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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

The Learning Profession

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Socrates is known to us, centuries after his death, as a great teacher. Schools of education still talk about the Socratic Method of teaching, and new teachers aspire to this great figure's success with his pupils. However, none of them aspires to his place in history. Today's teachers do not enter the profession with hopes of fame or fortune, but for a host of other reasons.

Good Teachers are Professional Learners

What inspires people to choose this career path? When I interview candidates for teaching positions, I always ask them what motivated them to make this choice. While the answers vary, in many cases teachers chose this career path because they themselves are excited about the learning process. They sometimes cite experiences with inspirational teachers that touched their imaginations in profound ways. They sometimes describe school settings that turned them on to learning. Whatever the source of inspiration, these teachers have discovered the thrill of the educational process of exploration, discovery and mastery, and they aspire to live that process throughout their lives, both in school and out. They want to be professional learners.

Neuroscience confirms the role of pleasure in the learning process. Whether in small moments or in more dramatic instances, the dopamine rush that the brain experiences when learners achieve mastery is addictive in the best sense, drawing the human brain towards the repetition of that experience. When teachers are themselves professional learners, they are modeling this passionate experience of

learning for their students. They are enticing students to crave the same neurochemical response to learning that they experience whenever they master new material. What we hope for is that our students will leave our schools with that same addiction already well developed. In other words, we want them to be lifelong learners. Success in the 21st century more than ever calls for them to approach life with an endless capacity and drive for learning.

Independent Schools Incubate Learning

Independent schools serve their students by creating environments where teachers thrive. These environments cultivate a learning mindset for all of the staff, from administration to maintenance, from lunchroom aides to assistant teachers. Establishing such a culture among all staff ensures that faculty will benefit from the momentum of the entire staff community in pursuing their own growth. Full staff meetings can underscore these shared values.

Teachers talking with each other about their work offers another powerful learning opportunity within schools. The popular image of a teacher working alone in isolation behind closed doors is not a picture of a great teacher producing substantive student outcomes. To the contrary, research supports a direct correlation between faculty professional development and student achievement. Therefore schools organize their calendars and their schedules to include time for faculty to talk regularly as part of their professional growth, sometimes departmentally, sometimes as a full faculty, sometimes in special task forces, or in other configurations.

Because continual growth is such an important part of teachers' lives, independent schools budget professional development funds so that faculty can attend conferences and workshops outside of their own schools. Having multiple attendees at a conference makes collaboration easier, and asking attendees to report back to other

faculty extends the learning opportunities to a broader group of teachers. Schools with substantial professional development funds can also support graduate work on the part of faculty members. During the summer teachers will frequently spend time studying some subject in depth, through coursework or independent study or travel. Some schools prefer that activities funded by the school be directly related to subject matter, while others will fund any pursuit of learning as worthwhile in its own right. I encourage faculty to pursue any subject of interest to them, from cooking to math, and from painting to outdoor endurance. In my mind what makes the investment important is that the teachers are engaged in meaningful and challenging learning, just as we want students to be.

Looking for Teachers with a Growth Mindset

An essential step in building a faculty growth culture is to hire teachers who are excited about modeling learning for their students. Conversations in interviews usually elicit a sense of whether the teaching candidate shares this mindset. The interviewer is contemplating any number of questions as the candidate talks about himself. Is this person self-reflective? Is this teacher tuned into his students? Does the interviewee talk about how much and what he has learned as a teacher? Does this person talk about how he has modified lessons in response to student learning? Is the person open to new approaches, new resources and new perspectives? Has he pursued professional development options beyond required coursework for a degree, whether by presenting or publishing or taking a course in a related or even unrelated field?

Besides conducting interviews, most independent schools ask prospective teachers to teach a demonstration lesson to an existing class at the school where they're teaching candidates. Watching such a lesson is telling about a teacher's core values, as is the debriefing

with the candidate afterwards. Another set of questions runs through the observer's mind. Did the candidate seem to enjoy the experience? Did she appreciate what the students made of the sample lesson? Was she flexible in adapting the sample lesson to the circumstances? Did the prospective teacher create an opportunity for genuine learning to occur? Did it occur? Of course prospective teachers are often very nervous about these demo lessons, so sometimes the lesson is not a true reflection of that teacher's talents and values. Nonetheless, if

afterwards in conversation the candidate addresses the issue of what should have happened in a meaningful way, she may still present a growth mindset to the interviewer.

One of my memorable moments in hiring occurred

when I offered a position to a teacher who fainted during her demo lesson from a case of nerves. In the end, she turned out to be a gifted math teacher.

All different kinds of teachers can bring a growth mindset to their work. Some may be charismatic, while others may be reserved. Some may prefer being up front in the classroom, and others may seem more like sideline coaches. Very experienced teachers can have this mindset as much as brand new teachers. Students benefit from different teaching styles, just as they benefit from different personalities. What matters is the consistent passion for learning and the ability to share that passion with students.

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The New Paradigm of Teaching

On the flip side, new clinical studies in the field of education underscore the value of teaching as a means of learning. Dr. Robert

Greenleaf, a pioneer in connecting brain research to teaching and learning, describes teaching as the most effective tool for transferring information from short-term to long-term memory. In other

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words, teach something and you will remember it. Thus, while teachers who are professional learners are better teachers, students who participate in the teaching process are better students.

The digital revolution has helped clarify this new paradigm of teaching for us. For centuries before the information age, teachers were believed to own all information about their subject matter; they spent their teaching careers imparting their expertise to students, who were empty vessels waiting to receive that knowledge. Once the digital age arrived, students began to step into the role of the experts, while teachers became dependent on the students' knowledge of new technologies and how to use them. The new paradigm of teaching blurs the lines between teacher and student and underscores the dynamic interplay and overlap between teaching and learning.

I am reminded of an example of the reciprocity between students and teachers in my own experience as a teacher. For several consecutive years I taught a section of eighth-grade English. One year my eighth graders pleaded with me to teach *Lord of the Flies*. I told them I would not because I had taught it many times and was tired of it. They kept pleading, and for a long time I resisted. Finally, however, I gave in and taught the novel for the sixth time in six years. Much to my astonishment, I enjoyed teaching the book more than ever that year because my students made the novel an entirely new experience for me. Their hypotheses and their interpretations were sophisticated; the connections they drew were

exceptional and their conclusions completely their own. I learned a lot from them that year, and they were encouraged by my excitement in working with them. Together we made something entirely new out of this novel, something I expect neither they nor I will ever completely forget. We fully engaged our brains, felt the stretch and enjoyed the feeling.

Authentic Learning is Not Passive

In the light of this new paradigm of teaching, Socrates becomes a more limited role model of great teaching. Modern research has debunked the idea of the teacher as the wise sage imparting knowledge to students who are waiting to be filled with that knowledge. We now know that this view of teaching and learning is inadequate at best. Learning is not a passive activity. Authentic learning touches the epicenter of the student and lights a spark in the process. It is active, responsive and personal.

Our schools are filled with teachers who ignite that spark in their students. They do so because they carry that spark within themselves. Call it neuroscience or call it magic, what they do changes lives. In the same way they share their own “Eureka!” moments with both students and colleagues, they orchestrate, illuminate and fuel endless “Eureka!” moments for their students. These moments become the building blocks of our students’ education, the finest education that teachers can evoke and provoke anywhere. I am deeply grateful for each and every teacher who has chosen to do so as part of this learning profession.

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