# The Perils They Face:
## Using Key Texts To Prepare Passionate Teachers for an Unfriendly World

**By Randall Shrock**

When the Earlham College M.A.T. program was simply an idea, our principal question was, "How do we create passionate teachers?" We wanted teachers with a "fire in the belly" to teach and with the ability to confront the realities of U. S. schools, including standardized testing which seems at odds with passionate teaching and learning. How would we accomplish these seemingly divergent goals?

Candidates entering the Earlham M.A.T. program are eager to teach. Driven by this passion, they leave behind their jobs in museums, insurance, newspaper publishing, engineering, broadcasting, hospital labs, and industry. Some have just graduated from college. All have asked, what is the meaning of life? The answer for them is direct and powerful. They are called to teach. They are called to help their students learn. They are certain that if they can just get into the classroom, their students *will* learn. Their passion is evident. "I had a great teacher who shaped my life and helped make me what I am today. I have got to do the same for kids." But then they worry, "Can I really teach?" And then they worry, "How will I translate that passion into reality — with real classrooms, real content, and real students?"

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Some answers come from Robert Fried's *The Passionate Teacher* (2001). Even before the program begins, candidates are asked to read this text, along

with Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1998). They are relieved. These books emphasize the possibilities and power of the *individual* teacher in promoting student learning. Fried's and Palmer's ideal schools are ones where reflective teachers care about and think about student learning. Candidates discover that their passion *can* be transformed into effective teaching. They can become passionate teachers.

Even so, it is not long before candidates begin to raise another question. "Yes, Fried explains passionate teaching, and I know that I can become one of those teachers — but what happens when I am asked to put my ideals aside and focus on what others think is more important? Even if I am a passionate teacher, how do I cope with the *Test*?" Standardized, high-stakes testing is a reality and a palpable threat. It carries enormous weight in schools throughout the United States. Even before new teachers have learned about Fried's concept of "stance" (p. 139), they have heard, read about, and come to fear the impact of standardized testing.

Standardized testing creates pressures that are significant and stressful, especially for a new teacher. How does a novice respond to a principal who continually urges, "Get those scores up at all costs!"? Looming behind the principal are the public and the politicians, clamoring for "real" accountability. How do emerging teachers in our M.A.T. program respond to these tensions between teaching passionately and confronting the Test? That question has become acute for me since I became director of Earlham's M.A.T. program. Do we inoculate the candidates? Fortify them? What approaches and answers do they find valuable in preparing themselves for passionate teaching, including the Test? How will they help students learn in a political climate that seems to value testing more than learning?

In our view, the best way for a new teacher to face standardized testing and the educational culture surrounding it is to know the assumptions, values, and efficacy of that culture. For example, standardized testing assumes that if we continually test students, their achievement will rise, and that children's learning is measured by comparing their test results to those of their peers. Standardized testing ignores the unique qualities of each child — how the child learns, and the assumptions, dreams, talents, and skills of each individual. Not all children learn the same way or care about the same issues.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the assumption has been that standardized testing can determine what knowledge a student has. This idea challenges the candidates' and their students' search for meaning. Such a search is fundamental to the nature of humans. It appeals to the soul. We humans naturally want to reflect. Although finding meaning has inherent value, it may not mean as much in our daily lives if we cannot control what happens. Understandably, students want to acquire authority to control the conditions and values that shape their learning and their lives both in school and out of school, now and in the future. For years Howard Gardner (1983, 1993) has promoted the notion that intelligence is not what we humans *have* but what we humans *do* or *perform.* Practicing intelligence empowers students. Good schools teach students how to do that — how

to frame questions, identify evidence, assess its merits, and reach judgments that are sound and a basis for action. Such judgments are not only common to scholars in a professional field but also to individuals leading lives in relationship to family members, co-workers, and communities. And what all learners remember best, even for the Test, is subject matter connected to personal insight and meaning.

Unfortunately, standardized testing does the opposite of enabling students to find meaning in their studies. It minimally encourages students to think about their own learning. It presents objectives that students are to meet as set by someone else, usually at a distance and with no real knowledge of each person's unique learning needs. The teacher's only role, seemingly, is to make certain that students are, somehow, preparing for the Tests. But student knowledge learned in response to standardized testing is often quickly forgotten. If anything, students are learning how to comply with a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure that insists on telling them what they are to learn and how they are to learn it. Few of us welcome such dictates. We want to find our own meaning, usually in conjunction with others who are also seeking meaning, and we look to people who are passionate about their subjects and values to help us in our quest.

M.A.T. candidates naturally want to know how they can teach well in a restrictive, test-oriented environment. As new teachers, they worry about what older teachers and administrators may think of their approaches to teaching, fearing that they will be told, "We don't do things that way around here." A school culture like this can easily undermine a new teacher's sense of mission.

Some relief comes when candidates talk with mentor teachers and selected practicing professionals who come to our M.A.T. classes to explain that although traditional school classrooms may be criticized for isolated instruction, the arrangement does permit teachers to work largely on their own terms. Children who learn how to learn from passionate teachers acting as facilitators and role models tend to do well on standardized tests. They invite candidates to acknowledge the Test's presence but not to let it dominate their practice to the exclusion of other worthy goals. It's not either/or, they explain. Our candidates come to recognize that standardized tests offer little information in comparison to the hundreds of assessments that a teacher makes daily in the classroom. Besides the limited information that standardized testing reveals, passionate teachers want to assess if a child is persistent, creative, thoughtful, and exhibits other positive habits of mind. They want to know what their students are learning in class each day.

Candidates appreciate that learning is a *social* process as much as, if not more than, an intellectual process. By contrast, the standardized test assumes two kinds of relationship between teacher and learner: a didactic and a hierarchical one. The teacher instructs (more than teaches) and the student (presumably) absorbs. For Earlham M.A.T. candidates, personal relationships are central. They enjoy young people. They enjoy learning with them. In contrast, testing is an isolated and isolating rather than social process. Rarely, in our society, do we learn alone or work

alone; in defining problems and devising solutions, we collaborate, each individual contributing to and listening to the other's ideas.

## Awakening the Teacher Within

Earlham's M.A.T. faculty prepares candidates in several other ways to think about both testing *and* passionate teaching. The goal is to prepare them to awaken the teacher within, to become reflective teachers, to learn collaboratively, to develop strong, mutually respectful relationships with students, to engage in action research, and to be lifelong learners. "Awakening the teacher within," a concept that is Quaker in origin, assumes not a hierarchical structure of teacher to student but rather that each human has within the capacity to teach him or herself, in collaboration with others. The *subject*, not the teacher, is at the center: as Parker Palmer suggests, all members of a classroom, including the teacher, are learning together. They can develop a relationship to the *subject* and to one another as they study that subject. (pp. 89-140) Besides attempting to teach candidates in this manner, our M.A.T. program asks candidates to teach their own students according to the same principle.

Even as candidates admire passionate teaching, they do not really know how to develop it. Upon entering the program, they expect to acquire a bag of teaching tricks and techniques. That does not happen. The M.A.T. faculty deliberately postpones extensive teaching about "techniques" until after the summer semester. Palmer explains that "technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (p.5). Real teachers engage students in their souls. Our program seeks to develop the passion of pre-service teachers by engaging them in intensive and extensive self-reflection. Although all candidates can be passionate teachers, they must awaken themselves to their own understanding of what is "excellent" about teaching and learning. This concept requires defining passionate teaching and being reflective about the nature of one's individual goals, values, and skills. At first, candidates refer to the descriptive qualities of their favorite teachers with phrases like, "She made the class so fun!" "We really did cool things in Biology, and I still like identifying plants." "He helped me all of way through; I would never have made it without my high school history teacher."

Candidates are then asked what made these teachers so effective. We ask them what qualities did they possess that you can also find in yourself and share with your students? Palmer writes, " . . . In every story I have heard, good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work" (p. 10). He observes that "good teaching comes from good people" and the task of education is to address the "living core of our lives." This task is especially important to teachers, Palmer asserts, because "we can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves."

All candidates must, then, discover the teacher within themselves in order to

be able to awaken the teacher within their own students. No teaching will ever really succeed "unless it connects with the inward, living core of . . . students' lives, with . . . students' inward teachers" (pp. 13-14, 29-33).

For Palmer, and for us at Earlham, reflecting on one's identity as a teacher has important connections to standardized testing and a candidate's views of it. Our candidates recognize that a teacher's authority derives from understanding one's students and one's self through reflection. With that authority, the new teacher has a significant tool for resisting the culture and power of standardized testing. As candidates discuss and write more about their own identity and integrity, they increasingly discover their own identity through the power of reflection. They discover that passionate teaching derives from within, not from test results. They know who they are as teachers, what they stand for, and how to evaluate their teaching and student learning, not to mention standardized testing.

This theoretical grounding is essential, candidates admit. But they rightly want more. As the summer semester proceeds, they want more specifics about how to discover their identity and how it will help them become passionate teachers on a daily basis. Fried's notion of "stance" helps them with their desired specificity. Stance is "a philosophy, an attitude, a bearing, a way of encountering students based on a set of core values about kids and their learning potential." Fried's concepts of stance, of passionate teaching and learning (as opposed to "the game of school" in which teachers pretend to teach and students pretend to learn), help these new teachers discern how to teach and how to avoid ineffective teaching. Candidates learn that their stance is partly a "physical" expression of attitude toward children, but it is also an "emotional or intellectual" one (pp. 91-105, 139). With these more specific ideas, candidates find they can more completely discuss and write about passionate teaching.

In M.A.T. classes candidates draw their respective stances. For them nothing concentrates their thoughts more than visual portrayals of their ideas. Wonderfully, too, every candidate views and discusses all of the pictures of stance that are displayed on the walls around the room. The drawings often offer more reflective insight than words. It is more difficult to disguise our innermost feelings and attitudes with pictures than with words. In sum, for them as for Fried, "stance is both a matter of *internal* discovery and a *public* statement" (p. 173). The two go hand in hand. They are awakening the teacher within while also reflecting on that discovery with their peers and teachers. For some candidates, it is emotionally difficult because they have never been asked, at least in a classroom, to reach so deep within. But that, they have come to realize, is where the real teacher is to be found.

Candidates ask if there are ways in which they can help their students to profit from standardized tests. True, standardized tests are usually offered only once per year, with a substantial delay between testing and receiving results. Still, the Test can reveal *something* about the effectiveness of a school system and its program. M.A.T. candidates begin to learn how to undertake action research by studying in

the summer semester the various web-based data on the schools in which they will be working and teaching during the fall and spring semesters. That data includes standardized test scores for the entire school and provides comparisons to other schools in Indiana. Candidates find such information useful in judging teaching programs and in reflecting how to effect changes in curriculum, assessment, and instruction for a group of students or even for an entire school. With the web, they also learn about the socio-economic circumstances surrounding their students. What stuns them, though, is that the data can reveal more about the schools and the strength or weakness of their institutional programs than about their students.

M.A.T. candidates continue their action research through the fall and spring semesters. The result is the development of skills that can make good use of standardized testing. For instance, in fall, 2003 one M.A.T. graduate is teaching math in a public school. Given that ISTEP (Indiana's standardized test) occurs in September, teachers are immediately and anxiously beginning to prepare students for that test. The Earlham graduate hopes his students will do well on the exam—but he also hopes that they will be learning important math concepts and skills while prepping for the exam. As a result, he has initiated a simple action research test. He utilized his own *individualized* pre-test to find out what students do and do not know about math at school's start rather than by simply surveying or rushing through every math subject in preparation for the Test. This method of instruction is a good example of passionate teaching in which the teacher's relationship to content and to students is extremely positive. He is helping individuals or groups of students with common needs. He has recognized the limits of standardized testing while also finding ways to educate his students well. He has learned before, not after ISTEP, about student knowledge, so that he can offer appropriate instruction that will help them learn math as well as score better on the standardized test. He is also able to use the knowledge to form a relationship to his students, because he can and will talk to each one about their learning. Being a reflective teacher is essential; doing so with the right data permits reflection to become passionate teaching. How he will expand his research remains uncertain since the school year has only just started at the time of this writing.

Besides developing one's stance, identity, and action research, candidates also work to develop specific lessons and units that translate into productive classes. They know that good intentions are an insufficient substitute for hard working, planning, and preparation. Passionate teachers must learn much about assessment, differentiated instruction, curriculum, rubrics, brain research, literacy, Socratic seminars, and habits of mind.

In finding meaning and developing a range of important questions and understandings, candidates greatly value Grant Wiggins's outstanding *Understanding by Design* (2000). Wiggins defines knowledge broadly, in ways that M.A.T. candidates endorse and that supercede conventional testing. In fall semester M. A.T. classes, they explore his three concepts of "worth being familiar with,"

"important to know and do," and "enduring understandings." They also practice his "backward design," by which Wiggins means that passionate teachers should "identify desired results," "determine acceptable evidence," and "plan learning experiences and instruction." This requires candidates to discern what makes them passionate about the content that they love to teach (pp. 9-10, 76-77).

New teachers can sometimes confuse passion with histrionics; they can also become too focused on the content and try to cover too much too quickly, because they are excited about the material and assume their students will easily or automatically absorb the same excitement. Most of us cannot become passionate teachers overnight. Good intentions, good stances, and good hearts are necessary but not sufficient.

Finding themselves attracted to Palmer's and Fried's texts, Earlham's M.A.T. candidates appreciate how they are acquiring authority as teachers. They recognize that their identity and their stance are integral to them. They now more clearly understand good (and ineffective) teaching when they see it. In the process, they are becoming self-reflective, the most critical quality in becoming and remaining a passionate teacher.

At the end of eleven months, the program is ready to certify the candidates to be teachers. They have begun the journey to becoming and remaining passionate teachers. Throughout the program, candidates reflected at length, orally and in writing, on a range of topics connected to passionate teaching. Such practice has become, we all hope, automatic. But candidates have not yet earned their master's degree. In the first semester of their teaching, they take one more course to help them both to survive and thrive in the world of standardized testing and to prepare a five-year professional development plan. Their plan must describe how they will sustain their lifelong journey of learning and reflection about passionate teaching. After all, they have embraced this noble calling of teaching and should, with the strength of their teacher preparation, be able to create challenging classrooms that "awaken the teacher within" themselves and their own students.

## References

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