



Become a Teacher: Light a Spark

Dear Friend,

Who would ever want to be a teacher? A teacher makes no money, gets no respect, and makes no difference to anyone! Now wait a minute. Is this true? Or are we listening to exaggerations and remembering stereotypical images of the bespectacled, mean old Miss Crabtree from old movies?

Think back to all of the teachers that you have encountered in your eleven or twelve years of schooling. Which one stands out in your memory? What grade? Was it your kindergarten teacher who was not afraid to give a hug when it was needed? Your third grade teacher who taught you the magic of cursive writing? Or that fifth grade teacher who made you retake that spelling test fifteen times until you triumphantly got them all right? The algebra teacher who made math finally make sense? A shop teacher with a sharp tongue and a helping hand? A foreign language teacher who showed you the world? Or an English teacher who shared your love of reading and writing? Somewhere in your educational career, one or more of these outstanding individuals opened your mind and showed you the way. That teacher made a difference in your life.

And when you become the parents of the twenty-first century, and you will, with young ones to care for and educate, who will teach those children? Who will make a difference in the lives of the next generation? If none of you choose to go into education, to make a positive difference in the lives of children who are not even born yet, who will be there to guide them, or direct their minds through the beauty and complexity of the vast wealth of knowledge that we now control?

As you consider teaching as a career, I'd like to offer my own personal response to teaching as a profession. My students often ask me, "Why are you a teacher?" implying that teaching is a terrible career choice. I tell them in response, "I teach because I need you as much as you need me. I teach because once upon a time a teacher made a difference in my life, so I am here to make a difference for you." They ask me about the lack of respect for the profession. I respond with, "Raise your hand if you don't respect me!" They grin and see my point. They want to know about the lack of financial rewards. I tell them honestly, "It's not fair that our society pays its entertainers more than its educators, but I make a good living, can support a family, and send my children to college. And I get extra benefits—smiles, hugs, and the knowledge that what I do really matters."

Historically and traditionally, the end of the bright freedom of summer marks the beginning of a new school year. You, as students, have accomplished this cycle many times. Each new school year is filled with new hopes and possibilities—new

bookbags and textbooks, fresh clean paper, and more often than not, a new teacher to encounter. A teacher who has the potential, just like a new textbook, to open your mind to ideas as yet unimagined. Why not be that teacher? The one who sings the song that you'll always remember.

Each generation benefits from the knowledge of the past. Your parents had less to learn than you do, and your children will learn more than you can imagine. We will need well-trained, dedicated teachers who can make this transfer of vast amounts of knowledge a reality.

For education to occur, there must be a learner, a teacher, and a place for them to connect. This could be accomplished in a traditional classroom with thirty students listening to a teacher in a three-story brick school building, or through a computer located on another continent. But education also happens in homeless shelters, hospital wards, computer labs, business offices, and parking lots. Education sings in hallways as well as auditoriums, and dances in small rural cottages as well as gleaming city edifices. Education soars when one child and one teacher make the connection between the unknown and the known. Where was your connection? Who made the difference?

Four hundred years ago someone taught Shakespeare to love the language and to make it sing through the ages. Stephen King and Martin Luther King, Queen Elizabeth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—all had teachers who prepared the vision and gave them the courage to fly to its heights. What unknown heroes and artists wait in the darkness, untouched and uninspired? What moment of magic will change their darkness into luminescence? And what will you do to light the spark?

The next century will bring discoveries as yet undreamed. Your children will need teachers who can provide them with a memory of the past as well as a vision of the future. If you, who represent the best young minds of today, are not encouraged to become the educators of tomorrow, who then will teach the children of the twenty-first century?

A child, unlike any other, yet identical to all those who have preceded and all who will follow, sits in a classroom today—hopeful, enthusiastic, curious. In that child sleeps the vision and the wisdom of the ages. The touch of a teacher will make the difference. And that teacher can be you.

Sharon M. Draper
Former National Teacher of the Year