

Educator Discussion Guide

The INFLUENCE of TEACHERS by John Merrow

The Influence of Teachers is a great resource for professional development. Here are some starting points for discussion:

Chapter One

The Influence of Teachers

"The teaching mission is complex and difficult, and yet oh-so-vital. Teachers can never declare "Mission Accomplished," because they are a bridge, not an endpoint, for all the boys and girls (and men and women) who come into their lives. Their involvement doesn't begin or end at the classroom door."(Page 21)

1. Can you think of a teacher that had a special influence on your life? What made that teacher special?
2. Have you had a 'Sandy' in your life – a student that you knew faced especially difficult challenges at home? How did you respond to that?
3. How have you had an impact on your students?

Chapter Two

Learning to Read

"Children don't learn to walk just so they can walk in place; they want to be able to get somewhere more efficiently. So too with reading; children want to learn to read so they can make sense of the world around them. Good teachers capitalize on that intrinsic motivation and teach children the many strategies they need to read with understanding, of which decoding is only a part." (Page 30)

1. How does your district approach reading? When do you expect your students to be literate?
2. Should we have national goals for literacy, and, if so, what should they be?
3. How can you instill a lifelong love of learning in your students?

Chapter Three

Learning to Teach

"It may well be that Teach For America's greatest contribution to education will not be the kids who are helped or the talented young men and women who develop a connection with and affection for public education, but its relentless self-examination – a process that quite simply puts the rest of teacher education to shame."(Page 35)

1. To what extent is classroom teaching a skill? How long does it take to learn those skills and is there a best way to learn them?
2. What experiences have you had with Teach for America or other 'alternative' certification programs?

Chapter Four

Serious Fun?

In excellent schools, the adults know the students in the building and approach them with respect. School is seen as a shared enterprise, with students as partners in that enterprise. Not equal partners of course, because roles and obligations are different, but students in excellent schools are not objects to be manipulated or watched. Instead they are searchers, questioners who share in creating knowledge. Meaningful learning is serious fun." (Page 47)

1. What does 'meet kids where they are' mean to you? Are you encouraged to do so in your school?
2. How could your school/ community allow you to do this more effectively?
3. Is your school a safe place to make mistakes?

Chapter Five

Evaluating Teachers

"In my experience, most teachers are not afraid of being evaluated. But what do they want? Conversations with teachers over the years suggest that, above all, they want to work in an environment that respects their professionalism and allows and encourages them to improve." (Page 71)

1. How should teachers be evaluated? How much should classroom performance be a factor? How should student test scores be taken into account?
2. What do you think of Toledo's PAR system? How would you feel about evaluating—and being evaluated by—your peers?
3. Should student performance and teacher info be public information, as it was in the *LA Times* incident?

Chapter Six

Paying Teachers

"Complications aside, the tide seems to be moving inexorably toward connecting the dots between teacher pay and student performance. What we don't know yet is what form this will take." (Page 75)

1. Should teachers lose their jobs based on student performance?
2. Would a merit pay system affect the way you teach? Why or why not?

3. In your opinion, how should the system change?

Chapter Seven

Keeping Teachers

"Where persistent shortages exist, these are generally self-inflicted wounds which fall into three categories: Schools underpay and mistreat teachers and eventually drive them from the profession; inept school districts cannot find the qualified teachers living under their noses; and substandard training ill-prepares young men and women for the realities of classroom life."(Page 80)

1. Have you come close to leaving teaching? Why did you stay?
2. What was your teacher training experience like?
3. Does your school have a recruitment/retention problem?

Chapter Eight

Who Needs Tenure? Why Seniority?

"In my conversations about public education, tenure is always the hot button issue, which may explain the statements from union leaders that lead this chapter. Perhaps they are trying to defuse the volatility. Good luck with that, because the heart of the matter is not tenure itself but the difficulty of removing incompetent teachers, men and women who should never have been granted tenure in the first place." (Page 89)

1. Who is in charge of the hiring in your school?
2. Have you ever had to teach out-of-field? If so, how was it? If not, do you know others who have?
3. How do you feel about your union? Does it protect teachers at the expense of kids?

Chapter Nine

Leadership's Revolving Door

"Typically, a new superintendent arrives in a city and is hailed as the answer to every problem: low scores, poor attendance, and embarrassing graduation rates. He creates some new (or new-sounding) programs. When change does not occur overnight, disappointment sets in. The superintendent departs for a new city, and the cycle begins anew. Instead of producing candidates with the hard-eyed management skills and single-minded concentration needed to figure out how best to teach kids, the search process gives these school systems more of the same."(Page 100)

1. What is your experience with school superintendents? Have you witnessed a high turnover rate in your district?
2. How would a more diverse hiring system change education?

3. According to Bill Roberti, educators cannot be trusted to fix their own school systems. Do you agree with this statement?

Chapter Ten

Following Leaders

"Whatever else he may accomplish in New Orleans, Paul Vallas is likely to be remembered – and mostly celebrated – for his enthusiastic embrace of charter schools. On his watch, the Recovery School District has become the most heavily chartered district in the nation, and Vallas predicts that before he leaves every school will either have a charter or be what he calls "charter-like," meaning that most of the authority rests at the school level." (Page 127)

"Michelle Rhee won a major victory, both in Washington and nationally. Simply put, she reframed the debate about how teachers are paid. Largely because of her, it's no longer possible to argue convincingly that teachers, whether effective or not, should be paid based on their years on the job and graduate credits earned. Largely because of her, it's impossible not to recognize the absurdity of the current system."(Page 132)

1. Does your school "try to compensate for what's missing at home?" What is a teacher's responsibility in doing this?
2. Do you think underperforming schools should be closed, as they were in DC?
3. What do you think about New Orleans' system of charter schools? Is this a good model for the country?
4. Compare Paul Vallas and Michelle Rhee. Whose model of reform is more sustainable?

Chapter Eleven

The School Turnaround Specialist

"In its never-ending search for quick, preferably inexpensive cures, public education has latched onto the notion of the Turnaround Specialist...Virginia's turnaround program is unabashedly pro-business, emphasizing the techniques of good management and the bottom line of test scores over pedagogy. As its website notes, those chosen for the program receive "the type of executive education typically received only by top-level business leaders."(Page 136)

1. Parker Land initially said, "So much of misbehavior is a result of teachers just being poorly planned." To what extent do you agree with this?
2. Is 'solid rules, solid consequences, solid rewards' a better approach?
3. What are some ways that your school deals with misbehavior?
4. Do you feel that a 'business' education can be beneficial for reforming schools?

Chapter Twelve

Education's Four Gaps

"There's no silver bullet in education. The recipe for success includes some mix of strong leadership, committed teachers, an integrated curriculum, the willingness to challenge conventional wisdom and accepted practices, and the moral imperative to care for and about all of our children. Real change requires real change."(Page 154)

1. Does your district over-emphasize the 'achievement gap' to the detriment of other 'gaps'? How do you aim to motivate all students, regardless of background?
2. What is the leadership in your school like? Do you have opportunities to 'learn from the best'?

Chapter Thirteen

Making Schools Safe

"Schools spend hundreds of millions of dollars trying to ensure the physical safety of their students... This effort and commitment is laudable, and physical safety is important, but the real issue – the underlying one that paves the way for physical violence and for some victimized children to take their own lives to escape bullying – is emotional safety. That's what adults need to pay attention to. And that's where adults are really failing." (Page 156)

1. What are some ways to identify a student that's been bullied?
2. What steps do you take to create a safe environment? What is a teacher's responsibility in doing so?
3. Do you think extensive school codes of conduct help stop bullying? Why or why not?

Chapter Fourteen

Charter Schools

"Never forget that the word 'charter' on a schoolhouse door reveals no more about a school's quality than the word 'restaurant' on a sign tells you about the food inside. There's no substitute for transparency, high standards and direct observation."(Page 176)

1. How do you feel about charter schools? Do you have any in your community? How do they fit in?

Conclusion

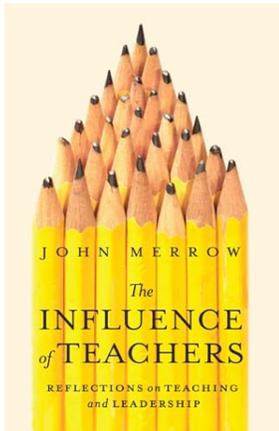
"Are mediocre teachers the heart of education's problems? Or is it the job itself, with its low pay and even lower prestige? Those two very different analyses of education's problem are competing for domination, and whoever gets to define the problem is likely to control education policies for many years."(Page 177)

1. How do you feel about the better people/better jobs debate?

2. How does your school administration motivate teachers?
3. What do you think has to be done to make teaching a better job? What needs to be done to attract better people? Are these the same things?
4. The argument of the book is that public schools are outmoded. Do you agree? How can they change to reflect the changed world?

Bonus Question

What is microfiche anyway?



ABOUT *THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS*

The Influence of Teachers is John Merrow's fourth book, and has been deemed 'invaluable,' 'terrific,' and a 'must-read' by some of America's most influential educational leaders. Drawing on John's 30 years of experience covering education for PBS and NPR, the book is a warm look at the current state of today's schools, filled with anecdotes from his experience in the field.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Merrow is the education correspondent for PBS *NewsHour* and President of Learning Matters, Inc. His many accomplishments include two George Foster Peabody Awards, three Emmy nominations, and dozens of awards from the Education Writers Association.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER



LM Books is a division of Learning Matters, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit media production company based in New York, and all proceeds from *The Influence of Teachers* go directly to Learning Matters. For more about Learning Matters, visit www.learningmatters.tv.