

When asked *What is an effective teacher?* this is how our students responded:

- *The teacher would do a little bit of everything—a little working, a little playing, a little reading.*
- *Instead of doing regular math, make math into games.*
- *A teacher who makes it fun, not just work.*
- *Someone who makes real-life comparisons.*
- *Keeps you interested and engaged.*
- *Tells you about tests in advance.*
- *Does not give you praise when you don't deserve it.*
- *Someone who connects to the students.*
- *Funny, but knows when to be serious.*
- *They can be strict when they need to be, but not so strict that there is no fun.*

FACILITATORS

We are now the guides, facilitators, and meddlers. We need to help our students explore, wonder, ask questions, critically think, and ultimately learn important concepts in ways that promote active learning. We need to teach so that our students are engaged in and passionate about their learning, and we are guiding them to the end goal. As facilitators, we are listening to their ideas, collaboration, and goals. As meddlers we guide their process, model ideas, and push our students to think and explore ideas they might not have considered.

SKILL DEVELOPERS

We need to ensure our students are prepared for the outside world. Certain basic skills are necessary, such as fluency with math facts and the structure of a sentence. More importantly, we also need to ensure our students have obtained the skills of learning, listening, and processing and adapting what they have absorbed. They need the skills of finding information, making connections, asking the right questions, and substantiating their answers.

ARTISTS

Our new role has us thinking outside of a textbook or procedural piece. We are not moving in a linear line. To facilitate and build our students' skills, we need to be divergent thinkers and consider which direction to push them in. We need to present options and think of problems and solutions that will extend their thinking. We need to think creatively about ways to reach our students and to inspire them to think creatively.

RESOURCERS

In our traditional teaching role of bearer of knowledge, we have been replaced. We are no longer expected to know all the information. The new bearer of knowledge is technology and our students have access to it. They can find information, match it to a visual, and possibly find a linking video to guide them step-by-step through a tricky concept. They do not need us to dictate facts or recite information; they can do that on their own in a few clicks. Their world is technology-based, and their future relies on their ability to find information quickly. Technology has not diminished our roles as teachers or the value of school. While students can access some information independently, curiosity

needs fuel—that is the role of the educators. We also need to teach them how to sift through the information and to distinguish what information answers their questions, what information comes from a reliable source, and what information can be discarded.

COLLABORATORS

As we no longer deliver information, we are also learning with our students. We are guiding and facilitating, and also collaborating. We share directions or ideas to build on their ideas. We place them with an appropriate partner or push them in the direction of someone who will inspire them. We build a collaborative environment.

CRITICAL CHEERLEADERS

As our students learn, experiment, and try different solutions, we are part of their feedback. We need to guide them with a belief that they can do anything and then cheer them on when they achieve their goals. We need to build their creative confidence. We also need to step back and be realistic, set targets for them, and offer critical and obtainable feedback for growth.

“The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by private trial and error, to be sure—but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks.”

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (1988)

DETOUR: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Endeavoring to do something different in our practice can be difficult if we feel we are alone in our decision to move away from tradition. While conversations in the staff room can give us some opportunity to share our experiences, these kinds of conversations are usually informal and may or may not be with people who are trying to do similar things.

In education, there has been a push to form professional learning communities (PLCs) at both grassroots and administrative levels. Richard DuFour, a leading figure in researching the efficacy of PLCs, describes a PLC as an ongoing process by which educators collaborate in inquiry and action research into best teaching and learning practices. The primary goal of any professional learning community in education is to improve student learning.

Sometimes these groups are formed within schools, across school boards, or through online communities. Online communities, with their global reach, can be especially enriching; you might be sharing and interacting with educators from all over the world.

Professional learning communities can provide

- Exposure to and development of new skills and capabilities
- Opportunities to share best practices with other teachers
- Increased communication and trust among teachers
- Possibilities to investigate different learning strategies
- Chances to develop new tools for teaching and assessment
- Reflection on evidence-based classroom research



Small Hop: Teacher Check-In

DESTINATION

To get feedback from your students about how they see you as a teacher and how they feel in the classroom.

SHIFT

We have all been to teachers' college, we attend professional development, we read, we discuss with colleagues, we know the latest thoughts on pedagogy. What more do we need to consider when planning for our classroom? What about the voices of the students? How often do we seek their feedback on how they see the classroom environment and our role in the classroom? Done well, this is not an exercise in discomfort, but instead a worthwhile practice that helps us to know how we are viewed by our most-important evaluators.

SPARK

Explain to your students that, just as you provide them with a report card to give them feedback on their learning, it helps you to get feedback on how you are doing as their teacher. Be clear with students about the purpose of the exercise to ensure they are honest (and mature) with their feedback.

UNFOLDING THE ROADMAP

- Briefly explain the purpose of the exercise and what you are hoping to achieve. There are limitations to your powers as a teacher: some things are within your control (like how fast you talk), others are not (like extending recess for an hour).
- Create a short checklist for your students to complete. Ask questions that are simple, centred around the daily routines that matter. For example:

Think about things that are important to you in a teacher: Do they speak clearly? Do you understand their ideas? Do you feel comfortable asking them for help? Do you understand their feedback?

Consider keeping the surveys anonymous by option. I do—if a student wants me to know how they've responded, they can add their name.

For younger children, the questions could be statements with a happy-face scale to measure their feelings.

- Read the checklists and look for trends.

CLOSURE

These surveys can be some of the most honest reflections you will receive about your teaching practice. Try to read what your students are expressing with an open mind and, after reading their input, choose one or two goals to work on. If you feel comfortable doing so, share these goals with the class. Ask for their help and feedback on how you can achieve the goals. Let them understand that for you, as for them, the work is always ongoing.

POSTCARD FROM THE CLASSROOM

I try to do a teacher check-in once a term. After the first one, the students are always eager for the next check-in. At first I was apprehensive and thought they might use the check-ins as revenge for a long homework activity. A few do approach the activity that way, but for the most part the students take this activity more seriously than anything I do with them. They feel quite honored that I actually ask their opinion about how I am doing, and they want to help me by giving me feedback. It is one of the easiest ways I can show them that I am interested in what they have to say. And, yes, every term their biggest issue is that I talk too much. So on that note, I will end this anecdote.