A focus on student learning can inspire and motivate teachers—but only if we define student learning in terms of education's highest aims.

Current education trends have clearly taken a toll on teacher morale. Teachers are often blamed for low student test scores, although it seems obvious that many of the factors affecting student achievement are beyond their control. Teachers are also threatened with new systems of evaluation, some of which are scientifically questionable—even bizarre—in the inconsistent results they produce. Some of our brightest, most dedicated teachers are unhappy because policymakers don't trust them to choose curriculum content or instructional methods. It's hard for teachers to maintain high morale when they feel neither respected nor trusted.

So efforts to raise teacher morale are certainly needed and important. But educators may be suspicious of superficial efforts to boost morale if they perceive that their school is using such efforts in a bad cause—to ensure compliance and rally uncritical teacher support for a new program imposed by the district or state, for instance. History is loaded with cases of groups being manipulated to exercise great enthusiasm for bad causes.

Here I discuss how we can raise teacher morale in a good cause—improved student learning. "All our children learning" is surely a worthwhile rallying cry. Yet dedicated educators may feel that something is missing unless we address two important, complex questions: What do we mean by student learning? and What is the aim of this learning? Our answers to these questions affect three areas that are central to our efforts to revitalize teacher morale: collegiality, creativity, and continuity.

**Collegiality—Around What Goals?**

We often hear that greater collegiality among teachers contributes to a sense of well-being and common purpose. Some even suggest that working together to implement the new Common Core State Standards will increase teacher collegiality. Although this might happen among elementary school classroom teachers, who teach both language arts and mathematics, it is unlikely to occur at the secondary level, where the disciplines are sharply separated. At any grade level, collegiality will only further the cause of improved student learning if we ask what mathematics, language arts, and other subject areas can offer one another and how each contributes to the deeper aims of helping students grow into better adults.

Something vital is missing from our current vision of schooling—a sense of the common purpose beyond the learning of skills and information specific to each discipline. Years ago, Jerome Bruner (1960) suggested, We might ask, as a criterion for any subject taught in primary school, whether, when fully developed, it is worth an adult's knowing, and whether having known it as a child makes a person a better adult. (p. 52)

Our main aim has become to prepare everyone for college, and the principal reason for going to college is viewed as getting a good job. These are not bad aims, but in emphasizing them we tend to neglect what have long been considered the deepest, truest aims of education: to produce people who are morally good, intellectually competent, socially sensitive, spiritually inquisitive, and committed to living full and satisfying lives. These aims do not appear in the Common Core standards. If they did, teachers from the various disciplines would be encouraged to meet together often to share what their disciplines can contribute to one another and to these truly common aims.

Consider how odd it must seem to bright high school students that they are expected to "master" (test well in) four or five disciplines, but they are taught by people who apparently know only one. Surely, we are missing something here.

As a former math teacher, I would be delighted to share with students the stories of Isaac Newton and his attempt to establish the chronological accuracy of the Bible, of Gottfried Leibniz and his "best of all possible worlds," of Carl Friedrich Gauss's schoolboy inventions of powerful mathematics, of the beautiful and fruitful correspondence between British mathematician G. H. Hardy and Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, of the Pythagoreans' dread of irrational numbers, of Bertrand Russell's stand on war, of Lewis Carroll's fascination with puzzles and logic. None of
these topics are forbidden by the Common Core standards, but neither are they invited. Collegiality across the disciplines would encourage such additions to the curriculum.

The current emphasis on high-stakes testing, unfortunately, has aggravated a tendency to focus on the details of each distinct discipline. Yet there are bright signs here and there—teachers trying to restore not just the prestige of the liberal arts but also their spirit (Edmundson, 2013).

For example, Andrew Delbanco (2012) describes a form of collegiality at Columbia College that could be promising for high school teachers. The professors and graduate students who teach in the core curriculum required that all first-year students meet weekly to discuss the assigned texts and to "consider substantive questions" (p. 30). Coming from different disciplines, they encourage one another to think beyond their individual specialties—to stretch their disciplines from within and make connections to the great questions of human life. If high schools practiced this kind of collegiality, they would raise the intellectual level and understanding of both teachers and students and, in doing so, also raise morale.

**Creativity—Why Leave Educators Out?**

Collegiality across the disciplines would help sustain a high level of intellectual interest among teachers. But teachers also need freedom to exercise this intellectual interest creatively. Education policymakers today tout creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving as major aims of education for students—yet they institute methods that deprive teachers of opportunities to exercise their own creativity. I hear stories of such deprivation from teachers across the United States.

Many teachers today are expected to follow a rigid routine for each daily lesson: Post a learning objective, instruct, assess the effects of instruction, and assign homework. Of course, all conscientious teachers use this routine for some lessons; as a math teacher, I used it often. But its overuse can be deadly boring and even counterproductive. Some days, our aim is not to produce specific learning, but to inspire. Some days, our aim is to open discussion about a social or ethical problem. Some days, our aim is diagnosis; we need to listen to our students before planning how to teach the next round of learning objectives. In every case, good teachers respond to both the assumed needs of their students (established by the curriculum) and the expressed needs of their students (gathered by observing and listening to them).

Good teachers recognize that students’ needs vary; groups and individuals have different aptitudes and interests. Therefore, good teachers try, at least occasionally, to help students create their own learning objectives. For example, math students might engage in projects connecting math with art, music, architecture, warfare, literature, ecology, genetics, religion, welfare, or a host of other possible topics. Such projects require both teachers and students to exercise their imaginations. The idea is to excite curiosity, awe, and appreciation of the world.

In suggesting that teachers use projects, even in math classes, I’m not saying they should use the "project method" for everything. Rather, I’m calling for teachers to exercise their creativity in using the host of methods and concepts available to them: object lessons, Socratic questioning, role-play, discovery, games, projects, mastery learning, group work, storytelling, and yes, drill and practice. The wealth of possibilities invites teachers to be creative, and this impulse should not be squelched by heavy-handed supervision.

Planning is part of the creative aspect of teaching. Creative teachers reject the search for pedagogical panaceas and take joy in planning a variety of lessons. They ask, What connections can I make to other subjects my students are studying? What methods, beyond direct instruction, can I include? Are there fascinating new words to discuss? Can I work in something about a story or article I’ve read recently?

For me—at every level, from a self-contained 6th grade class, through 12 years of high school math, through many years of doctoral-level teaching and advising—planning has always been a special pleasure. It presents an opportunity to review and extend my own knowledge and to reformulate it more articulately. Everything is possible at the first delightful stage of planning—all the material that is prescribed, all the material we already know and enjoy, all the new things we plan to introduce. Creative planning facilitates spontaneity.

Teachers are, of course, expected to think about what their students will learn as a result of their instruction. But teaching has the potential to produce much more than specific "learnings." Creative, caring teachers convey themselves, a view of the world, and a way of relating. By sharing knowledge in which they delight, they may bring some students to delight in it also. But they need not state this as an objective and insist on it; students should feel
free to consider and set aside such offerings, knowing that the teacher respects their individual interests. Creative teachers also strive to achieve desirable outcomes beyond specific learning objectives, such as confidence; the ability to relate; self-control for some kids, a little boldness for others; increased breadth of vision for some, settling down and concentrating for others; and a whole range of ethical values more felt than learned. Freedom to plan and teach creatively is conducive to both higher morale and a deeper sense of responsibility. Notice, too, that collegiality and creativity are symbiotic: Collegiality informs creativity, and creativity enriches collegiality.

**Continuity—What Kind?**

Intellectually vigorous collegiality and creativity contribute to strong morale, and so does continuity. Fairly stable school staffs are more likely to exhibit high morale than those experiencing high turnover. Further, recent research seems to show that, in general, low teacher turnover strengthens student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2013).

To increase stability, we should put less emphasis on getting rid of underperforming teachers and much more on making them better—just as good schools respond to underperforming students. As long as a teacher is not demonstrably immoral or irresponsible, the school community should work to improve that teacher's efficacy—for instance, by assigning a really fine mentor and by enlisting assistance from the collegial groups to which the teacher belongs. There should be no disgrace in needing and accepting help. The whole faculty will feel better knowing that the school community stands ready to give aid when it is needed. Substandard teaching should not be ignored or covered up—nor should it be advertised in public postings. Rather, it should be addressed vigorously. Such an approach is likely to increase staff stability and raise both teacher morale and student learning.

Another practice that can strengthen continuity is one that has enriched my own teaching experience and may do so for others as well. Why don't we encourage teachers and students to stay together for, say, three years instead of the usual one year (with mutual consent, of course)? Or we might consider arranging for a whole team of teachers to work with students over a period of years; one advantage of this arrangement is that students may be able to establish a strong relationship with at least one member of the teaching team. Stability and long-term relationships are two important kinds of continuity. Perhaps even more important to our efforts to raise morale are continuity of curriculum and purpose. The Common Core standards, implemented judiciously, may contribute to continuity of curriculum in separate subjects through the grade levels, but continuity of purpose, guided by the large aims discussed here, should pervade our efforts.

**A School with Purpose**

A school is not just a center for the production of learning. At its best, it is a place with which people identify, a place to which they become attached. It is a place in which educators break down curriculum boundaries to work collaboratively, planning and teaching with creativity and with the steady purpose of producing better adults—caring, competent people who will live deeply satisfying lives and contribute to an evolving democratic society. Working in such a good cause, teachers are bound to have high morale.

**References**


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