

Are important and authentic Teachers members of our family?

By Carlo Ricci

Abstract

In this paper I would like to share an episode that happened in one of my graduate classes where we expanded the definition of teacher and therefore received a wider response to the question of who is your most important and authentic Teacher. It was interesting for me to note that only one person picked a school teacher and that of the 17 most important and authentic teachers among this groups lives 14 out of the 17 were family members.

What makes an important and authentic Teacher? In the traditional literature search on “best” (I could not find anything on important or authentic teachers that directly related to what I was interested in) teachers the focus is on schooling, probably because most think of teachers and schooling as being related. I believe that we need to expand this narrow definition of teaching in the research to allow for the definition of Teachers to include anyone and anything. In the rest of the paper I will use teacher with a small “t” to denote school teachers and Teacher with a capital “T” to denote that everything and everyone can act as a Teacher in our lives. The narrow definition of school teachers as teachers and Teachers at large may stem from our limiting the definition of education to schooling. We must challenge this definition and recognize that

education is much more than schooling, and that, as John Holt (1989) reminds us, living is learning and as we live our lives we are constantly learning.

Holt writes:

Living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would say unconscious) without constantly learning things. If we are alive we are receiving various sorts of messages from our environment all the time. (p. 157)

By extension, if living is learning, then educators should be anyone or anything that we encounter in our everyday living that we believe has educated us. So we should not talk about teachers but about Teachers.

In this paper I would like to share an episode that happened in one of my graduate classes where we expanded the definition of teacher and therefore received a wider response to the question of who is your most important and authentic Teacher.

In the research, two of the arguments that I have found surrounding what makes a best teacher are the following: The one argues that the measure of good teaching is identified by student test scores (for example, Ohio measures 2004, March) and the other argues the impossibility of the task of determining what makes a good teacher (for example, Fallon, 2003, Fall).

An article in *Professionally Speaking* titled Ohio Measures (2004, March), is an example of the former argument. It reports that,

A group of Ohio organizations, including colleges that train teachers and the state's department of education, is launching a study that will try to identify what makes a good teacher.

The Ohio Partnership for Accountability is conducting a five-year study of teachers and the English and math scores of their students. The study will compare the teaching techniques of 25,000 recent graduates and experienced teachers to those currently being taught in teacher education programs.

The aim is to determine what works in producing good teachers and what does not.

The study will use a formula developed by University of Tennessee professor William Sanders that assesses schools and teachers in terms of improved test scores of their students.

As an example of the latter argument Fallon (2003) writes:

This is a standard form of research, and it can yield useful data for some purposes, but it obscures the observation of individuals and makes practically impossible the detection of differences in quality of teaching, good or bad. (p. 488)

Both are problematic, as far as I am concerned. I have written extensively on the problems of standardized testing (Ricci 2004, Winter; Ricci 2004, Fall ; Ricci 2004, October-December; Ricci, 2005, Summer; Ricci & Taylor, 2005, May) and using this flawed measure to determine a best teacher is misleading us. As for the impossibility of the task, I believe that individuals intuitively know who has been their greatest Teacher and so by asking them we can get a good sense for what good teaching is. In this study I stop short of this and simply reveal who are our greatest Teachers. If I had to do this again, I would be better prepared by recording why these people felt that the teachers

they identified were so great. Since the study came about spontaneously in a classroom setting I was unable to do this.

The class where this information revealed itself was a graduate holistic education course that I teach at Nipissing University. The course was held at the Brantford, Ontario campus. There were 13 people in the class, 4 males and 9 females. Throughout the course we challenged the myths and assumptions made popular by mainstream schooling. One of the conclusions we reached is that there is a difference between schooling and education and there was a consensus with Holt's notion that living is learning.

During a class presentation one of the students asked the others to think about whom the most important and authentic teacher they have ever had is. I thought it would be a good idea for us to share this information with others. As the class revealed who these people were I recorded their responses, but not their reasons for picking these Teachers. I do recall that their reasons were very sound, but I do not recall too much of the specifics and so I will report only what I know for sure to have happened.

I believe that the realization that living is learning allowed us to think beyond schooling when we considered who our most important and authentic Teacher is. These are the results:

Grandfather	Missionary	Life	Mother	Niece	Father	Children	Pets	School teacher	parents
1	1	1	1	1	5	4	1	1	1

The first thing you may notice is that there were 13 people in the class and the totals add up to 17. That is because some people could not pick just one and so they decided to

name more than one. In these cases I just jotted the names down and placed them in their appropriate categories. Specifically, one person picked her father and her niece; another picked her parents and son; another picked his son and grandfather; and another picked his dad and his dog. It was interesting for me to note that only one person picked a school teacher and that of the 17 most important and authentic teachers among this groups lives 14 out of the 17 were family members. As an unschooling advocate this information reinforces, for me, the value in having children spend time away from schools and with their families.

The person who picked his dog also challenges and inspires us to think of Teachers as being not only beyond school teachers but beyond humans. This is a very holistic and valuable way of viewing life and the mystery behind learning and important and authentic Teachers. We must recognize that everything and nothing can be our Teacher.

One student felt that she could not just pick one person, place or thing and so she ultimately decided to categorize her Teacher as “life.” This I think is also an important point about the limits of such a simplistic categorization and raises phenomenological questions in my mind about whether these same people would pick the same person at a different time and whether if they were given more time would they have picked more than one Teacher in the same way that some already felt compelled to do.

In conclusion, recently, I was at an introduction to a kindergarten session where parents and students had an opportunity to meet their teacher and see the classroom where the children will be attending the following school year. During the teacher’s remarks to the parents, she advised parents to spend less time with their children so that

the children can learn to be without them. I hope that this mini-study will at least get us to rethink and reinvestigate the importance of everything, in particular family members, as legitimate Teachers. I recognize that not all home environments are healthy places for children, and unfortunately we all have heard too many stories about these situations, personally or through the media. At this point I want to share with you one reason why I believe unschooling to be such a valuable option for how children ought to be raised. I am against spaces where children are oppressed and I believe that unschooling is a space where children's voices matter. I am against any system that oppresses children whether it is in the home or in an institutional setting. So, for those whose home environments are not ideal I believe that free schools are a positive alternative. In this sense, I am not against schooling, but against children's oppression. I think it is possible to determine what makes a good Teacher and being an important entity in your life and being authentic, I believe, are a part of the criteria. Once education is viewed as being beyond schooling then the empowering realization that learning and Teachers are everywhere becomes liberating.

References

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