



Teaching The Teachers

Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher
(Japanese proverb)

Dr Michael Nagel explains what goes in to making an excellent educator.

Study after study shows that the single most important factor determining the quality of the education a child receives is the quality of their teacher. Teaching is not an easy profession and great teachers can be rare, because teaching, like many other occupations, is a craft. There are some distinct skills associated with teaching that most people are not born knowing. Yes, some people are naturals when it comes to working with students and they seem to develop the skills by intuition. Most are not, however, and need extensive training before they can function at a professional level.

So how does one go about preparing future generations of teachers for the noble task of preparing future generations of students? This is a question that many teacher-educators face each and every day as they plan programs and courses to ensure that those who go out into schools offer their students something “Better than a thousand days of diligent study”.

I would like to share with you some thoughts on the trials and tribulations that often face those who are teaching future teachers and what some of the ‘magic’ ingredients are for making a ‘great’ teacher.

I have been a student, a student-teacher and a teacher, and am now in the business of teaching future teachers. Therefore I can offer a variety of perspectives for parents and educators alike. My ideas are not, by any means, a prescription for teacher success or teacher accountability, but rather an indication for parents of what goes into preparing future teachers and what, ironically, cannot be taught.

The complex nature of teaching requires broad knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and standards; an understanding of the nature of learning and behaviour; enthusiasm, empathy and a love of learning; knowledge of discipline and classroom-management techniques; the ability to take on myriad responsibilities and roles each day; the art of diplomacy; and a desire to make a difference in the lives of young people. So it’s no wonder that great teachers are rare or that producing a great teacher is a difficult task. Teacher-educators must deliver the latest theories of learning and teaching, practise what they preach and, with the assistance of schools and teacher-mentors in the field, monitor progress in practical situations. Yet all the theories and training in the world are not enough to fully prepare one for being in charge of a classroom.

During this time a young boy came up to me and asked to borrow a stapler... Not long after returning to his desk, that same boy put his hand up and told me he was going to staple his finger.



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expertise and in professional development. They know how to present material in an enthusiastic manner and how to instil a hunger in their students to learn more on their own. They form strong relationships with their students, show that they care about them as people, and always remember that they are teaching students, not subjects.

In terms of personal attributes and those things that cannot be taught, research tells us that great teachers have humility. They do not pretend to know something they do not, but demonstrate that they are learners too. It takes a great deal of courage for a teacher to say, 'I don't know, but let's find the answer together'. Great teachers possess patience and empathy, and understand that no two children are completely alike, having a range of temperaments, personalities and dispositions, and requiring tact and

patience when they encounter difficulties. They have the ability to relate to other people and the capacity to bring out the best in them. They have a positive disposition: they are able to encourage students to always do their best and they make it known that a mistake is also a learning experience. Great teachers have a passion for children, learning and teaching.

Each day we seem to learn a little bit more about great teachers. But one of the fundamental messages that teacher-educators attempt to burn into the psyche of aspiring teachers is that great teachers have students who are happy and engaged in learning so that the best can be brought out in each and every one of them. ■

Dr Michael C. Nagel is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Science, Health and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast.