

# Reimagining Teacher Development: Cultivating Spirit

by Amelia Dress

*"It is my belief that the thing which we should cultivate in our teachers is more the spirit than the mechanical skill of the scientist."*

— Maria Montessori

This quote by Maria Montessori piques the imagination in today's educational field where we still struggle to find an answer to the question of quality. What makes a good teacher? How do we teach people to teach? To listen to the wisdom of Maria Montessori, among others, is to suggest the answer doesn't lie in training requirements. Although well-meaning, some methods of training approach teaching as a one-size-fits-all approach. Yet, there are myriad techniques for teaching and no one method works for all teachers or all students. Indeed, good teachers use a variety of techniques (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006). Unfortunately, our search for objective standards by which to measure quality teaching has overlooked the fact that the root of



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teaching lies not in simple methodology, but in the messy business of human relationships. Embracing this means recognizing that who we are and how we relate to the world around us makes a difference in our teaching (Palmer, 1998).

## Cultivating the Spirit of Teaching

What would it mean to cultivate spirit? To begin with, we would remember that spirit can't be taught in a traditional, teacher-to-student methodology. The quality we long for in teachers is not only for them to have the right technique, but for them to have the soul of a teacher. In this context, we might spend less time telling teachers what to *do*, and more time showing them how to *be*. This is the idea behind teacher renewal programs like Courage to Teach and Multi-level Learning, programs that have seen great results in improving teacher ability in K-12 teachers (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006). These programs guide participants through processes of self-reflection with the hope of helping people connect with their inner lives as teachers. The premise is that teaching requires more than just a body of knowledge; its relational nature draws on our souls, as well as our minds. Ignoring the inner life of a teacher comes at the risk of burnout or ambivalence.

## Quality Improvement

The idea that teachers need more than mere skills training to be effective in their roles has not gone unnoticed in the field of early childhood education. In recent years, quality improvement standards have expanded to encompass the disposition of teachers as one indicator of a high-quality program. NAEYC accreditation recognizes that:

- Environments that foster "trust, collaboration and inclusion" among staff directly affect the quality of care experienced by children (Criterion 10.A.7).
- Relationships between teachers and children can be seen in a "positive emotional climate," that includes affection, laughter, and warmth (Criteria 1.B.01 and 1.B.02).

Similar indicators exist in the Environmental Rating Scales where factors like staff relationships and administrative encouragement are taken into consideration. The inclusion of 'intangibles,' like trust and warmth, in program assessments hints at our deepening knowledge of the ways teachers' qualities influence their student's success. While none of these qualities can be taught in a traditional teacher-to-student format, they can be cultivated by paying atten-

tion to the inner aspects that enable teachers to demonstrate these traits. To this end, there are three themes worth exploring: purpose, creativity, and wonder.

**Purpose.** In many religious and philosophical traditions, there is a sense of having a calling — something that you do because you are uniquely suited for it, and therefore tasked with pursuing it throughout life. In Christian theology, this is known as a ‘vocation.’ Although we frequently use this word in the secular world, we often strip it of its power. To help teachers remain vital, we must recapture the deeper meaning of *vocation*:

- To be aware of one’s vocation is to recognize that there is some mysterious combination of personal skill and passion that draws us into a particular line of work.
- Most teachers begin their careers with such a vision. They are drawn to early childhood education because they love children and teaching and believe they have the capacity to do this work.
- The challenge is keeping this sense of purpose alive as the day-to-day reality of the profession’s demands take their toll.

Maintaining this vision means helping teachers discover — and rediscover — why they teach. It’s simply not enough to recognize the work of teachers once or twice a year, nor is it enough to merely *tell* them what a difference they make. For real vitality, we have to help teachers explore their own sense of vocational identity, so that the meaning invigorates their work during good times and sustains them during the difficult days. Put simply, successful teachers know why they teach.

Encouraging reflection that helps teachers explore their reasons for teaching is one way of increasing vitality. The key to developing this kind of reflection is to make it a regular part of life, so that

teachers can begin to internalize the process and develop their own means of self-reflection. These questions might include:

- “Why do you teach?” or “What gets you up in the morning?”
- Questions about role models are also useful, as they encourage teachers to explore their sources of inspiration, likely, teachers who embodied the quality of purpose.
  - “Who is your model for teaching?”
  - “What were that person’s qualities that made him/her a great teacher?”
- Finally, it’s worth helping teachers reflect on the threats to their sense of purpose, to better understand the times when they feel unfulfilled by the work.
  - “What situations make you doubt yourself and your abilities?”
  - “What situations confirm your belief that you were meant to teach?”

Many leaders already include team-building activities in their staff meetings. Meaningful questions, such as those above, can help build staff relationships while prompting self-reflection on the meaning of teaching.

**Creativity.** Business sectors are paying increased attention to the need for creativity in the workplace, and with good reason:

- Creativity is the spark of life. Closely related to our sense of purpose, creativity is the result of inspiration that comes as we live out our vocation.
- Creativity in the workplace encourages vitality, engagement, and loyalty. Some leadership theorists have speculated that the cause of burnout isn’t so much the workload, but the inability to be creative at work. This may be why teachers find themselves responding to technical skills training

and mandated curriculum with a distinct lack of enthusiasm (Farkas, Johnson & Duffett, 2003). On the other hand, the sense of fulfillment and energy that results from working tirelessly on something we believe in allows us to live out our purpose with creativity.

Nurturing creativity is two-fold. It can be approached by fostering creativity in the workplace and by encouraging acts of creativity at home. Both are important elements for tending to the inner life of teachers:

- *Encourage teacher creativity in classroom planning.* Good teaching can never be fully scripted. The learning process of children is hindered when caregivers approach their time together as though any variation of the plan is a failure. Whatever a program’s guidelines are, vitality comes by finding the places where teachers can be given creative license. Meet with each teacher to review the guidelines that govern their class, including developmentally appropriate practices, learning goals and budgets, then give them the planning time and support to develop their own lesson plans and classroom goals within the specified frameworks.
- *Remember that administration support is critical to developing teacher creativity.* Well-meaning directors undermine their own efforts by voicing a preference for teacher creativity, but exercising control that inhibits teachers from acting on their ideas. Similar problems arise when there is inadequate support, planning time, and encouragement. These deficits leave teachers feeling abandoned and overwhelmed, rather than empowered and excited.
- *Encourage teachers to find creative outlets in their own lives.* Tap into the abundance of information about creativity and post it on your teacher information board. In addition to

sharing information about professional development opportunities, give information about local arts and crafts workshops, galleries, and shows.

- *Pay attention to the physical environment.* An environment rich in a variety of arts inspires creativity. Rather than using the teacher workroom as an overflow storage area, give it the same attention devoted to creating the children's areas. Inexpensive prints, clay or wood art, and colorful fabrics combine to create a space that inspires. Devote space for teachers to store journaling, knitting, and other projects-in-process for break times.

**Wonder.** The final inner quality that can be nurtured in teachers is a sense of wonder, or to use stronger language, awe. Wonder is not merely curiosity. Instead, wonder is a deep desire to be present in the world, to witness the marvels of the children as they learn and grow, and to be inspired to share this sense of wonder in the classroom. To cultivate a sense of wonder, then, is to help teachers reconnect with the world around them. This sense of connectedness is crucial to good teaching, particularly in early childhood where the relationship between teacher and student impacts a child's development for the rest of his life. Teachers who are highly connected to their students and the world around them:

- Stay centered on each child they encounter throughout the day, without being worn-down by a feeling of redundancy.
- Find ways to refuel in day-to-day encounters.
- Are better able to read students and situations (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006).
- Can be highly responsive and able to turn daily events into energizing encounters.

Documentation and observation records are a standard practice in many early education settings. These same techniques can become a means by which educators regain their sense of wonder and connectedness with the children. This idea is beautifully captured by Deb Curtis (2008), who recommends taking photographs of children living in the moment and reviewing those pictures later to fully grasp the significance of what the children were learning:

"The extra effort is worthwhile as it is much better to share in children's insatiable curiosity, deep feelings, and pure delight than it is to be the toddler police, focusing only on fixing behaviors, teaching to outcomes, or checking boxes on official forms" (p. 38).

Transforming observational practices into a tool for wonder means encouraging teachers to reflect on what the children *experienced*, rather than only what they *did*:

- *Use staff meetings to share moments of wonder or joy, as well as matters of business.* Encourage each teacher to share a time in their day that the children's eyes lit up with the joy of a new experience.
- *Create a 'discovery board' for each classroom.* On it, display pictures or brief written statements describing a moment in which the children experienced the wonder of learning something new. Sitting up for the first time, joyfully watching the birds eat seeds, or feeling the cool sand while digging in the sandbox are all experiences of wonder for children. Tuning into the children's experiences of wonder can help teachers recapture that sense within themselves.
- *Notice and point out wonder-filled moments when they occur throughout the day.* Not only will teachers bene-

fit from these informal observations, but it's a good practice for leaders, who often handle only the crisis moments, to restore their own sense of wonder.

Teachers who aren't accustomed to reflection or documentation, or those who are used to documenting only for assessment purposes, may need more guidance to move beyond seeing rote observation techniques. However, as teachers become accustomed to thinking about how children engage with the world, their inner reflection and perceptions will evolve, helping them to stay engaged and revitalized.

## Conclusion

To cultivate the spirit of a teacher is a challenge because it requires a shift in our thinking. No longer is the goal simply technical mastery, but an inner quality that resists definition. To adopt this mindset means taking seriously the inner life of a teacher, even putting it ahead of other attributes and skill sets. Traditional training methods and requirements are important; certainly teachers need skills and these can be enhanced by having a variety of techniques at their fingertips. We cannot, however, reduce the effectiveness of a teacher purely to her knowledge. As researchers and trainers Sam Intrator and Robert Kunzman (2006) have asserted, "The way to truly increase teachers' capacities and skills is to engage their souls." Knowing that our profession is too frequently one of high demands and low pay, we can strive to create an environment where the heart and soul of our teachers are fed. By nurturing teachers' purpose, creativity, and wonder, we can facilitate their vitality and the educational excellence they bring to the classroom.

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