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Teaching is Damn Hard Work: Advice for Those Considering Education as a Career

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This article is addressed to undergraduates considering teaching as a career. After explaining what personal indicators students should have when deciding whether to enter a teacher-preparation program and examining the complexity of intentional classroom teaching, the author lists some suggestions potential teachers can adopt to prepare for future classroom practice. The author closes with some final thoughts about choosing education as a career.

Keywords: Teaching Profession, Classroom Teaching, Teaching with Intention

Introduction

Teaching, if done conscientiously and well, is hard work at any level: early learning, elementary, middle school, high school, post-secondary. Indeed, teachers in the United States deal with a host of complex professional challenges. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2012) has noted, these challenges include low pay, increasing class sizes, criticism by legislators and pundits, and the ubiquity of standardized testing that hangs over the heads of educators like the sword of Damocles.

It should come as no surprise, then, that there is a significant shortage of classroom teachers in the U.S., especially in mathematics, science, and special education. But many school districts are searching for qualified candidates to fill teaching positions in other content areas as well (Westervelt, 2015). For example, in Washington State, school districts have indicated a shortage in several areas including bilingual education, biology, chemistry, early childhood special education, earth and space science, mathematics, physics, and special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As a result, teacher-preparation programs in colleges and schools of education across the country are recruiting students to meet this need.

If you're considering becoming a classroom teacher, you'll want to know what you're getting yourself into. Why, exactly, are you drawn to teaching? Maybe it's a love of knowledge. Perhaps it's a love of working with children. You might even have an inner desire to improve society by helping prepare the next generation to be informed, participatory citizens in a democracy. Before you go any farther, you need to consider this: If you want to become an effective, accomplished teacher, you'll need to have all three of these characteristics. And that's just for starters. You see, teaching is not merely a job. It's an arduous, complex, and, in many

ways, thankless job, but it's not without its rewards. If you are really serious about becoming a classroom teacher, read on.

The Reality of Education Today

What, then, is the reality of teaching in today's schools? First, there is rampant high-stakes standardized testing that all too often drives instruction—the equivalent of the pedagogical cart pulling the horse (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Make no mistake: accountability is necessary in education. We need to know how students are doing. But the mania of constant testing is the result of the accountability movement in general and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in particular. Second, students increasingly come from unstable homes and have serious academic deficiencies (Marzano, 2004; Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005). This situation requires that classroom teachers must individualize instruction more than they ever had to before in order to reach their students. Third, school systems are all-too-frequently bureaucratic labyrinths that can have negative results for marginalized students (Grissom, Kern, & Rodriguez, 2015). There are some schools and even school districts that make students the first priority, but large school systems can be Kafkaesque in their policies and procedures. Finally, accountability is often aimed only at classroom teachers and some building administrators, but rarely at district- or state-level managers and policymakers (Reeves, 2004, 2002). To be sure, accountability is necessary for education. But to hold the threat of dismissal over the heads of classroom teachers when they often lack the resources necessary to meet the needs of their students is akin to the maxim on naval ships in the 18th and 19th centuries: floggings will continue until morale improves.

Some Suggestions to Prepare for Your Future Classroom Practice

If, after getting an idea about the current state of K-12 education, you still want to become a teacher, consider these suggestions. They will make your transition from undergraduate to classroom teacher if not seamless, then at least smoother.

Recognize that there is no silver bullet. There is no easy cure to education's problems. During your career in the classroom, you will be flooded with a tsunami of programs and resources, most of which will be touted as the panacea for what ails education. Resist the urge to embrace these unless they have been proven to be effective. Always ask for the research to back up these types of claims. This will reduce the tsunami to a manageable swell.

Learn about education's past. Gain an historical framework to understand the history of education. This will help you recognize the progress that's been made and, consequently, help you avoid making the same mistakes in your classroom practice (Gutek, 2013; Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

Formulate an educational philosophy. Most successful teachers have created a philosophy of education, a document that conveys their beliefs about teaching and learning. But it almost always is a work in progress. It's good to have one—however brief—as you begin teaching, knowing that you will probably edit it periodically, based on your reading, conversations with colleagues, and experiences in your classroom (Combs, 2010; Petronicolos, n.d.).

Become a culturally responsive teacher. Accomplished teachers must be conversant with the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic aspects of their students' cultures by using culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Samuels, 2014). This sensitivity and the concomitant use of salient teaching and learning strategies can help level the playing field to ensure all students receive the high-quality education they'll need in their future.

Learn another language. This suggestion is closely related to the previous one about culturally responsive teaching. The world continues to shrink because of the digital revolution. Becoming proficient in at least one other language will increase your effectiveness in working with ELLs and understanding other cultures. It will also enhance your employment opportunities, regardless of whether you decide on education or another career (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, n.d.).

Commit yourself to lifelong learning. Educators have always had the obligation to keep current with advances in teaching techniques and learning strategies. This becomes even more important in the 21st century. Besides learning more about your content area (or areas), increase your knowledge of related disciplines such as cognitive psychology and technology that impact the teaching and learning process. This can be done in a variety of ways: take a course, attend a conference or workshop, get involved in an action research project with colleagues. All of these will deepen and enrich your classroom practice and benefit your students as well as you. Lifelong learning is absolutely essential to being an effective classroom teacher (Helterbran, 2005).

Find a mentor. Some districts provide comprehensive mentoring programs that match novice teachers with seasoned classroom veterans to provide appropriate guidance. These programs have done much to reduce the number of new teachers who leave the classroom. During the 1980s and '90s, this figure was staggering: 50% of all teachers left education by the end of the fifth year of teaching. This figure has declined to about 41%, but that's still far too high (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). Even if your first district doesn't have a formal program in place, seek out a mentor on your own. Having one will be invaluable.

Investigate advanced professional development. Continue to develop your repertoire of teaching strategies and techniques by enhancing your content and pedagogical knowledge. Consider, at the appropriate time, earning National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) status. This is the gold standard for classroom teachers, signifying that the holder of this certification not only knows what decisions to make in the classroom to be an accomplished teacher, but also recognizes the rationale for making those decisions. Several research studies have validated that NBCTs are highly effective in helping their students maximize their academic experiences (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014).

Be realistic. Regardless of how good your teacher-preparation program is, it's impossible to learn everything you need to know before assuming the mantle of classroom teacher. As Fuller (2013) noted, "In teaching, a person can be extremely competent, work relentlessly, and still fail miserably—especially in the first year or two on the job" (para. 4). Resolve to pace yourself accordingly.

Know yourself. To be an effective teacher, you must know the terrain of your own heart. Without this knowledge, you will not be authentic, accessible, or effective in dealing with students (Palmer, 1998/2008).

Take care of yourself. It's paramount to maintain good health as a teacher. As with most other helping professions, the stressors are not inconsiderable. Learn to pace and re-energize yourself. If you don't, you'll burn out and be no good to your students, society, or yourself (Graves, 2001; Mendler, 2012).

Some Final Thoughts

Contrary to what some people think, teaching—that is, consistent, intentional teaching—is hard work. Consider how Lee Shulman, teacher educator extraordinaire and former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, assesses this endeavor: “[Classroom teaching] is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (2004, p. 504). If you're still excited about becoming a teacher, remember this final observation. Accomplished classroom teachers must be part mother hen, part father confessor. They are expected to be exemplary role models who embody scholarly attainment, pedagogical know-how, and compassion for and appropriate interaction with their students (Shulman, 1986).

Be forewarned: Teaching is damn hard work (Wisconsin Soapbox, 2014). Weigh the pros and cons carefully. But if you decide to be an educator, know that it will be more than a career choice; it will be a way of life.

Choose wisely.

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