

Teaching children isn't easy: It takes a lot more than most of us realize

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Few fields of work have the extreme complexity of education.

Summary

- *The profession requires the development of capacities that go far beyond just technical expertise. In many ways, it is uniquely demanding.*

The ruins of the fortress were a couple of kilometres away. The class had returned from a history walk there. The teacher gave bananas, which she had got from her home, to the students before starting the walk in the morning. She knew that many would be hungry. She gave more to the kids whom she suspected would not even have had dinner the previous night.

Shepherding nearly two dozen 13-year-olds on this adventure was hard but fun. Back now in the classroom, she planned to spend the next hour discussing the adventure, and with that teach some fundamentals of history. How is history written? What are the different sources of history and how to observe and interpret them? After this session, she was planning to introduce these Grade 7 students to the Constitution; she had extra time for social science as the science teacher was on leave.

For a clear view of each, she got them to sit in a semi-circle. Skilfully, she ensured that the over-eager ones did not dominate the class, encouraged the unsure ones, avoided putting pressure on those who were diffident, and controlled the attention of those who were drifting away.

This was just another day in her role as a teacher. Most other days would not have this kind of excitement. Nevertheless, each day was an adventure that she had to create and handle with similar sensitivity for each child, and then use that for teaching.

This episode brings to life the three kinds of capacities that a teacher's role requires. First, technical capacities, which are about an understanding of the subject (in this case, history) and its methods. A good grasp of the content and the subject's methods is essential to teach that subject. Also, the teacher must know appropriate methods of teaching, usually called pedagogy.

Second are social-human capacities. Understanding each child: what she is like as a person; what excites and bores her; her fears and comforts; and relationships in and outside the class. Beyond that, what the child may be thinking and feeling; where her attention is; and whether she is learning at all. Which children get along and which don't. And how to manage each child and the class in a way that ensures their attention is guided towards learning.

Third are operational capacities. How do you arrange the class; how do you get or develop learning material; how to ensure that the work of the class and the school adheres to the timetable. How do you balance the multiple demands made on your time in school. How do you manage small and big emergencies that happen every other day. To perform, a teacher needs all three kinds of capacities. It's a complex role.

Almost every field of work needs these three kinds of capacities, although in different proportions. The mix depends on the nature of the work in that field. This nature becomes clear when we examine the role of the person on the front-line of work in that field.

A teacher is on the front-line of education, just as a software coder is on the front-line of the IT world. It must be amply clear that the role of a software coder requires few operational and social-human capacities; perhaps just enough to work in a team. The core nature of the software industry is such that technical capacities are paramount.

It's useful to consider only the front-line for this kind of examination because as you go higher up in any organizational hierarchy, managing people becomes an important aspect. However, that does not change the underlying or core nature of the work.

Take the example of a physician, who requires significant technical capacities and some social-human capacities to be able to deal with patients and their relatives. But the requirement of operational capacities in the front-line physician's role is minimal.

Few fields of work have the extreme complexity of education that arises from the requirement of all three kinds of capacities in significant measure. Particularly because the requirement of social-human capacities implies the need to deal with significant variability and unpredictability.

This is because people, both as individuals and in groups, tend to be unpredictable and display variable behaviour. The front-line politician's role is similarly complex because that too requires social-human and operational capacities in ample measure, though the typical politician does not require technical capacities of the level a teacher must have.

This inherent nature of each field has profound implications. While technical matters can be codified into knowledge, which can be taught and used, it is very hard to do so for social-human and operational stuff; particularly through our standard 'classroom'-based model of education. These capacities are most required on the front-line, which we usually under-invest in, thinking of them as being at the bottom of the hierarchy. But even with the best of capacities, it's hard to do anything consistently in such fields.

Put these together and they form a significant part of the reason why it is very difficult to change systems in fields that require all three capacities together, particularly those demanding social-human and operational capacities. Could our education system help us confront this challenge? We will explore that in the next few columns.

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