

Reading 7

The teacher's purpose

Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves

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In this brief excerpt, Fullan and Hargreaves identify what they think characterizes professionalism in teaching. They argue that it is not so much the possession of a certain level of qualifications or status, nor the possession of a set of technical teaching skills. Rather, it is the full acceptance of the moral responsibility that is attached to the role of teachers today, and the ability to make minute-by-minute professional judgements in complex and uncertain situations.

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Notes

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Teaching is not just a collection of technical skills, a package of procedures, a bunch of things you can learn. While skills and techniques are important, there is much more to teaching than this. The complex nature of teaching is too often reduced to matters of skill and technique, to things that can be packaged, put into courses, easily learned. Teaching is not just a technical business. It is a moral one too. There are two senses in which this is true.

Reading

First, teachers are among the most important influences on the life and development of many young children. They play a key role in creating the generations of the future. With the decline of the church, the break-up of traditional communities, and the diminishing contact that many children have with parents who can 'be there' for their children on a regular basis, the moral role and importance of today's teacher is probably greater than it has been for a long time.

There is also a second sense in which teaching is deeply moral, and so cannot be reduced simply to efficient techniques and learned behaviour. This has to do with the nature of teachers' decisions and judgements. In teaching, as in a number of other occupations, the core of its professionalism is best defined and described not in terms of pay or status or qualifications, but in terms of the distinctive kinds of actions and judgements that professionals typically make. As Schön (1987) puts it, professional

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action involves *making discretionary judgements in situations of unavoidable uncertainty.*

Teachers, like urban planners or architects or psychotherapists, are continuously involved in making innumerable, practical, everyday small decisions that are of great importance to their clients and their colleagues. For these decisions, there are few or no clear rules of thumb that can be clearly listed in a manual, and applied in a systematic way from one situation to the next. To confront a pupil or avoid the confrontation. To let the child's discovery run further, or to intervene and direct it. Decisions about discipline, classroom management, classroom fairness, the freedom of the child versus the need for teacher intervention and support – all these embody complex social, philosophical, psychological, and moral judgements. Yet they are also judgements that have to be made second by second, in the complex hurly-burly of the classroom. It is the application of accumulated skill, wisdom, and expertise in the specific and variable circumstances of the classroom that defines much of the teacher's professionalism – the teacher's capacity to make informed judgements in the rapidly shifting environment of the classroom [...]

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