The Attributes of Excellent Teachers: Views From Practicing Teachers

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Introduction

The key to a great educational system is great teachers as indicated by significant student achievement gains when placed with an effective teacher versus a less effective teacher (Wright, Horn, & Sundeen, 1997). This study examined the responses of 646 teachers from across the nation to a survey focused on the attributes of a great teacher.

Key Points in Relevant Research

- Pre-service teachers believe the following 7 themes are indicative of effective teachers: student-centered, classroom and behavior management, competent instructor, ethical, enthusiastic about teaching, knowledgeable about subject, professional (Minor, Ouwarguzaite, Witcher, & James, 2002).
- Sachs (2004) has identified five attributes of effective urban teachers: sociocultural awareness, contextual interpersonal skills, self-understanding, risk taking, and perceived efficacy.
- Effective primary teachers utilized more engaging activities, demonstrated greater enthusiasm about the subject matter, held higher expectations, praised student achievements, and encouraged self-regulation (Bohn, Rosberg, & Presley, 2004).
- Most teachers do not have the same cultural frames of reference as their students (Lee, 1993), yet students learn better from culturally contextualized teaching that builds instruction on cultural references and experiences of the students (Gay, 1993).
- According to Basow (1995), not only does the gender of the student affect teacher evaluations, but also the gender of the instructor affects students’ perceptions of effective teachers.

Research Goals:

As we prepare teachers in light of No Child Left Behind and the focus on a qualified teacher in every classroom, it is critical that teacher preparation institutions examine the characteristics of excellent teachers from different perspectives so that the best teachers are prepared for our nation’s classrooms and that these teachers have the attributes of excellent teachers, as determined by their peers as well as other interested stakeholders.

An instrument was adapted from the previous work of Johnson (2002) who studied college and high school student perceptions of excellent teacher attributes finding that students did not consider knowledge of content or instructional practices very highly, but they did value personal qualities such as warmth, caring and humor. The current study examined the responses of over 727 educators, focusing on the responses of practicing teachers.

Methods

Data collected from 727 educators across the country.

Respondent Demographics

Sample Items from the Instrument

Using a five-point Likert-type scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, think of an excellent teacher you have known. This person may be a colleague or a teacher you had as a child and who you know to be a great educator. Please respond to the following items with that one person in mind.

The excellent teacher you have in mind:

1) Is caring
2) Is humorous
3) Is knowledgeable
4) Enhances learning with technology
5) Is friendly
6) Uses the internet as a resource
7) Is fair
8) Is enthusiastic
9) Is flexible
10) Is a good disciplinarian
11) Is creative
12) Motivates students to learn
13) Keeps current with the latest technology
14) Provides a rich learning environment

Analysis

Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Conclusions:

According to Schunk (1985) modeling hinges on perceived similarity between the observer and the model, race and gender being two potential sources of comparison as exhibited in the results here. However, Gay (1995) indicates that as long as teachers embrace their own and others’ ethnic identities, models and mentors of students do not have to be of the same ethnicity. The fact that these findings indicated a similarity between the observer and the model may indicate that teachers are not teaching in a culturally responsive manner and that our teacher preparation programs need to emphasize how to link classroom content to students’ experiences. Similar to Minor, Ouwarguzaite, Witcher, and James (2002), White teachers valued instructional techniques more than individuals of a different ethnicity. As Minor, et al. (2002) explain, this may be due to the fact that many minority teachers are in urban districts where enthusiasm is crucial for student motivation and self-esteem. Also, Minor, et al. (2002) indicate that Black teachers find it critical to teach more than the subject matter and instill values of pride, equity, wealth, power, and cultural continuity. This finding may apply to Asian or Pacific Islanders as well. Likewise, Au (1980) found that Hawaiian students’ leading achievement increased significantly when communication patterns in the classroom resembled the storytelling patterns at home. Therefore, Instructional Techniques would not be as important, perhaps, as Personal Distributions, such as creative and is enthusiastic. Finally, contrary to previous studies (Minor, et al., 2002; Ogunde, et al., 1994; Witcher & Ouwarguzaite, 1999) women in this study were more likely than men to rate instructional techniques as a component of effective teaching. Our study presents an interesting role reversal with regard to Instructional Techniques, but one that is positive because these factors, over personal attributes, can be more readily taught and learned to influence student learning. Also, it may suggest that the historical gender imbalance of curricular content in schools is changing.