

What Makes a Good School? What Makes a Good Classroom?

We know that schools can be very different from one another, can subscribe to different educational philosophies, have different themes, and emphasize different areas of the curriculum. We also know that good schools exist in all kinds of communities, including communities that are urban, wealthy, rural, suburban, or poor. Despite all of this variation, in all schools and classrooms that work well, certain characteristics seem to be present that make them work—for students and teachers alike.

As a general rule, schools that work well are places where students are motivated to learn and learn to think in complex ways, which is necessary for success in today's complex world (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). They are strong communities in which students feel that they have a place—as human beings, as learners, and as members of their school; they are also professional communities for teachers and supportive communities for families. In such schools, teachers and administrators value improving the quality of their practice and take action to do so. They are places where teachers themselves are engaged in learning. In these schools, students are motivated to learn, with the result that students actually do learn well.

In Good Schools, Students Are Motivated, Challenged, and Engaged

Good schools are places where students are *motivated* to learn, and it is up to teachers to know how to create classrooms that provide that motivation. Students want to spend time in such schools and classrooms because they are exciting places to be. In classrooms that are motivating, teachers encourage all members of the class to do their best work. Classrooms that support students' efforts, classrooms where students believe they have a chance of succeeding, classrooms where teachers assist students in their learning on a continuous basis are classrooms where students are engaged and tend to learn well.

Motivating Students through High Expectations. Students know whether a teacher does or does not expect a lot of them academically and behaviorally. Schools and teachers that set high expectations for all students, not just for those who appear to have the ability to achieve or who come to school with greater readiness than others, are good places for students to learn. They are places where all students have the opportunity to achieve because, as a starting point, their teachers believe in their capacity to do so and create the conditions that will promote their intellectual and emotional growth.

In schools where high expectations prevail, teachers encourage all students to engage in complex thinking about the curriculum, developing rigorous assignments that push students toward high-level thinking. Teachers ensure not only that students have the basic skills, or tools, they need to engage in more complex work, but also that students think and manipulate information as they communicate about and solve problems. Students do not merely sit all day and listen to teachers—the transmittal approach to learning we discussed in Chapter 5. Rather, they engage in discussion with their teachers and their peers, in a dialogue designed to foster student growth and understanding of the work at hand (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). They also engage in inquiry into the issues they are learning about. That does not mean that a teacher will never lecture or never provide very focused,

explicit instruction, but a teacher's expectations of her students cannot be viewed as high or challenging if the students are asked to do only rote, low level work each day.

Teachers also set clear expectations in order to motivate students. If students do not know what is expected of them, or if a teacher's expectations are ambiguous, students are less likely to be eager to participate in school. Therefore, good teachers know not only what they are teaching, but also why they are teaching it—and they can communicate their reasons to students in ways that make sense to them. When students view what they are being asked to do as authentic and having value, they are more likely to be engaged.

Motivation, then, depends on the kinds of activities students are asked to do in school in the first place. How teachers decide to implement the curriculum, what to emphasize, and what approaches to instruction they provide can work in a way that is motivating or not motivating to students. When students are treated as passive learners and are only expected to sit still and listen, they will likely not be motivated because they may not see the point of being in school in the first place. In such situations students may not pay attention, may be bored, or, especially at the high school level, simply may not show up.

The Relationship between Teacher Knowledge and Student Engagement. One of the most important things teachers can do to engage their students in learning is to know their subject matter *and* know how to explain it to students well. In Chapter 3 we talked about the concept of pedagogical content knowledge—that is, the special knowledge teachers possess by being able to convey the content in ways that make sense to their students. When teachers do not deal with students' questions about the content authentically, students can easily tune out.

This happens in at least three ways. First, teachers might simply provide an answer that is incorrect, not wanting to appear as if they can't answer the question. Obviously, all teachers have moments where they might say to their students, "You know, I'm not sure, but I'll check and let's talk about it tomorrow." But if this recurs on a regular basis, teachers can quickly get a reputation for "getting it wrong" or just not knowing their material. Next, teachers can simply shut down the sense of community that enables students to ask questions and feel comfortable doing so. When teachers are not knowledgeable about the content and are not sure how to explain it, they themselves feel a lack of confidence and students easily pick up on this. Teachers such as these might follow the textbook and be uncomfortable diverging from it.

Teachers can also display their discomfort by ignoring students' questions altogether, by providing a partial answer that does not satisfy the student's question or their interest, or by creating a classroom environment where students do not feel comfortable or safe even asking questions in the first place. And this does not occur only with topics that might be controversial, for example, complicated current events or issues in science such as stem-cell research or evolution. Have you ever seen teachers shy away from answering a question in mathematics or from providing a scientific explanation because they simply did not know how to address it?

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation. Motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic, but to foster lifelong learning among their students, teachers need to help their students develop internal or **intrinsic motivation** to learn. That is, students develop the desire to learn primarily because they are interested in what they are learning and value it, and not just because they will receive an external reward or grade (Stipek, 2002). To foster intrinsic motivation, teachers need to create interesting lessons and units of study, as well as projects and assignments that students consider engaging and meaningful.

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In contrast, **extrinsic motivation** is characterized as working for an external reward or reinforcement for learning. Rewards such as candy or points toward a prize, or negative outcomes such as taking away classroom privileges, represent *extrinsic motivation* to learn. When students are motivated primarily by external forces, they are much less likely to be interested in engaging in school tasks or to see learning as an important goal in itself (LePage, Darling-Hammond, & Akar, 2005). Rather, they may only work to gain the material reward that a teacher offers—or to avoid an unpleasant consequence. Teachers often use extrinsic rewards that are social rather than material, for example, student choice time once a week. In schools and classrooms where students are intrinsically motivated to learn, teachers may use systems of external rewards and consequences, but only sparingly and strategically in order to promote an individual student's sense of efficacy (LePage et al., 2005).

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Why do some teachers rely almost exclusively on extrinsic systems of motivation? One explanation is that their lessons and instructional approaches may not be interesting enough to capture their students' attention, so they may be relying on extrinsic motivation to control their classes as a replacement for providing challenging instruction. Another is that teachers may not have developed sufficient confidence in their skills for managing classrooms for learning. For some new teachers, extrinsic systems of motivation provide them with a sense of security—that students will do what the teacher asks if they can receive a reward. Finally, teachers may rely on extrinsic motivation because they have not established positive, trusting relationships with their students. When such relationships are missing, students are less likely to be engaged in learning.

YOUR TURN... TO REVIEW

- 1. What is the major difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation?
- 2. What are the benefits and limitations of extrinsic motivation?
- 3. What is the relationship between teacher pedagogical content knowledge and student engagement in the classroom?

Good Schools and Classrooms Are Communities of Learners

Because school is a social phenomenon, principals and teachers need to consider how student interactions with each other and with the teachers and staff affect and support student growth and learning. Yes, school is about learning, but it is also a deeply social setting that provides opportunities for students to get to know each other, learn how to work collaboratively, and take on responsibility. Directly related to the issue of motivation, then, is the sense of community that is intrinsic to good schools.

Creating a Strong Classroom Community. One way the teacher facilitates student growth and learning is by creating a strong classroom community in which all students are affirmed as individuals and as learners. Classrooms that are strong communities exhibit a high degree of mutual respect among students and between students and the teacher. In these classrooms, things run smoothly and management problems are diminished and often prevented to begin with (LePage, Darling-Hammond, & Akar, 2005).

Motivation plays a major role in creating classroom communities. Teachers who motivate students acknowledge the good work of all class members regularly, both publicly and privately, providing *specific* feedback to students on the quality of their work. Such teachers support individual students who struggle—however confident, and recognize the accomplishments of students who may not feel confident, and small their accomplishments may be. These teachers also know that embarrassing and belittling students are not ways to motivate them to learn.

Strong classroom communities are learning communities in which students are clear about the teacher's goals and are responsive to the teacher's high expectations for their learning and behavior. Students and teachers, being "in it together," take mutual pride in the accomplishments of the community's members. A classroom in which students share responsibility for the quality of the community makes a strong statement about what role the school should take in the social development of its students.

Students are quite aware of what qualities the classrooms of good teachers should have. Figure 9-1 illustrates the opinions of some urban middle school students about the good teacher's classroom.

Connecting to the Local Community. Successful schools draw on the community as a source of knowledge and resources for their students' education (Comer, 1997; Gonazalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Teachers know the students and the community well and value that knowledge by using it to extend the community that supports student learning (LePage, Darling-Hammond, & Akar, 2005). Families and community members feel comfortable at school and participate in the life of the school. In schools where these connections do not already exist, teachers and administrators can take purposeful action to build strong relationships between the community and the school—attesting to their commitment to make community an important part of the school and to make the school an important part of the community.

Teachers who make strong connections between the lives of their students and classroom instruction, especially when the community of the teacher differs from that of the student, also promote student learning (Banks, et al., 2005).

A Community for Teachers. Strong school and classroom communities depend on the quality of their teachers. You cannot have a thriving school without capable teachers, so schools must be learning communities for teachers as well. Teachers and administrators should work toward sharing a vision of the purpose

Figure 9-1 Urban Middle School Students' Views
The Characteristics of Good Teachers

All good teachers share certain characteristics, and students readily recognize them.

- Good teachers push students.
- Good teachers maintain order.
- Good teachers are willing to help.
- Good teachers explain until everyone understands.
- Good teachers vary classroom activities.
- Good teachers try to understand students.

of the school, with shared responsibility for improving the quality of the community and the achievement of its students (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004).

Such schools are places where teachers are given the opportunity, and the support, to continue developing their skills and capacities. New teachers bring considerable skill to a school when they take their first positions—but being new, they need time and support to develop confidence. In strong schools veteran teachers support new teachers, and skilled teachers model instruction to help new teachers to develop greater capacity in the classroom (Humphrey, Wechsler, Bosetti et al., 2008). Supporting new teachers is the responsibility of the entire school, not just a designated mentor. They are places where teachers can talk about their work, share ideas, and find colleagues to support them as they try out new approaches with the goal of improving their teaching practice.

Teachers who are satisfied in their professional teaching communities and believe their professional expertise and experience are valued are more likely to be motivated to do their job well. Further, when teachers feel secure in their workplace, they are more likely to be creative and innovative. They are also more likely to demonstrate a willingness to try new pedagogies and to organize instruction in different ways to maximize student learning.

Good Schools Know How Well They, and Their Students, Are Doing

In good classrooms teachers continually assess the progress of their students and use those assessments to evaluate the quality of their own teaching (Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Rust, 2005). This does not mean giving tests daily. Rather, teachers assess their students' performance using multiple methods: observation, informal class work and projects, student portfolios, as well as through formal tests. All serve as tools that can inform a teacher's work.

In such classrooms, assessment becomes a learning tool for teachers and students alike. Teachers regularly provide useful, meaningful feedback to their students based on their assessments (Falk, 2000). A paper with a grade but with no comments or with only a generalized statement like "Good" or "Nice job" is insufficient; students need specific ideas about what they are doing well and where they need to improve. That teachers should provide specific feedback seems obvious, but it is not always provided in a way that helps students. Without it students are often left wondering what they have done incorrectly or which aspects of their work they need to improve. In many ways, it is much more important to provide feedback on work in progress than it is to comment extensively about a grade once the work is finished and the student is beginning a new task or project. If students do not know how they are doing and how to improve their work, they will not have a clear idea of how to meet their teacher's expectations.

Good schools also assess their own effectiveness. Administrators and teachers gauge the success of their teaching by considering how well their students are learning. It has always been important for teachers and schools to look toward evidence of how their students are learning as a way to improve



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their instruction. By reflecting on the data students produce in whatever assessments a teacher might use, teacher planning is grounded in their students' learning, and assessments are used to form new teacher approaches to instruction (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2005). In other words, assessment, learning and teaching go hand in hand. Unfortunately, in the era of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the pressure for students to achieve on standardized tests has spawned a frenzy of attention to only one kind of data—that generated by standardized tests. Schools need to be attentive to multiple forms of data, and the data generated by classroom teachers as they go about their daily work are one of the most important sources of knowledge for improving the quality of teaching. Based on their analyses, teachers and administrators can work together to make decisions about how to improve the quality of their work. For example, at the school level they may review student assessments, consider absentee and truancy rates, look at the range of students in Advanced Placement classes at the high school, or analyze rates of family participation in conferences.

Just as individual teachers reflect on their own performance based on what they learn from their students' work, the school staff as a whole can reflect on the school's performance based on what they learn from the data that describe the school's effect as a whole.

Rethinking School Organization to Meet Students' Needs

When teachers and administrators implement practices that characterize good schools, they are already putting the needs of individual students first. They are focusing on how to create healthy places for children and youth to learn, schools that motivate, support, and facilitate students' intellectual and emotional growth and development. But how much does the traditional organization of schools help or hinder creating schools that work for students—even when good teaching is taking place? In this section, we consider the traditional organization of schools and compare it with several organizational patterns that create different grouping structures.

When you think of the word "school," the image many of you conjure up is the traditional school—long hallways filled with classrooms, little interaction between classrooms or the teachers, a separate school for the elementary grades, another one for grades 6 through 8 or 7 through 9, and a comprehensive high school. You may think of classes as having about 25 or 30 students of the same age. If you grew up in a rural area, your image may be slightly different. You may have gone to an isolated small rural school for grades K through 8, followed by a regional high school serving several communities, with long bus rides every day to get there and back. School was generally in session from about 8 AM to 3 PM.

But whichever schools you attended, in all of them students were usually assigned to classes based on their age. This organizational scheme, known as the *age-graded* classroom model, predominates in U.S. schools, with students moving up in grade each year with their peers of the same age. Depending on the size of the school, several class sections may be provided for a single grade.

In the age-graded model, elementary school students traditionally stay with their teacher for only one year. That teacher usually teaches all subjects, although a specialist teacher might be provided for music, art, or physical education. In middle schools and high schools, students usually go from class to class, with a different teacher for every subject. This structure is known as **departmentalization**. Sometimes, in the upper elementary grades, some departmentalization also takes place.

The age-graded approach represents what we have come to think of as a well-organized school: classes of comparably aged-children learning with their same-aged peers, moving up from grade to grade year after year, with a new teacher every year. As we learned in Chapter 5, the curriculum is organized and divided by these same age and grade considerations, all the way from kindergarten to twelfth grade. As we learned with regard to the concept of the "hidden curriculum" in Chapter 6, we take grouping by age for granted. It is one of the assumptions that is made about schooling in the United States that often goes unquestioned.

The Traditional Approach: Age-Graded Classrooms and Curriculum

In the age-graded school model, school districts usually establish a cutoff date to determine when students are eligible to attend a certain grade. Sometimes this date falls at the end of the summer, for example, at the end of August, and sometimes it falls at the end of the calendar year. In a district where the cutoff comes at the end of August, all children who are 5 at the end of August might be eligible for first grade starting in September, and all children who are 12 by the end of August might be eligible to begin grade 7.

Why do we group children by age? The underlying assumption is that all children of the same age will learn at the same pace and have the same needs. Under this organizational plan, teachers are supposed to be able to meet individual students' needs because all of the students in a particular classroom are thought to be at approximately the same level precisely *because* they are all close in age. The curriculum is also organized in the same way, by grade, to meet the needs of children who are supposed to be functioning at that level. So not only are students grouped by age, but also textbooks, workbooks, and supplemental materials that students use are organized to meet age-graded classes.

Age-graded grouping, then, is designed to be an efficient way of organizing schools and classrooms, a way that makes it easier for teachers to teach and children to learn. Because in theory students in the same grade should be functioning at similar levels of intellectual and social development in a graded-level organizational structure, teachers are not supposed to have to differentiate their instruction much to meet the needs of their students. The age-graded classroom is assumed to be an efficient model because it limits the range of what a teacher needs to know and simplifies teachers' work and narrows the curriculum range for which teachers are responsible.

Historically, age-graded grouping in large schools was a product of demographic shifts and a move toward what is often called a factory model of education. As population centers moved from rural to urban and suburban areas, it was necessary to figure out a way to educate large numbers of children and move them through the system in an orderly fashion. Age-graded schooling developed as one solution to this problem, and, obviously, it has had a powerful, sustained impact on schooling.

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