



# Teaching The Teachers

Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher  
(Japanese proverb)

## Dr Michael Nagel explains what goes in to making an excellent educator.

Study after study shows that the single most important factor determining the quality of the education a child receives is the quality of their teacher. Teaching is not an easy profession and great teachers can be rare, because teaching, like many other occupations, is a craft. There are some distinct skills associated with teaching that most people are not born knowing. Yes, some people are naturals when it comes to working with students and they seem to develop the skills by intuition. Most are not, however, and need extensive training before they can function at a professional level.

So how does one go about preparing future generations of teachers for the noble task of preparing future generations of students? This is a question that many teacher-educators face each and every day as they plan programs and courses to ensure that those who go out into schools offer their students something “Better than a thousand days of diligent study”.

I would like to share with you some thoughts on the trials and tribulations that often face those who are teaching future teachers and what some of the ‘magic’ ingredients are for making a ‘great’ teacher.

I have been a student, a student-teacher and a teacher, and am now in the business of teaching future teachers. Therefore I can offer a variety of perspectives for parents and educators alike. My ideas are not, by any means, a prescription for teacher success or teacher accountability, but rather an indication for parents of what goes into preparing future teachers and what, ironically, cannot be taught.

The complex nature of teaching requires broad knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and standards; an understanding of the nature of learning and behaviour; enthusiasm, empathy and a love of learning; knowledge of discipline and classroom-management techniques; the ability to take on myriad responsibilities and roles each day; the art of diplomacy; and a desire to make a difference in the lives of young people. So it’s no wonder that great teachers are rare or that producing a great teacher is a difficult task. Teacher-educators must deliver the latest theories of learning and teaching, practise what they preach and, with the assistance of schools and teacher-mentors in the field, monitor progress in practical situations. Yet all the theories and training in the world are not enough to fully prepare one for being in charge of a classroom.

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When I entered university for the first time with a desire to teach, I remember thinking, 'What could be so difficult about working with students?' Open a book, do some exercises, provide some answers and presto – I am teaching.' The reality of my naivety came crashing home on one of my first placements as a student-teacher when I was left in charge of a Year 2 class for about an hour. During this time a young boy came up to me and asked to borrow a stapler. With a smile and a pat on the shoulder, I provided him with what was to become an instrument of torture. Not long after returning to his desk, that same boy put his hand up and told me he was going to staple his finger. I believed this to be the nonsense of a child and ignored his claims – until a shrill squeal resounded around the classroom. To my shock, this child had done what he said he would do and had driven a staple through his right index finger. No amount of theory professed by university lecturers prepared me for that event, and no amount of arrogance could overcome the fact that there was indeed a great deal to know that would remain unknown until I had my own class and built on my experience.

Much of what student-teachers receive is a balance between theory and skill development. However, a classroom is often made up of more than 20 individuals with a range of personalities, strengths, weaknesses, developmental timelines and experiences. That is why schools play such an important role in developing teachers. Some would argue that the opportunity for 'on the job' training is more important than the theories espoused in a lecture. I would like to think that both are equally important, and must also note the significant contributions made by teacher-mentors who give up their time to assist in the development of teachers.

As well as theory, skills and practical experiences, there are certain intangibles, or what we might call personal attributes, that are part and parcel of being a great teacher. Many of these are invisible, in that

we cannot measure an individual's level of sincerity when they espouse that they love children or enjoy working with children. The desire or love for working with students is not always easily maintained, but a great teacher loves the environment of learning and the opportunity to be an important part of all students' lives no matter what challenges present themselves. Knowing the theories and facts about teaching is very important, but future teachers must also enjoy being around students, have a passion for making what they teach meaningful and understandable, and have a deep desire to really 'know' their students.

Parents often ask me, as a teacher-educator, how they can identify a 'great' teacher. The short answer is that no single model exists for identifying or training a 'great' teacher. At the university level, we take what research tells us are important skills and try to impart them to our students. We also recognise that teaching is one of the most complicated jobs, and as teacher-educators we face a doubly difficult task: we must do our utmost to produce great teachers, while also being role models for future teachers. Talking the talk and walking the talk is not always an easy task!

On a technical and skills-based level, great teachers: are prepared and well-organised; have clearly articulated goals and objectives that can be seen in their planning and practice; set high expectations for all students; and motivate and engage students, while always offering a range of approaches to learning and perspectives on various tasks and issues. They are excellent communicators, with a clear and concise understanding of the nuances of language so that they can explain concepts and abstract thoughts in terms that students can understand. They also communicate frequently with parents.

Great teachers know the content they must teach. They demonstrate mastery of their subject area and confidence in their ability. They also spend time continuing to gain new knowledge in their field of



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expertise and in professional development. They know how to present material in an enthusiastic manner and how to instil a hunger in their students to learn more on their own. They form strong relationships with their students, show that they care about them as people, and always remember that they are teaching students, not subjects.

In terms of personal attributes and those things that cannot be taught, research tells us that great teachers have humility. They do not pretend to know something they do not, but demonstrate that they are learners too. It takes a great deal of courage for a teacher to say, 'I don't know, but let's find the answer together'. Great teachers possess patience and empathy, and understand that no two children are completely alike, having a range of temperaments, personalities and dispositions, and requiring tact and

patience when they encounter difficulties. They have the ability to relate to other people and the capacity to bring out the best in them. They have a positive disposition: they are able to encourage students to always do their best and they make it known that a mistake is also a learning experience. Great teachers have a passion for children, learning and teaching.

Each day we seem to learn a little bit more about great teachers. But one of the fundamental messages that teacher-educators attempt to burn into the psyche of aspiring teachers is that great teachers have students who are happy and engaged in learning so that the best can be brought out in each and every one of them. ■

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