Effective Teachers Are Made, Not Born: Habits Of Mind Make The Difference

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“Knowledge of methods alone will not suffice; there must be the desire, the will to employ them. This desire is an affair of personal disposition.”


Are teachers born with their teaching talents or can they learn to become more effective? What’s the difference between “good” and “great” teachers? Recent research into the development of “greatness” in many fields strongly supports the idea that in-born talent is not the determining factor in high levels of performance (Shenk, 2010, Colvin, 2008, Gladwell, 2008). In instance after instance, these authors show that excellence in music (Mozart), art (Cezanne), sports (Ted Williams), science and technology (Bill Gates), and in other endeavors develops from countless hours of persistent, continuous effort that, over time, leads to excellence. They also point out that a significant body of research indicates that those who seem to have a “natural” talent in a given field are not necessarily the ones who demonstrate excellence over the long haul (see, e.g. Terman, 1959).

These studies suggest that teacher improvement and greater effectiveness is not determined by genetics, but by whether or not a teacher has key qualities and positive attitudes – habits of mind - that create the willingness and motivation to put in the required effort to improve teaching skills over time. If school leaders want to improve teaching effectiveness, they have an obligation to reinforce good habits of mind and provide teachers with multiple opportunities and incentives to apply and practice these habits on a regular basis. Teaching proficiency is also more likely to improve when school conditions - its culture, climate, and system - enable, encourage and reward teachers as they put in many hours necessary for rethinking and refining teaching practices.

Seif, Kallick and Costa, Effective Teachers are Made, Not Born
Opportunities To Develop And Use Habits Of Mind

Which habits of mind make a difference? Costa and Kallick (2009) suggest sixteen habits of mind that lead to greater success and learning for students. We have reorganized most of the sixteen habits into seven qualities, described in figure one, that we think are critical dispositions for continuous growth and learning. In our experience, teachers who have these seven habits of mind qualities are more likely to be willing to make efforts to improve their teaching. For example, they are frequently on the lookout for new ways to improve what they do. They readily admit that they don’t know how to do something well, and are willing to figure out a problem and look for and try new ideas. They search for new teaching strategies in order to improve student learning. They find ways to listen to their students with understanding and empathy, in order to discover student needs and “customize and motivate…children’s learning”. (Newberg, 2009). As they incorporate habits of mind into their thinking and behaviors, teachers say, “I need more practice with…” or “I am so excited by how much I have learned about…” or “I need to go deeper into this material…” . They have developed the desire to continuously improve and learn.

Creating The Conditions For Professional Growth And Development Through Habits Of Mind

These habits, learned, practiced and used regularly, when coupled with a desire to improve one’s teaching skills, will lead to significant growth and greater effectiveness.
FIGURE ONE
SEVEN HABITS OF MIND CRITICAL FOR TEACHER IMPROVEMENT

Remaining open to continuous learning – Admitting you don’t know something or how to do something. Believing that “I have so much more to learn”.

Thinking about thinking – Being aware of your own thoughts, strategies, feelings and actions, and their effects on others. Being aware of your own strengths and weaknesses. Regularly planning, monitoring, and reflecting upon actions and tasks.

Figuring things out-- Includes a number of habits that support clarifying problems, data gathering, and rechecking information, such as:
  Gathering data through all senses
  Questioning and posing problems
  Striving for accuracy

Communicating—Communicating effectively with adults as well as with students, by:
  o Listening with understanding and empathy
  o Communicating with clarity and precision
  o Thinking interdependently


Taking responsible risks – Trying new and different ways, even if there is a chance for failure. “Living on the edge of your incompetence”.

Persisting – Persevering in a task through its completion. Looking for a way to reach your goal when stuck. Not giving up.
over time. But they do not automatically exist in every teacher. Dottin (2010. p. 12) suggests that “intelligent performance is not just an exercise of ability. It is more dispositional in nature in that we must activate abilities and set them in motion.

Dispositions concern not only what we can do (our abilities) but what we are actually likely to do.” In other words, dispositions – habits of mind - must be developed, nurtured, supported and practiced on a regular basis. Schools that teach, support and encourage the use of habits of mind are more likely to see significant improvement among its teachers than those that do not.

Based on observations in schools over many years, we think that strong habits of mind school cultures have four characteristics that help to support continuous growth and development. They:

- Explicitly teach and use habits of mind language and behaviors
- Provide positive reinforcements and incentives
- Create opportunities for persistent, “deliberate” practice
- Develop a coherent system of professional development options

**Explicitly Teach And Use Habits Of Mind Language And Behaviors**

Although many people come to teaching with some habits well developed, they usually do not consciously recognize how important these habits are in their daily lives and in their growth as teachers. Teachers do not automatically come equipped with the language and understanding of continuous improvement, a “figuring things out” attitude, positive communication skills, or an empathetic disposition. When teachers are explicitly introduced to the habits, they become aware of the need to strengthen and practice the habits in the classroom and with colleagues. They recognize the value of using the habits
and see the benefit that the habits have for their teaching effectiveness and for the success of their students.

Schools that wish to build a system of professional growth and development around habits of mind first need to explicitly teach and reinforce the use of habits of mind language and behaviors. Everyone in the school needs to know and understand habits of mind terminology and applications. The entire school needs to be made aware that habits of mind dispositions and behaviors are central to professional learning and improvement over time through such activities as professional development sessions, book and article study sessions, faculty discussions, or wall postings,

**Provide Positive Reinforcements and Incentives for Growth and Development**

Productive habits of mind school cultures develop explicit strategies that help teachers think about their strengths and needs, learn continuously, and solve problems independently and interdependently. For example, they provide time for collegial conversations, planning, and reflections on teaching and learning. At faculty meetings, less time is spent on administrative talk and more time on discussions of instructional issues. Collaborative planning time both during the year and the summer enables teachers to pose teaching problems, listen to each other’s problems with understanding and empathy, suggest new teaching approaches, and work together to plan and design units and lessons. The entire school staff uses school-wide professional development days to create and share new teaching ideas. Teachers are encouraged to take risks and try new teaching strategies in their classrooms, with the strong support of the school leadership and other teachers.
Some schools establish mentoring and peer coaching systems that enable teachers to persistently search for and try out instructional approaches with collegial feedback over a significant period of time. Others have instituted the “lesson design” model that enables teachers to work together and make “incremental improvements to teaching methods over time”…and…”gives teachers the opportunity to learn and grow their expertise” (Stigler, 2010). Some others make use of “master teachers” - teachers with specialized instructional expertise -- to encourage discussion and feedback and work with teachers over time to improve teaching and learning. Some schools have introduced innovative, exciting and unusual opportunities for professional networking through recent technological advances – texting, Skype, Facebook, Ning, chat rooms, and the like (Davis, 2010).

Create Opportunities For “Deliberate” Practice

Recent studies (e.g. Colvin 2010, chapters 5-7) suggest that, in order to improve one’s skills, it is not enough simply to practice something over and over again. The term that is used to describe practice that makes a difference in effectiveness is “deliberate practice”. Ericsson describes deliberate practice in the following terms:

“In contrast to play, deliberate practice is a highly structured activity, the explicit goal of which is to improve performance. Specific tasks are invented to overcome weaknesses, and performance is carefully monitored to provide cues for ways to improve it further. We claim that deliberate practice requires effort and is not inherently enjoyable. Individuals are motivated to practice because practice improves performance… maximization of deliberate practice is neither short-lived nor simple. It extends over a period of at least 10 years…”

Deliberate practice goes hand in hand with habits of mind. Teachers who are open to new learning, analyze their own strengths and weaknesses, figure out teaching problems and possibilities, and create new approaches to teaching and learning are likely to deliberately work on and practice specific teaching skills in order to become more proficient. Schools that encourage and support deliberate practice move away from “one shot” professional development programs and introduce innovative programs that are designed to solve identified instructional problems. They then enable mentors and experts (i.e. teachers who have mastered new teaching strategies) to conduct follow up sessions and classroom visits that support deliberate practice and provide analysis and feedback as teachers work to implement a new strategy or approach. One recent study found that “reading gains (up to 32%) were greatest in schools where teachers receive a large amount of coaching around specific teaching skills. It also found that “reading gains are greatest in schools where teachers receive a large amount of coaching…[T]he amount of coaching that teachers receive varies widely and is influenced by an array of factors, including relationships among staff members and how teachers envision their roles” (Viadero, 2010).

**Develop A Coherent System Of Professional Development Options**

Schools that develop, reinforce, and encourage teacher use of habits of mind and deliberate practice also need to institute a clear and comprehensive system of professional development that meet teacher needs. Professional development options, focused around key strategic teaching areas, helps teachers assess their strengths and problem areas, supports them as they learn new approaches, and helps them through a “deliberate” practice time that supports their growth and development. As teachers improve on what
they do, they are also able to share new techniques with other teachers and to help them implement strategies that improve achievement.

Lemov (2010), Jackson (2010), Wiggins and McTighe (2005), Berger (2003), and Hill, Rowan and Ball (2005) suggest a number of key areas that we should concentrate on in educating new teachers and improving teaching, along with specific techniques and practices used by great teachers. Figure two synthesizes the suggestions offered by these authors, and attempts to create a comprehensive set of categories that all teachers should master over time in order to improve effectiveness. Using a framework such as the one in figure two, a school can organize professional development options based on teacher analyses of strengths and areas for improvement. Teachers then create their own differentiated instructional improvement plans, similar to differentiated learning planning for students.

[Insert figure two here]

**Conclusion and Implications**

Recent research suggests that teachers, given the right conditions, can learn to be more effective through continuous improvement and growth in proficiency. In order for this growth to occur, we believe that teachers need to develop and use habits of mind to continuously improve and become more proficient and effective. A strong habits of mind culture:

- Explicitly teaches and uses habits of mind language and behaviors
- Provides positive reinforcements and incentives for using habits of mind to improve instruction;
- Creates opportunities for “deliberate” practice;
FIGURE TWO
KEY AREAS OF TEACHER
PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Explicitly develop and reinforce the language and use of habits of mind for both teachers and students

2. Develop a rich background knowledge and understanding of key ideas and skills related to specific curricular implementation

3. Use planning and implementation techniques and strategies that:
   
   • Clarify and focus learning on specific, targeted knowledge, understandings, processes, and habits of mind goals
   • Set and maintain high achievement expectations
   • Set and maintain high behavioral expectations
   • Create a strong classroom learning culture that supports positive habits of mind
   • Build character and trust in students
   • Develop student understanding
   • Help all students to think critically and improve comprehension and reading skills
   • Engage students in appropriate and effective learning strategies (so that they work harder than you do)
   • Share models of success with students
   • Use a “balanced” assessment system (traditional and performance assessments) to evaluate growth and performance
   • Use effective feedback strategies (check for understanding)
   • Enable students to apply learning to new and novel situations (transfer)
Develops a comprehensive professional development system organized around key areas of teaching and learning, designed to meet the individual and collaborative learning needs of teachers.

If we are to improve teaching and learning, and ultimately develop a strong cadre of effective, excellent teachers, greater emphasis has to be placed on developing, reinforcing, maintaining, and applying productive habits of mind dispositions and behaviors in schools and classrooms. School leaders need to take into account the habits of mind that teachers bring to their profession when they are hired. Habits of mind language and behaviors must be explicitly taught, studied and learned. Professional work ethics are developed and supported by a school climate and culture that encourages the use of habits of mind to improve teaching and learning. A coherent professional development program, built around categories similar to those cited in figure two, needs to be in place to help teachers identify strengths and weaknesses and work on continuously improving curricular and instructional practices. Deliberate practice – the kind of practice that leads to greater teacher effectiveness - must be encouraged. Special attention should be paid to creating opportunities for teachers to develop individual growth plans, learn new ways of teaching based on their identified needs, and institute appropriate changes over time.

Implementing this approach will require a reorganization of most current professional development programs, which often consist of an unconnected mix of college and in-service courses and a collection of discrete school-based elements. Schools will be better able to continuously improve teacher proficiency if they start from desirable habits of mind, and then institute a school culture and professional development
system as described above that, over time, will create highly effective teaching and excellence in education and schooling.
REFERENCES


Viadero, Debra (2010). *Coaching of Teachers Found to Boost Student Reading*. In Education Week, Volume 29, Issue 31, pp. 6-7.
