# TEACHERS OF THE UNTEACHABLES

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*Teachable Unteachables*

*Teaching Unteachables*

*A teacher's nightmare and horror*

*One who disrupts and creates laughter*

*Does not participate, only as observer*

*Leaves the class without permission*

*Teacher's wish is not his vision*

*Freedom sought never begotten*

*Punishment meted never forgotten*

*Unteachables are teachables*

*Patience, know how and lots of googles*

*Learning how to learn is what is needed*

*Let them loose then closely monitored*

*Recognize the learning styles and prior knowledge*

*Model preferences teachers must acknowledge*

*Engage the learners, if you are bold*

*Use ICT and catch them cold.*

*M-learning, e-learning are the craze*

*Teachers are fazed, lest they embrace*

*Press the button, teachers have to learn*

*The joys of teaching have to be earned*

*Motivate the child with all the resources*

*Get them involved with all the forces*

*Raja Maznah*

*9 January 2006*

## INTRODUCTION

The young teacher was exasperated! "Didn't you hear me? How many times do I have to explain the same thing?". Nini looked down. "I am sorry but…., " she answered. "The trouble is you weren't concentrating!," the teacher became impatient. The children looked at each other uncomfortably. One boy retorted to his friend, " Next time we don't ask the teacher. Better to ask our own friends to explain." The children couldn't wait for the bell to ring, nor can the teacher.

Teaching is pragmatic: its effectiveness is often judged by results. If the students learn, the teaching is successful; if they don't, it is not. So the facts we must face are: there are people who simply cannot teach; and some of them refuse to acknowledge the fact. Some of those teachers without ability, know their limitations and leave the profession, generally those who survived were those who could teach and those willing to improve their skills.

A body of literature (Shulman, 1987; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Ball, & McDiarmid, 1990; Cochran, 1993) has informed us that among the basic criteria for a teacher are: knowledge of the subject, and ability to impart it. You must know your subject well enough to teach it to impact learning. It is the unique ability of some teachers to impart their knowledge not only to the bright and disciplined students but to all including "the unteachables" that this paper is premised on.

### The Unteachables

Who are they?

A group of 20 practicing teachers were asked to define "unteachable" students. Their answers range from "students who lack interest, those facing problems in learning, those who refuse to accept changes, students who find it difficult to learn in formal environments, those who are unpredictable, defiant, show no interest in self-learning, hyperactive, no patience to sit and listen, have

short attention span, and are difficult to teach", especially those with low IQ".

Who will teach these children? Oftentimes they are left to their own devises, passed off as "difficult to deal with" and "hopeless", especially struggling ones. Teaching them is no small task - but it is the task at hand. Quality teaching seems to be at the core of the solution to the challenge of making a meaningful difference for all these students. Yet research (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Mathes, Cirino, Carlson, Pollard-Durodola, Sharolyn, Cardenas-Hagan, Francis, 2006; Fatimah, 1999; Clay, 1991, 1993) informs us that there exist teachers with certain attributes who have, time and again, nurtured and inspired these "unteachable" learners to succeed. So what are the key ingredients to such quality teaching? The most successful teachers share some common characteristics.

## A Case in Point

There is a more intimate and most challenging attribute, we believe, to quality teaching. One can help shape a teacher's mind, but one needs to get at her heart and soul. There remains the immeasurable piece of attachment and devotion to students in the profession. Perhaps these intangible and elusive aspects are the best definition of "quality" teaching.

Teaching is definitely a work of heart. Success in teaching, as is illustrated in the case of Azira (Fatimah, 1999) depends largely on one's attitude and approach. In the study, on the use of picture books to train a struggling thirteen year old to read in English the author describes a teaching approach based on Clay's (1979) theory of how learning can be accelerated. Clay presents that the low-achieving child needs security and acceptance, among other things. The study details the growing self-confidence of the struggling reader who learnt to hypothesise about her reading ability through patient and careful prompts and words of encouragement and praise from the teacher. The author concludes (1999: 14)

> That is why the presence of the teacher is crucial, the feedback component of the interaction between the teacher and the learner is the essence of the approach adopted in this reading program. Because the aim is to make the student less dependent on the teacher as she gains confidence in her ability and providing immediate feedback on successful attempts is important.

As such it is the teacher with a positive attitude and high expectations who can make a difference to learners like Azira. A positive attitude will help her cope with students' problems in the best way. Any effective teacher has high expectations, striving to raise the bar for their students, as in this case.

## Preparing Quality, Effective Teachers

How can teachers prepare to be effective, in particular, to be able to teach all students, especially the "unteachables"? What kind of knowledge base is necessary? Besides the works of Shulman et al as previously mentioned, Banks (1993) proposed a typology of knowledge that helps to situate transformative intellectual work in a larger conception of ways of knowing. He distinguished among five kinds of knowledge that have relevance to educators:

? Personal/cultural knowledge, which is the knowledge people acquire through everyday life experience in their own homes and communities,

? Popular knowledge, which are interpretations and concepts that are institutionalized in various forms of media,

? Mainstream academic knowledge, which are the concepts and theories in traditional research,

? School knowledge, which is the knowledge in textbooks, teachers' guides, and other curriculum resources, and

? Transformative academic knowledge, which are concepts and theories in the research and theorizing from historically marginalized social locations.

It is interesting to note that the author refers to personal/cultural knowledge as beliefs and perspectives students bring from their lives in the community and peer group, whereas popular knowledge is brought into the classroom by students as well as the teacher particularly in relationship to consumption of media.

Banks (1993) defines transformative knowledge as knowledge that consists of: "concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon. Transformative and mainstream academic knowledge is based on different epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge, about the influence of human interests and values on knowledge construction, and about the purpose of knowledge" (p. 9). He emphasizes that transformative academic knowledge, which is found largely in books, professional journals, and increasingly in scholarly websites, is the intellectual work of scholars.

However, the relevance of Banks' typology lies in the need for educators to be aware of the different aspects of knowedge that are essential. Without a doubt what drives quality teaching is continued growth and self reflection. Embedded in this assumption is that growth and self reflection are key ingredients - if teachers are not continuously learning, students may not either. In place of a fix-it solution, respite can be found in classroom action research which is a model that prevents teachers from getting stuck in a cycle of plan-plan or do-do without much reflection or meaningful action. The relationship between reflection and meaningful action parallels the relationship between teacher and student. That

relationship is the hardest part of making quality teaching happen. If a teacher engages in research and searches for ways to continually add to his store of knowledge to share with students, if he encourages collaboration among and exploration with his students, is that enough to create a quality teacher? Well it certainly is a good start.

## The New Millennium Teacher

With the advent of technology and advancements in research on teaching and learning, all teachers/educators need to face the challenge of equipping themselves with the latest innovations and knowledge development. It is, however, comforting to note that once a teacher closes that classroom door each day and begins teaching, she is really the one who decides what's going to happen. Not many jobs provide an individual with so much room to be creative and autonomous each day. All it takes is the right attitude!!

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Through the application of information technology, however, a wide variety of options are now available and, although these fundamental pedagogies are still part of the teaching-learning process, they are reconfigured and enhanced. Students learn in many different ways and bring to the learning activity varied talents and experiences. It's been shown that technology has the enormous potential to enable students to learn in a variety

of ways. Technology-mediated learning can provide dramatic visuals and well-organized print; encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation; and promote collaboration and group problem solving.

Of particular importance is the ability of the teacher to guide students through the morass of the internet, for instance, to identify the reliability of information. In addition, it is important for the teacher to be capable of identifying or creating courseware that evokes student motivation, and encourages interactivity and collaboration.

## Conclusion

This paper focuses on teachers who succeed in teaching "unteachables". However questions continue to persist about what exactly a quality teacher is. The answer lies in the context of teaching-that there is no standard list that can guide the preparation of aspiring teachers. Teaching in the new millennium requires gumption, commitment and a willingness to learn.

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