

Responsiveness in Teaching: Responsibility in Its Most Particular Sense

by Shelley Sherman

The late Senator Paul Wellstone was often a courageous, lone voice amidst the political rhetoric surrounding high-stakes testing. In a speech at Teachers College in March 2000, Senator Wellstone argued that policy makers were confusing high-stakes testing with accountability and spoke of the purposes of education that were threatened by the emphasis on standardized tests to assess educational progress:

Education is, among other things, a process of shaping the moral imagination, character, skills and intellect of our children, of inviting them into the great conversation of our moral, cultural, and intellectual life, and of giving them the resources to prepare to fully participate in the life of the nation and of the world. But today in education there is a threat afoot to which I do not need to call your attention: the threat of high-stakes testing being grossly abused in the name of greater accountability, and almost always to the serious detriment of our children.

That we continue to find both student learning and the extent to which teachers are considered responsible for student learning so often measured in terms of standardized test results is no great surprise. Teachers are responsible for getting the job done, and successful learning and teaching may look quite similar across settings when the primary cri-

teria used are standardized test results. Though a teacher's influence on student learning is potentially great within the confines of a single classroom, the teaching community's influence upon public conceptions of what constitutes student learning has been enervated. Senator Wellstone's concerns about equating greater accountability with high-stakes testing is one that is shared by a teaching community which takes seriously its responsibility to educate students. This community also understands that there are dimensions of responsibility in teaching that have gone unrecognized by political forces and the public-at-large.

If teachers and teacher educators share any hope of creating a vision for teaching that makes learning possible and meaningful for students and broadens the role of the teacher beyond that of a technician, we must express what we consider to be morally grounded representations of responsibility in teaching. By doing this, we would be taking seriously Dewey's (1964, 338) charge to improve education "not simply by turning out teachers who can do better things that are now necessary to do, but rather by changing the conception of what constitutes education."

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It seems incumbent upon those engaged in teaching and teacher education to make responsibility in teaching more visible in the public arena. Though no simple solutions are offered here as to how to accomplish this, a good start is to clarify conceptions of responsibility to ourselves and to the teacher candidates whom we teach. I am by no means suggesting that teachers are not responsible for helping students develop the basic competencies that standardized tests are purported to measure—reading comprehension and procedural mathematical knowledge, for example. In this respect, teachers are quite responsible, indeed, and accountable to ourselves and to multiple stakeholders. The teaching community, however, would better serve students, parents, external stakeholders, and itself if it could educate the public about more inclusive representations of learning than those measured by standardized tests and more expansive notions of responsibility in teaching. In fact, developing competencies in reading and mathematics, for example, may be within a closer grasp of students when teachers exercise responsibility in the manner discussed here.

I argue that responsibility in teaching is represented in particular ways by the responsiveness of teachers to individual students. Such a conception of responsibility is subtler than the characterization of responsibility that is associated with contemporary policy initiatives. The conception of responsible teaching that I will try to describe is considerably more nuanced than the one embraced by many of those outside of the profession and even by some within it. Responsibility in teaching may be

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more appropriately represented by the particular interactions between teachers and students than by the results of standardized test scores. Though this may be a taken-for-granted assumption among educators, the legislative language of *No Child Left Behind*, for example, seems to refute it. Finally, I propose that teacher educators have propitious opportunities to focus teacher candidates, particularly in the contexts of early field experiences, on the type of responsibility that is closely associated with the moral dimensions of teaching.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIVENESS

While narrowly defined outcomes that must be achieved at a certain grade level present obstacles to responsible teaching, broad aims of education can guide teachers. Broad aims of teaching include: advancement of literacy; deepening the ability to think critically; and fostering moral development. Responsibility, in this sense, lies squarely within the teacher's ability to approach these aims in light of contextual considerations that teachers themselves are in a unique position to interpret. The meeting between such interpretation and a vision for the advancement of the student toward a fulfilling life is borne out in the particular ways that teachers interact with students. These interactions reflect teachers' notions of what constitutes their responsibility as educators. They are not generalizable rules of behavior, but rather actions that represent both a teacher's conception of what is central to worthy teaching in a broad sense and facilitative to learning by a particular student in a specific context.

The importance of the more conventionally recognized purposes of education cannot be overstated. However, these purposes should be associated with a broad conception of responsibility in teaching and used to guide teachers' discrete responsive teaching acts. The three aims of teaching that have been provided are by no means exhaustive and require greater explication than is possible here; moreover, they may be interpreted in many ways. Furthermore, no single interpretation of these teaching aims can express all aspects of the practice. All three, however, may be associated with the capacity to lead a full life. Conversely, without any one of the three, the potential to lead a fulfilling life is greatly constrained. Any single teaching act may be associated with one or more of the broad aims of teaching and, simultaneously, with the dispositions for learning that support their advancement. This includes the nurturance of personal qualities that enable students to advance knowledge and skills with the assistance of more capable others (Vygotsky 1978) and, eventually, on their own. The cultivation of dispositions is central to responsive teaching and is not easily measured. In fact, at first glance and/or in the short term, such dispositions may be unnoticeable. And yet, teachers can help develop qualities and capacities that potentially have more far-reaching consequences for life-long learning than skills that primarily are assessed by pencil-and-paper tests. Perseverance, intellectual curiosity, the capacity to be metacognitive, tolerance, fair-mindedness, and self-confidence are but a few of the qualities that can be fostered by teachers. The influence of teachers can yield either extraordinary positive results or serious negative consequences. Teachers who model and encourage perseverance and welcome diverse viewpoints, for example, may influence students to

conduct themselves in a similar manner (Fenstermacher 1990; 1992).

Responsibility in teaching, therefore, can be associated with the particular ways in which teachers interact on a daily basis with their students—interactions that can foster dispositions for learning that serve students throughout their lives. Dispositions for learning can enable students to live full lives in a multitude of ways that sustain their capacity to become proficient, avid readers; capable, meticulous mathematicians; keen observers of scientific phenomena; and well-informed citizens.

What I am suggesting is that we look at responsibility in teaching as an overarching concept and attach to the notion of *responsiveness* an enactment of responsibility in its most particular application. Responsiveness is thus represented by the one-on-one encounters between teachers and students—the way teachers are attentive to students in distinctive ways that bring them closer to achieving the broad aims of education and cultivating dispositions for learning that may last a lifetime. Such an overarching notion of *responsibility* may point teachers in the direction of desired aims. Put simply, responsiveness is responsibility in its most particular sense.

Responsiveness is closely tethered to the *process* of teaching, or to what Hansen (1998) referred to as the intrinsic moral nature of teaching. That teaching itself is a moral enterprise is a notion that has been substantiated in literature and is borne out in the daily practice of teachers who dedicate themselves to the well-being of their students. Hansen (2001, 831) suggested this when he said “Teaching is a moral endeavor because it influences directly the quality of the present educational moment, a moment in which, as Dewey reminds us, the persons we are becoming hang in the balance.” My emphasis on responsiveness

and its umbrella concept, *responsibility*, is associated more closely with the *how* of teaching rather than *what* is taught. It is the *what* of teaching that already receives the lion's share of emphasis as a result of local and federal policy initiatives that mandate regular standardized testing to assess the knowledge and skills of students. Instead, the homogeneity of instructional practice that ignores the diversity of a student population comprised of individuals who have unique points of instructional need should be scrutinized. Though the broad aims of education may provide guidance for what we teach, the wisdom of the teacher provides a road map for advancing each student in a particular manner.

A conception of responsiveness as responsibility in its most particular sense draws inspiration from the work of Noddings' (1984) conception of caring, van Manen's (1991; 2002) "tone" and "tact of teaching," and Fenstermacher's (1992) "manner of teaching." I associate these with both an overarching conception of responsibility, as well as the potential enactment of responsibility—responsiveness—as I am sketching it here. Responsibility in this sense may be actualized in every individual encounter between a teacher and a student—in the way a teacher responds in a certain moment to a particular student. These responses are compelling expressions of responsibility or a lack of it because they do or do not represent a teacher's total engrossment with the well-being of the student. They are moments in which teachers may influence students for better or

worse (Hansen 1999)—that is, they are moments in which teachers may provide encouragement, support, and suggestion, or conduct themselves in ways that are quite the opposite. It is during these moments, too, that teachers may come to know more about a student, what his or her point of reference is at a particular moment, what questions need to be asked to ascertain the student's instructional point of need, and also may determine what guidance needs to be provided to advance learning. Teachers can be responsible or irresponsible dozens of times during the school day by being responsive or unresponsive to students as unique human beings who have individual capacities and interests.

How can it be known whether teachers are being responsible? Isn't this notion of responsibility too subjective, too contextually dependent, and too difficult to capture? Should there or can there be any degree of accountability attached to this kind of responsibility? If so, to whom is the teacher accountable? These are both troubling and hopeful aspects of a notion of responsibility that is grounded in often spontaneous and, what some might characterize as, idiosyncratic teaching acts. They are troubling because this kind of responsibility requires those who become teachers to have the skills and dispositions enabling them to actualize responsiveness to students—skills and dispositions that many who teach or hope to teach may lack. There is also a sense of hopefulness expressed here that teachers might renew their conception of what it means to be a responsible teacher.

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mined learning outcome established by those who have no specific knowledge or contact with the students in a particular classroom. Instead, the teacher is someone who has a vision for a student's future and has been granted the authority and given the responsibility to craft daily teaching practices to move toward an actualization of that vision. Teaching is represented as it should be, as an endeavor that requires intense intellectual and emotional attention. Such a conception of teaching not only may engender the respect of external stakeholders, but, necessarily, places greater and certainly appropriate ownership for establishing what constitutes education in the hands of those who must ultimately carry it out.

Presumably, the serious-minded teacher who always has the best interests of the student uppermost in his or her mind is constantly reflecting upon the degree to which he or she is being responsible to students. Such a teacher uses this reflection (Schön 1983) to shape ways to be responsive to individuals. He or she asks questions like these: What approach helped Thomas yesterday to make a breakthrough in understanding that difficult reading passage? At what point did Ellen become confused when I was explaining the math problem, and what question cleared it up instantly? How can I structure the history assignment for Michelle in small steps so that it is more manageable for her? By seriously pursuing answers to such questions, teachers are being responsive to students in very specific ways. At the same time, they are guiding students toward the broader aims of education for which teachers are rightfully held responsible. Teachers must not only know what questions need to be asked, but they also must possess the wisdom to provide the responses that enable students to learn. Their responsiveness may be instantiated in many seemingly isolated specific moments of peda-

gogical interaction with students that, when pieced together, represent the way in which a teacher is being responsible for the student's growth as a complete human being.

In addition to having the desire to be responsive to students, teachers also must have the capacity. This capacity is tethered to the skill of interpreting what needs to be done in a certain situation. The ability to be responsive springs in part from personal dispositions that motivate a person to grasp another's condition. Moral desire, what Blum (1987, 310) referred to as the "altruistic motive toward others," as well as acting upon that desire by coming to know the other's condition, are what might be called interdependent variables in the enactment of responsiveness. To come to know someone else's condition, we must want to know that person. We gather information through personal interactions, through conversations and personal encounters, for example, and through keen observation of others' conduct. We attempt to "read them." Reflection about the information we gather on our own, and with the help of others, enables us to consider what type of response to provide.

The initiative that Blum suggested is needed to be responsive is related to what van Manen (1991) called intentionality in pedagogy, as I interpret van Manen's meaning of it. Such intentionality requires the teacher to capture the essence of each student's personal learning space, recognize the uniqueness of that space, and enter it with respect and understanding. The teacher seeks to become part of that space to advance the student's learning. To accomplish this, the teacher learns about the student in a multitude of ways. These include intellectual strengths, personal dispositions, and special interests, as well as family background and prior learning experiences. The teacher comes to know thoroughly who the student is today to imag-

ine what the student might achieve in the future. Such an understanding can emerge from the close pedagogical relationship that the teacher develops with a student as he or she interacts with that student on a daily basis. Understanding students in this way is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve when students are primarily taught in whole-class settings, when the level of competency expected is the same for all students, when individual differences are not accounted for, and when the process of learning is unimportant as long as specific outcomes are achieved—all relatively common conditions in the climate of high-stakes testing in schools today.

THE CHALLENGES OF RESPONSIVE TEACHING

There are great obstacles to achieving responsibility in teaching, as I have framed it here. One of these is the pressure on teachers to raise student scores on standardized tests, especially in schools where performance on these tests is poor. Moreover, being responsive to students in the ways described here requires capacities and intentions on the part of teachers that are not universally present. Additionally, the time needed for teachers to respond to students in ways tailored to their individual needs is not readily available when teachers are responsible for teaching 25–30 students, or more, in a class. What kinds of standards could possibly be established for a conception of responsibility that is so closely linked to the particular interactions between teachers and students—a conception that surely defies standardization, replication, or objective characterization? How can teacher educators bring teacher candidates into serious dialogue about a conception of responsibility in teaching that rests so heavily on interpretation and sensitivity of response? Furthermore, teacher candidates may frequently ob-

serve mentors in early fieldwork internships and student teaching who do not model responsive teaching. And, even when teacher candidates are working in classrooms with teachers who are acting in a responsive manner to students, these acts are often so subtle that it may take an experienced eye to notice them.

Certainly, one of the many difficulties with the conception of responsible teaching that I am trying to represent is that it is challenging to actualize. Moreover, teachers must be able to share with others the ways in which their students are demonstrating growth over time. This type of responsibility would seem to require from the teacher significant time commitment, great physical and emotional stamina, and much smaller class size. Being there in personal ways for students requires intelligence and discernment, strong knowledge of subject matter, personal dispositions that compel teachers to want to understand students, and the capacity to be reflective. It requires the strong desire to act in students' best interests—an altruistic motive—and the physical energy and mental focus to be responsive to students on a consistent basis. Responsive teachers have a vision that places the best interests of students, as those interests are related to their development as complete human beings, and, most essentially, as unique human beings, at the center of their practice. For teacher educators who are increasingly pressured to design programs that focus on performance competency and emphasize dozens of discrete skills, an emphasis on responsibility that is enacted in particular moments of responsiveness seems illusory. And yet, because of these external pressures, as well as the climate in schools that has been created by high-stakes testing, it seems that it is much more crucial for teacher educators to turn teacher candidates toward serious dialogue about this type of responsibility.

MAXIMIZING EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES

Early field experiences may be particularly fruitful times for such dialogue to take place. The opportunities for teacher candidates to notice how mentor teachers are responding to students is heightened because, unlike during student teaching, teacher candidates have less responsibility for instruction and classroom management. The focus on individual children becomes far more difficult in full-time student teaching because of the concern student teachers feel to establish control and maintain discipline (Kagan 1992). Teacher candidates are unable, suggested Dewey (1964), to develop the psychological insight needed to make decisions that are responsive to students because of these concerns. Student teachers have a “tendency to develop a relatively utilitarian perspective on teaching” (Onslow, Benyon, and Geddis 1992, 302).

Early field experiences may be structured for interns to observe the class while the classroom mentor teacher is teaching and to work one-on-one with students and teach small groups while the classroom mentor teacher works with the remainder of the class. In this way, there may be more attention paid to the ways in which students learn and less concern given to classroom management. Teacher candidates may see that it is possible to learn a great deal more about students under these conditions and, perhaps, will attempt to create classroom environments that will allow them to be attentive to individuals when they have classrooms of their own. Such attention is impossible when instruction is primarily designed for the whole class and

all students are expected to master the same level of content and skills at the same time. Yet, individual attention is necessary if teachers have any hope of being responsive to students.

Indeed, the nature of learning experiences considered to be valuable for students may be similar to the experiences that have value for teacher candidates and, in fact, may serve as models for their future teaching. Such experiences are suggested by Duckworth (1996, 7), who argued that teachers can provide occasions for wonderful ideas for students who can be “caught up in intellectual problems that are real to them.” Similarly, real situations in classrooms can provide teacher candidates with authentic prob-

lems to contemplate and focus them on ways they might be responsive to individual students. These experiences often are emotionally compelling because teacher candidates often focus on developing relational bonds with students and show evidence of the “altruistic motive” discussed earlier. Dialogue between teacher educators and teacher candidates about classroom experiences has the potential to draw prospective teachers into thoughtful consideration of aspects of teaching that move beyond “technique” and “instructional strategy” to the way that teachers conduct themselves with students in one-on-one interactions that represent responsiveness. In fact, it is during these early field experiences that prospective teachers may be able to be most attentive to aspects of responsiveness in teaching and, perhaps, are most impressionable about the consequences of its absence.

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TOWARD AN APPRENTICESHIP OF CONTEMPLATION

The relatively small impact of teacher education programs on teacher candidates that is cited in literature includes the work of Lortie (1975), whose “apprenticeship of observation” referred to the deeply ingrained images of teaching that teacher candidates possess as they begin their teacher preparation programs. Hundreds of hours in K–12 classrooms have provided teaching models for teacher candidates, and many of these models are inconsistent with the notion of responsibility in teaching as has been framed here. Rather, teacher educators should embrace a different kind of apprenticeship during a teacher candidate’s preparation. This might be called an “apprenticeship of contemplation.” The practicality of contemplation in teaching was discussed eloquently by Buchmann (1989), who suggested that contemplation in teaching not only supports the practice of teaching, but also draws attention to its intrinsic value. Contemplation may move teachers closer to the notion that teaching is a “virtuous activity.” Such recognition walks hand-in-hand with the conception of responsiveness. The word contemplation itself compels us to slow down, take notice, pay attention, and recognize, as well as think through an event, idea, emotion, or encounter. These are the very same practices that teachers need to develop the capacity to be responsive.

At first glance, contemplation may seem similar, if not identical, to notions of reflective practice, and, indeed, the two have a strong kinship. However, according to Zeichner (1996, 202–05), the reflective practice movement had several shortcomings; these include its aim of replicating “university-sponsored empirical research [that] has allegedly found to be effective,” its avoidance of “ethical and moral implications,” “social considerations,” and its

emphasis on individual reflection versus reflection in which “groups of teachers can support and sustain each other’s growth.” Zeichner’s concerns were especially pertinent to the nature of responsibility in teaching. The reflective practice movement, Zeichner argued, focused too heavily on the technical aspects of teaching to the “exclusion of the moral and the ethical realms.” Responsiveness in teaching is much more closely associated with the moral and ethical realms of teaching than it is with notions of effective teaching, which are associated with process-product, positivist educational research. Such reflection may be strongly associated with getting the job done, with desired results being fairly uniform across students.

More inclusive notions of effective teaching were considered by Oser, Dick, and Patry (1992) and required a renewed attentiveness to the idea of responsibility in teaching. It was their view that responsibility is more resistant to procedural description than the behaviors generally associated with process-product research. Oser et al. (1992, 12) called for a synthesis between responsibility and effectiveness, suggesting:

We can say that a method is both effective and responsible if the criteria of performance are combined with the criteria of morality and commitment: reinforcement of good student behavior is effective and responsible if the reinforcement technique is combined with truthfulness; an individual learning sequence can be considered effective and responsible if the strategy used is appropriate (or fair) with respect to the learning capacity of the child.

The notion that responsibility and effectiveness in teaching are interdependent is a compelling one. Responsibility in teach-

ing requires teachers to be accountable to their students for teaching acts, to be fair, and to be trustworthy. Responsiveness is specific to each encounter that a teacher has with a student and suggests a moral responsibility to the well-being of the student inherent in each act—a responsibility that always is oriented to the personal development of the child. Responsive teaching practice is replete with moral meaning that transcends effectiveness, as it is ordinarily conceived. Responsiveness does not presume the need for a synthesis between effectiveness and responsibility, because it does not assume an inherent split between the two. Teachers who are considered to be effective also may be responsive. The ways that teachers know how to act responsively to students, however, emerge from their knowledge of their students first, rather than from a body of decontextualized knowledge about teaching and generalized assumptions about what all students should be learning and achieving at a particular grade level. Responsiveness, if it is to be considered effective teaching in a sense other than the kind of effectiveness that is often discussed in literature, is a point of intersection of these elements: interpretation and understanding of who the student is as a unique human being at a particular point in his or her development; commitment to a set of broad aims for teaching; and conducting oneself in responsive ways based upon both understanding of the student and a commitment to his or her development as a complete human being. Helping teacher candidates actualize such an intersection—indeed for teacher educators to actualize it themselves—would require a more robust emphasis on contemplation of the moral dimensions of teaching. It is this realm of teaching that Zeichner (1996) argued is missing from the reflective practice move-

ment, but one that deserves renewed attention in teacher preparation today.

REDEFINING RESPONSIBILITY

That the responsibility of teachers is so closely associated with expected outcomes, regardless of the particular situations of individual students, is problematic when the diverse needs of students is considered. In fact, in their zeal to help students develop and demonstrate subject-matter competency and perform well in the climate of high-stakes testing, teachers may engage in practices, such as hours of test preparation, that are deleterious to the well-being of students. As teachers feel pressure to push students to demonstrate what is considered acceptable grade-level performance, they may be less attentive to what is instructionally appropriate for individual students at a certain point in time. As they aim to be responsible and accountable to external stakeholders, they can be distracted from what they might do to make the biggest difference in a student's growth, while, in fact, this ultimately reflects to what extent they are responsible.

What seems to be called for is that we investigate how specific, and sometimes unrecognized, teaching acts may be powerful representations of responsiveness—responsibility in its most particular sense. Such investigations may help illuminate a notion of responsibility in teaching and teacher education that is different from narrowly defined conceptions of it. It is my sense that we have not yet examined alternative notions of responsibility as they are manifested in the practice of teachers with sufficient seriousness of purpose and in ways that may contribute to broadened public understanding of responsibility.

The responsiveness of committed teachers to their students is manifested numerous times during the school day. It is often subtly expressed when teachers act

in spontaneously sensitive ways as they intuit the needs of particular students at any given moment. In this regard, the impact of a teacher's responsiveness to a student may be profound. It is during such moments that students may come to understand their potential to learn and find ways to actualize this potential. Such an actualization may be partially represented by knowledge demonstrated through test performance, but certainly is manifested more compellingly by the way in which students live their lives.

Responsiveness in teaching is difficult to quantify, but its qualitative implications are significant—both inside classrooms and beyond them. Students come to school with a

wide variety of individual capacities, interests, and special circumstances, each at a different point of instructional need. Our sensibilities tell us, therefore, that the outcomes of schooling will be different—not necessarily better or worse—for every student. It is the responsibility of teachers to make sure that these differences do not result in some students having less of an opportunity to live well. Rather, through responsiveness to every student, teachers can nurture the unique personal qualities students possess and help move them toward deeper understandings of both the world around them and the universe within them.

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