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Preface

"My head is spinning! There's too much to think about: paperwork, budget cutbacks, yet another new initiative, making sure the kids pass those standardized tests, getting the computers to work, trying to keep discipline in a classroom where some can't even sit still for a minute!" Three teachers were part of a discussion group I led recently, and we were talking during a coffee break (that's when the real issues surface). From that discussion, we agreed how complicated teaching seemed to be today, given all the expectations placed upon teachers and given the lack of a clear sense of what is really important to do for and with students. As I drove home from that seminar, I thought about how right they were. There seem to be two huge, but connected needs, here: First, teachers today feel swamped by tasks and expectations, so many that it is difficult to discern what is really important. They ask, "What do I do that really matters for student success?" Second, teachers have an incomplete sense of how well they are meeting those many expectations: "What am I doing well? What might I do more effectively?" At this point I felt compelled to put together a plan that would clearly address these two needs. First, teachers need to get a clearer idea of what is really important in teaching (in terms of its effects on student success). Second, teachers need affirmation about the value of what they are already doing. Addressing these two needs—for information and affirmation—formed the basis for this book.

I could attribute these teachers' needs to many causes, depending on whom I wished to blame. Principals? Do they provide leadership and support to teachers as they did years ago? Parents? Are today's parents placing too many demands upon teachers? Politicians? Do they really understand schools and education? Students? Didn't they used to come to school, sit quietly, and cheerfully await instruction from the teacher? How about my blaming video games and TV? Or the fact our society has become so complicated with a bewildering potpourri of laws, rules, policies, and special interests? We could discuss these issues and come up with some good insights. But we can also say yes, these are all true and

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they all contribute to the two areas of need. In the end, affixing blame is unsatisfying, for blaming does not provide teachers with help that is useful. So while the finger-pointing may continue, my book is focused on providing useful information and help for teachers and for those preparing to become teachers. It addresses two need areas: (1) helping teachers identify what good teachers do and how they do it (information), and (2) through self-assessment and collaboration, helping teachers see how what they are already doing aligns with what is essential for student success (affirmation).

For 15 years I carried out research on classrooms, teachers, and students by asking, what is it that teachers and schools do—and do not do—that matters most when it comes to our students? What helps students learn, both academically and socially? In essence, I have been asking, what is good teaching? My research has involved teachers and schools at the preschool, elementary, middle school, secondary, and postsecondary levels. It has encompassed urban and rural schools and teachers in the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia, and the West Indies. My research brought me to Finland as a Fulbright scholar examining those same questions. Originally, I began my research by observing classrooms and talking to teachers and saw some very good, great, and even heroic teachers, as well as some victims and burnout casualties. The more I probed, the more I realized it is not the age of a school, or its test scores, or the sensitivity of its metal detectors, or the number of its computer terminals, or even its funding that matters as much as the skills and qualities of the human beings who work there that make a difference. The best news is that those skills and qualities can be learned. One of my goals is to help teachers identify what those skills and qualities are and guide teachers in developing them more fully. In sum, I have tried to compose a research- and practice-based guide to the essentials of teaching from the point of view of what helps students the most.

In a sense, I am also writing this book as a historical document. I worry that the awareness of the skills and qualities that comprise great teaching is shrinking, in danger of disappearing both from the public eye and from the scope of teacher preparation. Thus, I speak not as a cheerleader of teachers but as a curator who seeks to keep alive the awareness of teachers' skills and qualities that are essential to student learning.

Teaching has existed since the first humans—generously and competently—showed other humans how to hunt, build a fire, and cook food. Good teaching has always placed the learner's needs and interests first: What was beneficial to the student—hunting, fire-making, cooking, business, or medicine—defined what was right for teachers to do. Today, what is right for teachers to do is less clear. Getting information about how to teach

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well is not as readily available as one may think. Once their internships and student teaching experiences have ended, teachers seldom see, hear about, or discuss models of good and great teachers in the act of teaching. Yes, there are excellent teachers out there, yet even the general public rarely hears about them. The Royal Bank of Canada issued a bank letter on the unusual subject of "The Importance of Teaching." In it, the bank wrote that "unlike sports, politics, entertainment, the arts or the law, teaching does not give rise to 'stars.' Nobody ever got a Nobel Prize for teaching achievements. . . . School teachers, as opposed to university professors, are particularly under-recognized" (1989, p. 1). The media rarely depict capable teachers whose students are succeeding—academically and socially—despite difficult conditions in their communities. Even rarer is news about real young persons who do not bring weapons to school, young persons who are not violent, and young persons who have learned how civilized human beings behave, learning much of this from skillful, caring teachers.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND IS NOT

I do not claim that this book is an exhaustive, all-you-ever-need-to-know-about-teaching-and-learning text. Learning—and teaching—are complex processes, and this book—any book—must of necessity be limited in its scope. However, I have tried to limit the scope to *what is most essential to teaching in terms of what helps students most*. In this book I focus not only on what are *essential behaviors and attitudes* of teaching (*essential* meaning both fundamental and valuable) but also on those essentials that are *amenable to change*. In other words, I place the highest priority on helping teachers see, think about, and improve teaching behaviors *that are largely under their control* that can be improved upon. Actually, there are many similarities between the mostly effective teacher and the mostly ineffective teacher. Both give effort to teaching, both think about students, both want to be "their best teacher"—*nobody sets out to be a bad teacher*. However, mostly effective teachers differ in that they have "a sophisticated awareness of what students do and how they think, . . . a clear command of the subject domain being taught, and . . . confidence in connecting content to the experience and background of children" (Gettinger & Stoiber, 1999, p. 937). While no single book can address "command of the subject domain" (content knowledge), it is my goal to help teachers gain that awareness and gain confidence in the best ways to connect content to students' experiences. In other words, how to teach for student success.

In addition, I am intending this book to be a useful tool for teachers' professional development, recognizing that there has been a rapid

evolution in ways new and experienced teachers access professional development. Traditionally, the workshop has been the most popular format for professional development. Often led by an experienced leader or presenter who has special knowledge or expertise, workshops are typically held on teachers' inservice days, over summer or spring break, on weekends, or after school (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998, pp. 42–43). However, recently there has been a "growing interest in 'reform' types of professional development, such as study groups or mentoring and coaching" activities (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001, p. 920). Such reform activities usually take place right in school, sometimes during classroom instruction and planning time. Garet et al. (p. 921) explain that "reform types of professional development may be more likely than traditional forms to make connections with classroom teaching, and they may be easier to sustain over time . . . [and] may be more responsive to how teachers actually learn." Respected educators support the idea that reform activities may be better than other forms of professional development in terms of how successful they are in improving teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Little, 1993). Currently, elementary, middle, and secondary schools are making greater use of reform activities in their induction programs for new teachers, as well as in professional development for their more experienced teachers. These activities include mentoring, immersion, observation of peers, in-school collaborative teams, and one-to-one coaching. It is my aim that the activities, ideas, self-assessments, and information in this book be used in the context of such reform activities and that readers use the *individual and collective wisdom and experience* of their colleagues to improve their teaching methodology.

This new way of learning sound teaching methodology means that teachers should work together, plan cooperatively, take into account the needs of their students as well as the content of the curriculum, and look at different ways teachers teach, reflecting upon reasons why they were—or were not—effective. I have designed the checklists and activities in this book to be carried out in just that reflective way because it is likely that when "teachers document and analyze their own experiences," they are engaging in the most important contemporary ways of improving teaching and learning (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 174). Whether one is a beginning teacher, an experienced teacher, or a student teacher, I recommend using this book collectively with other teachers and within the context of the reform model. While the checklists and activities can be profitably done by the teacher on his or her own, they are better addressed with a partner or as part of a larger, collaborative effort within the school itself.

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A WORD ABOUT SCHOOLS

What do Americans want from their schools? Polls reveal that Americans say schools should teach students good behavior (socialization skills), how to get a job, and academics, in that order of priority (Galper, 1998). They say that, when today's students become adults, they should be able to succeed as well-informed citizens and contributing members of society. But how well do Americans think their schools are fostering and achieving those goals? According to the 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools, 26% of Americans would give public schools in the nation a grade of A or B. However, the results are quite different when Americans rate the school they know best—their local public school. In this case, 48% grade their local school as either A or B, while 68% of parents grade the public school their oldest child attends as A or B (Rose & Gallup, 2003). Thus, those who know the local schools best give public schools their highest ratings. The poll directors conclude that "the [American] public has high regard for the public schools [and] wants needed improvements to come through those schools." The vast majority want to reform our existing schools instead of finding alternatives to those schools (Rose & Gallup, p. 42).

Nonetheless, despite this poll's positive findings, public schools still suffer from bad press, probably because people pay rapt attention to trouble ("*Does your child's school have toxic air? Find out here at NewsEleven*"). Plus there's not much one can do for a school that is working well. Gerald W. Bracey said it better: "Indeed, we must recognize that good news about public schools serves no one's reform agenda" (2003, p. 621). The tendency to castigate U.S. public education is particularly unfortunate because our schools are invaluable institutions, the best places to tackle challenges our society faces, set goals for student achievement, and teach pro-social behavior. The American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth concluded that school must play a central role, and become a leading force, in efforts to prevent antisocial behavior and violence. The commission emphasized that school-based measures be taken "to help schools provide a safe environment and effective programs to prevent violence" (1993, p. 7). As institutions, schools have several advantages in achieving these goals:

- Schools are community based; thus, they can have more of an impact than either individuals or remote government offices.
- Each school is a local school, close to and within its community.
- Schools work directly with children and adolescents.

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- In terms of management, public schools are run by the public, typically an elected board.
- Schools are relatively controlled environments, and schools can provide some insulation from the world, especially valuable when that world is seen as dangerous.
- Schools are the safest of places for children and adolescents, safer than home or the neighborhood and safer than being on a bicycle or riding in an auto.
- Schools work with parents, and vice versa.
- Most of all, schools are inhabited by *people*, many of whom have the best interests of children and adolescents in mind.

Speaking of schools, the word *school* is used today as a unit of analysis, but that can be misleading. For instance, when we speak of *successful* schools and *failing* schools, we are looking at far too big a picture to make those judgments provide much meaning. In every so-called failing school are some successful students and good teachers, and in every so-called successful school are some unsuccessful students taught by not-so-good teachers. Ultimately, education reform serves students and communities best when we focus those reform efforts at the point where it really matters most: fostering good teaching for student success.

AND A WORD ABOUT TEACHERS

When I observe one of my student teachers presenting an excellent lesson, I am excited and reassured for the future. When I observe a skillful, caring teacher in action, I have hope restored.

still

A skillful, caring teacher is ^ the best resource we have to make our world a better place

American historian Henry Adams (1918) said "A teacher affects eternity." One can never tell where a teacher's influence stops. Yes, teachers are influential; we have known this since the time of the wise Buddha. But how influential is a teacher? Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond and research associate Peter Youngs reported "student achievement gains are much more influenced by a student's assigned teacher than other factors like class size and class composition" (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002, p. 13). In arguing "how to build a better teacher," public policy researcher Robert Holland (2003) writes "teachers make a profound difference in students' lives." He advocates we focus attention on improving

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teacher education and view the contributions of teachers based not on their credentials but on their students' success. Supporting this idea is University of Tennessee professor William Sanders (2003), whose controversial research shows that a teacher is more important as a predictor of student success than social indicators usually identified as explanations for student failure or success:

> We've been able to get a very fair measure of the school district, the school, and the individual classroom. And we've been able to demonstrate that ethnicity, poverty, and affluence can no longer be used as justifications for the failure [of students] to make academic progress. The single biggest factor affecting academic growth of any population of youngsters is the effectiveness of the individual classroom teacher. [Furthermore], the teacher's effect on academic growth dwarfs and nearly renders trivial all these other factors that people have historically worried about.

These are strong words. Certainly, teachers by themselves cannot compensate for the damaging effects of violence, prejudice, and lack of health care upon children, especially children in poverty. Plus, educational achievement and progress are the result of a complex number of factors. But of all the factors we can more or less control, ensuring that our teachers are skillful and caring is the most significant (and cost-effective) measure we can take. Sanders points out how particularly valuable a good teacher is for minority students, who usually start out well but then tend to fall behind as they grow through elementary and middle school. He blames this fading achievement on the broad emphasis on standardized testing, which compares children to norm groups instead of comparing them to themselves. A student's academic progress should be compared to his or her previous performance and not compared to the test scores of other, quite different students thousands of miles away. Does it strike anyone as inappropriate to contrapose the test scores of Aleut children in Alaska, Latino children in Texas, Bosnian children in Vermont, and Vietnamese children in California? What educational value could possibly be derived by applying a *one-size-fits-all* mode of comparison to these diverse children? In addition, tests used in this manner cannot possibly strengthen, verify, or inform good teaching practices.

We must keep in mind that it is not tests but teachers who are key factors in student success, and this book is my effort to highlight—to bring to the foreground—those vital skills and qualities that define good teaching. I wish to do so by helping teachers recognize not only areas of needed improvement, but areas in which teachers are doing well. By focusing on

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both what they do well and what they could be doing better, teachers can become their best teacher possible. The skills and qualities I address in this book are drawn directly from what research and practice say matters most in terms of student success. It's not what looks cool but what actually *works*.

Indeed, there is a timeless aspect to the skills and qualities of great teachers. Teachers possessed these skills and qualities in ancient Greece, during the Renaissance, in South Africa during the apartheid years, and today in the United States. After hundreds of years, thousands of innovations, and incalculable technological investment, today great teaching is still great teaching. Tomorrow great teaching will still be great teaching, because great teaching is timeless. I hope this book will help keep alive those key skills and qualities and foster conversation and professional dialogue around what makes teaching *good teaching* and what makes good teaching *great*.

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