



Teacher quality matters a lot. But can high-quality teachers be made?

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The Economist's [new cover story](http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21700385-great-teaching-has-long-been-seen-innate-skill-reformers-are-showing-best) (<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21700385-great-teaching-has-long-been-seen-innate-skill-reformers-are-showing-best>) makes a pretty strong case that teacher quality is really important. Among the many studies cited: a University of Melbourne review of more than 65,000 papers on the effects of various classroom interventions. It concludes that what matters most is teacher expertise: "All of the 20 most powerful ways to improve school-time learning identified by the study depended on what a teacher did in the classroom."



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/twenty20_b4a10816-d287-49fb-b495-30e05b496ba9_teacher_classroom_school-e1465838764964.jpg)

Twenty20.

Another paper found that students taught by teachers in the top 10% for effectiveness learn 1.5 years' worth of material in an academic year, three times as much as those taught by teachers in the bottom 10%. And this:

Thomas Kane of Harvard University estimates that if African-American children were all taught by the top 25% of teachers, the gap between blacks and whites would close within eight years. He adds that if the average American teacher were as good as those at the top quartile the gap in test scores between America and Asian countries would be closed within four years.

The big question, then, is to what extent good teaching can be taught. Are high-quality teachers born that way or can they be made?

There is some reason to think particular classroom techniques are more effective than others, and that they can be taught. Moreover a new breed of institutions such as [Relay](http://www.relay.edu/) (<http://www.relay.edu/>) and [Sposato](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewiKodeLvqXNAhUBcyYKHaQyD_YoFqgcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.relay.edu%2F) (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewiKodeLvqXNAhUBcyYKHaQyD_YoFqgcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.relay.edu%2F) is "applying lessons from cognitive science, medical education and sports training to the business of supplying better teachers." And what do these new teachers' schools do differently? From the Economist:

The curriculum of the new schools is influenced by people like Doug Lemov. A former English teacher and the founder of a school in Boston, Mr Lemov used test-score data to identify some of the best teachers in America. After visiting them and analysing videos of their classes to find out precisely what they did, he created a list of 62 techniques. Many involve the basics of getting pupils' attention. "Threshold" has teachers meeting pupils at the door; "strong voice" explains that the most effective teachers stand still when talking, use a formal register, deploy an economy of language and do not finish their sentences until they have their classes' full attention.

But most of Mr Lemov's techniques are meant to increase the number of pupils in a class who are thinking and the amount of time that they do so. Techniques such as his "cold call" and "turn and talk", where pupils have to explain their thoughts quickly to a peer, give the kinds of cognitive workouts common in classrooms in Shanghai and Singapore, which regularly top international comparisons.

Trainees at Sposato undertake residencies at Match schools. They spend 20 hours per week studying and practising, and 40-50 tutoring or assisting teachers. Mr Gutlerner says that the most powerful predictor of residents' success is how well they respond to the feedback they get after classes.

Among the biggest barriers to improvements cited: Unions may make it hard to collaborate; overconfidence (most "low-performing teachers in America think they are doing a great job"); and these newly skilled teachers could get overwhelmed by old-fashioned institutions "that lack the intense culture of feedback and practice of places like Match. This is a big caveat: across the OECD two-thirds of teachers believe their schools to be hostile to innovation."

Learn more: [Before we start building a wall: Why low-skill immigration may not really affect the wages of US-born residents](http://www.aei.org/publication/before-we-start-building-a-wall-why-low-skill-immigration-may-not-really-affect-the-wages-of-us-born-residents)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/before-we-start-building-a-wall-why-low-skill-immigration-may-not-really-affect-the-wages-of-us-born-residents>)
| [Is America smart enough? A Q&A with Garrett Jones on IQ and the 'Hive Mind'](http://www.aei.org/publication/is-america-smart-enough-a-qa-with-garett-jones-on-ig-and-the-hive-mind/)
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