

12/20/91

"The Art of Teaching" (504)

This program was produced by the University of Notre Dame and Golden Dome Productions for the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN) series, "Today's Life Choices."

Gus Gnorski
Narrator

The best teachers are those who care the most about the child's development, those who share an understanding of the whole person. In many ways, the art of teaching is an extension of the family and in recent years a growing number of parents have decided to educate their own children at home. But for most of American's 40 million school age children, education takes place in a school, in a classroom with many other children the same age, all learning at the same time. It can be a frustrating environment and a rewarding one.

Cathy Bartolini
Bradford Elementary School
Bradford, Vermont

Teaching some wonderful things everyday in school I see teachers affecting the life of children profoundly, that will effect them for the rest of their lives and it's fulfilling within the school walls. For instance, when you go out in the community and to hear this negative response, negative feedback that teachers don't work hard now, they get paid too much. The editorials scare them. They just don't realize what teachers do.

Gus Gnorski

What do teachers do? What should they do? The art of teaching has become an extremely complicated mixture of parenting, counseling, instructing, and discipline. Teachers are now in many cases, the key figures in helping our children make today's life choices. And those decisions will affect all of us for generations to come. In this program we will from teachers and from teachers of teachers. We will hear from those who want tougher standards for the profession, and from those who feel standards just get in the way. This is Today's Life Choices, challenges for our times.

By most appearances, the art of teaching has not changed very much over the last 40 years. The tools of the trade are still the same in most schools--a blackboard and some chalk. Children are supposed to listen and to sit still. Those who don't often find themselves in trouble.

It seems the duty of each passing generation to complain about the undisciplined conduct of the next. But beyond the usual griping

about dress and music, there seems today a growing uneasiness among educators about trends in the behavior of students. Most agree their attention span is much shorter.

John Gatto
1990 Teacher of the Year
New York City

Everyone's experienced that from a teacher perspective, but in times where I've had a chance to watch these kids alone with themselves and their own choices, you have almost a swift turnoff of attention. They can focus briefly, but they can't sustain attention. That's one of the phenomena, the other would be they are much, much closer to a flashpoint, either hysterical laughter, or anger and even those moods don't sustain themselves very long. I think we've gone way beyond the reach of journalism's description of the problems in the schools. I for at least five years come home and said this is a new breed the world's never seen before.

Gus Gnorski

The change in students is in large part a manifestation of society's problems outside the classroom.

Keith Geiger
President
National Education Association

It would be very easy and simple to say that the problems of society should not be brought into the schools. But the fact of the matter is we don't have an education problem in the United States, we have a societal problem of which education is a great part. For literally millions and millions of children in the United States today, most organizations have given up on them. And if the public schools give up on those children, they will have no hope. So we can't say to a 3rd grade student who comes into our classroom, now you leave your family problems at the door, you leave the problems that are out there on the streets at the doors, you leave the societal problems at the door, because when you come into my classroom all we're going to do is learn math, and science, and social studies, and English. It doesn't work that way.

Deborah McGriff
General Superintendent
Detroit Public Schools

Look at the condition of America's children compared to the condition of children in other nations and you'll find that as a

country, we really don't value our children. We say that they're our future, yet in terms of the amount of money we spend on them, the health services that they receive, the preparation that they get for coming to school, it doesn't measure up to other industrialized countries. On too many measures, we compare to Third World countries and it shouldn't be that way.

Paula Finkelstein
Principal, Prattville School
Chelsea, Maryland

We are individual cases with different youngsters. When they go home at night making sure they are safe, and they're well, and that they are being fed, and we can only control what happens when they are in school and it's very difficult some days when we send them home and hope that they come back next morning and that they're in the same good frame of minds that they were when they left at 2:00 in the afternoon.

Gus Gnorski

Responding to the change in students and society, America's education leaders recommend a change in teaching. Many of the recommendations are based on the realization that children learn in different ways.

Albert Shanker
President
American Federation of Teachers

Some people can't learn by listening to somebody talk to them 5 hours a day, they might learn other ways. They might learn by looking at a video tape, listening to an audio tape, doing something with their hands. There are a lot of different ways to learn. But we say the only way you can learn is listen to me talk and remember what I say. So basically we violate all the fundamental things we know about learning, namely we all learn in different ways. One person can learn something in 5 minutes, it may take somebody else 5 hours to learn the same thing. But if you have a lecture system everybody had better learn at the same rate, because I can't speak at a different rate to the 25 different people who are here.

Keith Geiger
President
National Education Association

Traditionally, you bring 20, 25, 30, 35, unfortunately 40 and 45 in

some school districts into a classroom. You arrange them in seven rows by five wide and you impart knowledge and you assume that they're going to learn that way. I didn't learn to drive by somebody telling me how to drive. I learned to drive by getting behind the wheel and actually experimenting with driving. I think we have to change the school setting so that students are participants in education and not only taking knowledge from teachers. We're doing that in a lot of places but I don't think it's vast enough.

Gus Gnorski

Dr. Howard Gardner, psychologist from Harvard, has done pioneering research in this area. He argues the human mind is made up of at least 7 different kinds of intelligence. Some people, for example are very good at math. Some excel in languages. Others are less gifted in those pursuits, but are talented musicians, or have the ability to understand what makes other people tick. As a result Gardner suggests that teachers approach each subject from different angles.

Howard Gardner
Professor of Education
Harvard University

I argue that there are at least 5 different windows which you can use to the room of any kind of concept. But a basic notion is if you have a concept like evolution, or a concept like democracy, these are rich things which should be taught in the schools, nobody would deny that, but it's very bad if you have a teacher who only teaches it one way. So my suggestion is that over the course of time, kids should be exposed to these concepts in at least 5 different ways. One is sort of by a story, what I call narrational perspective. Another one is a more numerical, quantitative perspective, what are the numerical implications of this concept. The third one is what I call foundational, sort of a big word for asking a basic questions about what is evolution, where does it come from, what's democracy, what are you comparing to democracy, how is it like a kingdom, how is it like a aristocracy. A fourth entry point to rich concepts like democracy or evolution, would be what I call aesthetic, having to do with the physical appearance of things, how they look, what are they essential properties. What sorts of thing might be attractive for someone who's interested in art or music, and so on. And that's a good way to get a concept typically to individuals who are interested in how things look and sound. And a fifth way, I call a hands on way. A hands on way simply means some people learn best about things when they actually get their hands wet.

Gus Gnorski

Gardner's vision has become reality at the Key School in Indianapolis. Part of a large urban public school system, the Key School represents an experiment now more than 4 years old. Here each of Gardner's 7 intelligences is given equal footing. Students learn foreign languages, but they also play the violin, and of course they've studied core subjects like math and English. The curriculum focuses on themes that provide the kind of windows to learning that Gardner speaks of.

Patricia Bolanos
Principal, Key School
Indianapolis

Every year we go through a process by which we select key things for the year. Everyone in school focuses in incorporating that theme in whatever area they are expressing. If they teach math they find a way to fit it into the math lessons. If they are teaching languages arts, they fit the theme into the language arts lessons. Now when everyone is doing that the theme becomes pervasive and it encourages collaboration among the staff, and it helps the children in their higher ordering thinking because they are being taught to make connections. They are not being taught to memorize separate bits of information, decontextualized information is the jargon that the educator's use. This theme-driven curriculum development is very exciting and it is more difficult. Teachers have to search our resources, look for community involvement. They can't do to the textbook on the shelf and say this is going to be the lesson for the day.

Gus Gnorski

By treating children as individuals and concentrating on the child's strengths rather than weaknesses, the Key School has found success in teaching. But there is another ingredient needed for the success of any curriculum.

Howard Gardner

You can have a wonderful assessment and curriculum, but if you don't have teachers who understand the material, who like it are willing to essentially exemplify to perform themselves, to perform those behaviors, then it's also not going to work, and I think in fact, teacher's education is the key component for educational reform. Unless teachers are really familiarized with more complex ways of understanding so that they can embody them for their own students. Wonderful assessment and curricular are not going to get anywhere.

Gus Gnorski

States and school systems have long realized the correlation between the quality of education and the quality of teachers. But, most have also found quality very difficult to legislate. Most states have a process of teacher's certification or licensing designed to put only qualified teachers in the schools. However, some people now argue those same laws keep the most qualified people out.

John Gatto

How is it possible that Exeter, Andover, Lawrenceville, Chote, Hill Rauten, and all of the elite private schools of the country manage to hire teachers who have not passed the teachers test and do not teachers certification. I think in those schools you have to live down being a certified teacher, and yet, all the government schools and the lesser private schools require this as a safeguard for the children. Is it just possible that the schools where the ruling elites of this country are trained understand as they've understood for thousands of years. If someone can't look you in the eye he's got a problem. And if his hand's sweating when he shakes your hand he's got a problem. And if he's got an egg stain on his shirt, he's got a problem, and on and on. I think what we've done is set up an elaborate useless apparatus that we're now wedded to and costs us yearly in money, in time, of course in the depletion of the reserves of self-respect.

Gus Gnorski

John Gatto is the 1990 New York City Teacher of the Year. Now most of his time is spent working with other teachers to improve their skills. Twenty five years of teaching junior high school teachers has led him to the belief that state monopolies on teacher certification create more problems than they solve.

John Gatto

It enriches many, many colleges. It's 30%, I believe, of all the higher education dollars spent in the United States; and yet, if you went to a class, pick it out of a hat, went to an ed class, and asked the kids if they would be there is they didn't have to be to get a license to earn a living, virtually all of them would say no. How do I know that, because I've done that 16 times since January, and only 10 kids out of a total of about 500 said they'd be there and I think they were just being polite.

Gus Gnorski

Others argue that licensing standards for most states are simply not high enough.

Albert Shanker

Now when you have states in this country where people can become teachers without any sort of entry examination at all, you can't become a lawyer without passing a bar exam. You can't go into medicine without passing exams, but there are states where you can become a teacher which is extremely important profession and even those states that do have examinations often the examination that a teacher has to pass is sort of the same 6th grade examination the kids are going to take in the 6th grade, and the passing mark for the teacher is often the same it is for the kids, 65%. Imagine states where if you get a 65% in a 6th grade arithmetic test, and a 65% in an English test and then it's okay to become a teacher, and then we're surprised that our kids aren't learning.

Gus Gnorski

Raising the standards for teaching also means raising the status of the profession itself.

Keith Geiger

How do we teach in our colleges, in our student teaching programs, in our internships or whatever it is, that very unique and needed talent of relating to young people, that is as important as knowing the subject matter. That's the tough part that we will have, because there are a lot of people believe that anybody can teach if you just know the academics. There are those of us who truly believe that there is another talent to being a good teacher and that doesn't take away from having to know the academic area. We have to do a better job in both of those.

Albert Shanker

I think the important thing to see is that we are now in many of our states, we are employing teachers who themselves should not be teaching, who meet very, very low standards. And the reason we're employing them is because we have to, because there's nobody else in line who wants to work for the kind of money or under the conditions that we provide the teachers. So I've never argued that we have to give teachers more money because it's a nice thing to do or because teachers want more, everybody wants more money. From a public point of view what we have to ask ourselves is: Are we ever

going to have kids who are really learning unless we've got teachers who read books, teachers who are able to think, teachers who are able to express themselves to solve problems, and who are able to do it at a rather high level, to be role models for the youngsters and really to be able to challenge them to do the work?

Gus Gnorski

In the search for better salaries and higher status, teachers have historically struggled. Since public school wages are paid with tax dollars, negotiations are often based as much on politics as performance in the classroom. Chelsey, Massachusetts, just across the bridge from Boston illustrates the point. The city of Chelsey is broke, unable to come up with a budget that would provide services in spite of a multimillion dollar deficit, the city has been placed in receivership. For teachers, it is just the latest development in a long story of cutbacks, layoffs and supply shortages.

Anthony DiGregorio
Principal, Williams School
Chelsea, Maryland

It does boil down to having some resources as opposed to not having any resources. Right now I don't have a pencil in this entire school, this is the second week of school, that I can pass out to any one of the 1200 children. So you need some things. I mean we can't fast for 40 days and 40 nights before we have supplies. We can't do that, so we're doing the best we can.

It would be nice to know that someday the Army and Navy have to run cake sales to fund themselves the way we do. This is, in my opinion, that's absolutely ludicrous that there is, that this country is so wealthy and can't make a commitment to education as some of the other countries in the world have already done.

Gus Gnorski

The art of teaching in Chelsey is one of patience and creativity in the face of frustration. The financial problems may be more severe than in other cities, but they are not unique to Chelsey. The answer for most teachers has been to fight city in the way it fears the most, by unionizing. Until about 30 years ago, teachers unions were virtually non-existent. Not any longer.

Albert Shanker

Eighty-seven percent of the teachers in the United States are unionized and there's no other sector of the work force that is so heavily unionized, and all this happened since 1955, 1960, in a very short period of time. So we really ought to ask ourselves why is it that for many years teachers who stayed away from unions because they considered them to be unprofessional, why they unionized so rapidly and why they are so loyal to their unions. I think largely it's the fact that they had no voice before they had a union. They had tremendous amount of insecurity. They had very authoritarian types of management and they were literally treated like dirt. You know it's rather interesting that we somehow think there's a conflict between dedication and earning a decent living. We don't think that of doctors let's say. We would probably hesitate to go to a doctor who earned a teacher's salary, or to a lawyer who earned that sort of a salary, so I don't see the conflict at all.

Gus Gnorski

The battle for status is only partially a battle for better wages. It is also a battle for recognition alongside other important professions.

Albert Shanker

You're in college and the professor says what do you think you're going to be Al? And Al turns around and says I'm going to be a teacher. The professor might very well say, "A teacher, but you're so smart," or something like that. So that the status of teachers is still very low. They by and large work in a sort of factory system where other people tell them what to do, other people pick the textbooks, the curriculum, there's the principal, there's your assistant principal, there's the department chairman, there's the state education department, there's everybody telling this person down here what to do as though he's some sort of an assembly line worker and he doesn't understand unless somebody else tells him.

John Gatto

The structure of the system itself, is highly resistant to change. It is very, very hard to adapt to changing behavior and to do that a decision would have to be passed through 4, 5, 6 levels of authority so that everybody feels safe and secure, well in fact my methodology has probably become that of an outlaw.

Gus Gnorski

Perhaps more difficult than the daily struggles with bureaucracy, more difficult than the arm twisting for salaries and recognition is a teacher's endless efforts to involve parents in the education of their own children. Teachers often take the brunt of criticism about schools, but with more single parent and two income families in society today, fewer parents actually knows what goes on in school.

Cathy Bartolini
Bradford Elementary School
Bradford, Vermont

Before I had children, I didn't know what went on in the local elementary school and before I started teaching. A lot of people never visit the school, and it might be a holdover from their younger days in thinking of school as an institution, like a jail, a place you want to get out of and not come back to visit. So I think there's a real misconception about what we do here.

Brenda Wiley
Key School
Indianapolis

I encourage my students to teach their parents Spanish, and the parents have come to me and they will tell me well my child taught me how to say the pledge of allegiance in Spanish, and the poem that goes along with that that we do in class. Or my child taught me a song that you taught them, and it's very rewarding for me.

Patricia King

The teachers here, I love every last one of them you know. I come in and they just like you know a big family and all the teachers are involved with my child, and that's what I like. And they let him know, I can't get away with nothing cause they got all these teachers here going be watching me and I like that. And it gives me a sense of mind that I know I don't have to worry about him. There's going to be somebody here that's going to take care of him and make sure he gets what he needs.

Gus Gnorski

Developing a closeness between teacher and student was at the heart of an experiment in the Detroit public school system. Detroit wanted to establish all male academies in an effort to address the specific needs of an endangered cultural group, young African-American men.

Ray Johnson
Administrator
Paul Robeson Academy

One of the things that's really consistent I believe with achievement and performance is this notion of having someone to model, this notion of recognizing, identifying with someone you can emulate who you would want to be like. We find that many instances of African-American males that they do not have in many instances this role model that's positive. This role model that not only exists with physical characteristics of what maleness is, but all the other sides that round out what being male is. It's very difficult to become by day that's what you can't dream of at night, that's very difficult if you don't have those images that give you those kinds of other ways. That thing is most secret, that where you find situations where you have those positive role models, there's a greater tendency for that youngster to select behaviors patterns and the expectations and all the wherewithal that role model projects.

Clifford Watson
Principal, Malcolm X Academy
Detroit

Right now in this country, males only represent 1½% or less of the teaching population. Our theory is one of the hypothesis, is that males, the presence of males in elementary schools, and high incidents of males, where in most elementary schools in this country generally is less than 3 in elementary schools. So if we could just get a 50-50 gender balance, what effect would that have in terms of academics, in terms of behavior patterns, as it relates to males, and particularly urban males, African-American males.

The second postulate or hypothesis is this, Afrocentric studies what effect will it have or could it have on the achievement and behavioral patterns of students. These things have not been tested, we want to see what will happen.

Deborah McGriff

I simply hope that we generate a model for delivering education to young people, that does not have a disproportionate subgroup of people who are not succeeding. I want to see schools that can guarantee students success, so that when a parent enrolls their son or their daughter in an African-centered academy, they are assured that at the end of the 5 years or 6 years in the program, they're going to be pleased with the level of performance and that young person will go on to a middle school and a high school, and college or into the world of work and become a productive citizen in the society and not a statistic or member of a prison.

Gus Gnorski

Detroit's experiment did not turn out as planned. It was stopped by a court injunction that found all male academies discriminatory against women. However, the school board and superintendent have not given up on the concept. The challenges facing teachers in Detroit are similar in many respects to those facing teachers in Indianapolis or Chelsea or any number of American cities. Those challenges are being met by dedicated people who understand that teaching is more than an occupation, it is truly an art.

Keith Geiger

If this country every gets to the place where everybody believes that there is a talent in teaching which goes beyond knowing chemistry, or knowing physics, or knowing mathematics we will have accomplished a lot. There are a lot of people that believe today, that if you can't fit in another profession you can still go into teaching and I would submit that the talent of relating to young people, be it 5 year olds, or 15 year olds, is just as important to being a good teacher as knowing math or knowing science.