge and skill without soul are common and ordinary. With soul and passion, knowledge and skill can become extraordinary. Teachers teach and students study, but somewhere down the road we all become responsible for our own education, and the only way we can be sure our knowledge base and our mind-set are sufficient is to plan on being a student for the rest of our lives.

To do this, we all need to be able to see everyone as a potential mentor, surround ourselves with teachers, and become part of a community of curious learners. Rarely will the world come looking for us. Teachers can be powerful people in the lives of students. Whether we like it or not, how we teach and what we teach subliminally tell students what we think is important. Avoiding parents is not an option as we nurture lifelong learners. We need to consider parents and the community as important resources and potential teachers.

For a high school science research class a number of years ago, mentors were coming in to work with students on their projects. We had two mentors from a water chemistry and aquatic biology lab: a marine ecologist from a local university and a fish specialist from Trout Unlimited. We had other professionals from a variety of disciplines. Some of the mentors were parents of students in the high school, and others were community members who wanted to work with kids. The mentors came to the class every Friday for a full year, or the students left to work off-campus with their mentors. They worked on a variety of local science-related projects together. I was in teaching heaven! My job as a science teacher morphed into that of a manager of learning. This was the Buddhist philosophy at work. There are indeed teachers around us, all the time, and many of them were in my classroom! All I needed to do was meet the goal to do everything possible to develop ready and willing students and surround them with potential teachers. My job was to connect the students with the mentors and support the mentors as they developed the teaching skills they

needed to seal their relationships with the students. They were excited and willing but needed help.

What Do Parents Want?

Let's examine what parents want. In many school districts across the United States, parents can express a preference for their child's school-teacher. Given that all teachers have distinct strengths and weaknesses, the requests that parents make may provide insight into the things they value in education.

In their 2005 study, *What Do Parents Value in Education? An Empirical Investigation of Parents' Revealed Preferences for Teachers*, Brian Jacob and Lars Lefgren reported findings that are somewhat surprising. It seems that, on average, parents of elementary students strongly prefer teachers whom principals describe as the most popular with students—that is, those who are good at promoting student satisfaction. In contrast, parents place relatively less value on a teacher's ability to raise standardized mathematics or reading achievement scores. This suggests that “softer” teacher attributes may be quite important to parents. However, the average preference masks striking differences across family demographics.

Families with children in higher poverty and minority schools in the district strongly value student achievement. When they make requests, they are more likely to pick teachers who provide high “value” in terms of student achievement scores and teachers whom the principal rates highly in terms of factors such as organization, classroom management, and enhancing student achievement. However, these parents were essentially indifferent to the principal's report of a teacher's ability to promote student satisfaction. Interestingly, the results are exactly reversed for families in higher income schools. These parents are most likely to request teachers whom the principal describes as a good role model and/or good at promoting student satisfaction. They do not choose teachers who provide high value in terms of student achievement or who receive high scores in the organization, management, and content strength areas from their principal.

The authors (Jacob & Lefgren, 2005) suggested several potential explanations for this finding. First, they noted that education should be viewed as a consumer good as well as an investment and that it is possible that wealthier parents simply place a higher premium on the consumption value of schooling. Second, the authors noted that these findings are consistent with a declining marginal utility of achievement on the part of parents. In other words, wealthier parents may believe their children already have something of a head start in basic reading and math skills, so they value a strictly achievement-oriented teacher less highly than do more disadvantaged parents whose children may not have these basic skills. More generally, these results suggested that what parents want from

school is likely to depend on family circumstances as well as on parent preferences. Fair enough; so the next question for teachers is what do they want from their parents and community?

What Do Teachers Want From Parents?

The research (Jacob & Lefgren, 2005) suggested that parents have a clear idea regarding their preferences for teachers. What do teachers want from parents and the community, and how can they get it? The answers to these two questions depend on the teacher and how he or she has come to view parents and community.

If you buy in to a wider view of what constitutes a teacher and when and where you can find teachers, then avoiding parents is not an option as we nurture curious, lifelong learners. Community, families, and parents are important necessities. We need to consider parents and the community as important resources. Everyone in the student's life has the potential to be a teacher.

It is part of a teacher's job to connect the motivated and willing student with the appropriate formal and informal teacher, and the timing for this magic does not always place the students in the classroom. When students need to learn something and when they are willing to learn, parents, families, and the community can offer the greatest opportunities for this to happen. It's the school and classroom teacher's job to facilitate these relationships.

This book is about making this happen. It is about empowering parents, families, caregivers, and community members to become teachers and mentors. This book brings together the strategies that work for helping parents, families, and others become better at being teachers, both in the classroom and in the community. Again, teachers teach and students study; but somewhere down the road we all become responsible for our own education, and we all need to help students recognize learning opportunities both in and out of class.

It's important to teach your students that most of their learning will take place once they leave your classroom, over their lifetime of work and achievement. Prepare them for it, and help others in the student's life to help with the task. Hopefully the strategies in this book will help you as you work with parents, families, and other community members to fulfill the notion that a teacher will appear when the student is ready.

Source

Jacob, B. A., & Lefgren, L. (2005, July). *What do parents value in education? An empirical investigation of parents' revealed preferences for teachers*. KSG Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP05-043 (also NBER Working Paper 11494).