

Why is teaching today so tough?

Spiritually evolved people, by virtue of their discipline, mastery and love, are people of extraordinary competence, and in their competence they are called on to serve the world, and in their love they answer the call. They are inevitably, therefore, people of great power, although the world may generally behold them as quite ordinary people, since more often than not they will exercise their power in quiet or even hidden ways. Nonetheless, exercise power they do, and in this exercise they suffer greatly, even dreadfully. For to exercise power is to make decisions, and the process of making decisions with total awareness is often infinitely more painful than making decisions with limited or blunted awareness. M Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*, London, 1978, p 75

Many teachers, I submit, are 'spiritually-evolved people' who are extraordinarily competent, loving and sensitive. Because they are invested with power they are constantly called upon to make complex and difficult decisions which lead to personal suffering. This is why teaching is tough – and also why it is so rewarding.

Love

In the end . . . only kindness matters

Jewel

There is one quality of the modern teacher that is essential, above all others – the ability to give and show love. In the past teachers could get by, and were often respected, if they were tough, distant and unyielding. Maybe these teachers still loved their students – but they sure didn't show it. 'Don't smile until Easter', beginning teachers

likely to complain today if they think a teacher is uncaring, than if she has poor class control or doesn't know her subject. Maybe teachers are being asked to fill the love-void left when parents are absent because of family separation or work commitments. Maybe children, reared more gently and flexibly than those of previous generations, only recognise love in a quiet voice and a compassionate demeanour.

Whatever the reason, teachers are responding to students' need for love by giving love in return. They are listening more and speaking less; they are reflecting more and confronting less; they are offering choices more and directing less. By opening themselves up to love, though, teachers are opening themselves to the possibility of pain. Teachers who become more aware of needs often act self-sacrificially to meet them. They spend more time, struggle to learn more sophisticated skills and use more energy solving problems. Indeed, Christian teachers find themselves modelling the servant leadership of Jesus who gave himself up in humble service to those he loved.

Power

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. Nelson Mandela

It is just as well most teachers are capable of love, because they have immense power. And the more teachers relate to students one-to-one, the more personal power they have. Parents delegate to teachers their responsibility to nurture their precious children for thirteen impressionable years for six or more hours of each day. One sentence from a teacher, can have a lifelong effect: 'You think you're special, but you're not' said to one of my children; 'You're basically a good kid – I think you'll be OK' said to another. One action by a teacher can change a life: a too-hard Maths paper that permanently affected a child's confidence; a teacher's home offered to a child during a traumatic time that



St Andrews Lutheran College students

brought about a family reconciliation. When teachers engage with students at a profound level, they begin to realise the extraordinary power they have to inflict damage or to promote good. Such a realisation can bring both anxiety and delight.

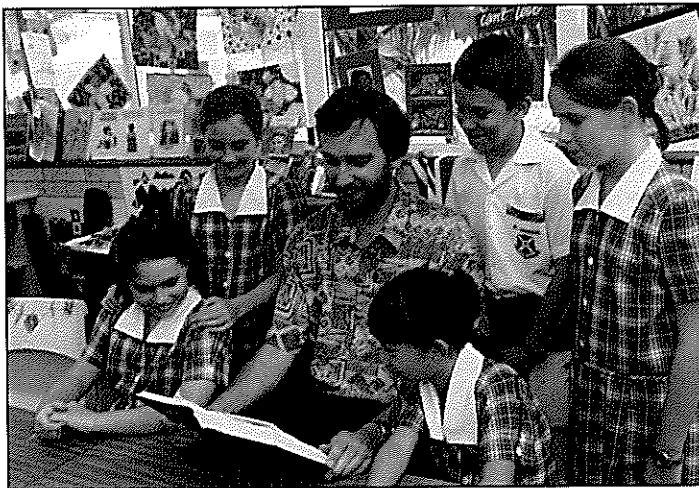
Teacher power has also increased in another way in recent years. At every level educational leaders are abandoning top-down hierarchical structures and employing collaborative processes to give stakeholders a voice in decision-making. Leaders are seen as those who influence the values of an organisation, not just those who occupy designated positions. Teacher-leaders spend hours of time working in teams to make policy and determine procedures in many aspects of school life.

Suffering

'His glorious power will make you patient and strong enough to endure anything, and you will be truly happy.'

Col 1:11

Thus teachers are now expected to make many more decisions than they ever have before and the decisions themselves are much more difficult. In today's world, moral, spiritual and educational direction is much less clear. Postmodern people generally reject the idea of absolute truth and authority and insist upon individual freedom and



Ed Szabo with St Andrews students

Almost everyone will tell you (except when they are complaining about teachers having too many holidays) that teaching is a tough job. 'I wouldn't want to do it' they say with a grimace. Teachers who have been teaching for years tell you it's tougher now than it ever was, and various reasons are given – the children are more badly behaved, the courses keep changing, the pay is lousy, the status has declined to that of a used car salesman, etc, etc.

But recently M Scott Peck's famous book suggested to me another reason.

were advised by experienced ones. While this saying has some practical use, it reflects an underlying belief, now discredited, that developing open and loving relationships with students will necessarily undermine order and the educational process. In fact, the reverse is true – many students will simply not learn if they think the teacher does not like them. In secondary schools, for example, students will not select a subject, even if it is essential for their future, if they think the teacher is demeaning or unapproachable. Parents, I have found, are much more



Sal Mattner with St Andrews student



Ruth Butler with St Andrews students

respect for 'difference'. There is so much choice on offer, and we are told that in our world change is the only constant. Many thoughtful Christians recognise that we need to accept some of the challenges posed to our life and faith by today's thinkers and policy makers (for example the commitment to social justice) but we cannot swallow everything whole.

For example, Christians stake our faith on the notion that there *is* such a thing as truth and it is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We affirm the reliability of a text, the Bible, to teach us clear guidelines for our lives. Yet society as a whole has no more respect for Christ or the Bible than it has for any religious text. 'Because the Bible tells you so' as a reason for obeying a rule carries absolutely no weight at all with most teenagers today. The only absolute truth, it seems, is that there is no absolute truth.

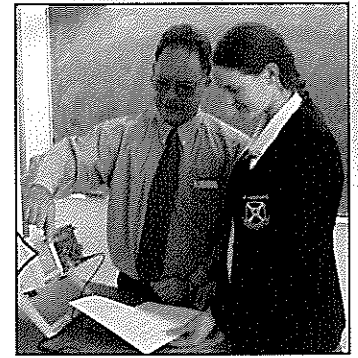
Decision-making for today's Christian teachers and administrators becomes very difficult when we must consider both biblical guidelines and the legitimate postmodern insistence upon social justice and equity. For example, what should we do about the homosexual student who 'comes out' to his peers, or the teacher having an extra-marital affair, or the student who is planning an abortion? Teachers make decisions about such situations, sometimes with considerable anguish, knowing that, whatever they do, they will incur the disapproval or wrath of some of the people concerned, their Christian friends and leaders, or society at large.

Perhaps the major source of stress in decision-making for teachers and administrators today is the tension between the postmodern concern about the rights and freedoms of the individual, and the traditional respect for order, authority and the value of

community. While there is a strong rhetoric in political and educational circles about the need for community, when the chips are down most students (and parents) today want their individual needs put first. St Paul's instruction, 'Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others' is dismissed as impossibly foolhardy, along with 'Turn the other cheek'. In the past in schools it was not so difficult to solve situations involving conflict between the interests of an individual and the interests of the group. If in doubt, the needs of the whole won over the needs of the one. If a child did badly on a test because of a personal problem - 'Tough!' If he disrupted a class - 'Outside!' If a child was disabled - 'Hard luck, off to special school!'

Today if the teacher clearly knows her students and is sensitive to their needs, it is a much tougher call. As Scott Peck says, 'the process of making decisions with total awareness is often infinitely more painful than making decisions with limited or blunted awareness (which is the way most decisions are made and why they are ultimately proved wrong)' P76. Consider the pain of the teacher who has to decide to leave out of the sporting team the student with low self-esteem who would most benefit personally from inclusion, or the Special Needs teacher who supports inclusive education for a disabled student despite the opposition of parents of other students in the class, or the Deputy who chooses not to suspend a student for fighting because he knows how the boy's abusive father will respond or the Principal who expels a normally well-behaved student for dealing in drugs.

It would not be surprising if we found today's teachers trying to back away



John Burnett with St Andrews student

from such powerful decision-making responsibility. But instead, they continue, day after day, to take up the challenge out of love for those whom they serve. Yes, they may suffer, but they can take heart in the knowledge that their decisions are more likely to have positive results than those made with less personal cost. According to Scott Peck 'The best decision-makers are those who are willing to suffer the most over their decisions but still retain their ability to be decisive. One measure - and perhaps the best measure of a person's greatness is the capacity for suffering. Yet the great are also joyful.' Those who experience pain through the service of others, then, can also expect joy. Joy because Christ comforts them with his Spirit, joy because they are working harmoniously with others, joy because they see their work bearing good fruit, and joy because once in a while, not too often, and usually many years later, somebody, somewhere says 'thank you - you made a difference.'

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Stephen McGrath with St Andrews students