

My Need to Teach

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A day in the life of a teacher is difficult to adequately describe. At times I will feel as though my sanity is hanging by a thread as I question whether the job of teaching is really worth doing when my paycheck is minuscule. The balancing act of trying to please everyone while doing what is best for my students will overwhelm me and seem impossible. I will have sleepless nights spent worrying about my students and weekends consumed with grading papers and writing lesson plans. The needs of my students will be numerous and different, but I will have to find a way to meet them all. This will result in hectic days as I try my best to maintain order. Scrutiny of my teaching will frequently come from those who know nothing of its challenges. I will be told to teach in ways that do not match what is best for my students. Standardized tests will loom over me as a deciding factor that determines my worth as a teacher. Parents may be quick to place the blame on me for their child's failures, but they won't know that I may already blame myself. There will also be times where I think quitting would be easier because the task of teaching just seems like too much to bear. And yet I want to teach. I need to teach.

Despite all the challenges of teaching, there are dedicated teachers who spend countless hours helping children prepare for their futures. Those on the outside looking in will frequently question why these individuals are teachers. Sometimes, even for the most dedicated teacher, answering the question of why they teach can be difficult. My answer to this question has evolved the more I've learned about teaching. I started out years ago as a person who would have told you to avoid teaching at all costs. I would have told you this despite my own desire to teach. I had been conditioned to focus on the negatives of teaching and to see it as a career for those who couldn't do anything else. After four years in the Marine Corps, I realized that going to college for a degree in something that I wouldn't actually enjoy would be a waste of my time so I ignored the naysayers and applied to colleges to pursue a degree in education. I entered college majoring in early childhood education with the idea that I wanted to teach because I like kids, like the

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act of teaching, and thought it would be easy. I was naïve to everything that teaching in America entails and realized early on that my idea of teaching was seen through rose-colored glasses. After two years of college classes, my rose-colored glasses have been retinted, and my desire to teach has only strengthened. I now want to teach not because it is easy but precisely because it is challenging, requires intelligence, is one of the most important jobs one can do, and I believe I am capable of being a good teacher. And good teachers are very much needed.

There is a common misconception in American society that teaching is easy. The first thing that I quickly realized when I really started learning about teaching is that it is not easy. I know that this seems obvious, but for many, it is not. When I was in high school, I ran a volunteer program where high school musicians weekly went and taught young children how to play instruments. I thoroughly enjoyed doing this, but the mention of pursuing music education as a career was treated by my high school teachers as a horrible decision that they needed to steer me away from. It seemed preposterous to them that one of their star students would give up their promising future of being a doctor or scientist to instead be a music educator. Even the music educators that I interacted with would be quick to name all the negatives of their own careers in order to save the naïve high schooler from following in their footsteps. Teachers themselves tell students who are high achievers in school that teaching is beneath them. This frequently seemed counterintuitive to me. Why would teachers insult their own profession? Why would they lower the standards for future teachers? Why would they demean themselves in this way? As Meier (2000) expresses, “What kid, after all, wants to be seen emulating people he’s been told are too dumb to exercise power, and are simply implementing the commands of the real experts” (p. 15). This led me to not really know what I wanted to do after high school because teaching had been made out to be a career I should not go near.

About the time that I was busy procrastinating with my college applications, I received a phone call from a Marine Corps recruiter wanting to talk with my twin brother. Thankfully for me, my brother was not home and I quickly became hooked on the idea of becoming a Marine Corps musician. This decision came with the voices of many more teachers, each of whom felt compelled to tell me that I would be wasting my intellect if I joined the military and played an instrument. I even had one English teacher who insisted I needed to write a spoken-word poem about departing for college despite the fact that this was not my plan. Instead, I wrote a critique aimed at my teachers that explained why they should be advocating for their students’ happiness and success, instead of pushing college like it was the only option to succeed.

In the Marine Corps, I was surprised to find that the band field was filled with many former music educators. They too were quick to demean the profession and speak of it as a waste of time. I was told daily by my fellow Marine

musicians who had left the education sector that it was the last thing they would ever go back to doing. I frequently heard about how if I was smart I would not become a teacher. I respected my fellow Marines more than my former teachers, and their daily critique of their former profession slowly wore me down to view teaching as a career that garnered little respect and was not worth doing if you were smart enough to do something else. This idea that you need not be smart to teach seems to stem from the misconception that teaching is easy.

Now that I've learned more about teaching, I question how anyone can see it as easy. Valle and Connor (2011) describe teaching as “a complex act that requires constant shifting among multiple and simultaneous skill sets” (p. 2). Teaching not only requires one to know content but also how to teach that material to a wide range of learners all while managing a classroom full of diverse individuals who may or may not be developmentally ready to learn that content. Moreover, at times teachers need to act as stand-in parents, nurses, janitors, and even bodyguards. There is nothing easy about any of this, and to say that it is beneath those who are smart is diminishing the many different kinds of skills and intelligences that teachers use daily to complete their jobs. I want to teach *because it is so difficult*.

I can now admit that if my naïve idea that teaching was easy had been true, I would not have wanted to continue pursuing it as my career path. The short hiatus I took after leaving the Marine Corps made me long to return to something that demanded more from me. I was actually relieved to discover that teaching would not be an easy task. To many of my fellow classmates, the revelation that I enjoy the challenge is shocking to them. In contrast, it surprises me that all people pursuing a degree in education don't share the same outlook. Teaching is extremely hard, and I feel it is important for teachers entering the profession to have a strong desire to embrace that challenge. If teachers enter the profession without wanting to be challenged, they will frequently become script readers who do the bare minimum.

You may wonder why being a script reader is such a bad thing. After all, there are few teachers who would not jump at the chance to have a classroom management and instruction plan that was guaranteed to work for every one of our students. This does not exist. I am confident that it never will. The students in our classrooms are not robots, which is why there will never be a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching that will actually work. Sadly, the American education system is becoming increasingly like a factory where the instructions for making citizens are uniform, test-focused, and narrow in their focus. Such a focus removes all the joy from both student and teacher. As Meier (2000) reminds both aspiring and in-service teachers, a script provides no room for “whimsical discoveries and unexpected learnings” (p. xi). While reading from a script is easy, it is not teaching. In part, this is true because even the best scripts rarely reflect teaching practices supported by science, and they rarely account for the numerous other roles that a teacher

must take on in the classroom. Even if the best scripts aligned with what the science of teaching tells us is most important—that is, they focused on student discovery and engagement—they would still fall short because there is more to good teaching than scientifically supported “best practice.” As Ohanian (2013) observes, “Teaching is too personal, even too metaphysical, to be charted like the daily temperature” (pp. 122–123). Of course, teaching is a science. But it is also an art.

Teachers need to be willing to face the challenge of creating their own dynamic lessons and need to be strong enough to turn away from the lure of the easy one-size-fits-all scripted instruction. This is why I view wanting to be challenged as a reason to teach, because without that desire it would be all too easy to comply with the standardized scripts. Teachers need to embrace the challenge for the benefit of the students; if they don’t want to be challenged then they shouldn’t be teaching.

The desire to be challenged, however, is not sufficient and does not constitute, by itself, a strong enough reason to teach. Teachers must also be intellectuals. This starts with teachers viewing themselves as scholars—of students and their development, of art, science, literature, mathematics, and history—who see themselves as something more than information dispensers, agreeing to pass their days by filling empty vessels. Teacher work needs to be examined “as a form of intellectual labor” (Giroux, 2013, p. 193). If we continue to act as though teaching does not require someone to be an intellectual we will further devalue teachers, and teaching and the education of children and young people will continue its mundane downfall. Being an intellectual does not mean that one needs to be a genius as defined by a test in order to teach. Instead it means that you must be knowledgeable; you must seek knowledge, possess many skills, and be continuously willing to learn from others. Giroux (2013) states the case most strongly and emphasizes that teachers need to be *transformative intellectuals* who “must take active responsibility for raising various questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving” (p. 194). It is not enough to be an intellectual; one must also advocate for the continued betterment of America’s education system. My desire to continue to grow intellectually, embrace the intellectual aspects of teaching, and advocate for positive change are also reasons why I want to teach.

Teachers must also have a desire to help children and young people. While teachers are frequently inundated with criticism regarding whether they are actually helping their students, the reality is that “educators often find themselves in a position to help kids who are in distress” (Greene, 2008, p. 53). While this is sometimes seen in a purely academic context, there are also many instances where teachers are confronted with helping students in other developmental domains. The healthy development of children and young people can only occur if teachers consider the development of the whole child.

This is ignored frequently in schools, and students are often deemed a problem if they have some kind of lagging skill in the social or emotional domain that is impacting their academic success. Ross Greene (2008) stresses that all kids want to do well and that “kids do well if they can” (p. 10). When teachers don’t help children develop in all developmental domains we end up failing some as they can’t keep up in an environment where help only comes in academic forms. I believe that teachers need to view children and young people as always wanting to do well, and if they experience a situation where a child is not doing well, then they need to find out what help they need to provide so that the child can succeed. If someone does not desire to help children in any way other than academically then teaching is not the correct path for them. While fulfilling the demands of the standards has become a necessity in America’s schools, helping children develop dynamic skills that they will use daily as adults is more important.

Most teachers will identify that the most important goal they have for their students is to become empathetic individuals who have a desire to do their best and work hard. There is rarely a teacher who views meeting all the prescribed standards as the most important thing they will help their students learn; many also question the purpose of the arbitrary standards. Further, the learning environment is also threatened by the increasing dependence on standards as it “decreases the chances that young people will grow up in the midst of adults who are making hard decisions and exercising mature judgement in the face of disagreements” (Meier, 2000, p. 5). To cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving in children, adults need to demonstrate these skills. The overreliance on standards to dictate instruction leads to classrooms where critical thinking does not take place because the teachers are not thinking critically. There then comes the question of who is actually creating these standards. The standards are almost always created from a perspective so far removed from the classroom that they fail to directly relate to the students and focus highly on what politically is deemed important to learn. This makes the standards not relevant to the students themselves, thus making the information learned from them not useful. Unfortunately, meeting the standards has become almost the sole focus of school administrations and lawmakers. This leads to teachers who are limited in the amount of help they are able to offer their students outside of strict academic deadlines. I view this trend toward only helping students meet standards and not helping them develop as a whole child as a dangerous one. It ignores the many differences among children and instead focuses teachers’ help on those students who are already set to succeed. Instead of helping children when they are in distress, we now see teachers who ignore the children who desperately need their help because to help them with anything but meeting academic standards is to distract from the apparent necessity to teach to the test.

I personally have witnessed this change in the type of helping that teachers provide and have seen the damage that it can do to a child. In a pre-K class that I recently observed there were many children who did not fit the ideal mold of the easy-to-teach student. The student who struggled to name letters of the alphabet was treated as if they were wasting the teacher's time and not worth the extra help. The student in visible distress when one of their classmates walked in on them in the bathroom was told to be quiet because a math lesson was occurring. The student with autism who was mostly nonverbal was kept at arm's length from all other students in the class and thought of as a nuisance. Helping the student to be a part of the class or to learn was seen as too much of a distraction from the main objectives the rest of the students needed to meet. What did this teach all the students in that class? It taught them to ignore people who need extra help and that needing help isn't something you want because it will not be given to you. This example is one illustration of how the state of schools is contributing to the current "crisis in human relationships" and "absence of any sense of responsibility for one's community" (Meier, 2000, p. 13). To really understand why this can have devastating consequences to society, it is vital to reevaluate the purpose of school. Too often schools are just viewed as a place to instill a bunch of knowledge into children about the core subjects. When schools are instead viewed as places to create citizens who will positively contribute to society then how much America is failing at creating a sense of responsibility for the community becomes much more alarming. Schools are where students should be learning how to build strong human relationships that emphasize helping others. Teachers need to help their students in more than just academics and create a classroom community to cultivate these qualities in their students. When teaching is viewed as being vital to creating future citizens and building the foundation for a democratic society then the impact that a teacher has is thus viewed as formidable. While there are other occupations that help children, teaching is one where you can help children beyond what any other profession can do. It is because of my view that teaching has the potential to have the greatest impact on children that I want to help children by teaching.

In my opinion, teaching is one of the most important jobs there is. This is because "the experiences we provide for our young people today will shape how they see themselves, one another, and the world" (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 236). How we teach children will greatly contribute to the outcomes they have as adults. I sometimes joke that I want to teach to make sure that when I am older and in need of care by the younger generations that there are individuals I will trust to care for me. While it is a joke, it is rooted in a reality that how our education system teaches our youth greatly impacts society. An individual teacher has the ability to contribute to the outcomes of anywhere

from 20 to 200 students a year. Nearly every single child in America will attend school at some point in their life and have a teacher affect their life outcome. This job should not be taken lightly because of the impact it has. Americans have slowly started to realize that our education is not up to par with many other first-world countries. We see the societal impact of that, and many fear for what will happen if we continue to perpetuate our education system's problems by confounding them with more of what does not work. As Greene (2008) emphasizes, the continuance of practices that do not work is "an exercise in frustration for everyone involved, and it's time to get off the treadmill" (p. 9). If good teachers do not step off the treadmill and facilitate a change toward better education practices, then the result will be a society that continues to fall behind those of other first-world nations. It is extremely important for teachers to be advocates for this change because of the impact that our education system has on student outcomes. My desire to help facilitate this change and positively contribute to the future of society through teaching children is one of the biggest reasons I have found that I not only want to teach but feel I need to.

To recognize that teaching is something you feel you need to do is a vital realization that teachers and future teachers must have. Wanting to do something can easily change over time, but a desire to do something because you feel you need to do it is much harder to get rid of. There is no question that good teachers are needed now more than ever. Nearly half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching, and many who stay quickly conform to the teaching-to-the-test mentality. We need teachers who understand all that teaching entails and are willing to persevere when things get tough because they know that doing their job well is vital to not only the future of the students in their class but also the future of society. It is by no means an easy task to teach, but it is one that requires vigilance. A good teacher is a hero in disguise, and if dedicated individuals don't don a cape and teach, then students will suffer. I feel I can not only handle this burden but want to, and that is why I am becoming a teacher.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

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