The New Heroes of Teaching

Identifying a few excellent teachers and hoping others will copy their methods has not improved teaching in the average American classroom.

By James Hiebert, Ronald Gallimore, & James W. Stigler

At a recent meeting of mathematics teachers and educators in Wilmington, Del., an 8th grade math teacher named Crystal Lancour was introduced to enthusiastic cheers and heartfelt applause. Had she won an award? Had her students accomplished something special? No, nothing like that. Then what prompted the applause? The answer to this question takes a little time, but is worth telling because it opens a new pathway for teacher learning—a path that might in time change the face of classroom teaching in the United States, if the country is wise enough to take it.

The story begins with a bit of history. Traditionally, classroom teaching in the United States has been viewed as a personal skill, invented and refined by each teacher during his or her career. Good teaching is considered to be the result of each teacher's doing his or her job behind the classroom door. Good teaching is believed to be idiosyncratic, depending on individual style and personality. To improve teaching, many say, the profession must find better teachers. Celebrity teachers, such as Jaime Escalante, are held up as models of what's possible and are hailed as heroes of the profession. The trouble is that most students do not have Jaime Escalante as a teacher, and more Escalantes are hard to find.

Identifying a few excellent teachers and hoping others will copy their methods has not improved teaching in the average American classroom. Teaching, as most students experience it, has not changed for decades. Why? Because the average classroom is not affected much by what the few celebrity teachers do. To make a dent in the learning experiences for most students, educators must find a way to improve the quality of instruction in the average classroom. Even slight improvements in the average classroom, accumulated over time, would have a more profound effect on students around the country than recruiting a hundred more Escalantes into the classroom.

To achieve small and continuing improvements in the average classroom requires a major shift in educators' thinking—from teachers to teaching. Rather than focusing only on evaluating the quality of teachers, the educational community must begin examining the quality of teaching. What kinds of
Methods are teachers using now and how could these methods be improved? Tackling this deep-seated problem begins with opening the classroom door. The process starts by learning to analyze the details of ordinary classroom instruction, with all its warts and foibles, and then learning to see more effective ways of teaching. But to do this, to even begin down this path, teachers must be willing to open their doors. They must be willing to allow others to use their lessons as data that can be examined and discussed over and over.

More than 600 math teachers from seven countries have done just this. Chosen at random (not because of their teaching abilities), these teachers agreed to be videotaped for the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS, 1999 video study, the results of which were released this year. The study documented what ordinary or typical mathematics lessons look like in each country. It did not try to find the best teachers, because the goal was to provide a portrait of the kind of teaching that most students experience in each country. There was to be nothing special about the filmed lessons—no special preparation, no special materials—because the lessons were to typify the way in which teachers in each country teach mathematics at the 8th grade level. The teachers were promised anonymity: Only researchers would see their videotaped lessons.

Following the taping of these 600-plus lessons for the research project, four teachers in each country went even further: They agreed to have their videotaped lessons made available to the public. These lessons would be posted on the Internet and included on a CD-ROM that could be ordered at cost. The lessons would be shown around the country as educators interpreted the results from the TIMSS 1999 Video Study of Mathematics Teaching. Many teachers are reluctant even for the teachers next door to come into their classrooms and observe their lessons, much less open their classrooms to anyone who wants to watch. These teachers whose lessons were publicly released displayed exceptional professional courage by allowing the videos to be circulated and discussed around the world.

The meeting in Wilmington, with which the story began, was taking advantage of the professional-development opportunities provided by these new heroes of the teaching profession. The meeting was organized to introduce participants to the results of the TIMSS video study, and to give them an opportunity to spend two days studying examples of typical lessons from various countries—the lessons that were publicly released.

Some of the participants were skeptical at first about the value of analyzing ordinary lessons. Why not analyze exemplary lessons instead? But by midafternoon of the first day, many participants were convinced that much can be learned by analyzing ordinary teaching, studying how missed learning opportunities can be saved, how students can be helped to connect key concepts, and how small successes can be strengthened by altering the methods that are used.

During a break in the afternoon session, the participants were informed that in the audience was one of the U.S. teachers who had released one of her ordinary daily lessons for public use—just like the videos the meeting participants had been collectively analyzing and discussing that day. There was an audible gasp and immediate, spontaneous, and expectant applause—as if a celebrity were about
to be introduced.

A second round of even louder applause greeted Crystal Lancour as she was introduced by name and stood to acknowledge the audience's appreciation. Clearly, those assembled were not applauding the lesson Ms. Lancour had taught. They had not seen her lesson. They were applauding her courage in allowing others to view the lesson as a means of improving their own mathematics teaching. This audience, at least, had come to understand the importance of her contribution to the profession.

Teachers and educators around the country are beginning to see that the goal of improving teaching—improving students' opportunities to learn—can only be reached by a path that the United States has never taken before. This new path moves educators away from a view of teaching as a solitary activity, owned personally by each teacher. It moves them toward a view of teaching as a professional activity open to collective observations, study, and improvement. It invites ordinary teachers to recognize and accept the responsibility for improving not only their own practice, but the shared practice of the profession. For this new path to be traveled, however, teachers will need to open their classroom doors and, rather than evaluating each other, begin studying their practices as a professional responsibility common to all. In short, it will require more teachers like Crystal Lancour.

Taking this new path also means a change in the culture of the wider educational community. It requires educators, parents, and policymakers to support and maintain this new pathway to improved teaching by respecting teachers brave enough to open their classroom doors. Petty nitpicking and ad hominem criticism of typical classroom lessons must give way to serious professional analysis for purposes of improving everyone's teaching.

If not a celebrity, Crystal Lancour surely is a pioneer and a new kind of heroic teacher in what just might become an overdue change in how America goes about improving the heart of its educational system—classroom teaching.

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