

Harvard Educational Review

Harvard Graduate School of Education

“The Passionate Teacher: A Practical Guide”

By Robert L. Fried • Boston: Beacon Press, 2001. 304 pp.

an excerpt

In *The Passionate Teacher: A Practical Guide*, Robert Fried argues that many of the difficult issues in education today can be faced constructively, and perhaps be overcome, by passionate teachers. Fried has developed the concept of the passionate teacher through his work in teacher professional development in schools throughout the country. For Fried, “to be a passionate teacher is to be someone in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day — or captivated by all of these” (p. 1). Speaking to both experienced teachers and new teachers, Fried examines several of the challenges that confront educators — including the amount of content to teach, the nature of assessment, and the most effective ways to motivate students — and illustrates, through stories of practitioners and their teaching, ways that passionate teachers can work through these dilemmas. While Fried acknowledges his debt to Deborah Meier and Ted Sizer for many of the ideas that he raises, his unique and effective contribution to the literature is the connection that he forges between philosophical ideas about teaching and practical steps that teachers can take to infuse their own teaching with passion.

The book is organized in five parts. In Part One, *The Passion*, Fried demystifies what he means by the passionate teacher. Breaking passionate teaching down into three components, he argues that passionate teachers can be passionate about their field of knowledge, issues facing the world, or children. Speaking to teachers, he says: “The passion that accompanies our attention to subjects, issues, and [student learners] is not just something we offer our students. It is also a gift we grant ourselves: a way of honoring our life’s work, our profession. It says: ‘I know why I am devoting this life I’ve got to these [students]’” (p. 19). Interweaving stories from practitioners he has met in his professional development work, Fried brings passionate teaching to life by demonstrating ways that specific teachers forge relationships with their students, create classroom environments that promote integrity and respect, and provide students with opportunities to take ownership of their learning.

In Part Two, *The Game*, Fried discusses what he believes is the greatest obstacle that educators face: what he calls “having to play ‘The Game of School’” (p. 93). As he sees it, educators face this obstacle “whenever nobody cares what’s going on intellectually in the classroom or the school, when the idea of learning is treated as a mindless duty — something to ‘get through any way you can’” (p. 93). Students play the game of school when they figure out what teachers want and treat school as a trick rather than as an opportunity to learn. However, Fried argues that administrators, parents, and teachers . . . can also play the same game. . . . Teachers play the game of school when they are more interested in covering the curriculum than in their students’ learning. Parents who pressure their children to take on activities or courses with the purpose of constructing transcripts and records that will impress colleges, regardless of their children’s actual interests, are playing the game of school. According to Fried, the way that schools function makes us vulnerable to the game. As he explains, schools “load us up with things to do that help everybody avoid confronting issues about meaning and motivation and choice in our work” (p. 96). Fried maintains that passionate teachers can change the game of school by generating excitement about their subject matter, about issues in the world, and about students and their learning. The genuine enthusiasm that passionate teachers express in their work can motivate students and focus the attention of

administrators and parents on student learning as the highest educational priority. In this way, passionate teaching counteracts and interrupts the game of school.

In Part Three, *The Stance*, Fried argues that passionate teachers have what he calls a stance: “a philosophy, an attitude, a bearing, a way of encountering students based on a set of core values about kids and their learning potential” (p. 139). Grounded in this philosophy, passionate teachers project their stance in their teaching, in their planning, and in their interactions with students, parents, and administrators. In the chapter “Putting Your Stance into Practice,” Fried gives readers questions to consider as they formulate their own stances as teachers. These questions are designed to encourage teachers to clarify and verbalize their values and to uncover connections between their values and students, the subject area, and teaching and learning:

What are the five most important values or beliefs in my life? What are the ideas and ideals I try my best to live by? What are five core beliefs that I hold about [student learners]? If I were the boss of the whole school, what words would I like to see greet everyone who entered the building and every student who walks into a classroom? What is it about the subject(s) I teach that connects with my core values and beliefs? Why have I chosen to devote my professional life to this field? What might my students produce or demonstrate that would prove to me that they had really benefited from my role as teacher? (pp. 173–174)

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In Part Four, *The Student*, Fried discusses three ways that teachers . . . can inspire students to perform at their personal best. First, he argues that teachers should teach only what is most important about their disciplines, that the amount of subject matter that covered by most courses is too great, which gives students only superficial exposure to a wide range of material. By emphasizing depth over breadth, Fried hopes to encourage teachers and students to explore the curriculum through engagement with meaningful ideas and experiences. Second, Fried suggests that teachers give students meaningful challenges in the classroom, rather than rote or mechanical activities. He calls these challenges “real jobs” and notes: “There is hardly an instructional unit that cannot be transformed into a job that students can plan, organize, carry out and complete for the good of the community. Only then will we feel their pride and see how capable our students are” (p. 107).

The Passionate Teacher: A Practical Guide offers an inspirational perspective on teaching and learning. Furthermore, by skillfully blending philosophical writing, the voices of real practitioners, and practical suggestions for becoming a passionate teacher, Fried brings passionate teaching to life in all its richness and complexity. Works by John Dewey, particularly *Experience and Education* and *The Child and The Curriculum*, would be interesting companions for this book, as they are the most often cited formulations of these ideas in U.S. educational history.

Fried uses an informal, conversational tone that makes the book an engaging read, and his interviews with and stories about teachers seat the reader at a fascinating roundtable discussion with skillful, passionate practitioners. Some readers may find Fried’s focus too narrow, as he places the responsibility of facing — and perhaps overcoming — educational issues on the individual teacher. Nowhere in the text does Fried address the ways school structures can inspire and support passionate teaching. Still, *The Passionate Teacher* is must read for all teachers, no matter what subject or age groups they teach, and this book is a particularly valuable resource for educators of preservice teachers.