

What Makes a Good Teacher

Every parent wants her child to have a good, if not great, teacher. The question of what makes a great teacher is a complex one but I would like to offer some thoughts on what we can look for in determining the quality of the professionals in our schools' classrooms.

First, teachers need to be experts in whatever subject matter they have the responsibility for teaching. The math teacher needs to know math and the science teacher needs to know science. It's not enough to just know the subject matter, however; teachers should be passionate and curious about the subjects they are teaching. The more interested and excited they are about the subject the more excitement they can communicate to their students. The more teachers know about a subject the more they understand the possibilities for student engagement with the wonders of math, science, or whatever. Knowing their subject matter also allows teachers to stay more than just a day ahead of their students; they are able plan curriculum activities that will hold students' interests over longer periods of time.

Teachers also need to know - and be fascinated by - the subject matter of children's development. For example, it's not enough to know the subject matter of math; in order to best connect children's minds to the subject matter, teachers need to understand children's thinking and how children come to grasp the workings of mathematics. No matter what the class is called, in the end teachers don't teach a subject matter, they teach children.

In addition to knowledge of subject matter, teachers need to be students of teaching; they need to be continually looking for the best methods for helping children learn. This is a challenging task because all children learn differently so teachers have to be able to adjust their teaching methods to meet the needs of the particular children in their classrooms. As far as teaching goes, the reality is that one size does not fit all.

A good teacher also recognizes that she isn't the only one who influences the learning of the children in her classroom and she looks for ways to form and build partnerships with other teachers, building staff, and parents. These partnerships are built on a sense of respect and cooperation and a

belief that nothing is more important than the education and well-being of the children.

One of the most important qualities of a good teacher is dedication and commitment. You can't be a good teacher if you see the job as being contained within a nine to five workday. It may be a cliché, but for the best teachers the profession is not just a job, but a calling. They accept the fact that they will get to work early, leave late, and spend evening and weekends thinking about ways in which they can make that science lesson a little bit more interesting. Good teachers accept the fact that they will need to continue developing their skills by reading, taking classes, and attending workshops. Good teachers realize that they won't be able to reach each and every student but good teachers never stop trying.

If these are some of the qualities that make up a good teacher, are good teachers born or made? The answer, I think, is both. Good teachers are the products of good training; they have had a strong education in subject matter and received strong training in the methods of teaching. But I also think that there may be a quality that could be called the "soul" of a good teacher; a concept that speaks to the patience, dedication, commitment, and respect that the good teacher brings to her interactions with students and to her love of the profession.

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