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COMMENTARY

Attention, Gates: Here's What Makes a Great Teacher

10 Qualities of an Effective Educator

By James D. Starkey

Here are the first two paragraphs of [a story](#) that appeared in my local paper, *The Denver Post*, in the fall:

"In a quest to find out the best teaching practices, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is giving \$45 million to six school districts, including Denver, for a two-year study of teaching.

"The Measures of Effective Teaching project will examine the work of 3,700 teachers from across the country, using videotapes, surveys, and student assessments to figure out what works and what doesn't."

Now, I know I am supposed to applaud the foundation's philanthropy. And I know I'm supposed to think it is about time somebody stepped in to do something substantive about public education. But I don't feel that way. I think it stinks.

Interestingly enough, further on in the *Post* article there was a quote from Melinda Gates that said what I really think about this new research windfall. Speaking in a telephone news conference about the foundation's near-decade of research into the factors that improve school quality, she said this: "What was the thing that works absolutely the best? At the end of the day, it is the teacher in the classroom."

At the beginning of the day, too.

So my question is, if you know what the answer is, why are you spending \$45 million on research?

I have a better idea. Give me the \$45 million and I will save you some time. Or give the dough to any of the retired teachers I hang out with. We'll tell you what the research will reveal about effective teaching, and it has almost nothing to do with time on task, identifying objectives, administrative fiat, or the latest recycled fad (small-group instruction, large-group instruction, writing workshops, reading labs, concept attainment, modular scheduling, block scheduling, traditional scheduling—or, for that matter, following curriculum guides). Teaching and learning happen whenever significant adults interact with and direct children. You can't stop it.

Of course, it's important to note that significant adults can promote learning that society doesn't necessarily want. Guys who drive around town in chopped BMWs dripping in gold are significant. Fathers or mothers who abuse their children are significant. Catholic priests who fondle altar boys

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are significant. Sports heroes who—you know the rest—are significant.

I'm talking about the effect a serious and interested and knowledgeable adult can have on a group of children. It can be a wonderful thing to see. In such an atmosphere, learning happens regardless of the curriculum, or the objectives, or the strategies. In any given school, on any given day, you could walk by rooms with master teachers doing their thing. One might be a lecturer, and every day students would go into her class, get out notes, and pay attention. Another might be totally committed to large-group discussion, and every day that teacher's students would be seated in a circle talking to one another. The teacher next door might deal exclusively with small groups. The one next to him might be convinced that a writers'-workshop approach is the best.

There are as many classroom approaches as there are master teachers, but the one thing they all have in common is that students learn. They get higher test scores. When you walk by such teachers' rooms, students will be smiling. There will be no one asleep (well, let's not get too carried away). Their classrooms, though different from one another, are good places to be. They feel right. And none of those teachers learned how to create that feeling in a methods class, or from an administrator, or from some groundbreaking research.

When the Gates Foundation finally crunches all the numbers from its two-year research project, that is what it will discover. Great teaching is not quantifiable. As dorky as this sounds, great teaching happens by magic. It isn't something that can be taught. I'm not even sure that *good* teaching can be taught. The only thing that I know can be taught is average teaching, and almost anybody who has paid attention through all those interminable hours in school classrooms and is willing to work hard can pull that off.

Now I will attempt to give you the keys to great teaching. The fact that I understand the irony and hypocrisy in that statement makes it almost forgivable. And I will add a huge disclaimer: It is possible to talk about great teaching without being a great teacher yourself, which is the position I find myself in. I taught for almost 35 years and am still amazed that I wasn't fired during my first four. The fact that I managed to stay in the profession so long could, I suppose, be an indictment of the tenure system.

But, on the other hand, my various supervisors' indulgence during those first rocky years gave me the chance to get better. That is the one thing I can say for sure about my career.

Every year made me a better teacher. I could even go so far as to say that every year made me love teaching more. Of course, every year also made me hate schools more. There is no contradiction there.

The thing to do now is to make a list. Everyone likes lists. Educators are particularly taken by them. I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of times that just the act of making a list during a faculty meeting served to convince us that a problem was solved.

So, Bill and Melinda, listen up. Here are 10 qualities of a great teacher: (1) has a sense of humor; (2) is intuitive; (3) knows the subject matter; (4) listens well; (5) is articulate; (6) has an obsessive/compulsive side; (7) can be subversive; (8) is arrogant enough to be fearless; (9) has a performer's instincts; (10) is a real taskmaster.

There, see how easy that was? And inexpensive to boot.

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