An Interview with Mary Kennedy: About Teacher Training in the Year 2006
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MARY M. KENNEDY is a professor at Michigan State University. Her scholarship focuses on the relationship between knowledge and teaching practice, on the nature of knowledge used in teaching practice, and on how research knowledge and policy initiatives can improve practice. From 1986-1994 she directed the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. She has published three books addressing the relationship between knowledge and teaching and has won five awards for her work, most recently the prestigious Margaret B. Lindsey award for outstanding research in Teacher Education. Her most recent book, Inside teaching: How classroom life undermines reform, directly addresses the problems teachers have accommodating reform ideas in their practice. Kennedy has consulted with four ministries of education, the World Bank, and a host of national organizations and has published numerous articles on teaching, research and policy.

1. What are you currently writing, or researching?

I've actually been reviewing existing literature lately. I've been looking at literature on the contribution of teachers' educational backgrounds to the quality of their teaching practice, and in the Fall I will start looking at strategies researchers have used to try to describe and document teaching quality.

I've also been thinking a lot about what constitutes quality in teaching. We have so many different kinds of expectations for teachers-to be nurturing, to foster intellectual engagement, to be cultural sensitivity, to be productive, and so forth. I've sorted these ideas into four general dimensions to teacher quality: Knowledge (which includes both content and pedagogy), beliefs and values, actual classroom practices, and impact on student learning. I'm interested in seeing what we know about each of these and how they influence one another.

2. The perennial debate is whether teachers should know their subject matter, or be trained in pedagogy and teaching strategies. Briefly, what are your main views?

In my review of the literature, I have found empirical evidence that courses in each of these areas ultimately contributes to student learning. However, each area also has a limit to its usefulness. After some number of courses, additional courses add no further value. There isn't enough literature to say where that point is, what the magic number is, but it's pretty clear that after some point, more isn't better. And that seems to be true for content knowledge as well as for pedagogy.

3. Librarians are trained to deal with information sciences and books and journals, Lawyers are educated to practice law, engineers to construct building and bridges. However, teachers are entrusted with the minds and the growing spirits of children. How should teachers be taught given their charge of educating kids?

Well, you've put your finger on a central problem in teacher education. We try to "professionalize" it by focusing on knowledge and skills, but we all know that personal character is important, that cultural sensitivity is important, that warmth is important-that ultimately, teachers must be the day-time parents, with all the things that parenting entails. Universities can't "flunk" students because they lack interpersonal skills, but most programs do try to persuade such students that this might not be the best career for them. And schools use their hiring interviews to try to assess teachers' personal qualities once we've given them the Official Credentials they need.
4. Many teachers enter teaching to instruct nice normal well-adjusted average children. However, in the classroom they are confronted with children who may be autistic, have speech/language problems, adolescents with emotional and psychiatric problems, students with visual or hearing impairments and other exceptionalities. Is there a kind of "culture shock" that teachers encounter nowadays?

Indeed there is, but interestingly, culture shock is not unique to teaching. You can find it in other fields too. There is evidence of it in nursing, for instance, and even in law. I suspect it occurs in any field that people enter for naïve and idealistic reasons. Certainly teaching is one of those fields.

5. In your writings, you refer to "codified knowledge". What do you mean by this?

I use that phrase to refer to all the knowledge that is held in books and articles, written down and stored. In that sense it is codified, and the puzzle for me is how teachers can translate all of that into action strategies that would make a difference in their classrooms. Knowing about photosynthesis, for instance, doesn't mean you can talk about it with a second grader. Knowing that kids respond to rewards doesn't tell you which rewards, and how often, for Johnny.

6. Can't teachers learn to teach just by doing it? That's how we all learn to be parents. Isn't a lot of it learned in the doing?

I think the biggest problem in learning to teach is that there are too many things going on at one time. There are kids, and they want to socialize with one another. There is the content and it is abstract. Then there is a clock and a schedule, and there are materials-books, papers, materials needed for often projects, displays on the walls, objects you plan to use to demonstrate something. You need to keep track of where all that stuff is and make sure it is there when you need it. And there are social norms too to attend to also. And the teacher has things going inside her-personal hopes and fears, anxieties, and so forth.

So, when you teach, you're trying to pay attention to all those things at once and it can be overwhelming. When you are placed in situations like this, you learn how to solve problems expeditiously, but not necessarily well. When things get out of hand, I discover that I can scream at students to SHUT UP! And it works. They do shut up. So I depend on that strategy again in the future. But this is a short term solution to the problem when a longer term solution is needed. It's not an educative strategy, it's a survival strategy. That is what we all learn by doing: Survival.

7. There are those who believe that teacher training should be done IN THE SCHOOLS, not in "the ivory towers of academia". What is your belief in this regard?

In an ideal world, this would be a terrific idea. Work in schools would make it immediately apparent who has the personal qualities that are needed; it would give those who came with naïve expectations an opportunity to change their minds before investing heavily in this career, and it would enable teachers to find ways of balancing all the myriad concerns they need to attend to as teachers.

But schools are a big part of the problem we face in education. They are governed by locally-elected boards whose agendas shift over time and aren't always about education per se. There is very high turnover in superintendents. There are uncertain budgets almost every year. Schools are amazingly disorganized and fragmented places. As it is, they aren't able to provide teachers with the kind of stable and dependable work environment that would foster intellectually coherent work. They are in no position to add to their burdens the task of helping novices figure this profession out.
8. Teachers are generally quite serious professionals. Yet with the emphasis on high stakes testing and annual yearly progress, it seems that their integrity is being questioned. Am I off base on this?

Most really are dedicated and are very conscientious. They spend a lot of their evening hours developing materials for the next day or reading and grading student papers. They worry about their kids and are always seeking new approaches to their problems.

The problem is, most of their problems are really hard problems. How do you explain subtle and complicated concepts like photosynthesis or division by fractions? How do get kids to learn complicated ideas like that when one of them is missing every third day and another is disrupting the conversation every other day? Most people think they could do a better job than the teachers they see in their local schools, but they only think that because they haven't tried it.

Tests aren't always bad. They help teachers by letting them know what the outcomes should be, what they should strive for. I am not sure of the wisdom of using them as motivators though, because that implies that teachers secretly know how to do better, but are simply lazy or unmotivated. I don't think that is true.

10. Teachers are increasingly being confronted with computers, the Internet and iPods and other devices. Not all teachers have been trained to cope with these devices or to use them appropriately. This makes for some chaos in our schools. How can teachers be continually brought up to speed so to speak in this environment?

Most states now have technology requirements for teachers, so they may be better prepared than you think at the time they graduate. But that doesn't mean they will embrace technology or use it in clever ways in their classrooms. As I said earlier, they already have a lot to keep track of and when technology doesn't work, it can create a major league problem for a teacher who is already harried, behind and confused by all the things she is trying to keep track of. I suspect teachers avoid it because it simply adds to their burdens, not because they don't understand it.