Why Teach?

By: Joshua Barnett and R. Openshaw

Why would anyone go into the teaching field? This question and many others regarding the teaching profession are becoming more than just talk around school lunchrooms and teacher lounges. In fact, such questions are no longer posed only in board of trustee meetings; rather these discussions are going on in colleges and universities across the globe. Invariably, nations are facing shortages in recruiting and retaining teachers. The question remaining is how can the teacher loss be filled? To respond to this question, we consider two key issues. First, what challenges face potential teachers? Second, to what extent are teachers responsible for students?

To begin, we consider what challenges potential teachers face. While the challenges are undoubtedly many, we categorize them into three issues – recruitment and retention difficulties, stress-related matters, and behavioural problems. We contend that these three issues reduce the number of individuals applying to be teachers and are partially responsible for teachers leaving the profession.

With regard to recruitment problems, a potential teacher, which includes virtually every university student, often hears about the disadvantages of being a teacher – low salaries, overwhelming paperwork, difficult students, unsupportive administrators – as well as criticisms aimed at teachers – such as questions about how curriculums can be made so as to reduce teacher errors. In the United States, this equalization of teacher ability is often referred to as “teacher proofing” the curriculum. That is to say, if the curriculum is created in such a prescriptive way as to instruct teachers on exactly what to say and when to say it; then teachers will be uniform in their instruction. Teacher proofing? When did society advance beyond allowing teachers to teach? When did those outside of the classroom know more than those inside of the classroom? Moreover, many teachers and researchers have viewed recent educational restructuring as yet another sign of deprofessionalisation, which causes fewer people to want to enter and remain in the profession.

The next challenge facing teachers is stress. Many teachers decry the fact that they cannot focus on students as they would wish because of their already excessive work load, which includes but is not limited to administering tests, preparing students, marking papers, serving on committees, mentoring other teachers, dealing with parents, and making sure all students are performing and no one is falling behind. Certainly policymakers and teachers agree on at least one issue, much is expected from teachers.

Additionally, the teacher's work day doesn't begin or end inside of the classroom. Future teachers should be prepared to take stress, emotional issues, fear, and actual work home to complete in the evenings and on weekends. That's right, any homework assigned to students should be considered a double portion for teachers. This concept of taking work home can create additional stress inside the teacher's personal life.
The final potential recruitment challenge teachers face is poor and even threatening classroom behaviour. A popular view is that a half century ago, teachers faced the horror of a student chewing gum in class; today, teachers may have threats against their lives. Then, they must turn around and emotionally support another student with low self-esteem. One minute a teacher may be a disciplinarian, the next a counselor, the next a nurse, then maybe a guard-ian later on. Teachers serve many functions and wear many professional hats.

So, why would anyone want to be a teacher when the stories of being overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated are proliferated?

Hold your thoughts on this question as we turn to our second point – how responsible are teachers for students’ learning?

In 1966, James Coleman produced a ground-breaking report that was highlighted by the finding that socio-economic status was more influential in student achievement than what happened inside the classroom. Albert Beaton, the statistical mastermind behind the Coleman study, found this same outcome in 2002, when he analyzed the international comparisons of over 40 countries in the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), which included New Zealand.

Again, Beaton found that factors such as parents’ education, the number of books in the home and the amount of time parents have at home proved critical to children’s performance in school. Despite recent attempts in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand to place a renewed emphasis on teacher culpability for poor student performance, good teaching is a necessary but not sufficient condition of student achievement. Moreover, today’s teachers arguably face much more complex issues than before, including an onslaught of the new issues that threaten students’ well being.

The fact is, no matter how knowledgeable, competent and prepared the teacher may be, the child who comes to school hungry, exhausted, in pain, or fearing for safety is not ready to learn. Therefore, let’s be fair to teachers and understand that they are working with different types of students. That is to say, if we were going to run a 100 metre race with 10 students, and five of those students were given additional weights to wear during the race, two students were asked to run uphill, and one student was asked to run downhill, while the remaining two students were asked to run the 100 metres on a smooth straight running track. Should we expect different outcomes for the runners?
We contend that we should. Different students follow the pattern of these runners. Some students face challenges outside of the school, which forces them to climb hills other students may not climb. Other students have advantages that allow them to almost coast downhill. Certainly, we ask our teachers to do their best inside of the classroom, but we must understand that measuring student performance is a function of different students learning at different rates. That is, not all students are the same.

While there are different areas of learning and development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, physical), there is a general consensus that much of the focus for teachers inside of the classroom should be on whether they are improving the academic aptitude of students. That is, are students more prepared for the world and better equipped for the future. This is what we must hold teachers responsible for – improving the ability of the students. Generally, this improvement is measured in terms of a testing standard. While teachers likely prepare students and improve students emotionally, these changes are difficult to measure. Additionally, there is no set curriculum regarding how teachers should address the emotional needs of their students. What we do have is a set and approved curriculum for improving students’ academic performance; therefore, it is claimed, we should focus on how well teachers are doing that.

However, as Coleman, Beaton, and others have shown, teachers are not solely responsible for the academic performance of students. Therefore, we must find a way to measure how well a student is doing and how much that student has improved during the course of a year with a given teacher.

Consider this issue alongside the other as we turn our attention back to the original question – how can the teacher void be filled?

How were teachers viewed a half century ago? Was teaching a noble and charitable position, one respected and honored within society and the media? A 1947 Time magazine article titled, Why Teachers Teach, provides a glimpse into the positive world of teaching. Dorothy McCuskey, a teacher quoted in the article, states: “The day you help Johnny discover that multiplication is really a short form of adding...you know why teaching holds people. All farmers...know the fascination of watching things grow. But for the teacher it is not things – it’s people.”

According to Eva Belliston, a teacher in Utah in the United States, a former administrator gave her a card that now sits on her desk and reminds her why she became a teacher – the card says “it’s about the kids, stupid.”
So, what can be done to get more teachers into the classroom? How can the world get more highly qualified teachers? How can policymakers ensure that all students are treated equally and fairly? Perhaps, the best statement is to remember that it's all about the kids, which isn't so stupid as much as it is simple.

As policymakers in New Zealand and around the world continue to seek ways to improve the teaching workforce, they must be reminded that teachers are the front line workers. Teachers are the ones inside of the classroom with the students everyday. Teachers give their “extra” time to help students. Teachers make the difference. However, while many teachers may take on the label of superhero with their incredible workloads and inexhaustible giving, teachers cannot do everything.

What happens inside the classroom is most assuredly affected by what happens outside of the classroom. Can teachers teach students who are hungry? Can teachers teach students who are suffering? Certainly, teachers are trying and working hard. However, evidence consistently indicates that socio-economic factors influence student ability.

In contrast to earlier education policy reforms, the next wave of reforms must address the two issues discussed above. First, policymakers must reduce the challenges facing teachers. That is, reforms should improve the working conditions for teachers, reduce the stress level, and reward their hard work, especially those who consistently find ways to improve student performance. Second, policymakers must recognize what teachers can and cannot control; what they are and are not responsible for regarding education. Following these two guidelines for reforms will be necessary to reverse the current declining teacher ranks and avoid continued teacher shortages. We contend that addressing these two issues can alter the trend from “why teach” to “why not teach”. Finally, policymakers, researchers, and educators must continue to seek reforms aimed at not either but both of the fundamental building blocks for education – teachers and students.