

Implementation: The difference between effective and ineffective teaching

By Samuel Felkowitz

Best practices in education are easy to find, yet hard to implement. What are *Best Practices*? *Best Practices* in education are actions that demonstrate a high probability of producing positive outcomes in learning. Innovation is important in education. However, even more important, is the ability to *implement* policies that have been *proven* to work. *Implementation* is key.

For example, research consistently demonstrates that providing high quality feedback on student work promotes academic achievement. However, scan the gradebooks of low performing classrooms and you will consistently see student notebooks with no feedback or an out of date online gradebook. Almost never are these flawed actions the byproduct of malice intent from the teacher or school.

Implementation of school policies too often follow a consistently flawed pattern. The school year starts off with *Professional Development Week* in which school leaders expound school policies and expectations. “Lesson plans are due on this day, homework should be posted by this time, and boards need be updated by this date.” The hopes, expectations, and ambitions of the school are high (as they should be!). Then the year begins.

For the first month, school leaders implement a series of accountability measures to ensure school policies are followed. You might expect reminder emails sent to staff members and report cards for teachers among these accountability measures. Subsequently, at a certain point in the school year, the reminder emails stop, the accountability measures are diminished, and the training wheels are removed. *Self-accountability and responsibility are key*. This period of time is the dividing line between *ineffective and effective teaching*.

Ineffective Teachers

It is common for ineffective teachers to take a mental accounting of *what is* and *what is not being enforced* by school leaders. A general rule with ineffective teachers is that if they can get away with failure to follow a school policy, they will ride the wave as long as they can until someone flags their practices, or lack thereof practices. These teachers know that they *should* post grades on time, but they think to themselves “Is anyone really looking at the gradebook?” A hundred rationalizations can be given for why best practices are not implanted in their classroom:

- “I have a family at home. Who has time to grade papers?”
- “It is Sunday. No one cares if I wait until Monday night to post my homework.”
- “My students are so far behind. Even if I provide feedback, they are still three grade levels behind!”

When confronted with a parent complaint, ineffective teachers might even blame an individual student or parent for their actions. School policy calls for a teacher to post a clear description of homework for the week online. When a parent confronts the teacher after failing to post, you might hear the teacher respond as follows: “I told the kids in

class what the homework is and everyone else knew the homework.” Rather, than taking responsibility to improve and implement best practices, ineffective teachers too *commonly rationalize, deflect, or blame others*.

Effective Teachers

In contrast, effective teachers are self-accountable. Administrative reminders are nice but not the reason for performing *best practices* for their students. Rather than taking a mental checklist of *what is* and *what is not* being enforced by school leaders, effective teachers strive to implement best practices in their classes for their intrinsic value. These teachers understand that implementing best practices will in the long run lead to greater work/life balance and peace in and out of school.

Effective teachers develop habits for success. Rather than leaving work exactly at the school bell, these teachers stay after school 30 minutes on a Thursday or Friday to post homework for the upcoming week. By doing so, these teachers free up their Sunday night from the anxiety of posting homework last minute. Moreover, this proactive approach will save teachers the stress of parent phone calls or emails about not knowing the homework in the future.

Effective teachers start with the goal in mind and work backwards. They are value added in their approach to their students. Rather than questioning why an 8th grader writes at a 5th grade level, they accept their students 5th grade paper and provide feedback every day of the school year. You’d be surprised how many grade levels a student can grow with 180 days of small feedback on their writing.

Effective teachers are not driven by a rod from administration, nor are they credit seeking. Rather, effective teachers implement *best practices* with a sense of a moral obligation to their students, their parents, and the community they serve. They understand that best practices- which to some teachers are a burden- are in fact the driving force for their professional success, wellbeing, and work/life balance. In the long run, these professionals will be rewarded and recognized for their efforts.

Is there such a thing as a purely effective/ineffective teacher?

In truth, the vast majority of teachers are neither *entirely* ineffective nor effective. Rather, to use a baseball analogy, some games the batter strikes out every at bat; other games, he gets a hit every at bat. Teachers also have their good days and not so good days. Moreover, in some area’s a teacher may be highly effective (i.e. classroom management) whereas in other areas (i.e. grading papers) a teacher might be a work in progress. However, as in sports, consistency, responsibility, and growth is key. When confronted with a strike out, a good baseball player does not blame the umpire or his coaches for the strikeout. Rather, a good player goes to the batting cages, studies his swing, and practices every day to raise his batting average for the betterment of his team. As it is with teaching. Implementation is key. When schools collectively strive to implement best practice in their schools, a winning culture takes hold. The following is a list of 5 recommendations for teachers to help them successfully use best practices in their classroom.

- 1) **Develop systems for success:** Yes, it is true that implementing best practices may in the short run require additional training, thinking, and/or implementation measures. However, in the long run, these measures increase not only teacher effectiveness but job satisfaction. Systems for implementation are key. Systems are habits, routines, or processes that can become automatic with time. For example, if teachers find

grading papers to be a challenge, a teacher may call students up one at a time during independent work to grade and provide students instant feedback. It's a win-win. Students receive feedback. The teacher is able to block off 20 minutes of class time to input grades. Procrastination and perfectionistic thinking are the death of teachers. Rather, develop life and work hacks to be more effective.

- 2) **Develop a growth mindset:** Implementation is in fact challenging at first. Sadly, too often teachers give up or lower standards just as they are about to succeed. Remain resilient. With time, you can succeed.
- 3) **Research how other teachers implement best practices in their classroom:** You do not need to reinvent the wheel. Today billions of data points on teaching can be accessed with the click of the button on our phone. Are you waiting in line at the DMV to get your license renewed? Take out your phone. Go to google.com and type in "strategies for implementing differentiated instruction in your classroom." You will find millions of articles, YouTube videos, and professional development courses on the topic.
- 4) **Develop relationships with your colleagues:** Learn what teachers in your school are doing to support student learning. You'd be surprised what great ideas you can gain by asking a colleague for feedback.
- 5) **Leverage school leaders, parents, and influencers in your school with a solutions approach:** School leaders and parents are an incredible resource when used *effectively*. The most effective teachers approach school administrators or parents having first thought out solutions or ideas to promote student learning in your class. Speaking out challenging of course is important in professional growth. However, if your conversation with administration or parents begins and ends with the problems you have in your class, you will rarely win the support nor develop the ideas needed to affect positive change.