



What does it mean to be an effective educator? Analysing the qualities for a successful and interesting career as an educator in the 21st century

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"It appears, therefore, that of all secular professions, teaching is the most profoundly important" (Menzies, 1945). These are the words of the leader of the opposition, the politician Mr Robert Menzies, to the Australian House of Representatives in 1945 (Robertson, 2015). Although these words were spoken quite long time ago, the echo of Menzies' words seems to still reflect the present time. Therefore, one can rest assured that "teaching is the world's most important profession" (Cox, 2019). If you are an educator reading this article, you may know from your own professional experience that educators (teachers in general) can make a positive impact in students' lives. In the eyes of Rose (2014), in general, the whole teaching process can be immensely satisfying. Similarly, for Cox (2019), "teaching is immensely satisfying and exciting".

To me, teaching is my true passion. Having worked for multinationals and small and family businesses in different countries, in my early thirties, I decided to engage fully in teaching. I have never regretted this decision. I enjoy teaching as much as I enjoy life itself. Teaching is 'the element' of my true professional satisfaction. As Ken Robinson, the author of the book *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*, says, "too many people never connect with their true talents and therefore don't know what they're really capable of achieving. In that sense, they don't know who they really are" (Robinson, 2009, p. 23). To be a successful educator, one must be connected with one's talents and abilities, or as Robinson says, to be within the element. In today's climate of accountability, high-stakes testing, and legislation (valid in different countries), however, becoming a successful teacher is challenging and requires professionalism and commitment (Parkay, 2020). However, remember that teaching, the job of an educator (teacher, professor instructor or tutor), has never been easy, and it never will be. It takes heart, commitment and passion to be an effective educator. Educators frequently share that teaching is the most difficult job that anyone can have — and the most rewarding (Duncan, 2015). Now, at a time when educators are courageously raising the bar for student achievement higher than ever before — particularly in developed economies, but more recently in developing economies — the job of a professional educator has never

been more critical to the success of young minds and to the prosperity of economies.

Why professional development and empowerment?

"Let he who would change the world first change himself."
(Socrates)

"I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings and to put my trust in God."
(Queen Elizabeth II, 25 December 2002)

There is no better resource for an academic institution than educators who are empowered and equipped to solve problems using their own talent and experience. Some governments such as Japan, South Korea, Finland and Singapore have been empowering their educators for quite a long time, and the results are clear in the statistics. The world education rankings from the OECD and The Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), which is highly respected across the globe, and enables politicians and policy-makers to assess how different countries' education systems compare, show that the performance in these countries are higher than in many others. Empowering educators means offering appropriate professional development to educators at all educational levels (from primary school to university level). Professional development is an ongoing process, one that evolves as you assess and re-examine your teaching beliefs and practices. Some of the approaches can be pursued individually while others prove to be more beneficial if done collectively. Some activities can be done informally (journals, study groups, etc.) and some follow more traditional formats (e.g., workshops, conferences; Murray, 2010). According to Murray (2010), one of the main reasons to pursue professional development is to be empowered — to have the opportunity and the confidence to act upon your ideas as well as to influence the way you perform in your profession. The main focus is on empowering educators for inclusive practice. First, the

meaning of 'empowerment' should be clarified. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "empower" can mean "to make (someone) stronger or more confident" – in this case, increasing educator confidence to include all learners in their classes. It can also mean "to give someone the authority or power to do something" (ibid.). Teachers need to be confident in carrying out a range of key tasks – for example: assessing, analysing information, planning, putting plans into practice, adapting as needed, evaluating and critically reflecting – with all learners in mind. They need to shift their thinking from "ideas of 'most' and 'some' learners to everyone" (Florian & Linklater, 2010, p. 370).

Empowerment is the process through which educators become capable of engaging in, sharing control of, and influencing events and institutions that affect their lives. As educators, we have the capacity to empower ourselves if we keep in mind the following precepts:

- Be positive.
- Believe in what you are doing and in yourself.
- Be proactive, not reactive.
- Be assertive, not aggressive.

Feeling empowered can also manifest leadership skills, and educators' empowerment leads to improvement in student performance and attitude. To be an effective educator requires a combination of professional knowledge and specialized skills as well as your own personal and professional experiences and qualities. And adding to their knowledge base and acquiring new skills are among the main reasons teachers participate in professional development activities (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). For both a novice educator and a veteran, learning about new ideas and techniques in their teaching discipline can be motivating and encouraging. The university I work for, for example, provides all academics with an annual personal development budget. We, as academics, are encouraged to improve ourselves and the teaching discipline we are in charge of, to teach the students on campus and abroad. Academic institutions, like the one I work for, are encouraged by the national government (the British government in this case) to keep professional development programmes to empower the educators. The result is visible in the university's ranking which has been improving considerably in the last few years. Student satisfaction also has improved markedly due to educators' commitment and passion for their teaching and their research expertise.

Educators all around the world face similar challenges due to the very nature of educational environments. They teach their classes independently from their colleagues, which makes them feel isolated. Sometimes these educators, especially those who are new to the field, can become overwhelmed by the demands of the educational institution bureaucracy (particularly in some countries) and if they do not receive regular supervision or feedback, they can become frustrated. Therefore, professional development activities can alleviate some of these issues. Such activities can also bring together educators who have similar experiences and interests. Just having the opportunity to share experiences and ideas with

colleagues can help an educator gain a sense of community and belonging. I, for example, regularly participate in academic conferences and workshops worldwide where I am able to learn and share ideas, and at the same time feel being part of the community. The most recent conference I had the privilege of attending was EDU 2019 in Athens run by the Communication Institute of Greece (in May 2019). This is a type of professional development programme that brings educators from different countries into a friendly environment, and we all can contribute and share teaching and educational ideas from around the world. We learn from each other, and take the lessons to our own educational environment.

It does not take a miracle to solve the biggest challenges in education in many countries, but real transformation can take some time; the transformation of the Finnish education system, for example, began some 40 years ago as the key propellant of the country's economic recovery plan (Hancock, 2011). National and local government and educators, together, can truly lead large-scale transformation; government and local systems must be willing to provide educators both time and training to exercise empowerment and leadership in appropriate professional development programmes. Successful teaching systems that we hear of in the news are those that are supported and encouraged by local authorities for their efforts. This results in an achievement for the whole economy and society. By empowering educators at all levels in the educational system, we are creating a better and integrated educational environment for effective educators in the 21st century. Empowerment and professional development is not something new, Socrates already mentioned centuries ago that 'the life which is unexamined is not worth living.' I would say that an educator who does not keep improving and empowering him- or herself is not a true professional engaged with the students and colleagues, and the whole academic community overall. To succeed as an educator, you must master a variety of different skills and competences constantly. The full complement for an educator to empowerment is self-management.

What makes a successful and empowered educator?

If you were to ask any observer you may hear things like, the teacher kept the students engaged via unique teaching strategies, and the classroom basically ran by itself. But, if you were to ask a student, you would probably hear a different response along the lines of "they (teachers/educators) make learning fun" or "they (teachers) never give up on me." There are countless teaching strategies you can use to achieve success in the classroom, but irrespective of the teaching style, the most effective educators have one thing in common — they know how to reach their students in a long-lasting, positive manner. In this section, I present and critically discuss some of the most relevant qualities that contribute to a long-lasting successful teaching career. To be honest, an exciting, successful and happy teaching career, regardless of the teaching style, seems to be offered by those educators who have one main aspect in common –

they impact their students' life personally and professionally in a positive manner. The following successful teaching strategies are based on Cox (2019).

1. Successful teachers have high expectations of their students.

The most effective teachers expect their students to succeed, they believe in them, and motivate them to keep trying until they reach their goal. As a result, they set the bar high and create an environment where students can push themselves beyond their comfort zone to reach their goals, but also have a safety net to catch them if they fail.

2. Successful teachers have a sense of humour.

If you ask a student who their favourite teacher is, they are more than likely to tell you about the teacher that makes them laugh, but also, and more important and relevant, make them 'think critically'.

Making learning fun does not mean you have to put on a comedy show, but definitely humour may help to create that lasting impression, and at the same time to address difficult topics.

3. Successful teachers are knowledgeable in their field.

Successful teachers are masters in their subject area. They know their craft and never stop learning. They are curious, confident, and do not (always) need a textbook, or a full set of PowerPoint slides in front of them to teach their students. They stay abreast of their subject and transfer their love of knowledge to their students.

4. Successful teachers use teaching strategies that cause them to think outside of the box.

Successful and productive teachers think creatively and try and make classroom experiences exciting for students. They identify ways to leap outside of the educational norms and create experiences that are unexpected, unique, and ultimately more memorable.

5. Successful teachers take risks.

A popular saying is, "If there is no risk, there is no reward." Successful teachers know that risk-taking is a part of being successful. Children learn by observing, and when they see you try new things (and watch how you handle success and failure) they too will know how to handle similar situations.

6. Successful and productive teachers are consistent.

Successful and productive teachers are consistent in all that they do (related to their profession). They apply and enforce class rules, a consistent grading system, and the

expectations for all (possible) students. They do not play favourites or make special exceptions.

7. Successful and effective teachers communicate professionally with students and colleagues.

Successful and effective teachers know that communication is the key to student success (and colleagues). They create an open path of communication between themselves and students (and colleagues), and recognize that a united front between these groups lowers the chance that no student is left behind.

8. Successful teachers are up-to-date with the latest in technology.

Great and successful teachers take the time to explore new tools and stay up-to-date with latest technology. They are not afraid of what technology holds for education in the future, and are willing to learn and incorporate the new trends into their classroom. They are willing to learn even from their own students (usually young bright fellows).

9. Successful teachers make learning fun.

This goes hand in hand with having a sense of humour, but making learning fun does not mean you have to put on a comedy show. Find ways to mix up your lesson plans based upon your students' interests. When they see you putting in effort to get to know them and mould your teachings around their lives, the more successful you will become.

10. Successful teachers can empathize with students.

The best teachers are patient with students, and understand when they are under stress or have problems with the material. They do whatever is necessary to get their students back on track, and are able to recognize that everybody has bad days.

Despite mistakes, disasters, failures, and disappointments, Leonardo Da Vinci never stopped learning, exploring, and experimenting. He was persistent in his quest for knowledge (Gelb, 1998).

I strongly believe that a successful educator is the one who understands and follows Leonardo's philosophy. I have been trying myself, and the rewards are visible, for the last 6 years, I have received teaching awards from students and the university I work for.

To conclude I would leave you with a quote from one of my recent undergraduate students at Royal Holloway, University of London:

'More than a teacher, a motivator. Ailson has always been able to inspire the classroom, making every subject interesting. He has the great capability of being able to find the right angle to share his

knowledge, both theoretical and practical. Whether in or outside the classroom, he is always ready to offer advice and guidance and always with a smile!"

Paul Messian-Imbert,
undergraduate student, 2016/17.

Receiving these words is what makes life as a professional educator worthwhile, and there is no better reward than to see the development and empowerment of young minds in this chaotic society we live in. Teaching is the world's most important (and rewarding) profession indeed on this planet!

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