

One to Grow On / Being a Guiding Light Teens Need

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Adolescence is a sea of uncertainty, but teachers can help navigate it.

Adolescents stand astride the worlds of childhood and adulthood. Their legs are wobbly, and the space below is an abyss. They are cocky—and terrified. They know everything and, for all practical purposes, nothing. They long to be accorded the privileges of adulthood while yearning (if they are lucky) to crawl back into a parent's lap. They are becoming many things, and the becoming is awkwardly incomplete. They often see themselves as wonderful when adults see them as maddening, and as maddeningly inadequate when adults see them as wonderful.

So what do they need in school? The simple answer is, "Everything." Adolescents in school need help navigating a terrain littered with sinkholes and sharp-edged rocks. They need teachers who see teaching as much more inclusive and encompassing than just providing and measuring content.

On my best days as a teacher, I have seen the world through the eyes of my adolescent students and have been a more adequate teacher for them. I have also been mentored by wise authors whose words have extended my vision of teaching. One of those mentors-through-writing is Max van Manen, an educator with Dutch and Canadian roots whose thoughts I've found particularly applicable to teaching adolescents. He suggests five elements that seem a reasonable answer to the question of what teenagers need in school. They need teachers who *embrace*, *invite*, *lead*, *trust*, and *embody*.

Embrace

When the teacher enters the classroom, he sees children who are big and small, coarse and finely featured; he sees sullen faces and noble appearances, ill-shaped and well-proportioned bodies—as if they were the representation of creation. And his glance, the glance of the educator, embraces them all and takes them all in. (van Manen, 1991, p. 66)

Adolescents need adults in their lives who "embrace" them, who seek to know them, who have abiding respect for who they are and who they will become. Adolescents need adults who dignify them and who make clear that they, as teachers and fellow human beings, are themselves dignified by virtue of their ongoing apprenticeships with the students. Students who have teachers who see them in this light, are, I believe, far more likely to traverse adolescence—and beyond—successfully.

Invite

Schools need to offer young people a caring and supportive environment, not only because caring teachers and caring schools tend to reproduce a caring orientation in the students, but also because a caring school climate sponsors the conditions for personal growth itself. (van Manen, 1991, p. 66)

In order to grow cognitively and academically, adolescents need what John Hattie (2012) calls an invitational learning environment—a place where they feel seen, known, appreciated, challenged, and supported. In that place, they see themselves and their peers being contributing members of teams. Not only does each team of learners provide reliable support for academic success, but it also creates opportunities for meaningful peer connections—a pivotal need for adolescents who are transitioning away from parents and other key adults as anchors for their world. Teachers who "invite" teenagers to learn understand that when a student's social-emotional needs go unmet, the likelihood of academic success is significantly, if not fatally, diminished for that student.

Lead

Leading means going first, and in going first, you can trust me, for I have tested the ice. (van Manen, 1991, p. 38)

Strong leaders take care of their students. Strong teachers are effective leaders of their students. They ask them to go on a journey that is both rigorous and rewarding. Their vision for students individually and for the class as a whole is compelling. It raises learning to a higher plane and lifts up the learner. A strong leader listens more than speaks, learns more than tells, has a sharp sense of direction, and communicates that direction clearly. These teachers honor the experience and judgment of their students by regularly seeking their counsel on ways in which the class is working well and ways in which, together, they can make it more effective.

Trust

Young people who experience our trust are thereby encouraged to have trust in themselves. Trust enables. (van Manen, 1991, p. 68)

Adolescents need teachers who trust both their capacity to learn and their intent to do the right thing. Those teachers also know that adolescence is prime time for learning the pathways to success and

making sound choices. The most effective teachers provide teens with the opportunity to do aspirational work and to exercise their judgment in significant matters. At the same time, these teachers are keenly aware that most teens are relative novices in the art of learning and reasoned judgement, and so they mentor the students in developing the skills, attitudes, and habits of mind most likely to lead to learning success and to right-minded decision making. These teachers provide parameters and principles for growing independence. They eschew cages.

Embody

In some sense, (a great) teacher is what he or she teaches. A mathematics teacher is not just someone who happens to teach math. A real math teacher is one who embodies math, who lives math, who in a strong sense is math. (van Manen, 1991, p. 77)

Adolescence should be a time for dreaming and giving shape to dreams. Excellent teachers don't cover content and prepare students for tests on which they will be asked to select "truth" from a brief set of snippets. Rather, they help students see the poetry and drama in their lives, show them the long parade of human triumph and folly, enable them to lend their voices to the human song, and guide them to wonder at the reliability and flux in the natural world. Great teachers for adolescents say every day, through words and actions, "To learn is to be fully human. Let's share the joy and the struggle of finding meaning in our lives and in the places where we live."

What adolescents need in school is teachers who not only care *about* them, but who care *for* them (Gay, 2018). They need teachers who enjoy their company, but who go well beyond that to ensure that they build foundations for strong, sturdy, contributing, and satisfying lives. That seems an appropriate mission for teachers who commit to teaching young people during the most complex, promising years of their lives.