

# Are Teachers Allowed to Think for Themselves?

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As a public school teacher, I am often told what to do and how to do it.

Go teach this class.

Report to lunch duty at this time.

Monitor this student's progress in this way, that student's progress in another way, differentiate the following, document this medical condition, write up this behavior, check for that kind of hall pass, post and teach these academic standards, etc., etc., etc.

Some of these directives I agree with and others I do not. But that is treated as an irrelevance because the one thing I'm never told to do is to think for myself. The one thing that seems to be expressly forbidden – is that I think for myself.

In fact, it's such a glaring omission, I often wonder if it's actually prohibited or so obviously necessary that it goes without saying.

Am I expected to think or just follow directions?

Does society want me to be a fully conscious co-conspirator of student curiosity or a mindless drone forcing kids to follow a predetermined path to work-a-day conformity?

Most days, it feels like the later.

Every last detail of my job is micromanaged and made “foolproof” to the degree that one wonders if the powers that be really consider teachers to be fools in need of proofing.

Teaching may be the only profession where you are required to get an advanced degree including a rigorous internship only to be treated like you have no idea what you’re doing.

And the pay is entirely uncompetitive considering how much you had to do to qualify for the position and how much you’re responsible for doing once you get hired.

It makes me wonder – why did I take all those courses on the history of education if I was never supposed to have the autonomy to apply them? Why did I have to learn about specific pedagogies if I was never to have the opportunity to create my own curriculum? Why was I instructed how to assess student learning if I was never meant to trust my own judgment and rely instead solely on prepackaged, canned standardized tests?

And now after 16 years in the classroom, I’m routinely told by my principal to use student testing data to drive my instruction. And, moreover, to document how I am doing so in writing.

But what if I don’t trust the student testing data in the first place?

What if – in my professional opinion – I don’t agree that the state should have purchased this standardized assessment from some corporate subsidiary? What if I don’t think it does a good job evaluating a child’s aptitude as a prediction of subsequent achievement on the next test? What if I don’t think the test provides valuable data for actual, authentic learning? What if I want to do more than just improve test scores from one standardized assessment to another? What if I want to actually teach something that will affect students’ whole lives? What if I want to empower them to think for themselves? What if my goals are higher for them than the expectations thrown on me as shackles on an educator’s waist, hands, and feet?

Because it seems to me that there is a bit of a mixed message here.

On the one hand, teachers are given so many directives there’s no room for thought. On the other, teachers can’t do their jobs without it.

So what exactly do they want from me?

The principal can’t educate classes from his desk in the administrative office. The school board director can’t do it from his seat in council chambers. Lawmakers can’t do it from Washington, DC, or the state capital. Only the teacher can do it from her place in the classroom, itself.

You have to see, know, and interact with your students to be able to tell what their needs are. No standardized test can tell you that – it requires human interaction, knowledge and – dare I say it – discernment.

You need to gauge student interest, background knowledge, life skills, special needs, psychology, and motivation. And you need to design a curriculum that will work for these particular students at this particular time and place.

That can’t be done at a distance through any top-down directive. It must be accomplished in the moment using skill, empiricism and experience.

The fact that so many lawmakers, pundits, and administrators don’t know this, itself, has a devastating impact on the education kids actually receive.

Instead of helping teachers do their jobs, policymakers are accomplishing just the opposite. They are standing in the way and stopping us from getting things done.

We're given impossible tasks and then impeded from doing them. At least get out of the way and leave us to it.

It's ironic. The act of removing teacher autonomy results in dampening our effectiveness.

So as many of these same bureaucrats complain about "failing schools" and "ineffective teachers," [it is these](#) very same complaints and the efforts taken in their name that result in ineffectiveness.

If we trusted teachers to do their jobs, they would be empowered to accomplish more. And I don't mean blind trust. I don't mean closing our eyes and letting teachers do whatever they want unimpeded, unadvised and unappraised. I mean letting teachers do the work in the full light of day with observation by trained professionals that know the same pedagogy, history, and psychology we do – trained administrators who are or were recently teachers themselves.

That would be both accountable and effective instead of the present situation, which is neither.

Moreover, it might incentivize policymakers to realize teachers can't do everything themselves. Hold us accountable for what we do – not what you'd like us to do but over which we have no control.

After all, home life has a greater impact on students than anything that happens in class. And helping students to self-actualize into mature, productive members of society requires we equip them with the ability to work things out independently.

However, that does not seem to be the goal.

We don't want free thinking students just as we don't want free thinking teachers.

We don't want a school system that produces independent thinkers. We want it to simply recreate the status quo. We want the lower classes to stay put. We want social mobility and new ideas to be tightly controlled and kept only within certain boundaries.

And that is why our school system keeps teachers so tightly constrained – because we want status quo students.

Educators have always been the enemy of standardization, privatization and conformity. We are on the side of liberty, emancipation, and release.

Which side are you on?