The Attributes of Excellent Teachers: Views from Practicing Teachers

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Abstract
The key to a great educational system is built upon great teachers. In former President Clinton’s 1997 State of the Union address, he stated that education would be the number one priority for the next four years, and that a good education begins with first-rate teachers; “To have the best schools, we must have the best teachers” (http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/SOU97). In 2001, President Bush reiterated the necessity of qualified teachers in his address to the Joint Session of Congress; “We've increased funding to train and recruit teachers, because we know a good education starts with a good teacher” (http://www.usconsulate.org.hk/usinfo/sou/2001.htm). Through the No Child Left Behind Act, we promise a qualified teacher in every classroom. However, the definition and preparation of excellent teachers is not clearly defined because there are multiple perspectives of these qualities. This study examines the responses of 626 teachers to a survey (using a Likert-type 5-point scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) focusing on the attributes of a great teacher they have known. Teachers were asked to respond to the following prompt: Throughout your years of experience, think of a great teacher that you know. What are the characteristics made that teacher great for you? The sample consisted of 626 teachers; 22.6% male and 77.3% female; and 18% rural, 42% suburban, and 40% urban. Using principal components factor analysis, the following seven factors emerged: Instructional Techniques, Personal Attributes, Use of Educational Technology, Social Skills and Warmth, Consistency, Class Format, and Strictness. The results indicated that the top responses were not related to classroom management or knowledge of the content as indicated by the factor Instructional Techniques, but by affective characteristics found in the Personal Attributes factor, such as caring, humorous, flexible, etc (M=4.62). Additional analyses indicated a significant pattern of teachers selecting someone of their own gender and ethnicity as the excellent teacher.

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, & Sanders, 1997). While many researchers understand that teacher quality matters for student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Gay, 1995; Rice, 2003; & Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997), there is still a great deal of uncertainty in the definition of a highly qualified teacher. A large array of research that attempts to identify the characteristics of a great or an effective teacher exists (see Abrami, 1985; Costin, Greenough &
Menges, 1971; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Frankel, 1995; Karle-Weiss, 1990). Rice (2003) noted that the attributes of excellent teachers are found to vary due to discipline, grade level, and student population. For instance, Sachs (2004) identified the following five attributes of effective urban teachers: sociocultural awareness, contextual interpersonal skills, self-understanding, risk taking, and perceived efficacy. Meanwhile, 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, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004). Bohn, et al. (2004) also indicated that effective primary-grades teachers spend more time on instruction, utilize more diverse instructional strategies, act as a coach rather than teach through direct instruction, motivate their students through positive reinforcement, and manage their classroom effectively. In contrast, Thompson, Ransdell, and Rousseau (2004), in a study of kindergarten through 6th grade teachers, found that master teachers managed a teacher-centered classroom where teaching was didactic rather than constructivist. These master teachers also managed students’ behavior through established rules and procedures. These master teachers were, however, talented in the use of positive reinforcement and in clear verbal and nonverbal communication.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) outlined the many kinds of knowledge attributed to teachers’ effectiveness: general academic and verbal ability, subject matter knowledge, knowledge about teaching and learning, teaching experience, and the set of qualifications measured by teacher certification in addition to traits such as enthusiasm, perseverance, flexibility and concern for children.

While student performance in high stakes testing often determines the effectiveness of teachers at the K-12 level, student ratings have a significant impact on the evaluation of teachers and their effectiveness in higher education. For numerous years, students have been asked to identify characteristics of effective teachers. Upon examining studies from various years beginning in the 1950s, the characteristics have differed minimally. French (1957) conducted a study at the University of Washington and found that five characteristics of effective teachers were frequently cited (as cited in Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971). According to this study, great teachers are those who capture students’ attention, stress important material, make good use of examples and illustrations, inspire class confidence in his or her knowledge of the subject, and are clear in their explanations. In 1968, undergraduates surveyed to characterize great teachers indicated that a thorough knowledge of content matter, as well as preparedness, organization, enthusiasm, and student-orientatedness were critical (Crawford & Bradshaw, 1968).

In 1990, Artiles and Trent (1990) examined prospective teachers’ descriptions of effective teachers and found that the social qualities (entertaining, boring, flexible, inflexible, approachable, unapproachable, friendly, distant, caring, and uncaring) of a teacher were most important. Following social context, instruction (instructional processes and classroom management) and curriculum (content, materials, and student outcomes) were found to be the
most important characteristics of a great teacher. Likewise, findings from Witcher and Onwuegbuzie (1999) coincided with Artilis and Trent. Witcher and Onwuegbuzie’s survey results of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of great teachers indicated that student-centeredness (love of students, sensitivity, support, kindness, caring, and compassion) is the most important characteristic. Enthusiasm, classroom and behavior management, teaching methodology, and knowledge of subject followed respectively. Additionally, Young, Whitley, and Helton (1998), surveyed high school students, college freshman in developmental studies, and college seniors in education classes. Out of 19 items describing important characteristics of a teacher, 14 were found to be significant. Among high school students, college freshmen, and college seniors, a significant change was found in the importance of the amount learned, the number of outside assignments, the number of tests taken, the difficulty of the tests, class discussions, volume/ clarity of instructor’s voice, humor, calling on students, enthusiasm, knowledgeable, inspires to think deeply, movement, parent/teacher communication, and friendliness. Again, similar themes were found among pre-service teachers who believed the following seven themes are indicative of effective teachers: student-centered, classroom and behavior management, competent instructor, ethical, enthusiastic about teaching, knowledgeable about subject, professional (Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002).

While the United States is becoming increasingly diverse in its population, it is important to consider diversity and cultural reference. Fraenkel (1995) studied effective teachers in the United States, Australia, Germany, Korea, New Zealand, and Poland. Through observation and student interviews, he concluded that effective teachers embody similar traits regardless of the academic ability of students they teach or the country in which they teach. Yet, with regard to cultural frames of reference, Lee (1993) indicated that most teachers have different cultural references than their students. This is important because students learn better from cultural contextualized teaching that builds instruction on cultural references and experiences of the students (Gay, 1995).

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. Meanwhile, Freeman (1994) demonstrated that undergraduate students valued professors that exhibit androgynous, such as an instructor who exhibits assertiveness as well as affection. In examining student-defined characteristics of great teachers, gender differences are important to consider because they offer additional explanations of the response patterns.

**Methodology**

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. This instrument was comprised of 45 Likert-type items ranging on a scale of strongly...
disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Demographic data, such as location of work, grade level where one teaches, gender, and ethnicity, were also collected. The instrument was administered electronically and was programmed not to force participants to respond to each item.

Approximately 1600 educators were sent an invitation to participate in the study through e-mail. They were invited to participate once and then reminded once to complete the survey. All data collected was anonymous. The survey was available for four weeks.

Over 727 educators participated in the survey, including teachers, administrators, and other educational personnel. The participants in this analysis were 626 teachers from various geographic areas of the United States. Of the sample, 22.6% were male and 77.3% were female. The majority of the participants were white (89%) with 2.9% being African American, 3% were Hispanic, and 1.9% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Also, 18% were from rural areas, 42% from suburban areas, and 40% were from urban areas.

Results

Using principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization, the following seven factors were extracted based on eigenvalues greater than one and upon the examination of a scree plot: Instructional Techniques, Personal Attributes, Use of Educational Technology, Social Skills and Warmth, Consistency, Class Format, and Strictness. These seven factors accounted for 62.975% of the variance. Thus, five of the seven reliabilities were considered acceptable as indicated by Gable and Wolf (1993) who report that while good cognitive measures have Cronbach alpha reliabilities in the high .80s and .90s, a good affective instrument often reports reliabilities as low as .70 (See Table 1 for Reliabilities and Means). The reliabilities for Class Format and Strictness are low and results with regard to these factors should be interpreted with caution.

A 6x6 chi-square analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in response rates between the ethnicity of the person and the ethnicity of his/her excellent teacher (See Table 2 for significant chi-square results).

A second 2X2 chi-square analysis indicated that there is a significant relationship between the gender of the person and his/her Excellent Teacher’s Gender. There is a significant pattern of teachers selecting someone of their own gender as the excellent teacher (see Table 3 for significant chi-square results).

Multiple univariate analyses indicate significant Gender and Ethnicity effects are related to the Instructional Techniques factor. Females rated Instructional techniques higher than males \( F(2,724) =23.6, p<.001, \) Partial \( \eta^2 = .06 \) and Whites rated Instructional Techniques higher than Asian or Pacific Islanders \( F(5,714) =2.3, p=.043, \) Partial \( \eta^2 = .02 \).

Discussion

According to Schunk (1987) 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, Onwuegbuzie, 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 to 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’ reading achievement increased significantly when communication patterns in the classroom resembled the storytelling patterns at home. Thereby, Instructional Techniques would not be as important, perhaps, as Personal Attributes, such as is creative and is enthusiastic. Finally, contrary to previous studies (Minor, et al., 2002; Ogden, et al., 1994; Witcher & Onwuebuzie, 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 influenced.

Rice (2003) noted that the attributes of excellent teachers are found to vary due to discipline, grade level, and student population. Future recommendations suggest that analyses break down by subject matter and grade level. Also, teachers are currently being measured by their students’ achievement scores. However, Sanders and Rivers (1996) indicated that there is a cumulative effect of teachers on academic achievement. Thus, if a student is placed in a classroom with an ineffective teacher followed by a class with an effective teacher, although the effective teacher can influence the student’s learning, the change will not be great enough to be reflected in the standardized scores. Thus, other measures of teacher effectiveness must be considered for teacher quality and retention.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) has outlined three educational goals geared toward improving the quality of teachers and of teaching in American schools: What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn; recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers is the central strategy for improving our schools; and school reform cannot succeed without creating the conditions in which teachers can teach and teach well

www.tc.columbia.edu/nctaf/whoweare/index.html). Without knowing what characteristics make a teacher effective, recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers will be difficult. 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.

References


Excellent Teachers

Brown, Johnson, Ioannou & Maneggia


### Tables

Table 1.

**Reliabilities and Means of the Factors.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Instructional Techniques</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Use of Educational Technology</th>
<th>Social Skills &amp; Warmth</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Classroom Format</th>
<th>Strictness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reliability Estimates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha</td>
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<td>.941</td>
<td>.894</td>
<td>.711</td>
<td>.727</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>.489</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of items</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>4.62</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.19</td>
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<td>Standard Deviation</td>
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<td>.57</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.86</td>
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Table 2.

**Chi-Square Analysis Results with Regard to Ethnicity of Participant and Excellent Teacher.**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chi-Square Tests</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
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<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
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Table 3.

*Chi-Square Analysis Results with Regard to Gender of Participant and Excellent Teacher*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chi-Square Tests</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
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<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>139.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>132.445</td>
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<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
<td>110.14</td>
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</table>

**Author’s Note**

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