

# TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

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**Abstract:** Teachers and parents are a class of people who become role models without their permission and knowledge. The influence of their personality on the minds of the students is lasting. The idea of the teacher as change agent has roots in the progressive education movement and was first articulated in Dewey's (1920) book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Counts (1932) echoed the philosophy in his classic work; *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* The belief that society must be transformed and that schools in general and teachers in particular can be the agents for the transformation of the present social order has been more recently articulated by Apple (1978, 1987) and Giroux (1983, 1988). These visionary philosophers would point to the profile of a teacher as change agent, as an educator who possesses the skills, desire, and motivation necessary to make schools more equitable. The teacher who is a change agent believes that schools must not simply perpetuate the present social order but seek to effect change by assuring that all students have the necessary skills for equal access to the job opportunities that, in turn, will provide access to the good life. A self motivated teacher can change the attitude of students and through them, the society.

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Please read the story that follows.

*One day in 11th grade, I went into a classroom to wait for a friend of mine. When I went into the room, the teacher, Mr. Washington, suddenly appeared and asked me to go to the board to write something, to work something out. I told him that I couldn't do it. And he said, "Why not?"*

*I said, "Because I'm not one of your students."*

*He said, "It doesn't matter. Go to the board anyhow."*

*I said, "I can't do that."*

*He said, "Why not?"*

*And I paused because I was somewhat embarrassed. I said, "Because I'm Educable Mentally Retarded."*

*He came from behind his desk and he looked at me and he said, "Don't ever say that again. Someone's opinion of you does not have to become your reality."*

*It was a very liberating moment for me. On one hand, I was humiliated because the other students laughed at me. They knew that I was in Special Education. But on the other hand, I was liberated because he began to bring to my attention that I did have to live within the context of what another person's view of me was.*

*And so Mr. Washington became my mentor. Prior to this experience, I had failed twice in school. I was identified as Educable Mentally Retarded in the fifth grade, was put back from the fifth grade into the fourth grade, and failed again, when I was in the eighth grade. So this person made a dramatic difference in my life.*

*I always say that he operates in the consciousness of Goethe, who said, "Look at a man the way that he is, he only becomes worse. But look at him as if he were what he could be, and then he becomes what he should be." Like Calvin Lloyd, Mr. Washington believed that "Nobody rises to low expectations." This man always gave students the feeling that he had high expectations for them and we strove, all of the students strove, to live up to what those expectations were.*

*One day, when I was still a junior, I heard him giving a speech to some graduating seniors. He said to them, "You have greatness within you. You have something special. If just one of you can get a glimpse of a larger vision of yourself, of who you really are, of what it is you bring to the planet, of your specialness, then in a historical context, the world will never be the same again. You can make your parents proud. You can make your school proud. You can make your community proud. You can touch millions of people's lives." He was talking to the seniors, but it seemed like that speech was for me.*

*I remember when they gave him a standing ovation. Afterwards, I caught up to him in the parking lot and I said, "Mr. Washington, do you remember me? I was in the auditorium when you were talking to the seniors."*

*He said, "What were you doing there? You are a junior."*

*I said, "I know. But that speech you were giving, I heard your voice coming through the auditorium doors. That speech was for me, Sir. You said they had greatness within them. I was in that auditorium. Is there greatness within me, Sir?"*

*He said, "Yes, Mr. Brown."*

*"But what about the fact that I failed English and Math and History, and I'm going to have to go to summer school. What about that, Sir? I'm slower than most kids. I'm not as smart as my brother or my sister who's going to the University of Miami."*

*"It doesn't matter. It just means that you have to work harder. Your grades don't determine who you are or what you can produce in your life."*

*"I want to buy my mother a home."*

*"It's possible, Mr. Brown. You can do that." And he turned to walk away again.*

*"Mr. Washington?"*

*"What do you want now?"*

*"Uh, I'm the one, Sir. You remember me, remember my name. One day you're going to hear it. I'm going to make you proud. I'm the one, Sir."*

*School was a real struggle for me. I was passed from one grade to another because I was not a bad kid. I was a nice kid; I was a fun kid. I made people laugh. I was polite. I was respectful. So teachers would pass me on, which was not helpful to me. But Mr. Washington made demands on me. He made me accountable. But he enabled me to believe that I could handle it, that I could do it.*

*He became my instructor my senior year, even though I was Special Education. Normally, Special Ed students don't take Speech and Drama, but they made special provisions for me to be with him. The principal realized the kind of bonding that had taken place and the impact that he'd made on me because I had begun to do well academically. For the first time in my life I was on the honor roll. I wanted to travel on a trip with the drama and you had to be on the honor roll in order to make the trip out of town. That was a miracle for me!*

*Mr. Washington restructured my own picture of who I am. He gave me a larger vision of myself, beyond my mental conditioning and my circumstances.*

*Years later, I produced five specials that appeared on public television. I had some friends call him when my program, 'You Deserve,' was on the educational television channel in Miami. I was sitting by the phone waiting when he called me in Detroit. He said, "May I speak to Mr. Brown, please?"*

*"Who is calling?"*

*"You know who is calling."*

*"Oh, Mr. Washington, it's you."*

*"You were the one, weren't you?"*

*"Yes, Sir, I was."*

I am sure, all of us have many stories like this drawn from our own lives or the people around us. These passionate teachers have touched our lives and changed us as never before.

While analyzing the spectrum of manpower development, the teacher may be seen as the center that permeates to all sectors. The students produced depend mainly upon the teacher. The teacher's lifestyle reflects a pattern the students absorb and internalize consciously and unconsciously in their association with one another. A child in kindergarten, when instructed to do something by his or her parents which does not conform to the teacher's ways, would retort: "This is not what the teacher said."

In these formative years, the teacher is an idol of the growing child. His teachings, orally spoken, his daily ways of life, behavior patterns and manners of conduct, are continuously being registered in the child's brain, nervous system and emotions, all which ultimately get into the biological system that makes up the total nature of the person, gifted with bios (life), interacting with other living forms in an environment in the fullness of life.

In an examination of the societal patterns of population, it is the teacher who produces the future professionals. It is also observed that one can trace some imprints of the teacher's behavioral patterns, training skills, concepts, beliefs and practices among the students that passed his tutorship. Thus, the kind of professionals manifest both in their private and occupational lifestyles some traits that their teachers have handed down to them. An honest and diligent teacher practicing what he preaches, both in the classroom and in the outside world would transmit these traits in the

developing child. On the other hand, a lazy teacher, a corrupt one, tampering grades, could present unrealistic facts just to consume the scheduled teaching hours and use stereotypical laboratory experiments not inciting the inquiry of the student. This teacher will also transmit to the child these practices which unconsciously and consciously become a part of the child's lifestyle. In effect, this teacher produces a student with corrupt ideas and practices to the extent of degrading and depleting environmental resources attributable to his ambition to amass wealth and to deprivation of his fellow men in the enjoyment and contentment of bios.

Considering the above scenario, the teacher can be regarded as the central factor around which the developing student revolves and looks up to, especially in his or her formative years. Thus, the preservation of bios must be emphasised at the early stage of the learning child. This is the teachable stage, when a child internalizes concepts and lifestyles he associates with.

The transformation of the student does not happen all of a sudden. It involves three processes in actualising the three domains of Education - Cognitive, Psychomotor and Affective. The three processes are *1. Transmission, 2. Transaction* and *3. Transformation*.

- 1. Transmission** – It is a process generally formal-school based where educational concepts and knowledge are imparted through a structured system. The main characteristics of this process are a highly organised, rigid syllabus and methodology, single textbook, external examinations and external discipline with little or no attention to students' emotional life. Moreover, it is heavily teacher-dominated with high expectations for the students to acquire or accumulate knowledge after thorough rote-learning techniques. The primary task of education at this stage is to transmit to the present generation, bodies of information collected in the past. Further, the transmission emphasizes the cognitive domain.
- 2. Transaction** – It emphasizes students' interactive role in learning, At this stage, it is found that whatever the teaching goal, it would seem that teachers need to encourage students to express their views during classroom discussion, in field trips or at any occasion when a situation arises. It is at this stage that the student's understanding, intuitive beliefs and alternative frameworks are strongly dependent upon the context in which they were developed.

In this situation, teachers need to build upon students' prior knowledge and conceptions. In the teaching-learning process, students interact, to a certain degree, with the teacher, which reflects the student's experiences and beliefs about his world drawn from the immediate environment. In this process, there is a high degree of effective teaching, in the sense that students are able to voice their opinion, ideas and concepts upon which future directions to meet their needs are conceptualized and made concrete. On the other hand, teachers are facilitated to identify resources and formulate strategies to respond to the students' needs. Eventually, rapport is established between the teacher and student, making the teaching-learning situation a satisfying one.

- 3. Transformation** – This is a process by which the effect of the accumulation of knowledge and concepts triggers the teacher and student to engage in an interaction stage, exchanging views, ideas, beliefs and practices which when deeply internalised by the student, become a part of his system resulting in a changed, transformed individual. Thus, it demands that the teacher be dedicatedly concerned with the needs and problems, strengths and weaknesses, individual differences of the learners in particular, and the community in general.

The teacher as an agent of change plays a pivotal role in the teaching-learning process. It has been said that *'no education system can rise too far beyond the level of the teachers in it'*

It is in this context that the role of a teacher as a mentor becomes important. The concept of the Teacher-Mentor is nothing new. Teachers have been taking on Teacher-Mentoring and pastoral roles for as long as one can remember, though it's only in recent years that the spirit of mentoring qualities have been promoted within communities.

Global research suggests that when students connect to their school there is a far greater possibility they will reach their undoubted potential. They are likely to develop high self-esteem when they feel safe and secure, have a positive self-image, a sense of purpose and skills of competence.

Research also points to the positive impact a significant adult, including parents/caregivers, teachers, coaches, faith leaders, relatives, friends, youth workers etc. have had on the lives of numerous adolescents.

Students attend school on approximately 190 days of a year. Thus it stands to reason that their teachers are probably the people who can most powerfully and positively impact their lives, in addition to families and friends. Teacher-Mentors sow the mentoring seeds during their interactions with their students, thus having the ability to positively impact communities in positive ways, creating more stable and secure environments for our children. This process could be further enhanced when the mentoring baton is passed down from Teacher-Mentors to Peer Mentors, Peer Support leaders and other students placed in positions to positively impact the lives of younger students.

Research has shown that a creative teacher who would act as a change agent demonstrates the following traits.

He/She:

- has a student-centered learning climate within his/her classroom.
- uses a variety of assessment methods in addition to standardized tests.  
Examples: naturalistic teacher-made tests, portfolio assessment.
- has an expanded definition of back to basics that includes problem solving, higher level thinking skills, and computer literacy.
- has high expectations for all students.
- uses a variety of teaching methods in addition to teacher-centered approaches.  
Examples: cooperative learning, hands-on activities, simulations, individualization, peer tutoring, learning centers.
- does not rely solely on the standard state adopted textbooks and teacher's manuals.
- uses holistic, integrated instruction.
- incorporates technology in instruction.
- takes advantage of all opportunities to continue learning and gain new ideas.
- sends clear messages to students that success is expected and provides strong academic press.

Are all teachers change agents? May not be. But all have the potential to become change agents. Teaching at its core is a moral profession. Scratch a

good teacher and you will find a moral purpose. Moral purpose and change agency, at first glance, appear to be strange bedfellows. On closer examination they are natural allies. Stated more directly, moral purpose—or making a difference—concerns bringing about improvements. It is, in other words, a change theme. In addition to the need to make moral purpose more explicit, educators need the tools to engage in change productively. Moral purpose keeps teachers close to the needs of children and youth; change agency causes them to develop better strategies for accomplishing their moral goals.

Those skilled in change appreciate its volatile character, and they explicitly seek ideas for coping with and influencing change toward some desired ends. I see four core capacities for building greater change capacity: *personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery, and collaboration*. Each of these has its institutional counterpart: *shared vision-building; organizational structures, norms, and practices of inquiry; the development of increased repertoires of skills and know-how among organizational members; and collaborative work cultures*.

But we are facing a huge dilemma. On the one hand, schools are expected to engage in continuous renewal, and change expectations are constantly swirling around them. On the other hand, the way teachers are trained, the way schools are organized, the way the educational hierarchy operates, and the way political decision makers treat educators, results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo. One way out of this quandary is to make explicit the goals and skills of change agency. To break the impasse, we need a new conception of teacher professionalism that integrates moral purpose and change agency, one that works simultaneously on individual and institutional development. One cannot wait for the other.

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