

ARE YOU WILLING TO JOIN THE LEARNING REVOLUTION?

Imagine a school where teaching is considered a profession rather than a trade. The role of teachers in a child's education - and in western cultures - has fundamentally changed. Teaching differs from the old 'show-and-tell' practices as much as modern medical techniques differ from practices such as applying leeches and bloodletting.

PLEASE READ ON

Teaching should not consist primarily of lecturing to students who sit in rows at desks, dutifully listening and recording what they hear – but offer every student rich, rewarding, and individual learning experiences.

The learning environment should not be confined to a classroom, but involve the home and communities locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Information should not be found and kept only in books, but be recorded and available in families, communities, bits and bytes.

Learners are not merely consumers of fact but are active creators of knowledge.

Schools are not just brick-and-mortar structures, but centres that encourage and support lifelong learning. Teaching must be recognized as one of the most challenging and respected career choices that is vital to the social, cultural, and economic health of our nation.

Today, the seeds of a dramatic transformation in education are being planted. Prompted by massive revolutions in knowledge, information technology, and the family and community demands for better learning, schools are slowly beginning to restructure themselves.

Supporting this revolution are thousands of parents and teachers who are rethinking every part of their input - relationships with their children, students, colleagues, and the community; the tools and techniques they employ; their rights and responsibilities; the form and content of curriculum; what standards to set and how to assess whether they are being met; their roles as parents and teachers ; and the very structure of the places in which they work.

Traditionally, teaching has been a combination of information-dispensing, custodial child-care and identifying academically inclined students from others. The underlying model for schools was an education factory in which adults, paid hourly or daily wages, kept like-aged youngsters sitting quietly through 'one size fits all' lessons and standardized tests.

Teachers were told what, when, and how to teach. They were required to provide for every student in exactly the same way, but were not held responsible when many failed to learn. They were expected to teach using the same methods as past generations, and any deviation from traditional practices was discouraged by supervisors or prohibited by myriad education laws and regulations.

Many teachers simply stood in front of their class and delivered the same lessons year after year, growing grey and weary of not being allowed to have real input into what they were doing.

Some of today's teachers are now encouraged to adapt and adopt new practices. They now understand that the essence of education is a close relationship between a knowledgeable, caring adult and a secure, motivated child.

Some teachers are beginning to understand that their most important role is to get to know each student as an individual to comprehend his or her unique needs, learning style, social and cultural background, interests, and abilities.

This attention to personal qualities is becoming more important as Australia continues to become one of the most pluralistic nations on Earth. Teachers need to be committed to relating to youngsters of many cultures, including those young people who, with traditional teaching, might have dropped out - or were forced out - of education systems.

The teacher's new job description is to counsel students as they grow and mature - helping them to understand and better integrate social, emotional, and intellectual growth.

The mixing of these often separate dimensions should provide the ability to seek, understand, and use knowledge; to make better decisions in their personal lives; and to value contributing to society.

Parents and teachers must be prepared and permitted to intervene at any time and in any way to make sure learning occurs. Rather than see themselves solely as masters of subject matter such as history, math, or science, teachers increasingly understand that they must also inspire a love of learning.

In practice, this new relationship between teachers and students takes the form of a different concept of instruction. Tuning in to how students really learn prompts many teachers to reject teaching that is primarily lecture-based in favour of projects and activities that challenge students to take an active role in their own learning.

Teachers should no longer view their primary role as being the 'king' or 'queen' of the classroom, or as a benevolent dictator deciding what is best for the young people in their care. Teachers will accomplish more when they adopt the role of an educational guide, facilitator, and co-learner.

The most respected teachers have discovered how to make students passionate participants in the instructional process by providing project-based, participatory, educational adventures. They know that to get students to truly take responsibility for their own education, the curriculum must relate to their lives, learning activities must engage their natural curiosity, and assessments must measure real accomplishments and be an integral part of learning.

Students work longer and are more active when teachers give them a role in determining the form and content of their schooling - helping them create and focus on their own learning plans and interests.

The day-to-day job of a teacher, rather than broadcasting content, is becoming one of designing and guiding students through engaging learning opportunities.

A teacher's most important responsibility is to search out, select and provide meaningful learning resources that encourage students to solve real-world problems and investigate the big ideas, powerful skills, and habits of mind and heart that meet pre-agreed educational standards.

The abstract, inert knowledge that students used to memorize from dusty textbooks comes alive as they participate in the creation and extension of new knowledge.

One of the most powerful forces changing teachers' and students' roles in education is new technology.

The old model of instruction was predicated on information scarcity.

Teachers and their books were information oracles, spreading knowledge to a population with few other ways to get it. But today's world is awash in information from a multitude of print and electronic sources.

The fundamental job of teaching is no longer to distribute facts but to help children learn how to develop their abilities to think critically, solve problems, make informed judgments, and create knowledge that benefits both the students and society.

Freed from the responsibility of being primary information providers, teachers have more time to spend working one-on-one or with small groups or individual students.

Revisiting the relationship between students and teachers demands that the structure of school changes as well. Though it is still the norm in many places to isolate teachers in rooms with age-graded pupils who rotate through classes every hour throughout a term - or year, the old paradigm is being abandoned in more and more schools that want to give teachers the time, space, and support to do their jobs.

Extended instructional periods, timetables, and seasonal schedules are being examined to try and avoid chopping learning pre-set chunks based on limited time. Also, rather than inflexibly group students in grades by age, many schools feature mixed-aged classes in which students spend two or more years with the same teachers.

In addition, ability groups, from which those judged less talented can rarely break free, are being challenged by the realization that standardized tests do not measure many individual abilities or acknowledge the different ways that students learn best.

One of the most important innovations in instructional organization is team teaching, in which two or more educators share responsibility for a group of students.

This means that an individual teacher is no longer expected to be all things to all students. This approach allows teachers to apply their strengths, interests, skills, and abilities to the greatest effect, knowing that children won't suffer from their weaknesses, because there's someone with a different set of abilities to back them up.

To truly professionalize teaching we need to further examine and differentiate the roles a teacher might fill. Just as a good law firm has a mix of associates, junior partners, and senior partners, schools should have a greater mix of teachers who have appropriate levels of responsibility based on their abilities and experience levels. Also, just as much of a lawyer's work occurs outside the courtroom, so, too, should we recognize that much of a teacher's work is done outside the classroom.

Aside from rethinking their primary responsibility as directors of student learning, teachers are also taking on other roles in schools and in their profession.

They are working with colleagues, family members, politicians, academics, community members, employers, and others to set clear and obtainable standards for the knowledge, skills, and values we should expect Australia's children to acquire. They are participating in day-to-day decision making in schools, working side-by-side to set priorities, and dealing with organizational problems that affect their students' learning.

Many teachers also spend time researching various questions of educational effectiveness that expand the understanding of the dynamics of learning, and more teachers are spending time mentoring new members of their profession, making sure that education school graduates are truly ready for the complex challenges of today's classrooms.

Reinventing the role of teachers inside and outside the classroom can result in significantly better schools and better-educated students. But though the roots of such improvement are taking hold in today's schools, they need continued nurturing to grow and truly transform the global learning landscape.

Politicians and parents, superintendents and school board members, employers and education faculties must also be willing to rethink their roles in education so that teachers are provided with the support, freedom, and trust they need to educate our children.

'Instead of revamping school policies to welcome every child, many school systems are bent on revamping the students to conform to their schools.'

– Alexander Robbins

