
Original Paper

Teachers' Intuition and Clinical Judgement

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Abstract

All too often, many teachers have to rely on their own intuition or gut or hunch or even common sense when working with the vast number of students with special needs. This paper will review this issue and highlight the importance of clinical judgment in the education of certain students.

Striving to Thriving: A Personal Recollection

As a first grader back in the 1960's, I (WM) had a teacher who was not at all interested in me as an individual. She was more interested in me sitting still and minding her every request. My parents had raised me in a way that I was to respect my elders, and I did my best to respect my teacher (we'll call her Mrs. DowhatIsay, or Mrs. D.)

Mrs. D. had a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and if you fit in her approach, you may have done alright in her class. I did not fit in her approach during this monumental year of learning, in which I should have been building a foundation that would lead me to becoming a competent reader.

Mrs. D had moved from teaching fourth grade to teaching first grade the year I had her as my teacher, and fourth grade students are a world apart from first graders. As a little boy, I was filled with wonder at the world around me and I loved to move. At 6 years old, I was already riding a two wheeled bike, and I was a pretty good shot with a sling shot. While in class, I would spend a considerable amount of time daydreaming about the activities I enjoyed (school was not one of those activities). During these times of daydreaming my legs would fidget.

Honestly, while sitting in that desk, all I wanted to do was move, but Mrs. D. frowned on movement or any type of sound. The classroom was to be quiet and still. My mom spent many an afternoon meeting with Mrs. D. because Mrs. D. thought there was something amiss with me. She was convinced I had issues with my bladder. Mom never once let on to me that my teacher thought I had issues.

At one point during the year, Mom took me to another teacher's classroom where I would be tested. Again, mom never let on that I was going to be tested to see what the heck was wrong with me. She just told me we were going to see what I was learning in school. During the diagnostic testing, I only missed one item, which was on a picture of an umbrella that was missing some of the structural supports and I didn't notice them missing (of course growing up in Phoenix AZ I had not seen an umbrella much).

After my first-grade year in school, I switched to a new school, and it did not take long for my second-grade teacher, Ms. N, to discover I was a non-reader. Knowing this, Ms. N put me in a group with other students that were at a similar level in reading, and she met with us on a regular basis at a kidney table in the corner of the classroom.

Ms. N also figured out that not only was I low in reading, but I also did not like reading, and I did everything I could to avoid it. I did, however, like picture books and I had high interest in books filled with pictures, drawings or photographs.

Ms. N was a safe-cracker (a teacher who could "figure out" just how to approach a student), form a relationship and ascertain their learning preference and motivation. And as she observed me on a daily basis, she began to slowly, methodically, and patiently turn the dial to my little second-grader heart.

One day in October Ms. Ns had the class working on an art project. The project was simple: draw and color a picture based on the subject, Halloween. I decided to draw a black cat.

As each of us drew our picture seated at our individual desks, Ms. N walked around the room observing. As she was passing by my desk, she paused and took a particular interest in my drawing. Then she began to talk to me.

Ms. Ns: "Wayne, have you had formal training in art?"

Me: "Why, no"

Ms. N: "Well, your artwork is excellent and you appear to have had formal training."

That simple interaction changed the trajectory of my life. Ms. N had just opened the safe that was my heart, and from that point forward, I did everything I could to please her.

Reading with Ms. Ns as my guide?

Absolutely !

The above anecdote personifies the challenge of teaching on almost a daily basis- Teachers are confronted with students who may show either specific skills and proclivities or a sense of boredom and ennui and frustration and exasperation

Teachers as Mentors

Teachers are more than instructors- they are coaches, motivators, and, in a sense, artisans. They have some clinical intuition, which sometimes came naturally, sometimes was developed over the years, and sometimes came through supervision. Mentoring has been around for decades, yet has not always been seen as important but has been written about extensively (Shaughnessy.)

Paul Torrance (1984) has indicated that mentors should:

“Help them to:

- 1) Be unafraid of “falling in love with something” and pursue it with intensity and in-depth. A person is motivated to do the things they love and can do best.
- 2) Know, understand take pride in, practice use exploit and enjoy their greatest strengths.
- 3) Learn to free themselves from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games that others try to impose upon them.
- 4) Free themselves to play their own game in such a way as to make the best use of their strengths and follow their dreams.
- 5) Find some great teachers and attach themselves to these teachers.
- 6) Avoid wasting a lot of expensive, unproductive energy in trying to be well-rounded.
- 7) Learn the skills of interdependence and give freely of the infinity of their greatest strengths. (pp.56-57)

Teachers, on the other hand, need to be careful of time management and not get over-extended. Students may have a difficult time as the really great teachers are often asked to do more than their contemporaries. There is a great deal of stress today in the teaching profession, especially at the secondary level.

Teachers as Moderators

Teachers know when to push and when to probe and when to support. They may act as intermediaries and advocate for a child who may show relative weakness in a certain area- for example-math. They may discuss a student's strengths with another teacher- when they hear a child is struggling in a certain domain- math, writing or whatever. It is a sensitive subtle juggling act.

Teachers as Motivators

Motivation is a key issue in instruction and teaching and education. Many teachers expect a student to arrive at school ready and eager to learn. This is not always the case. Some students arrive at school hungry and tired and without breakfast. Some teachers arrive at school worried about the mortgage or the flat tire on their car and pending surgery on their wife or daughter. There is both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and teachers need to be aware that not all students arrive at school eager to learn. Some are in survival mode, some are dealing with their peers and some are responsible for peers with special needs. Teachers have to ascertain what type or types of rewards or motivators to use with both male and female students of varying ages and grades. (Ormrod,2023)

Teachers as Support Systems

The school year- in the United States, at least- is a long one. Most districts have a 180-day (or more) school year. Other countries in Europe have a 200-day or even 230-day school year, and some districts have a four-day school week. Point being -it is a long-time frame to provide incessant motivation for oneself and for ones students and this is not always discussed in teacher training programs

Teachers as Clinicians

Teachers are not just safecrackers (Shaughnessy and Marshall, 2025) but they are clinicians-they are like human thermometers who sense when students are physically tired or emotionally drained. They sense when students are depressed or discouraged. They sense when a student needs a bathroom break or a drink of water. And they sense when a student is frustrated or exasperated. They pick up on cues and clues and discern when things are not going right in the life of one of their students. And on a separate note, teachers pick up on the fact that one of their students may need glasses or perhaps need an evaluation for their hearing.

Teachers as short term and long-range promoters

In the anecdote at the beginning of this article, the teacher invested in that student. As someone who drops a rock into a lake to see the ripple effects, teachers are often the ones who provide just the right amount of support, encouragement and enthusiasm to start the snowball rolling down the hill and they hope that physics and momentum will follow. They suggest just the right book to motivate the child or they suggest just the right book to parents (such as Denis Waitley's *Seeds of Greatness*).

They plant what Denis Waitley calls "Seeds of Greatness" (Waitley, 1993) and they know exactly what seed to plant, and in the above case, artistic potential. Some guidance counselors also fill this slot or function by suggesting a specific teacher or course that a student may find interesting.

Teachers are identifiers of potential. They see leadership. They see artistic or musical talent. Some teachers are coaches and they spot a child who will someday be captain of the varsity basketball team. Some teachers coach and mentor players and follow their careers with interest. I think of John Wooden and Kareem Abdul Jabbar (who was Lew Alcindor when he played for Power Memorial in Manhattan) who maintained a close friendship over the years and John Wooden followed his former student with interest over the years (and probably followed Bill Walton also!)

Initition

Some teachers have a vast knowledge of the human condition and other teachers come from a large family or perhaps an involved church family. They feel loved. They feel valued and appreciated. This makes a difference. Teachers can communicate these things in a subtle manner to students. Teachers need to tell students that they appreciate their work and effort and enthusiasm toward the subject matter. Exactly when and how to do this- relies on the teacher's intuition for the teachable or reachable moment.

Summary and Conclusions

This brief paper has attempted to address some key issues in education and discuss the student-teacher relationship and some motivational concerns. This is just a superficial overview of an intricate complex human interaction involving personalities and educational concerns.

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