



# Then Who Do We Teach?

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I stand just inside the classroom, waiting for the teacher to notice me. In the corner I can see my student teacher sitting in a rocking chair, a group of second graders huddled in a semi-circle around her. They listen quietly as she reads from a picture book.

During each round of practice teaching I visit fourteen student teachers from my pre-service class. I am the “Evaluator” from the faculty of education, and no matter how casual I try to be, the student teacher and the associate always stiffen when I enter. They have formed a team, and I am the outsider.

The associate teacher looks in my direction and nods politely. Then she surveys the group of children, walks over to a boy sitting on the edge of the semi-circle, and whispers something in his ear. When she greets me she explains, “I was just making sure Devon behaves himself. He can be quite a handful.”

The story is finished and the children return to their seats. As Devon approaches me, I notice his tousled blonde hair and dancing blue eyes, his front teeth now in the possession of the Tooth Fairy. Between his upper lip and nose he carefully balances a pencil. When he passes me he suddenly realizes a stranger is in the room. His eyes meet mine, and he demands, “Who are you? Why are you here?”

I’m not used to such direct questions, and he catches me off-guard. “I’m Miss Green’s teacher,” I stammer.

He lets this information sink in, then smiles, “So you teach her what to teach us?”

“Yes, I guess that’s right,” I reply.

Another pause, as if he’s trying to make this all fit together. “So, you teach her, and she teaches us.”

“Yes, that’s the way it works.”

“Then who do we teach?” he wonders aloud.

Again, I am stuck for an answer. I mumble something about students teaching each other. He shrugs, accepts this explanation, and goes to his seat.

I’m not satisfied with my answer, and the question stays with me for days. Finally, I solve the riddle. My response to Devon should have been, “You teach Miss Green what teaching is *really* about.”

“Miss Green” and her colleagues had spent many hours in my Language Arts classes before this teaching block. As Devon so wisely figured out, I (and the provincial curriculum) taught her *what* to teach. I even shared insights about *how* to teach, by introducing and modeling many research-backed instructional strategies. Yet I wonder whether she found my lectures helpful when she faced Devon sitting at the edge of the circle, pencil perched precariously under his nose as she read from the picture book? Were Devon and his classmates her real teachers?

When my students returned from the teaching block three weeks later, I described my encounter with Devon.

They had been in the trenches for a month, and were eager to reflect on their experiences. I asked them to write about the lessons their students had taught them.

Not surprisingly, very few comments dealt with curriculum or specific teaching methods. Instead, the children in their classes had taught them about compassion, fairness, consistency – the human side of teaching.

From over sixty responses, here are *10 Lessons in Teaching* that should be at the front of every teacher’s daybook:

- If you enforce behavioural rules firmly but fairly, you will earn the respect of your students.
- Many students have much bigger problems in their lives than whether they memorized the times tables for the quiz that day.
- To be quiet all the time is an unreasonable request to make of anyone – but especially of students.
- A teacher gains more respect by being honest with children than by trying to bluff through an answer.
- Fair is not treating everyone the same; fair is giving everyone what they need.
- Letting students know that you expect them to do well makes them really want to do a good job and prove that you were right.
- The students who give you the hardest time are usually the ones who like you the most.
- Just because students appear fine on the outside doesn’t mean they are feeling that way on the inside.
- You cannot teach children completely unless you understand them completely.
- The greetings from a teacher in the morning are sometimes the most important part of a student’s day.

In the end, Devon was my teacher, too. I begin another round of observations this week, with fourteen new classrooms to visit. In each one, I will watch for a Devon who may be a “handful,” but who has much to teach all of us. ■

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