



Guiding Questions

- How do the five professional commitments in this book help you think about a career in teaching?
- How does reflecting on your own teaching help you improve your teaching?
- What are the rewards of a career in teaching?
- What are the demands and challenges of a career in teaching?
- What are the standards for good beginning teachers, and how do they influence learning to teach?
- How do you decide if teaching is for you?
- What kind of teacher do you really want to be?

Teaching: A Career That Makes a Difference

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Years after they have left school, students may forget specific lessons, but they will remember their teachers. They remember their teachers' names either because their experiences in those classrooms were good or, unfortunately, because their experiences were bad. Sometimes a teacher who seemed strict and harsh at the time may, over the years, be recalled with respect and admiration. For some students, a teacher is remembered as the person who turned their lives around completely. Whatever the situation, the influence teachers have on their students is long lasting and frequently it is profound.

The premise of this book is a simple one: *Good teaching makes a difference in the lives of children and youth.* Students spend six or more hours a day, five days a week, in classrooms with their teachers. It is within these classrooms that students are challenged and motivated, where they can begin to believe in the possibilities of their futures, and where they gain the knowledge and skills to pursue their dreams. When teachers do their jobs well, students from all life circumstances, in every community, attain the potential to thrive and grow and *learn*. When teachers do not do their jobs well, students irrevocably lose the opportunity school can offer for impacting their individual lives positively. The day-to-day choices and judgments teachers make directly affect the quality of learning that takes place—and so, the very lives of their students. In other words, good teaching matters, and it matters a great deal.

It is precisely because teaching matters so much that your decision to choose teaching as a profession is such a significant one. Once you make the commitment to teach, you are, in essence, making the commitment to take responsibility for the quality of the experiences each of your students will have in your classroom over the entire life of your career—for hundreds, maybe even thousands of students.

But what does it mean to *learn* to teach? What is it like to be in a classroom every day as the teacher, and how do you go about the work of making every day count for your students? What are you expected to know and be able to do as a beginning teacher, at the start of your career? How will you develop your abilities as a teacher so that you can assume your professional responsibilities with self-assurance and

The purpose of education, as many have seen it, is to open the way, as the young become empowered with the skills they need and the sensitivities they require in order to be human—to create themselves and to survive.

Maxine Greene, 1978, p. 85

ensure that your students are growing and learning? What kinds of choices are you expected to make as a teacher, and what will guide you as you make these choices?

The purpose of this book is to help you begin to understand what it means to learn to teach. In so doing, you will have the opportunity to learn more about the teaching profession, consider some of the most basic issues that confront the field of education today, and make a more informed decision about your potential career. More importantly, this book is designed to help you think about the real situations teachers encounter every day, the real choices teachers make, the real consequences for students, and the real differences teachers make in their students' lives.

Five Professional Commitments to Guide the Choices You Make

Teachers make deliberate choices about the kinds of classrooms they create and in so doing, the kinds of experiences their students will have. The choices *you* make regarding your students, your classroom, and your place in the larger school, district, and community in which you will teach all have implications for the kind of teacher you will become—and for how you will be remembered. The idea of making choices as a teacher and taking responsibility for the consequences of those choices is a central theme of this book. Teachers certainly do not have complete control over what happens in school or over their students outside of school. Nor do they have control over certain requirements that must be met. But all teachers do have a great deal of control over what happens every day in their individual classrooms and the kind of roles they themselves play within the school, the district, and the community.

This book is organized around five professional commitments that, taken together, are essential if teachers are going to make a difference in the lives of



As a teacher, what will you do to make a difference in the lives of your students?
(Monkey Business/Adobe Stock Photos)

students. Within each of these commitments (see in Table 1-1), teachers make choices that affect the students they teach. These are enduring issues for teachers, and if you become a teacher, throughout your career various aspects of these five commitments will be part of your decision-making.

Table 1-1 Five Professional Commitments for Teaching

These five commitments represent career-long challenges for teachers and are areas for ongoing professional growth and learning.

Professional Commitment	Why It Matters
Learning from multiple sources of knowledge throughout your career	Teachers do not finish learning when they complete their teacher education programs. They go on learning from reflecting on their own practice, from their students, and from working with other teachers—but only if they are open to learning and improvement as a career-long commitment.
Using the curriculum responsibly	The curriculum is not a static set of documents that teachers follow blindly. Within curriculum documents that exist in any state or district that provide guidance to teachers, teachers themselves make choices about how they enact the curriculum within the classroom to meet the needs of their own students.
Practicing equity-minded teaching	Teachers are charged with creating classrooms where every student can thrive. Practicing equity-minded teaching means supporting all of the children and youth in their care—by checking any prior assumptions they may have about which students in the class can and cannot learn, and by assuring that every student is welcomed, safe and secure in the classroom and school community so they can learn well.
Meeting the needs of individual students in the context of the classroom and school community	Schools and classrooms are organized as group settings. Within these group settings teachers face the challenge of making sure they engage their students and are responsive to the needs of their individual students both as individuals in their classroom and within the whole school community.
Contributing actively to the profession	Teaching is not just a job where one clocks in and out at the beginning and end of the day. To keep the profession vital, teachers themselves need to contribute to and take responsibility for improving their practice and the profession as a whole.

Why is it so essential to think about these five commitments, not only as you begin your professional journey, but throughout your career? Consider some of the important choices you will have to make regarding each commitment once you become a teacher.

Commitment #1: Learning from Multiple Sources of Knowledge Throughout Your Career

What you learn during your teacher education program should provide you with a sound and solid foundation for teaching—and the confidence to get started in your own classroom. But as is true of all professions, you cannot possibly learn everything there is to know about teaching from your formal program of teacher preparation. As in other professions, teachers are expected to begin with a certain level of competence in creating engaging classrooms, planning instruction, and working with students to support their learning. But to excel in the profession, to demonstrate that you take your work seriously, to challenge yourself to higher levels of

professional expertise, it is important to recognize that teaching is a continual learning experience over the entire course of your career. You have already learned something about teaching from your own experience as a student, but that experience is likely to look very different as you now begin to view teaching from “the other side of the desk.”

Your formal education for teaching represents only a starting point for a lifetime of professional growth and development. Highly skilled, experienced teachers know that learning how to teach did not come to an end when they completed their teacher education programs. They know that they do not know everything yet and that working with many different students with many different needs can present ongoing challenges. To meet those challenges teachers need to continue to learn.

Where do teachers turn for credible sources of knowledge about teaching, and how do they sort through all the new ideas for “fixing” education they will inevitably encounter? Does growing throughout one’s career mean shifting with every change that comes along? On what basis do strong teachers make decisions about what directions to take for their own new professional learning and development? In addition to continuing to learn from teacher educators, teachers also learn from their own teaching practice and from interacting with other teachers about their teaching (Donovan et al., 2000).

Teachers can attend classes, professional conferences, and workshops, as well as professional development activities sponsored by school districts themselves. These various sources of new teaching knowledge can help teachers discover new ways of thinking about teaching. But they can also pose a dilemma for those teachers who have not developed a good strategy for figuring out why some kinds of new knowledge and teaching practices may be more useful than others or what benefits and limitations each new kind of knowledge or practice may bring. Your philosophical ideals about education—along with your professional knowledge—should help you form a set of ideas against which you judge these new sources of knowledge. So, for example, you would not adopt a new approach just because someone tells you it works, or is motivating, or is exciting. As a professional you will want to weigh new ideas against what you know and have learned about how students learn and about your specific students themselves, their families, and what will benefit them most.

The past several decades have witnessed an explosion of research about what kinds of school environments best support the lifelong professional learning and development of teachers. Teachers continue to learn when schools function as collaborative professional learning communities. In such communities, teaching is talked about regularly, teachers share their experiences as they all may start to try out new approaches to, for example, reading or mathematics. In this way, teachers help each other learn (Admiraal et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). In these kinds of schools, teachers reflect on what they are learning from their teaching experience in collaboration and in community with their colleagues. Understanding the ways teachers learn and the sources of new knowledge such collaborations can help you make sound choices about how you will go on learning and improving your skills throughout your career.

What critical choices will you face in making decisions about the most credible sources of knowledge for your own professional growth and development over the course of your career? First, teachers who view themselves as learners are committed to learning from their students. Students have much to teach teachers about their lives in and outside of school, about how they learn, about what their



As teachers make choices about how to organize their classrooms, they need to do so in ways that make time for groups and for individual students.

(weedezn/AAdobe Stock Photos)

individual life circumstances are, and about how well teachers are teaching based on an understanding of their students' learning to date. Second, teachers who view themselves as learners model the importance of learning itself for their students. Recognizing that there are significant new things to learn, that learning is to be valued, and that together with your students you may be trying out new approaches to teaching as a way of learning—all translate into the climate you create within your classroom. Finally, teachers make choices about what they are open to learning about in the first place. Is your interest in new learning focused on content only? Is it focused on new teaching methods? Your students' development both socially and emotionally in relationship to their learning? Are you willing to be flexible in what you will entertain as being possible in your classroom—for example, a major shift in how you use technology? All of these issues are related to setting a course of learning throughout your career and drawing on multiple sources of knowledge to do so.

Commitment #2: Using the Curriculum Responsibly

There is no universal agreement about the purposes of schooling. Indeed, based on varying philosophies of education, competing purposes for being in school can operate simultaneously. As teachers make choices about the kind of professionals they wish to be, they constantly navigate these competing purposes, or philosophies of education. The curriculum, or what to teach, is one of the most prominent places where these different purposes of schooling can play out.

The issue of what to teach is more complex than it may first appear. As a teacher, you will have access to a formal curriculum, or course of study, with formal instructional materials and textbooks to guide your work. But once you are handed these materials, you still have to make many choices about what and how you will teach. In other words, when you are handed curriculum materials, you are not handed a foolproof recipe for teaching.

For example, what topics will you decide to cover in depth, and what will you relegate to the sidelines? How will you make the curriculum, which may seem

overwhelming in breadth and depth, manageable? How comfortable are you with, and how deep is your knowledge in the academic content you are teaching? How will you make the curriculum interesting and relevant for your students so that they are motivated and engaged to learn in the first place? Will you expect your students to learn only facts and figures, or will you challenge them to understand more complex issues and ideas? How will you adjust the way you teach to assure that the range of students you have can learn what you are teaching? What if at some point you are asked to adopt new curriculum materials that represent a different philosophy from the one upon which you have based your teaching? How will you respond in this situation? What knowledge and perspectives will you use to evaluate and respond to such changes in the curriculum?

In addition, education is not just made up of teaching and learning the academic curriculum. Schools are, by their very nature, social institutions, and the changing nature of society also influences how teachers choose to teach. Students do not only learn academic content in school. Instead, by the mere fact of being in school for so many hours each day, year after year, students also learn a lot about what is and is not important. This is a kind of unspoken “curriculum” too. Because of this, teachers need to be aware of the full impact being in school has on their students’ development socially and emotionally. Creating the appropriate environments to support this aspect of learning is also an essential part of a teacher’s work.

A professional commitment to using the curriculum responsibly means that teachers not only know what is in the curriculum, but also actively think about the best way to teach that curriculum to *their* students, in *their* specific school community, so students can become independent, lifelong learners. Throughout their careers, teachers are faced with choices about whether to simply “cover the curriculum,” or instead do the harder work of connecting the curriculum to their students’ particular lives, giving students meaning and reasons for being engaged in studying new and challenging topics and issues. Leaving the students out of the equation and opting for a focus on the content alone diminishes the human, interactive nature of the teaching enterprise—the very part that makes it worthwhile.



To be happy and fulfilled in their work, teachers must enjoy being with young people every day.
(Christopher Futcher/Getty Images)

Commitment #3: Practicing Equity-minded Teaching

As the demographics in the United States continue to change, reflecting a more multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual society than ever before, today many teachers in many locations—urban, suburban, and rural alike—are working with students whose life experiences may not mirror their own. When teachers are unfamiliar with the cultures, languages, and life experiences of their students, or when teachers live outside the communities in which they teach, they often have a great deal to learn about the lives of their students and families. They may also have to overcome biases they may not even know they have about what their students are capable of accomplishing. In contrast, others may be planning to teach in underserved communities, where their own backgrounds may match those of their students—with a conscious commitment to helping assure that students with life experiences similar to their own can overcome any societal barriers to success they may face. Teachers also need to understand the educational systems in which they are working, and how the structure of those systems can either help or hinder the opportunities every student deserves.

Further, along with their similarities, students in all settings are individuals with individual differences and individual abilities to be met. So, teachers must be prepared to work with students who have disabilities. They must consider students' sexual orientations and gender identities. And they must also take into account their students' different religious identities. Each of these differences is unique, but also exist together—or interact—within each student to form their social identity. So, for example, it is important to understand that a child who has a disability also comes from a particular social class and cultural background—all of which teachers need to take into account as they figure out what is the best approach for that student. Understanding the complexity of who students are often requires teachers to step outside the comfort of their own life experiences, challenge their own beliefs and potential biases, all for the purpose of creating classrooms where no student is pushed off to the margins.

Like all choices teachers make, teachers make decisions regarding how hard they will work to meet the needs of every student—those students whose life experiences may be more similar to their own, or students whose life experiences may differ greatly from their own. Making the commitment to work equally hard for every student, to root for every student's success, will challenge each teacher's capacity in different, individual ways. Are teachers committed to learning about new cultures and communities, and seeing the rich cultural and language skills their students may bring as assets—however unfamiliar those assets may be to teachers themselves? Do they view the array of differences among students and their families as assets that enrich the classroom? Do they respect and value the differences they encounter? Are they committed as teachers to believing in the potential of each of their students, rather than favoring students from some backgrounds and not from others? Or favoring some students because they like them better than others? Do they possess the skills to meet their students' different needs? As teachers make such choices, they are choosing to make the difference between a student's success and failure in school.

Commitment #4: Meeting the Needs of Individual Students in the Context of the Classroom and School Community

Schools and classrooms in the United States are by design collective, large-group settings. Within their classrooms, however, teachers are constantly concerned

about meeting the needs of individual students; they work at the intersection of meeting individual needs and a classroom's group dynamics every day. Strategies for engaging students in the classroom involve how teachers choose to group students and how their classrooms are structured and organized to enable teachers to allocate time to provide individual attention to students who are struggling or who need advanced work. For example, how will teachers use technology to create deep student engagement and motivation for learning? All teachers face such issues throughout their careers. These choices overlap with decisions teachers make about the curriculum itself, what is important to learn, and what individual students and the classroom as a group are interested in and motivated to learn.

As part of this professional commitment, teachers must understand that teaching does not consist of just passively going into the classroom, opening the textbook, and reading the directions for the next activity to the whole class. Skilled, committed teachers actively work to figure out how to motivate and engage their students in learning. They know their students well and deliberately seek out organizational structures for their classrooms and use teaching methods that will enable all of their students to find success. Schools themselves can adopt different schoolwide organizational strategies that support more engaged forms of teaching. No longer is teaching only to the “average” student an option; teachers must be committed to meeting all of their students' needs.

Teachers who are serious about meeting their students' needs actively advocate for them and make choices to seek out resources and solutions to problems so that their success becomes a real possibility. They are advocates not only for individual students, but also for their classrooms as a whole—advocating for implementing educational structures, experiences, and opportunities that enable their students to deepen their learning.

One of the great rewards of teaching is the satisfaction of watching students learn and grow. (Monkey Business/Adobe Stock Photos)



Commitment #5: Contributing Actively to the Profession

Long gone are the days when teachers could just go into their classrooms and shut the door—essentially shutting out the need to work with other adults. Today teachers are expected to collaborate with one another to make schools and classrooms places where teachers grow so that their students can thrive and learn. For example, beginning teachers may be overwhelmed with the tasks before them as they start their careers, and without the help of other skilled, veteran education professionals to mentor them, their work would be even more challenging.

Teachers can contribute to the profession in many different ways. Throughout the course of your career, you will need to make choices about the kinds of commitments you will make. Will you be a passive teacher who comes in every day, gets through the day, goes home, just to collect a paycheck every month? Or will you be a teacher who actively participates in the professional, intellectual life of teaching to improve what takes place not only in your classroom, but in your schools and even in your district? In what areas might you develop special expertise, and how might you then use that expertise to better reach students and to help other teachers do the same?

What kind of contribution will you make to the individual school in which you teach? Will you take on a leadership role at your local school site, for example, to build greater family participation in the school? Will you make a commitment to improve district or state education policy or work in professional organizations devoted to teaching in particular subjects or specialty areas? At this point you do not have to answer these questions, but as you plan for a career in teaching, it is important to recognize that becoming a productive, active member of your profession is an important goal. In other words, as you gain experience as a teacher, how will you work to both improve education and help transform it for the future?

Your turn... to reflect

Consider each of these commitments and identify at least two questions you have about each one. How would you go about answering your questions?



The Role of Reflection and Action in the Choices You Make

A vital part of learning to teach is recognizing the role of teacher reflection in how to teach well. To be a teacher who makes a difference is not to do the same thing year in and year out. Teachers who are committed to their profession regularly reflect on and inquire into the quality of their work, asking *themselves* how much their teaching is helping students grow and learn. In this way, teachers work toward identifying areas for their own improvement and reach for more effective practices.

Reflection also helps you understand that teaching is not just doing what someone tells you to do or what the textbook tells you to do. As a prospective teacher, it is important to begin by asking yourself challenging questions about what it means to teach in the first place. This means being willing to look critically at yourself as a developing teacher—which is what reflection is all about.

Teachers use reflection to inquire into all aspects of their teaching, including, for example, how to reach students who are struggling, how to teach academic subjects, how to manage relationships with students and their families, how to assess student learning, or how to integrate the arts into the academic subjects. Reflection creates a healthy tension between what a teacher already knows and does well, and what a teacher sets as new professional goals. It requires teachers to be actively engaged in setting goals for their own growth and development.

Asking questions and reflecting on the quality of your own teaching are not enough, however. *It is the action teachers take as a result of their reflection and inquiry that is the link to being a real professional.* As teachers ask questions of themselves, they can begin to identify areas and issues for further learning and use these as a focus for their own professional growth and development. When they ask such questions alongside their colleagues in their schools or districts, the potential for improving teaching practice is even greater. This is because working with your colleagues spans classrooms and can build powerful communities of professional learning among teachers in the school or the district as they help each other try out to work out problems implementing new approaches to teaching or solving specific problems they may be facing.



Managing multiple tasks at once is one of the demands of teaching. (Maskot/Getty Images)

The Rewards and Demands of Making a Commitment to Teaching

Teaching is probably one of the most misunderstood professions—except by those who are teachers themselves. Uninformed, naive views of teaching are all too common. Such misconceptions include that teaching is easy, that all a teacher does is stand up in front of a group of students and talk, that teachers don’t work “real” hours, or that it’s a job anyone can do well. But ask any good teacher and you

will get a *very* different answer. Good teachers know that their work is both demanding *and* rewarding. Those who choose to teach make a commitment not only to getting great satisfaction from the rewards the profession offers, but also to meeting its demands.

The Rewards of Teaching

Being with young people every day is one of the most important benefits of teaching. Teachers who are committed to their profession choose to spend their days with young people and often say that they can’t imagine doing anything else. As a teacher you will spend your working days with students, and your satisfaction will occur from doing so. That is one of the essential foundations of making a commitment to teaching—that you enjoy and want to spend time with young people. This is true for anyone who wants to become an effective teacher.

The greatest reward of teaching, however, is not just enjoying *being* with your students, but more important, assuring that they *learn and grow*. As a teacher, you can take pride in helping your students make progress—in specific skills, in deep knowledge of a subject, in their ability to become confident in themselves and become independent thinkers, in making good choices about their futures, and in making good use of what they have learned. At whatever grade you choose to teach or in whatever subject, your satisfaction will come from watching your students “get it,” watching the light bulbs go on in their minds, and seeing how they learn to grasp new concepts and think in more complex ways. If you teach first grade, you will have the satisfaction of teaching children to unlock the code of written language and learn to read. If you teach middle school mathematics, this can mean watching your students master algebra for the very first time. If you are a high school music teacher, it might mean listening to students play the first compositions they write for a class assignment—and finding a few gems among them. Such rewards drive teachers at every level—from preschool to elementary to middle school to high school.

Your turn... to reflect

If you were asked to honor one of your teachers, whom would you select? Prepare a short statement for your class describing why this teacher deserves to be so honored. What is the connection between what you are saying about this teacher and your own motivation to consider a career in teaching?



Teachers also derive rewards from empowering their students, both as individuals and as members of a democratic society, and opening new possibilities for their futures. Teachers help students expand their views of what they can pursue and accomplish. If you teach high school, this might mean encouraging a student who may not have thought attending college was important or possible, and then watching that student choose to apply to, locate potential scholarships for, and attend college as a result of your guidance. If you are an English teacher, it might mean seeing your students learn to write persuasive essays and then prepare letters based on those essays to a local official in the interests of improving the community. It is for these rewards that many people choose to teach in the first place.

One of the hidden rewards of teaching is that you do not always know how far your influence might reach. Sometimes the positive influence you have on your students is not apparent until years or even decades later. For example, a student may visit you long after graduating, and let you know that your class was decisive in their career choice. Even though some of the gratification you receive from your work may be delayed, when you do receive it, the wait will have been worthwhile. The website *Teacher Stories* (<https://teacherstories.org/appreciations/list>), includes many stories from former students who have posted on teachers who have made a difference in their lives.

Teaching can also be rewarding if you seek a career where not everything is predictable and where you must be flexible to do your work well. No matter how organized or prepared a teacher may be, no teacher can predict, for example, exactly what kind of mood the students will be in each morning when they enter the classroom. “Reading” your students and making changes based on their mood may make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful day. Furthermore, you cannot predict how well your students will do in any given lesson. Teachers have to be prepared to “read” their students’ understandings while they are teaching and make adjustments to instruction along the way. Similarly, you cannot predict whether an interruption will occur that requires you to stop your teaching briefly, attend to the interruption, and pick up again—without missing a beat. This aspect of teaching also gives the work vitality, and those who are comfortable with some level of unpredictability will find teaching a rewarding challenge. Finally, teaching is rewarding because it allows you to be creative in your work—in the way you structure the semester or year, in the way you develop lessons, in the way you use instructional materials, and in the ways you ask students to demonstrate what they have learned. Teaching offers you a regular opportunity to change your approach to the material you are teaching to better meet your students’ needs. You can experiment, see how the changes affect your students’ learning, and then try it again.

A Case In Point

Influencing the Lives of Students—A Teacher's Gift

A teacher's work seldom gains public recognition. Students themselves may not recognize the positive influence a teacher has had until years after they have left that teacher's classroom. In some instances, students reconnect with teachers who changed the direction of their lives. Russell Paterson, a twelfth-grade student who attended elementary and middle school in a small rural community in Nebraska, moved to Chicago with his family when he entered high school. In his senior English class students were asked to write a letter to an influential person in their lives. He chose to write to his fifth-grade teacher, Eleanor Wilson.

Dear Ms. Wilson:

I'm not sure if you remember me, but I was a student in your fifth-grade class not so long ago. My family moved to Chicago when I began high school. This year our English teacher asked us to choose a person who was very influential in our lives and write a letter to them, and as soon as he gave us this assignment, I knew I had to write to you.



When students enter your classroom each day, what kind of experience will be in store for them?

(monkeybusinessimages/
Getty Images)

I wasn't exactly a model student in elementary school. In fact, I was a pretty rowdy kid. Looking back on it, I worked hard at doing everything I could do *not* to be a good student. I was more interested in cutting up and being the class clown than I was in what we were doing in class. I didn't do my homework and I didn't like to participate in class. I also didn't have a lot of help at home. The summer before fifth grade my father was laid off and things were pretty tense around my house. None of this helped my attitude.

But there you were every morning, with a smile on your face, saying hello to me like I was the best student who had ever walked into your classroom. Every day you asked me how I was doing. I didn't always answer you as nicely as you had asked, but you still treated me like I was someone who mattered to you. Sometime later in the fall when I was falling further behind, you began having a

bunch of kids stay in for lunch with you and you always asked us about what we were interested in. At one of those lunches I must have mentioned that I always wondered about what life was like on the other planets.

After that you began bringing books and magazines for me to read about outer space, the other planets, and NASA. You let me do some special assignments about those things when other kids were doing the regular subjects. I had a little corner in your room where you kept all of those books and magazines for me. You told the rest of the class that I was the resident expert on the planets, so if anyone had questions they should come and ask me. I still wasn't a star student, but I always had something to do. It was around that time that you said to me, in a casual way, "You know, Russell, when you grow up there is a way to make a living being an expert on the planets."

At the time I didn't realize how much those words made an impression on me. I don't remember all the details about the rest of fifth grade, but I do know that I managed to get into less trouble that year, passed, moved on to middle school, and did pretty well in science all along. Now I realize that in the back of my mind I could hear you telling me much more than that I might make a living being smart about planets. What you were really saying is that I had something I could do well, that there was a way to use what I was interested in, and that what happened to me in the future was important to you. That also made it important to me.

So here I am in my senior year of high school, and next year I will be attending the state university to study astronomy. I've kept up my interest in the planets and space, and last year my counselor connected me with some people from the Museum of Science and Industry who work with high school students. I was able to get a summer job there working with the younger kids. So I'm writing to thank you for a lot of things. Thank you for not giving up on me when I was a handful, thank you for taking the time to learn about me and what I was interested in, and thank you for planting a big idea in my mind. You were a great teacher and I was very lucky to be in your class.

Sincerely,
Russell Paterson

The Demands of Teaching

Along with the rewards of teaching come the demands of this profession. It takes skill to plan and implement motivating lessons, to assess how students are progressing, and to calibrate instruction to meet students' varying needs. Teachers who are successful don't just open up the textbook each day and teach. Instead, they prepare to teach by using what they know about their students, the curriculum, and the most effective ways to instruct their students.

Teaching is also demanding because the classroom is a social environment unlike any other. Building a community that fosters learning requires teachers to establish a solid foundation of good social interaction among the students themselves, as well as between students and teachers. Once that foundation is established, teachers must focus on keeping the classroom community working well. This means knowing how to make sound judgments about what students need—as individuals and as learners—in the midst of a busy day, every day. In a learning environment in which students get along well, teachers still need to maintain the community, minimize the chance of problems occurring, and manage problem behaviors when they do take place.

Being a teacher also demands simultaneously managing the students, the curriculum, instructional groups, schoolwide activities, and unintended interruptions in the classroom. In fact, the term *multitasking* could have been coined expressly to describe teaching, and good teachers do it well. Have you ever wondered, for example, how a teacher manages to work with a small group, look up at just the right time to make sure the rest of the class is doing what it is supposed to be doing, and then go back to the small group and continue the lesson? Or how a teacher knows what is going on between two students in the back of the room when they are talking with a student at their desk at the front of the room? Doing this takes practice, but it is essential to making sure the classroom runs smoothly.

Teaching is also demanding because it is an inherently human profession, with all of the challenges this entails. Students have complex lives, and those lives come into the classroom every single day. Teachers must be prepared to meet their students' needs even when they don't know from day to day what those needs might be. This demand also means that it is not enough simply to know the content you will teach. Instead, you must be able to engage in the human interaction of teaching that content to your students in ways that make sense to them. If your students can't connect with what you are teaching them, they probably won't be eager to participate in what you have planned to teach.

Another demand placed on teachers comes from the public sector. The work teachers do is not independent of mandates of local school boards, state government, and federal government. These mandates can constrain teachers' freedom to determine what they do within their classrooms. In today's polarized political climate, in many places those constraints have become greater.

Finally, teaching is demanding because of the wide range of student needs in the classroom. Some students may be victims of abuse or neglect, some may not have anyone at home to help with homework, others may struggle because they live in poverty, and still others may have material wealth but little emotional support. Some may be the only people in their home who speak English, so they may be called upon to help their parents every day. When you make the commitment to teach, you are agreeing to teach all the children in your classroom and to work from the problems and challenges they present in ways that will lead to their learning. More importantly, you are agreeing to find the strengths your students bring to the classroom, even in the midst of the struggles they and their families may be facing.

Teaching: Is It Really for You?

One of the most important purposes of this text is to help you answer the question: Is teaching really for you? Because teaching matters so much to each and every student you may teach in the future, now is the time to think about whether you can make the commitment to this profession. As you gain a deeper understanding of what teaching entails, as you obtain a more complete understanding of the dimensions of this career, and as we expose myths about the profession, you will be able to make a much more informed judgment about your career choice. If you are participating in an early clinical experience in a school as part of this course, you will have an even broader base of experience to begin to draw upon in making your decision.

You are making the decision to become a teacher at a very exciting yet challenging time in the development of the profession. The first few years of teaching, known formally as the period of *induction*, are now viewed as a time when teachers need and are increasingly receiving focused professional support. No longer is a new teacher expected to be able to do everything at the same level as a skilled veteran teacher. A clear understanding is beginning to emerge that the profession needs to create ways to make sure that new teachers have support and do not feel isolated within their classrooms to sink or swim on their own.

Many new avenues have also opened up for teachers to provide leadership within their profession, and increasingly there are opportunities to be compensated for taking on such leadership roles—not as principals, but as master teachers who have advanced expertise in a wide range of areas. At the same time, the expectation is greater than ever before that teachers demonstrate their abilities in the classroom so that every student in every community has the benefit of a competent, caring, and qualified teacher.



Your turn... *to review*

1. What is the purpose of reflection in your studies to become a teacher?
2. Why is it important to engage in reflection together with your future teaching colleagues?

For many of you the decision to become a teacher is something you have thought about for a long time, whether teaching will be your first or your second career. Others of you may be considering the idea for the first time. In either case, it is critical at this point to match your initial ideas about what it means to teach with the new experiences and knowledge you will start to gain about the profession. Even if you have always wanted to be a teacher, now is the time to think carefully about whether you are ready to make the commitment.

Teaching is not a profession for the faint of heart. Your commitment to your students and to their learning must be unequivocal. If you find that you are not enjoying the students as much as you thought you would, now is the time to consider how this will translate into spending every day in a classroom where the students should be the focus of your attention and the source of your professional satisfaction. You may learn that you cannot handle the unique and complex demands of classroom life as readily as you thought you could when you first considered teaching as a career. Some of you may find yourselves unable to juggle the many tasks teachers carry out. If you cannot cope with these demands, then you have an important decision to make—not only for yourself, but for the students you may be teaching. If your commitment is strong, however, then it is probable that you are ready to find that balance between the excitement of moving toward your professional goal and the challenges of getting there.

Your turn... to reflect

What are three things you are most excited about or motivated about when you think about becoming a teacher? What are your three greatest concerns right now about learning to teach? Why do you think these things hold such importance for you?



Making a Choice about the Kind of Teacher You Want to Be

As you think about the professional journey ahead of you—the journey to learn to teach—a good way to get started is to think about the kind of teacher you want to be. Every September, all over the country, families send their children to school. And every September many families are grateful that their children have been placed in the classrooms of wonderful, dedicated, caring, competent, and qualified teachers. Other families, unfortunately, are anxious or disappointed or worried because their children have been placed in the classrooms of mediocre or inferior teachers. These families realize that it will be a rough year ahead for their children.

As you envision yourself learning to teach over the next year or two, keep in mind the goal you are trying to achieve in becoming a teacher. Your future work as a teacher matters a great deal—to your students, to their families, to the school and the district in which you will teach, and to the profession itself. It is the expectations you set for yourself as a professional and the quality of the work you do as a teacher that will determine how parents and family members feel about their children being in your classroom. When you stand at the classroom door to greet your first class of students, do so with the certainty that you have made the right choice—for you, and for students you will teach.

