

# *From Lists to Images: Exploring the Concept of the Good Teacher in Teacher Education*

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*Youth demands images for its imagination  
and for forming its memory.*

Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1989

The ultimate aim of teacher education, it can be argued, is the development of good teachers. This aim and the questions it raises persist, however much we might argue about exactly what this means and however much our circumstances shift and change. In this way, the question of what it means to be a good teacher is central to the very endeavour (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Although this question by itself is not directly a curriculum studies issue, it can be approached in such a way that it draws upon questions such as *What knowledge is of most worth?* (Pinar, 2006) and *Whose knowledge is of most worth?* (Apple, 2010) and *What do we teach? What are schools for?* (Young,

2010). Moore (2004) positions both teacher education and the question of what it means to be a good teacher within broader curriculum discourses: "By and large, the notion of what represents good teaching is inevitably linked to notions of what represents a good school and a good education (and even, in some cases, to how a specific subject area should be taught), and equally inevitably these are all variable concepts" (p. 35). Curriculum studies makes it possible to examine the taken-for-granted social, moral, philosophical, linguistic and cultural issues in education which includes the question of how we conceptualize *good teachers*.

Darling-Hammond and Snowden-Baratz (2005) titled their defense of teacher education programs *A Good Teacher in Every Classroom: Preparing the Highly Qualified Teachers our Children Deserve*. Even though the book itself is small by academic standards (a mere 104 pages), it constitutes a rather lengthy list of what student teachers need to know and be able to do. It is evocative of another thin volume written by another American teacher educator a century ago. In 1915, William M. Wemett of the North Dakota State Normal School wrote a type of educator self-help book called *Am I a Good Teacher?*. In it, he created categorised lists of questions to provide teachers, especially new ones, "an intelligent standard by which to judge his [sic] own teaching ability" (Wemett, 1915, p. 4). Overall, there are 514 questions that teachers ought to be able to answer satisfactorily in order to be comfortable that they are, in fact, *good teachers*.

### A Brief History of List-Making in Education

Both of these books, well-intentioned and supportive of the intrinsic value of teachers to student learning, dared to address the challenge of how we define what it means to be a *good teacher*. They are merely representative, however, of more than a century of list-making in education. Some curriculum scholars mark the beginning of such activities with the rise of Frederick Winslow Taylor's *scientific management* and the corresponding emphasis on efficiency and "the logic of fragmentation" (D. Jardine, 2013, p. 14). Taylor measured industrial workers' movements and productivity down to each step and each second; this resulted in lists of instructions and duties for employee. In Friesen's (2009) landmark Canadian study of student engagement, she directly links the impact of Taylorian logic with changing descriptions and definitions of teacher effectiveness; such definitions included lists of tasks such as "managing the class by stressing punctuality, obedience and time on task and delivering information in a timely, efficient manner" as well as adherence to a curriculum that was "standardized, simple and invariant" (p. 3).

That spirit of industrial efficiency infused the work of Taylor's contemporary, Franklin Bobbitt (2009), who emphasized the creation of lengthy lists of "social deficiencies" (p. 21) which would form the foundation of a new American curriculum: "Education needs to assemble them in as accurate and particularized a form as possible" (p. 3). Indeed, the pursuit of "accurate and particularized" lists continues to abound in education, especially among American scholars. Even a brief

survey of the American educational landscape since the turn of the 20th century demonstrates the regular return to list-making.

Bobbitt's curriculum work began at the end of the First World War, and the oft-cited Tyler Rationale (Tyler, 2009) was first published immediately following the Second World War. Tyler's focus on listing specific learning objectives is taken up a few years later in Bestor's (1955) critique of post-war schooling and his call for a renewed emphasis on content mastery; interestingly, Bestor makes an explicit connection between his disdain for progressive curriculum in schools and what he calls "inadequate training" of new teachers (p. xi). While Bestor makes this connection in the most negative of terms, it is significant to note the recognition of the relationship between curriculum writ large and teacher education which was not often acknowledged in that era. Writing at the same time as Bestor, Bloom (1984) published one of the most well-known lists in teacher education: the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Although now accompanied by updates and revisions (see, for example, Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001), the lasting influence of Bloom's original taxonomy highlights the appeal of clear, hierarchical lists.

Although some more recent lists created by American educational theorists have not been as influential in Canada and other nations because of their narrow focus on national identity (see, for example, Hirsch's (1987) list of 5000 essential facts that all Americans should know), it is not difficult to trace the impact of Taylor, Bobbitt, Tyler, Bestor, and Bloom in programs of study for both K-12 students and

student teachers throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first centuries (Friesen, 2009; D. Jardine, 2013; Kliebard, 2009; Pacheco, 2012). Educators are regularly bombarded with lists of many types: student names and numbers, policies and procedures, objectives and outcomes, resources, competencies, assessment strategies, etc. Lists may be overwhelming, but they are also appealing because they appear orderly, concrete, and tidy when so often the lived experience of teaching is unpredictable, fluid, even messy.

### The Limitations of List-Making

Attempting to create a list of the universal traits, skills, knowledge or competencies of good teachers, however, quickly becomes problematic. Lists, by their very nature, have the possibility of expanding endlessly. List-making also requires the fragmentation of a given subject—in this case, the complex, contingent, relational act of teaching—into seemingly discrete pieces. And, perhaps more subtly, conceptualizing good teachers as compilations of traits, skills, and/or competencies limits the kinds of conversations in which teacher educators, student teachers, and partner teachers can engage.

A key question that arises when list-making is chosen as the means for describing good teachers is *how do we know when the list is complete?* One of the appeals of lists is that they can always be added to. For example, a large study with American middle school teachers sought to establish what practicing teachers themselves consider the key elements of good teaching (Watson, Miller, Davis, & Carter, 2010). The researchers

compared their results with Stronge's (2007) *Teacher Skills Assessment Checklist*, chosen as "the most comprehensive" description of effective teachers (Watson et al., 2010, p. 12), hoping to highlight some of the key elements already listed. Instead, they found that rather than narrowing the list, their findings led to the recommendation that 20 more items be added. In this type of list-making, it seems the more input that is sought, the longer the list grows. As it happens, during the writing of this paper I received a social media alert directing me to an online article entitled "11 Habits of an Effective Teacher" (Lam, 2014); the tag line of the alert asked readers to respond to the question "What would you add to the list?". List-making can be a never-ending task. Regardless of how formal or informal the process, the quest for clarity and inclusion of multiple voices seems to result in longer and longer lists.

Perhaps one of the deeper challenges of using lists to describe what it means to be a good teacher is that the very creation of such lists does injustice to the complexities inherent in the relational acts of teaching and learning. In his critique of a movement toward competency-based teacher education in the mid-20th century, Korthagen (2004) described the inevitable result of list-making: "In order to ensure sufficient validity and reliability in the assessment of teachers, long detailed lists of skills were formulated, which gradually resulted in a kind of fragmentation of the teacher's role" (p. 79). Such lists seem divorced from the reality of life in classrooms where teaching and learning are "contingent, dynamic, everchanging: every moment, every second is situation-specific" (Van Manen, 2008, p. 12). van Manen (2008) contends that the speed and

fluidity in classroom interactions defies even reflection-in-action, let alone conformity to checklists. Despite the risk of this kind of fragmentation, however, lists of teacher qualities, competencies, and practices continue to proliferate as a way to try and talk about what is meant by the phrase *good teacher* (see, for example, *Common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications*, 2010; Ko, Sammons, & Bakkum, 2013; OECD, 2013; Stronge, 2007). Thus, it is worth heeding Biesta's (2014) caution that "generating lists that are far too long and far too detailed" runs the risk of turning teacher education into "a tick box exercise" (p. 2).

To be fair, even in the midst of the list-making, many researchers acknowledge that *what it means to be a good teacher* defies universal, once-and-for-all definition (Biesta, 2012; Goldberg, 2003; Haysom, 1985; Hinchey, 2010). The impulse to formulate lists and definitions continues, however, as both a result and a reflection of the way programs of study are often written; lists of objectives or outcomes or competencies provide the appearance of unanimous agreement, uniformity, and unbiased assessment practices. The rewording, additions, and improvements of existing lists implies a conviction that the insufficiency is in the current lists rather than in the very process of list-making. Therefore, it is worth asking, hypothetically, just what the creation of the *ultimate list* to describe good teachers would do for teacher education.

Like Wemett's (1915) book of over 500 questions, it would be a long list indeed. Ideally, however, such a list is sought as both a guide and measure of teacher development. Teacher educators, student teachers,

and administrators would have a common set of expectations and vocabulary with which determine *just how good* any particular teacher is. Perhaps the list would be conceptualized as a ladder up which student teachers could climb rung by rung, or perhaps as a developmental continuum within which they would be asked to place themselves at various points in their education. Perhaps, it would literally be turned into Biesta's (2014) feared tick boxes, and pre-service teachers would have to provide evidence of each one in order to graduate. This hypothetical exercise is not intended to belittle the efforts of those who have endeavoured to create effective lists to answer the difficult question of what it means to be a good teacher. Rather, the purpose is to underscore the contention that the very act of list-making, even when it is well-intentioned, can both oversimplify ("All you have to do to become a good teacher is complete this list.") and overcomplicate ("Good teachers demonstrate all *x number* of these traits, attitudes, and skills simultaneously.") teacher education.

List-making also limits the kinds of conversations teacher educators, prospective teachers, and partner teachers might engage in. The subtlety of these limitations makes them all the more important to highlight. Jardine (1990) told the story of attempting to talk with a student teacher about her apparent "disconnectedness" in her field experience—the sense that she was not being fully present to her young pupils (p. 211). The student teacher, operating within a technical, list-based discourse of education, responded by asking if she should use more frequent eye contact. Jardine used this anecdote to demonstrate the difficulty of



having authentic conversations regarding the lived experiences of teaching and learning when the participants operate from different understandings of what it means to be a good teacher:

Education is a risky, tense conversation between the old and the young, between the old and the new. Given this, educational theorizing cannot be simply a matter of declaring an end to this conversation through objective re-presentations which render it univocal (i.e., turn it into the singular voice of the disinterested, methodical theorist). It is a matter, rather, of getting in on this conversation. (p. 229)

Lists are often perceived as univocal and can, therefore, foreclose on conversations. Student teachers who genuinely want to become good teachers can easily become overwhelmed just by reading the catalogues of good teacher traits (Kottler, Zehm, & Kottler, 2005), competencies (Common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications, 2010), beliefs and attitudes (OECD, 2013), and/or practices (Hattie, 2012), let alone trying to demonstrate them all to evaluators. Conversations about genuine presence in the classroom may be reduced to itemized behaviours such as increased eye contact. Teacher educators and partner teachers faced with such lists can also get caught up in the "tick boxes" rather than "inquiry into the full phenomenon of education" (Jardine, 1990, p. 225).

### Images Rather Than Lists

Entering into the "risky, tense conversation" (D. W. Jardine, 1990, p. 229) about what it means to be a good teacher involves acknowledging the insufficiency of both lists and list-making. There may well be many other ways to approach this question, but one way that we might begin to move away from list-making is to address "the images of teachers" that "populate our minds" (Eisner, 2006, p. 44). There is a small body of research which proposes that practicing and pre-service teachers already conceptualize what it means to be a good teacher in images (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Clandinin, 1986; Harris, 2009; Johnston, 1992) and discourses (Moore, 2004). This paper aims to foreground that research and the types of conversations it enables in order to begin to interrogate the images and corresponding discourses about *good teachers* that are held both individually and collectively within "a culture of images" (Smith, 1999, p. 54).

A few years ago, Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco curated an exhibition at the Louvre that focused on "the essential nature of lists" (Beyer & Gorris, 2009). In an interview, Eco stated that "The list is the origin of culture," but it becomes clear that his conceptualization of lists is broad and encompasses multiple forms of visual representation including images (Beyer & Gorris, 2009). While acknowledging the possibility of relationship between lists and images, this discussion takes a more narrow understanding of what a list is and focuses on the contrasts between lists and images rather than on the ways in which they might interrelate.

Much of the literature that draws upon the concept of image to describe how teachers and student teachers understand themselves and their work harkens back to Clandinin's (1985) early work that defines image "as a component of personal practical knowledge ... based on the narrative unity (Clandinin and Connelly, 1984; Connelly and Clandinin, 1985) of an individual's life ... as a central construct for understanding teachers' knowledge" (p. 363). Such images, Clandinin (1985) emphasized, are based on one's experiences and are, therefore, highly specific to the individual teacher. They are grounded in the past, impact the present, and reach into the future as embodied ways of making meaning. Image, in this sense, provides a way to discuss teachers' knowledge as personal and practical rather than as merely conceptual or propositional. The question of what it means to be a good teacher can, therefore, begin to move beyond the search for universals to include the particularities of individual experience and context.

While Clandinin's (1985) initial study was of practicing teachers, similar approaches to better understand how teachers conceptualize what it means to be a good teacher have since been used in both professional development and teacher education settings. Calderhead and Robson (1991) utilized this understanding of image as a way to explore first year student teachers' "taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and children that inform their practice" (p. 2). In their analysis, they explained that although there are debates in cognitive psychology about whether images are representations or reconstructions, the concept of image is useful in describing student-teachers' knowledge (it could be

argued that beliefs and attitudes could also be included in this use of the term knowledge) because of its "strongly visual nature" and inclusion of an "affective component" (p. 3). The student teachers described their ideas of good teaching in images rather than in lists of teacher traits and behaviours. By analyzing these images in detail, the researchers concluded that these novices were actually "synthesising quite large amounts of knowledge about teachers, children, teaching methods, and so on" (p. 7). Of interest to teacher educators, the images expressed by the student teachers were both positive, highlighting what kind of teacher students wanted to become, and negative, highlighting what kind of teacher they were committed to *not* becoming.

Johnston (1990, 1992) also used Clandinin's (1986) construct of image to study "the actual ways in which student teachers and teachers hold, develop, and use the knowledge which guides them in the practice of teaching" (1992, p. 123). In her first study, that of curriculum decision-making by experienced teachers, Johnston (1990) noted that images are "modes of knowing" and therefore tend to operate outside of conscious thought (p. 469). Entwistle et al. (2000) referred to this concept as "intuitive theories of teaching" (p. 9). These images of what it means to be a good teacher appear to be persistent throughout a teacher's career and "seem to guide practice towards the achievement of intentional goals" (Johnston, 1990, p. 469). Although they were not the ones to introduce the concept of image into the study, the teacher participants were able to directly address and "readily respond" (p. 469) to the construct of image when it was raised by the researchers. This seems to support Johnston's

conclusion that images are a useful construct for understanding and describing teachers' decision-making.

In a subsequent study, Johnston (1992) explored how the construct (such an interesting word that is never fully explored in any of this work) of image can also be helpful for teacher educators to better understand how student teachers envision what it means to be a good teacher. By again using Clandinin's definition of image as a form of practical knowledge, Johnston focused on the images student teachers both bring to and develop during teacher education. The stated aim of the project was to "use this understanding to build more effective teacher education programs" (p. 126). Like Clandinin (1985), Johnston concluded that these images are highly individualized and are related to the whole of a student teacher's educational experiences, including childhood schooling experiences; even students who had been in the same teacher education program for nearly three years held strongly divergent images of teaching (p. 134). Thus, the main recommendation for improving teacher education programs was to provide opportunities for student teachers to "explore their images of teaching prior to the practicum and then use their classroom experiences specifically to clarify and develop those images" (p. 135). The construct of image thus becomes significant as a means by which student teachers, partner teachers, and teacher educators can discuss and compare their personal visions of teaching.

### Interrogating the Images

While the concept of image can successfully interrupt the practice of list-making to describe good teachers and teaching, we ought to challenge the notion that these images are purely personal and individualized. As Gadamer (1989) emphasizes in *Truth and Method*, young people require images in order to form their memories and imaginations, and a dozen years spent in school desks along with a plethora of media representations of schooling ensure there is no shortage of images available to pre-service and practicing teachers (Britzman, 1986). Thus, while it can be argued that each teacher develops an image of what it means to be a good teacher, it can also be argued that these images are not developed in isolation. They are, to return to Gadamer, formed within and shaped by the *sensus communis*, the sense of what is right and good "that is acquired through living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims" (p. 20). Thus, it is necessary to explore some of those held-in-common images and popular ideas about what it means to be a good teacher.

In contrast to the studies described above, Harris (2009) took the idea of the image of the good teacher more literally and explored the visual and narrative images presented in popular culture. By examining four well-known Hollywood films (*Dangerous Minds*, 1995; *Freedom Writers*, 2007; *Dead Poets' Society*, 1989; *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003), Harris concluded that western media representations of good teachers are problematic for many reasons: teachers in films often ignore mandated curriculum, have few students, work in isolation from colleagues, are

"not just heroic but saintly," and have very short careers (p. 17). Movie teachers also tend to teach by force of personality without reference to any teacher preparation or professional development. Harris' focus, unlike the previously described studies, is on the types of images portrayed in films about teachers rather than on the images held by teachers themselves, but this work contributes to the discussion about how images can both shape and reflect conceptualizations of good teachers by positioning those images as being culturally formed rather than simply the result of personal experience.

Moore (2004), in his book *The Good Teacher: Dominant Discourses in Teaching and Teacher Education*, makes a direct link between cultural representations or images of good teachers and the expectations of teachers, student teachers, and teacher educators. He states that the "concept of the charismatic teacher" which is "popularized and hegemonized in filmic and other fictive representations of successful teaching" is one that "continues to haunt large numbers of teachers and student teachers" (p. 5). Such images are powerful forms of *cultural myth*, described as "'a set of ideal images, definitions, justifications, and measures for thought, feeling, and agency'" (Britzman, 1991, as cited in Moore, 2004, p. 5). Because the images of teachers are combined with and reinforced by platitudes and catch phrases, Moore uses the term *discourses* rather than simply images to describe three common conceptualizations of good teachers: charismatic subjects, competent craftspersons, and reflective practitioners. Using a Foucauldian view of discourse, Moore emphasizes the idea that these images are socially

constructed and therefore bestowed with a sense of authority and legitimacy; this is a helpful counterpoint to Clandinin's (1985) early assertion that "each image is specific to a particular teacher" (p. 380).

### Conclusion

The literature focused on good teacher images and discourses offers different possibilities for teachers, both in-service and pre-service, and teacher educators to "get in on the conversation" (D. W. Jardine, 1990, p. 228). However, these images and discourses must also remain open to interrogation. It will not do to simply exchange the idea of the ultimate list of descriptors with an idealized image of the perfect teacher. As Harris (2009) and Moore (2004) highlight, media images of good teachers are hegemonic, culturally powerful, and problematic. Although Johnston (1992) proposed that the exploration and development of student teachers' own images could become central to the teacher education process, these images ought to be examined as both individually and culturally informed. Images can be interrogated in the same way as lists: through conversation.

The types of questions posed in curriculum studies can provide some guidance for such ongoing discussions in teacher education. Rather than, or in addition to, asking student teachers to brainstorm a list of good teacher behaviours or to describe their individual images of what it means to be a good teacher, teacher educators can model and support conversations around questions such as *What kinds of images of teachers currently dominate popular culture? Whose images are those? What are the*



*implications of adopting those images as "commonsensical"* (Britzman, 1986, p. 454). The questions *What do we teach?* and *What are schools for?* (Young, 2010) can also be asked in light of individually held and socially mediated images of good teachers. It is important for such conversations to acknowledge that, as Ricoeur (1992) cautioned regarding narratives, an image is "never ethically neutral" (p. 115).

Conversations in teacher education about what it means to be a good teacher are "irresolvable, ongoing, fluid, risk-laden" (D. W. Jardine, 1990, p. 229), but they are necessary conversations. Moore (2004) reminds us that "the words 'good' and 'teaching' are conceptually contestable, and perhaps demand rather more contestation than they often receive, particularly when they are bracketed together in this way" (p. 9). He advises that "we need to abandon easy answers, and in particular those which claim universality" (p. 11). It is widely agreed that good teachers matter, but unless we understand what we each mean when we say *good teachers*, that consensus is restricted to word choice rather than shared understanding.

Many lists have been constructed in the effort to clarify what it means to be a good teacher, but teaching and learning are activities that resist simple definition, or, as Jardine (1990) put it, they require "a love of ambiguity" (p. 231) that cannot be captured through list-making. If it is the case, as suggested by the literature discussed above, that practicing teachers, student teachers and by extension teacher educators already construct and operate from images and discourses of what it means to be a good teacher, then focusing on these might offer meaningful

opportunities for "risky, deliberate engagement of the full conflict and ambiguity by which new horizons of mutual understanding are achieved" (Smith, 1988, p. 175). These conversations, however, must be entered into with a keen awareness that the aim is deeper understanding not the creation of an image-based definition to simply replace prior list-based definitions.

### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Many thanks to Dr. David Jardine for his thoughtful and thought-provoking comments on an earlier draft of this work.

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