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Are Great Teachers Born or Made?

by Peshe C. Kuriloff – October 28, 2015

In light of recent debates about the value of professional development, this article revisits the question of whether or not great teachers are made or born. If, as the recent study released by TNTP claims, professional development has no impact on teacher performance, we could draw the conclusion that good teachers are simply born good and no professional development program will make them better. That conclusion, however, contradicts ample evidence that teachers, like other professionals, can learn and improve their practice over time. As TNTP reports, school districts may well be wasting billions of dollars on ineffective professional development, but the need for well designed, differentiated teacher support has never been greater.

The field of teacher preparation assumes that anyone with the will to learn can become a good, if not a great, teacher. You don't have to be a great student yourself (a B average is sufficient); you don't have to be an extrovert; you don't need to love children; you don't need to love your discipline. We open the door to all comers, suggesting that we can teach them what they need to know to become effective practitioners. We can make them into teachers. But can we?

What Do We Expect Teachers to Know and Be Able to Do?

Policy makers clearly believe that there is content teachers should prove they know before they enter the classroom. In the state of Pennsylvania and in many states across the country, teacher candidates are tested on basic skills like reading, writing, and math before they can apply for teacher education. They are also tested on their knowledge of child development (if they will be working with young children) and their content knowledge (if they will be working with middle grades or high school students). In some states, we test their pedagogical content knowledge as well, trying to determine if they have learned appropriate strategies for teaching their content knowledge to students.

No state requires personality tests, however. We don't assess their interpersonal skills or ability to connect with children. We don't consider whether teaching is just a job or a calling. We don't assess their resilience or work ethic. We don't test their ability to keep striving even when confronted with adverse conditions like unsupportive administrators, hostile parents, unmotivated students, or lack of basic tools like books and paper, even though we know that these contextual factors greatly influence teacher success and satisfaction.

For many teacher educators, our failure to pre-screen teachers for these factors enables countless individuals to enter the profession who will never make a go of it. It also raises challenging ethical questions about whether we should exclude candidates while they're still in basic training, before they even get a chance to learn from live classroom experience or to test themselves under fire. Should we reject teacher candidates who do not as students exhibit the right disposition, or can we make them better?

Can Professional Development Create Better Teachers?

Classroom-based teacher preparation accounts for a percentage of teacher development, but teachers and teacher educators agree that classroom experience and mentorship matter most. Many educators argue that it takes three years or more for a good teacher to get "made." If that is the case, a major part of the teacher-making process would inevitably include on-the-job professional development.

The study recently released by The New Teacher Project ("The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth about Our Quest for Teacher

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Development," 2015), however, calls into question the value of professional development for practicing teachers. The authors assert that billions of dollars are being wasted in a misguided effort to improve teacher practice. That conclusion will resonate with many teachers who insist that the professional development they are offered fails to meet their most basic needs. Does it also suggest that professional development for teachers is a waste of time?

Clearly, no professional becomes an outstanding practitioner based solely on what they learn in school. Some seem destined for success from the moment they enter the field; others take years to develop their skill sets or don't find the right job situation that taps into their distinctive abilities immediately or ever.

Teachers face the same challenges other professionals encounter. Some seem born to the classroom, authoritative, knowledgeable, and comfortable in their role, respected by students and colleagues alike right from the start. Others need support and mentoring and time to learn from experience and develop their teacher persona. Given the right conditions, they might thrive as teachers, but they don't have the skills, stamina, or initiative to survive independently at first, especially in difficult urban contexts.

Over time, as teachers learn basic skills, their performance plateaus if they and their school leaders do not continue to raise the bar. New tools are introduced; new discoveries or new ways of thinking require new pedagogies. In a rapidly changing world, we all need to refresh our understandings on a regular basis, teachers perhaps even more so than other professionals. Can they acquire the skills and qualities they lack while on the job? Can the billions of dollars allegedly being squandered be used more effectively to help teachers learn and become more successful in their chosen profession?

The Value of Professional Development

Studies conducted over the last 15 years report mixed results for professional development of teachers. Some document marked improvement as a result of high quality interventions (e.g., Supovitz et al., 2000); others, like those from the TNTP study, claim professional development shows no impact on teacher quality even after large expenditures of time and money (although the charter school network in the study spent a great deal more than the other three school districts and achieved much better results).

An often-cited study documenting the absence of high quality research on the impact of teacher professional development involved only elementary school teachers (Yoon et al., 2007). In addition, many of the nine examples cited focused specifically on professional development that introduced teachers to new pedagogy designed to increase student achievement. They did not study teacher development more broadly.

What do we know about professional development designed specifically to help teachers enhance their professional skills and become better at their jobs? Not a lot. In the early years on the job, as teachers accumulate experience, they tend to get better. Individual evaluations of programs like the National Writing Project document teacher development and increased student achievement, and there is evidence that mentoring programs produce results. At the same time, there is considerable evidence that school districts rate poorly on many measures related to teacher development.

Developing Teachers One at a Time

We didn't need research to tell us that teachers are a precious resource, and we should invest in them if we value our children's well-being. Their ability to perform well consistent with any definition of good teaching, their ability to communicate effectively with children—to inform them, to set an example for them, to promote their self-esteem, to facilitate their cognitive and personal development—make an incalculable difference to individuals, families, and society.

And just as clearly, putting research aside, there remains much for them to learn once they become teachers. Some of what they need they will acquire on their own, especially if they have been coached in reflective practice. Many other skills they can master with the help of

colleagues, school leaders, and other purveyors of professional development.

Most teachers start out strong in some areas, weaker in others. Not every teacher needs the same resources or professional development to become better. Some teachers need to know their content better; some need to understand their students better. Some need to become more effective at time management; others need basic tools for differentiating instruction in today's highly diverse classrooms or engaging students in the post-Internet world.

Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. A one-size-fits-all strategy will likely fit few, if any, well. The search for professional development that can be realized "at scale" and meet all teachers needs misunderstands the nature of professionalism.

Numerous studies of practices designed to increase teacher effectiveness have shown promising results. Their responsiveness to identified teacher needs and/or preferences distinguishes those practices from the type of wholesale training so often administered by school districts. When we respectfully work with teachers to pinpoint their needs and interests and help identify useful, practical resources, they get better at what they do.

Teachers are Born and Made

The TNTP study concludes with interesting recommendations, which emphasize the complexity of the challenge. A culture of high expectations for teachers and students seems like a prerequisite for promoting continuous improvement. Acknowledging that today's classroom teachers perform an array of tasks that require a diverse set of skills and that no one can be good at everything also offers a good starting point for thinking about developing teacher quality. Such an approach challenges conventional assumptions about the role of the classroom teacher.

Lest we lose our way in an effort to sort through contradictory and misleading research results, we can follow our intuition and common sense by affirming the positive role professional development has to play in helping teachers become increasingly successful. A small percentage of teachers may be born to the classroom, but most of us learn how to teach well over time, and more differentiated support often translates into better outcomes for teacher performance and student learning.

If we wait for good teachers to be born, we will be waiting a long time. If we strengthen our system for making teachers by choosing them carefully, educating them well and generously providing the ongoing support for development their success requires, we might see positive change in our lifetimes.

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