



Chapter 2

Why Learning Schools Are Needed

Preview

This chapter considers the following questions:

- What is the importance of an emphasis on learning in this century?
- What is the influence of a global perspective on education?
- What are the inadequacies of past and current practice and the implications of a failure to change?

The analogy that might make the student's view more comprehensible to adults is to imagine oneself on a ship sailing across an unknown sea, to an unknown destination. An adult would be desperate to know where he/she is going. But a child only knows he is going to school ... The chart is neither available nor understandable to him/her ... Very quickly, the daily life on board ship becomes all important ... The daily chores, the demands, the inspections, become the reality, not the voyage, nor the destination.

Mary Alice White (1971)

Why a new emphasis on learning is needed

Ask members of the public what schools are for and the vast majority will reply using one of three phases:

- (a) To teach children.
- (b) So that children can learn.
- (c) To educate children.

The word 'educate' is a broad one and implies that those using it leave the means to the schools themselves but the balance or choice between 'teaching' and 'learning' in schools has become a matter of considerable debate, especially in the last decade of the last century and the early years of this one. Perhaps inevitably, as a new century, and indeed millennium, approached, many writers and educationalists looked forward to the needs of a new era in the twenty-first



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century. Many of these arguments centre upon the changing needs of the world and individual societies in this century, the vastly different circumstances which face people in the future and, particularly, the unpredictability of that future. What many schools have successfully provided was seen as no longer appropriate or adequate for this future and this is linked with a fundamental shift in thinking about the relative significance of teaching and learning.

In 1980, Carl Rogers set out the characteristics of what we shall call 'a teaching school'. The main principles were:

- teachers have the knowledge: pupils receive the knowledge imparted to them;
- tests and examinations measure the extent to which pupils have received;
- teachers have the authority in the classroom; pupils obey – they do not work effectively unless the teacher controls and directs them;
- teachers determine the goals for pupils;
- the intellect is central to success.

(Based on Rogers, 1980)

It is easy to see what the characteristics of a school based on these principles would include:

- learning is a product – what you have learned;
- conformity would be encouraged – dissent is unacceptable;
- labelling (e.g. of those who do not 'fit') becomes self-fulfilling;
- structures are rigid – what you learn is prescribed;
- compartmentalisation exists in age groupings;
- performance is seen as all important;
- emphasis is on rational thinking and on knowledge from established sources.

Later, it may be helpful to you to return to this list and think about how many of these characteristics exist in your school at present.

New developments

There are a number of developments in the past 15–20 years which have had an influence on our thinking about the relative emphasis in learning and teaching. These include the following (all of which are dealt with in following chapters in this book):

- increasing discovery of how the brain works (it is claimed that 80 per cent of all we know about the human brain has been found out since 1990!);
- ideas of multiple intelligence, rather than a fixed entity of intelligence;
- understanding of the different learning styles that individuals have;
- recognition of the importance of emotions or emotional intelligence (Golman, 1996);



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- realisation of the large number of factors that affect individuals' capacity to learn (diet, physical environment, time of day etc);
- influence of ICT.

All these, and others, have shown us the extreme limitations of the assumption behind the teaching school described above. If you add to these the political and sociological developments related to education, particularly the notion of inclusiveness, there are overwhelming arguments for trying to ensure that our educational systems and their institutions reshape themselves so that their focus is firmly on learning, first and foremost. Hence, the need for schools to be 'learning schools'.

Relationship between learning and teaching

Whereas in the teaching school the basic assumption was that you needed to be taught to learn something, we need to understand that:

- teaching can take place without learning occurring;
- and learning can take place without any teaching.

First, teaching can have any of the following learning outcomes:

- (a) It may efficiently transfer knowledge to learners who put this to use in tests or examinations.
- (b) It may inspire learners to go away and develop what they have learned and apply it in other areas.
- (c) It may induce no learning at all (except the conviction that school is 'boring', 'irrelevant', 'a waste of time').
- (d) Or it may encourage those being taught to learn that there are certain 'rules' that enable you to survive or even do quite well at school.

These include:

- keep quiet and you won't get into trouble;
- look as if you are concentrating hard and you won't get asked too many questions;
- do any copying from books thoroughly;
- in general, do what most other people are doing;
- make your work very neat and well laid out even if you think it may not be correct;
- do the minimum required, enough to avoid trouble.

These may appear cynical but research has shown that thousands of children in our schools learn the processes which enable them to be relatively unnoticed. Have you ever tried shadowing a pupil through a day or more in a secondary



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school? Those who have (including the authors of this book) have found children or young people who went through a whole day or more (up to three days in one case) without uttering a single word in class. In most cases, these learners had adopted (probably unconsciously) the above 'rules'. One imagines when they arrived home and a parent asked 'what did you do at school today' that the answer familiar to many parents 'nothing much' was more truthful than might be thought.

However, learning also takes place without teaching. Most of our learning outside of school, as well as post-school, college or university learning, does not give us an official teacher (except in such situations as organised adult education classes of course). Yet we all know that we go on learning throughout our lives. How do we do this?

- we learn by watching others, sometimes formally sitting or working alongside someone else who is doing something, or informally just by noting what someone else does;
- we learn by advice or tips from others;
- we learn by reading, watching television, exploring the internet;
- we learn by trial and error;
- most of all, we learn by doing. From our daily experiences we, often unconsciously, review, draw conclusions, conceptualise, adjust our practice.

This kind of learning all takes place in contexts which:

- are *real*;
- and *relevant*.

This means the context is not artificial or hypothetical; the consequences of our learning or our failure to learn have a direct impact on our lives.

We also learn to manage our lives, most people perfectly successfully, while remaining ignorant in a huge number of areas. We do this through developing learning strategies.

Think of some areas of life in which you are incompetent! Don't worry, all of us as mature adults are useless in certain things. The authors of this book, all well qualified and we believe intelligent, listed these as some of the things that we are no good at (although we are not saying whose is which!):

- *cooking;*
- *dealing with a car breakdown;*
- *dancing;*
- *household money management;*
- *do-it-yourself work;*
- *understanding opera;*
- *finding your way round a strange area.*



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We have done this exercise with many teachers and support staff and the list is usually considerable. The next step is to ask 'how have you managed to be successful mature adults whilst being useless at so many things?' In other words, what learning strategies have you developed? You might like to jot down yours. The commonest ones given are:

- get someone else to do it for you (far and away the commonest);
- avoid situations where your ignorance will be shown (the second commonest);
- bluff (the third commonest and as one person pointed it, this makes you a knowledgeable expert in waffle!);
- pretend or convince yourself that such things are not important (the fourth commonest and it can include belittling the skills which you do not have).

Knowing what your weaknesses are, as well as your strengths, is a crucial part of our learning and successful experience. We can then make decisions about what to do about them and develop strategies to manage effectively in those areas where we are not so strong. Dubin (1962) developed a model, which is adapted here.

The unconscious incompetent: the person who is no good at something but does not know this. This person is never going to learn! This is why when we counsel or mentor someone, we start by saying 'how do you think it went?', hoping that the person will show their own awareness of their weakness or problem. If they do, they are:

The conscious incompetent: you know you are not good at something, but your being aware of this makes you likely to be in a good state for learning. As you begin to learn, perhaps by trying something new, you are becoming:

The conscious competent: you can do something but you are aware of each step you take. At a later stage, when you are used to the change, you may well become:

The unconscious competent: you can do something automatically, as if on autopilot. This is what we do for much of our work and lives in the areas in which we have become proficient. However, there are dangers because at some point we just assume we are doing something well and may not notice when we are not.

Driving is a good example. Most people start learning to drive knowing they have it all to learn (conscious incompetent). As they progress, they learn the techniques but are conscious of what they are doing, especially up to and including the driving test! (Conscious competent.) Having passed the test and been driving for a few years, most of us are driving on autopilot when we get into our cars (unconscious competent). However, road accident research shows that over 70 per cent of drivers are not as good as they think they are and



Case example

Dissatisfied with the quality of work being handed in as homework, some of it obviously done with no understanding, and also conscious of the time wasted to produce inaccurate or poor work, one school in the East Midlands in England changed its strategy to one of positively encouraging students to seek help from others in doing homework or 'out of hours study' as it was called. The main features of the strategy were:

- if the student had an elder sibling he/she should seek help from them and if that sibling had done that work or similar previously, so much the better;
- students should get in touch with other students to find out how they had got on with the task, what they had put for answers/solutions etc;
- the students would record which other students they had sought help from or given help to on the work they handed in;
- follow up and feedback on the homework involved not only the work itself but what had been learned through the collaboration;
- credit was given for both the work produced, the way help had been sought, help that had been given, and what had been learned.

It is important to note that the school's policy was that those students who completed the task without help could gain as much credit as those who had sought help. The principle to be encouraged was to learn when help was needed – that is in itself a key learning strategy.

frequently make errors. Many of those tell the police and the courts that they were doing nothing wrong (unconscious incompetent).

If we could become aware of our strengths and weaknesses in learning while still young (i.e. at school) and develop learning strategies, how much more effective it would be for people. For example, the strategy of 'getting someone else to do it for you', which all of us appear to use in adult life, is positively discouraged in many schools, and the wrong lesson is learned.

Schools with learning at the centre

The twenty-first century is already offering – and will continue to offer – new challenges to us as individuals, members of families, employees and employers, members of communities, societies and nations. We do not even know what some of the challenges will be. As Dalin and Rust expressed it in their book *Towards Schooling in the Twenty First Century*, published in 1996, they envisaged that the task of the school of the future

assumes that teachers, students and others, often must work with assignments where there is no known answer or with an approach where the solution is not fully known.

(p.153)

However, Dalin and Rust did offer a list of possible challenges for the student:

- to develop and live in a multicultural society;
- to develop a practical and living partnership between genders;
- to develop and take responsibility for local surroundings;
- to take responsibility for the physical environment and understand the consequences of an ecological perspective in daily life;
- to understand possibilities and dangers related to an advanced economic/ technological society;
- to work for peace and prevent war;
- to live and take responsibility for a multigenerational society;
- to understand media language, and how to cope with the flood of information confronting humankind;
- to understand differences in conditions of life, and work for a fair and just world;
- to understand the internationalising tendencies and learn to take responsibility to live and function in an international society;
- to understand the dynamics in work and industry, to learn to create an active relationship to work life and the challenges that wait when a major focus of life is work;
- and to take advantage of a boundless learning market, and become capable of developing an individual learning plan, which incorporates co-operation between student, home and teacher and takes advantage of the electronic market.

(Dalin and Rust, 1996 p.152)

Thus, we need to ask ourselves first:

what kinds of people will be best placed to thrive or survive, help others to thrive or survive, in such a world?

We suggest that the qualities such people will need include (not in any particular order):

- resilience;
- emotional self-awareness;
- adaptability and flexibility;
- being at ease with uncertainty;
- empathy with others;
- optimistic outlook.



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Others can be added of course.

This is an ideal list and no one person will possess them all, hence the importance of different genders, of team and group support, of different cultural dimensions and so on. Nevertheless, such a list can provide a starting point for those trying to set out what education should be striving for.

The second question is:

how can schools play an effective part in helping people during the compulsory schooling period of their lives in preparing them to become such people?

Perhaps the answer to the second question includes, by helping them:

- to *be* effective learners while at school;
- to understand that learning will remain central to their future lives' success;
- to know sufficient about themselves as a learner to want to go on and to be able to go on applying and developing this self-knowledge throughout life.

The significance and importance of school learning therefore is that it harmonises in various ways with the learning that utilises everyday activities and insights. In this way, students' learning is most effective when they can relate what they learn to something else in their experience. Learning schools of the twenty-first century need to be less artificial as organisations, less cut off from what goes on outside them, and the learning that takes place within them needs to be felt and perceived as relevant by all those concerned. When we say 'less cut off', this in the future means not just from our immediate locality and community, but from the international world we live in.

Globalisation

Globalisation cannot be ignored in thinking about how learning schools of the future can be at their most effective. However, the term can be used to refer to:

- *a cultural dimension* – whereby western cultures (especially American) influence local cultures throughout the world;
- *a political dimension* – whereby dimensions have international implications, often overriding national or regional ones;
- *an economic dimension* – whereby market-driven approaches are spread everywhere and prosperity and deprivation are clearly linked across the globe;
- *a technological dimension* – whereby electronic technologies link the corners of the world and underpin all of the above, especially the economic;
- *an environmental dimension* – whereby, as we all live on the same planet, the effects of action in one part will have consequences for all other parts.



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The understanding of the interconnectedness of all of us on our planet is crucial to the future of us all and must therefore play a part in the learning and understanding of twenty-first century citizens. Harter's (2000) global village composition powerfully brings home this point to those for example in a European country who wish to focus exclusively on 'home grown' needs. Harter points out that as this century began, if the earth's population could be seen as a village of 100 people, with the ratios exactly the same, the village population would comprise:

- 57 Asians; 21 Europeans; 14 from the western hemisphere, both north and south; 8 Africans;
- 52 would be female; 48 would be male;
- 70 would be non-white; 30 would be white;
- 70 would be non-Christian; 30 would be Christian;
- 89 would be heterosexual; 11 would be homosexual;
- 6 people would possess 59 per cent of the entire world's wealth and all 6 would be from the US;
- 80 would live in substandard housing;
- 70 would be unable to read;
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition.

(Harter, 2000)

Paradoxically, this interconnectedness has also led to greater struggles and conflicts at local levels. Stoll et al (2003, p. 9) describe this well:

In a world of complexity, instability and unpredictability, people are struggling to make sense of the changes, and to situate themselves within the new milieu. Just as globalisation can destabilise nation states and democratic institutions in the pursuit of profit, tribalism can undermine them in the name of meaning and identity.

This 'greater hunger' has motivated large elements of previously marginalised populations, such as women, racial and ethnic groups, the poor and disabled, to seek more meaningful places in our nations and in the world. It has also contributed to an increase in membership in fundamentalist versions of all the major religions that offer security, predictability and stability in a rapidly changing and somewhat scary world.

Cogan and Derricott (2000) summarised the views from nine different countries on necessary characteristics of twenty-first century citizens as being:

- looking at problems in a global context;
- working co-operatively and responsibly;
- accepting cultural differences;
- thinking in a critical and systematic way;
- solving conflicts non-violently;



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- changing lifestyle to protect the environment;
- defending human rights;
- participating in politics.

We may ask ourselves the question: How many of these are fostered through the current educational system and the assessment procedures it requires?

Most of the chapters of this book deal with some of the ways in which these ideas and others mentioned earlier may be achieved, whilst acknowledging that we need to start from wherever we are and all schools are not at the same starting point. We need to be aware of what may be some of the consequences of failing to change to put learning at the centre of our schools.

Implications of a failure to change

(i) The context

Because of the context within which schools (and other educational organisations such as colleges or universities) have been forced to operate, there has been an overwhelming pressure on *achievement*. This is of course a good thing in itself but it is the way in which achievement has been measured and defined, thereby also defining success and failure, that has led to an obsession with standards. Schools have been forced to play 'the standards game' (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001 p.45) to obtain narrow outcomes which can be assessed in tests and examination results. One headteacher writes, in 2001, of 11 years as a head in England:

The focus on systems, standards, inputs and outputs, data and accountability has been relentless ... I struggle to recall a piece of legislation which, when implemented, would have increased children's enjoyment of education and made them want to come to school more.

(Arrowsmith, 2001 p.21)

Why has this happened?

Somewhere along the way, in the name of educational reform, policy makers may have confused structure with purpose, measurement with accomplishment, means with ends, compliance with commitment, and teaching with learning.

(Stoll et al, 2003 p.185)

All this has led to a concentration on how students and their teachers and schools 'perform', and this huge emphasis on performance in these limited terms and the 'performativity culture' which develops in the concern to deliver it is often anti-reflection because of the urgency that there is to reach the required performance levels. Here is one quote from a teacher indicating some of these



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consequences:

I don't have the job satisfaction now I once had working with young kids because I feel every time I do something intuitive I just feel guilty about it. 'Is this right; am I doing this the right way; does this cover what I am supposed to be covering; should I be doing something else; should I be more structured; should I have this in place; should I have done this?' You start to query everything you are doing – there's a kind of guilt in teaching at the moment. I don't know if that's particularly related to Ofsted but of course it's multiplied by the fact that Ofsted is coming in because you get in a panic that you won't be able to justify yourself when they finally arrive.

(Quoted in Jeffrey and Woods, 1998 p.118)

And here is a quotation from an interview with a student:

A student was explaining why she liked her maths lessons. She was able to perform the problem-solving tasks her teacher set to the required level of attainment in 20 minutes, leaving her 15 minutes to talk with her friends before the end of the lesson.

(Quoted in Elliott, 2001 p.198)

She was prepared to play the standards game so that she could then get on with real matters!

Currently the demand for public accountability places pressures and demands on students which get in the way of effective learning. The public examination system in the UK, for example, is outmoded, unwieldy, prone to inaccuracy and very expensive. Over £250 million pounds was spent in the UK on administering a system which is geared to credentialing rather than encouraging learning and which fewer and fewer people – most notably students – have any real faith in. There are other – more telling – costs. A survey in 2004 revealed that one in eight UK children *under* 12 years is taking some form of drugs to treat depression, and during the 2003 'exam season', over 9,000 calls were received by charities and support services from young people feeling suicidal or very depressed.

(ii) What might this mean?

What 'messages' or 'lessons' may a large number of students in schools under present conditions be taking into the future?

- That formal schooling is a ritual you are required to go through (like the maths student above) before you get on to real life. Some students accept this, enjoy the rituals and play the game successfully in terms of what the outcomes are. Others may see the ritual as irrelevant and meaningless, and may drop out altogether. Others see it as something to be endured before they



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- can escape to 'real life' when schooling ends.
- That there is basically one way (the 'correct' way) to do things, including one way to learn. This one way is heavily dependent upon the teacher.
 - That, if you want to improve, the way is to absorb more knowledge and that the improvement will be recognised by an improved grade or number.
 - That love of product (Willmott, 1992) is the most important thing; how you gained or achieved the product is much less important.
 - That learning is essentially utilitarian.
 - That, if all else fails, figures can be manipulated and there is a thin line between 'being creative' and 'cheating' in this context.

This may seem exaggerated but it would be a brave teacher or headteacher who, in the present climate, could claim *never* to have put the best possible gloss on statistics which were for public consumption.

Of course, many students in our schools do not fit this picture but, unless the emphasis in our schools is shifted away from 'the technician, managerialist and mechanistic' (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001 p.151), generations of adults may emerge who will never meet any of the criteria for prospering in or even coping with the world of this century. Already, these who work in education know how difficult it can be trying to engage parents in their children's education because the parents' own experience of schooling was painful and one of failure.

(iii) One example

In education systems where prescription comes from governments, what inevitably emerges is the notion of the 'one-fit-for-all' approach. Examples in the UK include:

- national strategies (including a 'literacy hour');
- performance management;
- Ofsted's model of teaching;
- and many more.

It is not that any of these is not helpful and/or can be very effective. What they convey, however, is the message that there is *one* way of doing things – which the experience of effective teachers and effective schools have shown is manifestly *not* the case. This approach may be essential because the purpose is to achieve certain predetermined, measurable outcomes (as already mentioned). But the education and development of humans is simply not like that! As Preedy (2001 p.94) has pointed out:

Many of the most valuable outcomes of education are multidimensional, complex and long term and cannot be represented by test scores.

Most teachers – and indeed parents – will also be able to describe some



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‘unplanned’ and ‘unexpected’ outcomes!

The message that those going through the school system may take into the rest of their lives – that there is one set way of doing things, tackling problems, dealing with situations, gaining new knowledge – is the worst possible one for life in this fast-changing world. Of course many people will discover the real truth for themselves and become adept at these things. How much better though if schooling could be experienced as something where you learn this truth in childhood, adolescence and young adulthood!

Watkins (2004) has summarised the research of many people over many years into what are the inherent attitudes and beliefs about our approaches to learning and education when we operate within a ‘performance orientation’:

- we believe that ability leads to success;
- we are concerned to be seen as able, and to perform well in others’ eyes;
- we seek satisfaction from doing better than others;
- we emphasise competition, public evaluation;
- when the task is difficult we display helplessness: ‘*I can’t do X*’.

All this shows a concern for **proving** one’s competence and therefore he concludes that this performance orientation can actually depress performance! (Watkins, 2004.)

The purposes of learning and education

At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested three answers that member of the public were likely to give if asked what schools are for. However, beyond that lies the fundamental question of what are the purposes of learning that is gained at school. One of the authors has suggested elsewhere that schools should ideally facilitate:

- learning as a means to an end;
- learning as a process, learning how to learn;
- and learning which provides knowledge which is worth pursuing for its own sake.

(Middlewood, 2005)

There is no doubt that that purpose of learning and education has come to be perceived in most countries as a means to an end, essentially as something utilitarian. Up to and including the 1970s, for example, thousands of young people in developed countries such as the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and others went from school to university to study a subject because they liked, even loved, that subject and wished to spend three years or more reading and examining it in depth. Surveys in the 1990s and this decade show that students



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above all are motivated by the extent to which a higher qualification will give them a better job, career and financial prospects. (See for example Ivy, 2004). In developing countries, it would be impossible to ignore the fact that educational attainment is the passport to economic success and a higher place in social status, and it would be hypocritical to criticise such desires in those contexts. However, this is not only true in poorer countries. Sugimine (1998 p.121) describes the desperate competition in Japan to get children into the 'right' streams, turning schools into 'fast-grinding and knowledge-based institutions even at elementary level'.

The universities and people seeking the highest qualifications are only one example. What is known as vocational education provides another. The world in which we live will become increasingly driven by technology but it seems certain that people who perform certain tasks will remain essential to our well-being. Examples include:

- people who cut and style our hair;
- people who maintain and mend our boilers, taps, etc;
- people who maintain our parks and gardens;
- people who build our walls, conservatories, etc;
- people who repair our machines – cars to lawnmowers.

Hairdressers, plumbers, gardeners, bricklayers and mechanics are just some of many hundreds of occupations which require particular skills. These skills have to be acquired and regularly updated. Young people need to have the opportunity to acquire these to an appropriate level during the years of schooling.

However, the same principle applies here as in more so-called academic education. At the time of writing, an acute shortage of plumbers has been identified in the UK and several institutions are recruiting people onto relevant courses to meet the demand. But those who become plumbers solely as a means to the end of earning large sums of money are less likely to find satisfaction in the actual work they do, than those who wish to do the work as also some kind of service and who enjoy the processes involved. Bricklayers also are in short supply. Stories are told of those bricklayers who see themselves as:

- laying row on row of bricks to make walls;
- or helping to create buildings;
- or having a vision of what the building looks like at the end.

Learning in any context which is *merely* a means to an end is ultimately unsatisfactory and has all kinds of consequences for the education that is based upon it.

In conclusion

In looking back to the 'teaching school' characterised earlier in the chapter, and looking forward to the 'learning school' of the future, perhaps we may summarise as below.

	Twentieth century teaching school	Twenty-first century learning school
1	Learning is a product.	Learning is a process.
2	Learning at school is complete in itself.	Schooling is a contribution to a life-long learning process.
3	Intelligent, rational and right answers are paramount.	Emotions, instinct, creativity are as important as intellect.
4	Assessment is of outcomes.	Assessment is for learning.
5	Learning takes place at school.	Learning takes place everywhere.
6	Groupings are based on age and ability.	Basis for groupings varies according to learning need.
7	Conformity is crucial to school achievement.	Independence is encouraged.
8	Schools are self-standing institutions.	The school's boundaries are endlessly flexible.
9	Schools and teachers determine goals.	Students determine own goals.
10	Teachers provide and deliver. Pupils and students receive.	Teachers manage and facilitate learning. Pupils and students learn how to learn and apply this to themselves.
11	Teachers are experts.	Teachers are specialists – in teaching – and are learners.
12	Teachers have authority.	Teachers have authoritative presence, based on learning.
13	Professionals provide; parents support.	Parents and others contribute to learning.

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