Lee Shulman (2004) is a master at providing wisdom about the process of teaching. One gem I treasure is what I call “Shulman’s paradox.”

Teaching is impossible. If we simply add together all that is expected of a typical teacher and take note of the circumstances under which those activities are to be carried out, the sum makes greater demands than any individual can possibly fulfill. Yet, teachers teach…. How is the impossible rendered possible in practice? (p. 151)

Most of us who prepare and mentor teachers face Shulman’s paradox. We ask a great deal of our teachers and they sometimes protest, “But aren’t you asking for the impossible?” We smile, acknowledge their point, and yet note, “Look around, teachers teach and some teach very well indeed.” We might add, “We need to honor these teachers’ contributions.”

Most teachers working alone cannot cross the yawning gap between what teaching should accomplish and what any human can actually accomplish when working with a diverse group of students in a school that places increasing demands on its teachers. Most teaching would grind to a halt were teachers not given the supports they desperately need.

There are critical supports every teacher needs to teach well. These are:

- a sound preparation that launches beginning teachers with a strong foundation to tackle the myriad challenges of the classroom;
- a support system that mentors fledgling teachers and guides their progress toward becoming masters of classroom learning;
- a well-examined set of values that guides teachers in making sensitive responses to the questions and thoughts that students raise;
- worthy curricular resources that teachers can draw from in shaping classes rich with inquiry and challenge.

We are in a moment when the place of teachers in American society is much under attack. I think what we as scholars can contribute is an understanding that teaching is indeed a delicate balancing act. Those who threaten to throw off this balance endanger the whole project of preparing our children to assume their places as educated leaders in the world they will inherit.
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