

What makes great teaching?

A Cambridge Education synthesis of the global research and frontline experience from over 25 years of helping teachers to be great all around the world.

1.

High expectations for all

Great teaching starts with great teachers who have high expectations of every learner in their classroom and believe that every child can learn and excel. The teacher must work diligently towards that end. Educators' core beliefs and biases can make or break their students' futures.

They create a classroom that is constantly demanding more, but still recognising students' self-worth. This also involves attributing student success to effort rather than ability and valuing resilience to failure.

Teachers have the same academic, technical or vocational ambitions for almost all learners. Where this is not practical – for example, for some learners with high levels of special educational needs – the curriculum is still designed to be ambitious and to meet their needs.

2.

Rigour and relevance in the curriculum

Content is cognitively engaging and intellectually challenging to students as they apply essential concepts to real world, culturally relevant situations. This provides students with meaning, while using situations that mean something to them.

Lessons are interesting, relevant to students' lives by use of examples from the local environment and cover teaching from simple to complex concepts.

The curriculum delivered is coherently planned and sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills for future success. Over the course of study, teaching is designed to help learners to remember in the long term the content they have been taught and to integrate new knowledge into larger conceptual frameworks.

3.

Content knowledge and a passion to share it

Educators must master their content and teach it with passion. The more passion planted into instruction, the greater these seeds will blossom and bear fruit. Teachers should skilfully engage and empower students to learn. First-hand classroom observation across major reform programmes shows a key difference between classrooms where students are passive recipients of facts and knowledge compared to those classrooms in which students are actively engaged.

The most effective teachers have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, and when teachers' knowledge falls below a certain level, it is a significant impediment to students' learning. As well as a strong understanding of the material being taught, teachers must also understand the ways students think about the content, be able to evaluate the thinking behind students' own methods and identify students' common misconceptions.

4.

Collective teacher efficacy and professional learning

There is a collective efficacy – the belief that teachers working collaboratively can make a positive impact on student outcomes, through building their capacity, reflecting on their practice, and learning with and from each other.

Teachers learn from action research and knowledge of evidence-based findings in education. High performing systems implement improvement cycles that are built on inquiry processes which provide data-driven and robust approaches to teacher collaboration.

Teachers are active in learning from and with each other in a focused, disciplined manner. This professional learning is built into daily practice – exemplified by the teacher who is continuously looking into and reflecting on their own teaching practice.

Teachers work collaboratively with co-teachers and school leaders to improve their teaching, including being open to opportunities for peer observation and taking in feedback.

5.

Quality of instruction

The quality of instruction begins with lesson (and assessment) planning. A clear focus for the lesson ensures students know what they are expected to learn.

Teachers present subject matter clearly, promoting appropriate discussion about the subject matter they are teaching. They check learners' understanding systematically, identify misconceptions accurately and provide clear, direct feedback. A teacher with pedagogical knowledge of approaches, methods and techniques of teaching puts the learners' outcomes at the centre of their practice. Great teaching provides the opportunity for:

- Challenge and real-life problem-solving situations
- Learning in which teachers and students work together
- Opportunities for students to work co-operatively with peers
- Continuous assessment and feedback to learners

True equity in the classroom is not providing all students with the same thing but providing each student with what they need to be successful in reaching their full potential, requiring effective use of assessment to inform lessons and to plan appropriately. Teachers should know each and every student and where they are in their learning journey.

6.

Creating a positive environment

Teachers create an environment that allows the learner to focus on learning. A teacher's abilities to make efficient use of lesson time, to co-ordinate classroom resources and space, and to manage students' behaviour with clear rules that are consistently enforced, are all relevant to maximising the learning that can take place.

This requires the ability to foster positive relationships with students and to create a community of learners where errors are part of the learning process and students feel safe to express ideas with peers and the teacher. Great teaching can build students' self-efficacy through their expressed belief in the students' abilities and through praise and encouragement.

References and further reading

1. Coe R, Aloisi C, Higgins S et al. (2014) What makes great teaching? Review of the underpinning research. Sutton Trust, October 2014. London: Sutton Trust.
2. Hattie, J. (2008). Visible Learning. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge
3. What other countries can learn from Singapore's schools (2018). The Economist, August 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com>