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# The Bank Street Thinkers

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Foundational Knowledge to  
Support our Roots and Wings



# How Do We Know a Good Teacher?

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Barbara Biber and  
Agnes Snyder (1948)

*The answer to the question asked in the title is approached in two ways: an analysis of a possible concept of good teaching and a discussion of the problems involved in evaluating good teaching. Conclusion: there is no such person as the good teacher but it is possible to know when a teacher is good and what good teaching is.*

What good teaching is and how to recognize when a teacher is good are closely related problems, as baffling as they are persistent. Except for those who claim an intuitive power of knowing the instant they step into the classroom whether or not the teaching and teacher are good, supervisors and administrators under the necessity of passing such judgments are faced with truly bewildering dilemmas.

Here, for example, is a teacher who obviously violates most of the accepted principles of good teaching. But year after year his pupils return to visit him with affection and appreciation.

Here is another teacher whose pupils score high in all achievement tests, who learn to read better and more quickly than other comparable groups but who seem to develop very little in social attitudes and relationships.

Here is a teacher, warm and understanding, whose room is a veritable bit of life with birds singing, white rats peering out of cages, geraniums blooming in window boxes, children happy and

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contented. But her pupils show a general sloppiness and lack of accuracy in the tool subjects that are definitely disturbing.

Here is a teacher whose pupils become identified with problems of the community and even of the world. They correspond with children in war-devastated countries; they serve on traffic patrols; they send letters to their congressmen. But when they are confronted as individuals with anything requiring a steady, concentrated effort, they seem utterly incapable of settling down.

Here is a teacher who believes in discipline; who proclaims aloud that “order is heaven’s first law,” and gets it. Her teaching techniques are almost flawless but the children do not learn.

On the upper levels, here is a teacher who proudly points to the fact that practically all of his pupils go on to high school and college, and make good records. In contrast, here is another teacher whose pupils marry early, settle down into happy family life, and occupy obscure positions in the social scene.

And we ask—how are we to judge in the last analysis which teaching is of most worth?

Difficult as it is, every educator responsible in any way for the education of teachers must, to the best of his ability, stake down what he, out of his experience, thinks a good teacher is.

What is expressed in the flowing paragraphs is by no means a complete account of our concept of good teaching but it may be sufficient to indicate an orientation toward a way of thinking about the problem. In any event it would be impossible to draw up a set of criteria without regard to the needs and goals of a particular situation.

## **A Possible Concept of Good Teaching**

We are accustomed to the idea that a teacher should be someone who loves children. In fact, many a novice thinks she has done extraordinarily well when in answer to the question, “Why do you want to become a teacher?” she answers with feeling, “I love children.” It’s a disarming answer, especially to the interviewer who may have given the question a considerable amount of thought. It’s a good thing that she loves children, that she realizes that loving children is an asset in a teacher. But if she thinks that is the end rather than the beginning, she has a long way to go.

Children do need to be loved and accepted by their teachers. The young teacher who naturally warms to children has the fundamental ingredient of acceptance, but her growth as a fine teacher will depend upon her ability to reach deeper and deeper levels of acceptance. What these are can only be briefly suggested:

- accepting children on the basis of enjoying their vitality, their charm, their freshness, their creativeness
- being able to handle the expression of raw emotion occasionally involving negative feeling toward the teacher, especially in younger children
- appreciating differences among children with respect to ratio between potential and overt accomplishment
- including the concept of children-within-families but not with the attitude of pointing an accusing finger at the family for what the child may lack.

In fact, it is probably true that a deeply accepting teacher is involved almost not at all in the process

of blaming either the child or the family. Instead she is always looking for ways into rather than ways out of her responsibility as a teacher. “What makes you think you would be a good teacher?” often brings the direct reply, “I get along very well with children.” One might hope for a reply that included the idea that the teacher gets along well with people, and children are people. Teachers are happiest and most successful when they are natural communicators - personalities who realize the best in themselves through their interaction with other human beings. Not all professions are equally dependent on this quality. To be in rapport with children is essential but good rapport is not the same for all stages of growth, nor is there any one formula for what it should be at any one stage. Teachers can get into rapport through:

- offering warmth, protection, unspoken understanding (most essential in the younger years)
- establishing an atmosphere of camaraderie that keeps feeling a little under the surface (important to children of the middle years)
- being themselves happy, positive people in whose presence it is natural to feel good about life
- having great resources of knowledge and experience which they can transmit without exerting pressures
- their talents for helping children to discover the intricacies of the world around them
- being able to teach others how to learn for themselves, thereby establishing confidence in the child’s sense of his own prowess.

It is interesting that few candidates for teacher education nowadays justify their choice of a profession by laying claim to enjoying the life of learning. Many of them probably think such an idea would sound old-fashioned to the modern “progressive” educator who is set to make something less intellectual, less didactic, less academic out of school experience.

Actually, the modern educator is deeply concerned with learning. He has broadened the concept of learning so that he talks of growth as much as he talks of knowledge. But it is an error to assume that knowledge—functioning, meaningful information—and the processes by which knowledge is attained and absorbed are not essential in his system of goals and values. The good teacher needs:

- an organized reservoir of knowledge of the world in which he lives - its physical nature, its work processes, its social forms and problems, its historical background
- as much awareness of the concrete, here-and-now environment as of the sources and origins which are remote in time and space
- understanding of the conceptual development of children in order to judge intelligently the kind of information which children can absorb at different stages of their growth
- to have his own information so deeply absorbed and integrated that he can draw on it imaginatively and freely without being too bound to lesson plans and courses of study

- knowledge of the psychological nature of the learning process so that he teaches within a framework of basic principles such as:
  - children like to learn unless something interferes with their motivation
  - children learn most successfully when they are identified with their teachers as people
  - children learn best through a wealth of direct vital experience which can be supplemented in gradual doses with vicarious experience as they grow older
- facility in the tools of acquiring knowledge—the three R’s in the early years; the skills of research, reference and organization in the later years, and in modern methods for helping children acquire these skills
- an approach to problem-solving that has the scientific attitude at the base, a willingness to search for evidence behind opinion, a high threshold for prejudice
- delight on his own adult level in clarifying confusion and an equal delight in the dawning of understanding on the part of children and in their growing ability to fathom ever more complex relationships.

Briefly one might say, as Lucy Sprague Mitchell has so often said to her students and her colleagues, a good curriculum is based on sound knowledge of children on the one hand, and the world on the other. The psychologically-minded have, in recent years, laid emphasis on love of children in addition to understanding what they are like. No one disputes the importance of this latter-day emphasis but it is time to become concrete and emphatic about still another emphasis: *the importance of developing teachers who not only know the world in which they live but also love it and all the manifestations of life on it.*

In a matter-of-fact age one hesitates to make statements that seem to border on the sentimental. The danger of such hesitation is that we will omit the large areas of feeling, devotion, idealism and be left with a relatively barren and seriously ineffective system of values. In saying that the good teacher needs to love the world she lives in there is no thought of acceptance of the status quo. Quite the contrary. A genuinely positive attitude toward life almost inevitably carries with it a critical attitude toward the many distorted forms of modern living and a deep protest against the far-reaching injustices and the pitiable depths of human waste which are part of the fabric of society. A genuinely positive attitude, a love of life, holds within itself an abiding though not foolish optimism concerning man’s progress.

Children need teachers who have:

- sensitivity to all the ways in which life experiences can be re-expressed by children
- experience with expression through the arts on their own level
- developed values concerning the life-problems which each growing generation rediscovers and struggles with for itself
- beliefs, ideals, and quality of devotion to a way of life that is transmitted to children in the atmosphere which the teacher creates

The good teacher needs to bring a fine blend of strength and delicacy to her job. She needs to be a person so secure within herself that she can function with principles rather than prescriptions, that she can exert authority without requiring submission, that she can work experimentally but not at random, that she can admit mistakes without feeling humiliated. In her role as a teacher she has to maintain an intricate system of delicate balances between:

- giving support, sympathy, comfort, protection, *and* nurturing reliance, independence, growing up
- clearing away confusion, being the agent of reality *and* remaining sensitive to the importance of phantasy in wholesome growth
- allowing a full measure of freedom from restraint and prohibition *and* establishing clear limits and boundaries of acceptable behavior
- being efficient, orderly, careful and not becoming rigid, exacting and executive
- being soft, understanding, yielding *but* not sentimental or sloppy.

### **Problems in Evaluating Good Teaching**

Even though only suggestive, the characteristics of good teaching as discussed above are never found in completeness in any one good teacher. Only a paragon would embody them all and, fortunately, children thrive very well with something less than paragons for teachers.

The deeper one probes into the problem of evaluation of teachers the more insurmountable the obstacles become. Should emphasis be placed upon the teacher's performance? If so, on what—methods, techniques, attitudes, relations, evidence of scholarship? And how should these be weighted?

Or, should emphasis be placed upon children's performance? Again, if so, on what - knowledge, skills, human relations, attitudes toward self and others? If emphasis is placed on performance, a certain immediacy is assumed: that evaluation can be made on what is happening in the classroom in the present. But, is it the present that matters after all? Isn't it results that count? If so, how long must one wait before being able to appraise the worth of, say, a year's work in the classroom?

Growth is very slow; there are plateau periods in which the growth that is taking place is far from apparent. And yet who knows but that some of the most profound changes may be taking place in these quiescent periods? Again, if judgment is to be postponed as to the value of daily classroom teaching, where is the emphasis to be placed—upon honorable mention in the community, on happy family living, on the success in college and profession?

Of course none of this is an either-or proposition. Combinations of these criteria must be made. But how can they be determined? And by whom? Situations vary so greatly that it would be totally unreasonable to expect on one what might be expected of another. Needs, too, in situations vary, and good teaching that meets the needs of one situation might be totally inadequate in another. These considerations have led to certain conclusions:

First, before any evaluation is attempted, the hypotheses on which the evaluation is being made must be clear or there will inevitably be widely divergent opinions as to the worth of the teach-

ing. That is, there must be consideration of the kind of world that is desirable, of the kind of society that it is assumed will make for the fullest development of the individual, of what constitutes the good life, of whether reliance must be placed primarily upon force or upon the infinite potentialities of human nature.

The second conclusion is a corollary to the first. Since values are not here regarded as absolutes, the values upon which the evaluation is to be made must be agreed upon by those to be evaluated and by those doing the evaluating. These values must be constantly re-articulated because the point of view of even the same group broadens and deepens. Unless this common base is established there can be only divergent opinions as to the worth of teaching and a feeling of frustration in all concerned. Procedure on the opposite base—the base of absolutes in traits of teachers and characteristics of the teaching function—is responsible for much of the failure of past efforts.

Appraisal in terms of all-inclusive standards should seldom be attempted. Instead, it is concluded that appraisal should be made in terms of specifics. Once having established the point of view from which evaluation is to be made, the next step is to determine the specific goals toward which the teaching is to be directed and hence, evaluated. What these goals should be, how simple or elaborate, how few or how many will grow out of the situation and the values of the people in it. The important consideration is that the values be clear and real and that they be accepted as significant by all who must work toward their realization.

Fourth, the setting of goals needs to be followed by decision as to how to determine when the goals are achieved. If, for example, the goal of greater participation in group discussion is set, it would mean that ways of recording the participation should be made. Or, if more freedom of expression in the use of art materials is the goal, dated samples of the children's work would be kept. Or, if speed and accuracy in arithmetic are desired, tests for measuring speed accuracy would be agreed upon. Or, if more cooperative behavior is the goal, the anecdotal behavior record would become the instrument of measure. Or if participation in community activities is aimed at, records of such participation are necessary. Such measures are in terms of child performance and child growth. They all presuppose continuity of evidence in terms of periodic testing, dated samples of work, dated anecdotal records.

But what of the teacher? Is he or she to stand or fall as a teacher solely in terms of child growth and performance? Certainly it is the results in such terms that count the most. But here again we cannot divorce the act from the environment. Hence along with all evaluations there must be consideration of the situation for, without question, some situations are more conducive and some less conducive to child growth.

Again, the measures suggested are more or less immediate. They do not seem to take into consideration what eventually happens to the child when he becomes an adult. Must this future goal be abandoned except in expensive long-term research projects?

Most certainly not. Any school can contribute to long-time evaluation of its efforts if it will merely repeat the process suggested here and keep year after year statements of the point of view from which the evaluation was attempted, of the goals set, of the measures used to accomplish

them, and the records of accomplishment.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is not until the school assumes such responsibility that it will ever have any valid way of knowing if its accomplishments are consistent with its efforts, financial as well as intellectual and spiritual. Out of the cumulative records of years, too, will come some measure of fair evaluation of the teacher. Similarly will come the possibility of a broad evaluation of the effect of the school upon the community.

Finally, the conclusion is reached that evaluation is just an inseparable part of the total educational process. It cannot stand alone. It cannot be performed apart from the situation. It must follow clarification of point of view and goal setting. It must have regard for the fundamental principles of democracy in that it is participated in by the “governed and the governing.” The process must be regarded as continuous and an essential factor in healthy growth.

There really is no such person as *the* good teacher. Instead, there are many kinds of good teachers and many kinds of good teaching. They are good only in terms of the environment in which they exist.

1. Editor's Note: By way of illustration see “Through a Cooperative In-service Program” by the faculty of the Ohio State University School. *Childhood Education*, October 1947, 24:73-81