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Principals' View of the World: Identification of Valued Teacher Characteristics

by Mary Lou Fuller and H.B. Slotnick

There was an aura of joy that delighted the children, and me, the principal.

With the words, an elementary principal described the best teacher who ever taught for her. Her observation is interesting, but it stops too soon: It doesn't describe those teacher characteristics that result in the "aura of joy." Stated more generally it doesn't identify those characteristics the principal valued in the described teacher.

The study examines elementary principals' perceptions of good teachers. It was a study designed to determine what elementary principals value in teachers. This information is important because of the impact principals' values have on a variety of areas within education.

The knowledge of what principals value in teachers is important to both the teacher and the principal. For practicing teachers, this information bears upon professional issues: teacher development, hiring, placement, evaluation, tenure and dismissal. For preservice teachers, the issues bear on admission policies (e.g., What personal characteristics are to be sought?) and curriculum (e.g., What skills should [can] preservice teachers be taught?).

For principals, knowledge of those issues allows development of self-awareness and makes explicit the issues under consideration when working with the people they supervise.

Review of Literature

She treats each child as someone special and tries to make learning a very special experience for every student.

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The quote beginning this paper spoke of a teacher's enthusiasm—this one speaks of warmth and humanization of instruction—both hallmarks of effective teachers.

The research uses labels such as "good," "effective," and "superior," and tends to look at collective behavior patterns. There is very little literature dealing with the *best*: Those teachers whose exceptional abilities set them apart and who truly deserve the Master Teacher designation.

In examining elementary principals Tuckman found that they appear to prize teachers who are warm, accepting, highly organized and creative (1977). These characteristics are also cited in the effective teacher research with this body of literature identifying additional specific behaviors as well. Some of these specifics are personal interest in students, willingness to listen to students (Sears, 1940); warmth, consideration, caring (Cogan, 1958; Tikunoff, Berliner and Rest, 1975; Reid, 1962), and enthusiasm (Martin, 1963; Rosenshine and Furst, 1973).

Hamachek (1985, p. 315) classified the attributes of effective teachers under the categories of personality and intellectual traits.

Personality Traits. Effective teachers appear to be those who are, shall we say, 'human' in the fullest sense of the word. They have a sense of humor, are fair, empathetic, friendly, enthusiastic and more democratic than autocratic. Warmth, enthusiasm and humanness are important considerations when it comes to figuring out what it is that contributes to the psychology and behavior of effective teachers. However, these qualities are practically useless possessions if they are not accompanied by certain intellectual abilities.

Intellectual Traits. These abilities include understanding the use of teacher expectations (Brophy and Goode, 1973); knowing the subject matter, good communications skills (Barr, 1929); and recognizing and dealing with students' needs. While intellectual traits are essential to being an effective teacher, such individuals are nevertheless student-oriented as opposed to subject-oriented (Brophy, 1980).

Another way of looking at personality traits and intellectual skills is to examine what good teachers *are* and what they *do*. Using this framework, Olliva and Hanson developed Florida's 23 Essential Generic Competencies, a list divided into five general areas: communications skills, basic knowledge, technical skills, administrative skills and interpersonal skills.

In summarizing the research, Hamachek (1985, p. 326) notes the repetition of certain effective teacher characteristics: "... current research findings allow us to say that certain patterns of teacher behaviors are more likely to be associated with greater frequency among teachers who are effective or ineffective as the case may be..." These patterns include a warm attitude with firm but reasonable expectations, enthusiasm, knowledge of subject area, responding to students as individuals, providing study guidelines, encouraging and challenging, giving appropriate feedback, maintaining positive rapport, and remaining flexible.

The above traits appear to be exemplified by the description of the following teacher:

He was sympathetic, intelligent, and had a great sense of humor! His quick smile and relaxed mannerisms seemed to put his students at ease. His concern was genuine and students responded to his teaching. He would spend hours developing the curriculum to meet each student's needs.

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Given the observations in the literature, then, our general research question can be expanded to the following:

1. How do principals characterize "good" teachers?
2. How do principals characterize the "best" teachers?
3. Do principals perceive best and good teachers as sharing common characteristics?
4. How do principals' perceptions compare with those in the literature?

Materials and Methods

Sample. Respondents in this study were elementary principals attending the 1984 North Dakota Elementary School Administrators meeting. Continuing education courses are offered as part of the annual meeting, and students from two of those classes were invited to participate in this study. Demographic information including age, gender and years of experience as a principal was collected from each respondent.

Instrument. An open-ended instrument was distributed to all participants. This format allowed respondents to identify attributes of importance to them rather than selecting descriptors we provided, descriptors which may or may not reflect how they felt. An open-ended format meant some attributes might be overlooked by respondents, but we accepted this limitation intending that our results would "estimate the lower bound" of attributes important to principals.

In identifying the best teacher, we asked respondents to recall a specific individual, providing demographic information about this person (gender, age, grades taught), and writing a description of them. The description was subjected to a content analysis producing the lists of attributes we sought.

A more "objective" approach was used to identify "good" teachers; the principals listed 10 attributes of good teachers, and reviewed the list in the same manner as the description of the "best" teachers.

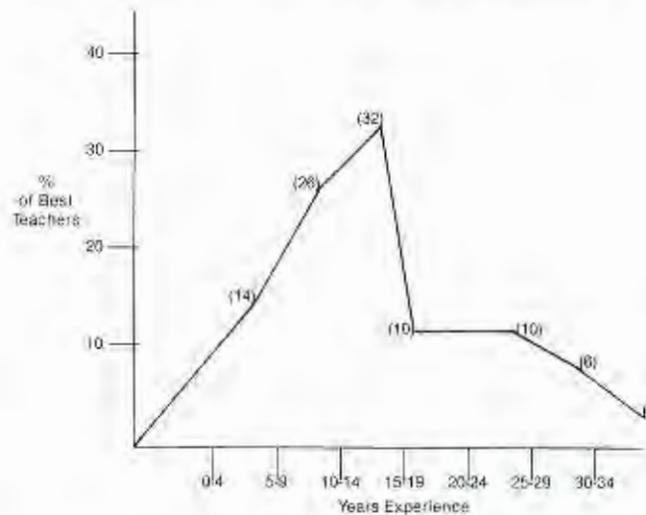
The analytic strategy used in both cases identified all attributes the principals nominated, and then tabulated the number of respondents listing each. Finally a scree test identified attributes mentioned often enough to represent the principals' views of that teacher group (Slotnick, 1982): We used the rule of thumb that any attribute mentioned by half or more was "definitely" characteristic of the teacher group, and any mentioned by one-fourth or more was "probably" representative. Attributes mentioned less often were considered idiosyncratic to either the teacher described or the principal responding.

Results

Sample. Fifty-two of the 60 persons eligible completed questionnaires (87 percent). Thirty-three of these persons were male and 19 female, and 79 percent administered schools with 400 or few students (the median school size was 275 pupils). The median age for the respondents was 43.03 years, and the median years of experience as a principal was 8.71. All had elementary school teaching experience before becoming principals.

Best Teachers. While the age distribution for best teachers indicated approximately equal numbers from age 20-24 to 35-39, the experience distribution was more leptokurtic (see Figure 1): While best teachers were likely to be between 20 and 39 years of age (a 20-year spread), most had 5-14 years of experience. The proportion of men nominated increased from the primary grades to grades 6-8. This probably reflects more men teaching in the higher grades than in

Figure 1. Ages of Teachers and Years of Experience



the primary grades. (The chi square = 8.8889, df = 2, is significant at p = .0001.)

Best vs. Good Teachers. Thirteen of the 84 attributes nominated as characteristics of good teachers were listed by 25 percent of principals responding. In the content analysis, of attributes of best teachers, 10 of 68 attributes met the X-25% criterion. Table 1 shows the overlap of attributes of good and best teachers with six of 17 attributes meeting criterion in both groups. Good teachers were characterized by seven additional nominations, best by four. In the former case, the attributes dealt with the teacher generally, while the latter typically described the teacher's one-to-one inter-

Table 1. Most Nominated Items for "Good" and "Best" Teacher.

Items nominated	"Good" Teacher	"Best" Teacher
Just, fair, honest	X	
Expertise in subject, knowledge	X	
Good discipline	X	
Sense of humor	X	
Positive outlook	X	
Pleasant personality	X	
Good communication skills	X	
Caring, concern, compassion	X	X
Willingness to go the "extra mile"	X	X
Well organized	X	X
Creative, innovative	X	X
Good rapport with staff	X	X
Enjoys students, loves, likes	X	X
Enthusiastic		X
Concern for individual		X
Good rapport with parents		X
Good rapport with students		X

actions with some other person. The common attributes are a collection of both general and those concerning one-to-one interactions.

Discussion

Sample. While the response rate was high (87 percent), the lack of random sampling means that caution must be used in generalizing the findings reported here.

Instrument. No problems were encountered in data collection and analysis; respondents had no difficulties understanding what was expected of them, in responding to both the prose (best teacher) and the listing (good teacher) questions.

Fewer attributes were nominated for best teacher than good teacher, and about 15 percent of the attributes for each group reached the 25 percent criterion. While it is possible the 84-to-68 advantage for good teachers reflects differences in instructions given to respondents, the requirement that items be nominated by 25 percent or more to be considered in further analysis meant that attributes retained were genuinely important without regard to the question's format.

Question 1. How do principals characterize "good" teachers? Attributes (Table 1) of good teachers tended to fall in two general categories: general professional skills (e.g., communications), and personality traits (e.g., sense of humor). Good teachers must have mastered basic professional skills and have certain personality attributes which facilitate working with people (e.g., a sense of humor).

Question 2. How do principals characterize the best teachers? Items attributed solely to the best teachers included enthusiasm, concern for the individual, good rapport with parents, good rapport with students, and new ideas. Apparently, some of the characteristics of the good teacher are prerequisite for the best teacher qualities: Expertise and knowledge must be mastered before much time and energy can be spent on developing new ideas; a sense of justice, fairness and honesty are prerequisites for an appreciation of the individual; a sense of humor and a positive outlook are important factors in developing enthusiasm; and communication skills and a pleasing personality contribute to establishing good rapport with parents and students. The feature underlying three of the four attributes is the teacher's working with persons as individuals.

Question 3. Do principals perceive best and good teachers as sharing common characteristics? Some attributes are common to both groups: caring and concern; willingness to go the extra mile; organization; creativity; rapport with staff. While some of the good teacher characteristics involve basic professional skills (expertise and knowledge, discipline and communication skills) only one item in the common group (organization) might be categorized this way, and none of the best teacher traits deals with basics. Apparently, basic professional skills are mastered before a teacher enjoys the "best" designation.

Question 4. How do principals' perceptions compare with those in the literature? This is important because the literature on effective teachers is authored primarily by persons (such as educational psychologists) who are not elementary principals. This difference in perspective means that while principals take a relatively broad look at their teachers (e.g., Do children seem to learn in the classroom?, How much administrative energy is required to supervise the teacher?, How does the teacher deal with others such as parents and other teachers?), the educational psycholo-

Figure 2
Continuum of Good and Best Teacher Characteristics



gists' view is much more focused on learning and learning outcomes (e.g., Rosenshine and Furst, 1973).

Hamachek (1985, p. 326) sees the commonalities in the effective teacher literature as:

1. warm attitude with firm but reasonable expectations,
2. enthusiasm,
3. knowledge of subject area,
4. responding to students as individuals,
5. providing study guidelines,
6. encouraging and challenging,
7. giving appropriate feedback,
8. maintaining positive rapport, and
9. remaining flexible.

First, the research literature identifies having a "warm but firm attitude" which appear in the principals' two attributes of good teachers: Such teachers are just, fair, and honest, and have a pleasing personality. We see warmth as deriving from a pleasing personality, and firmness from being just and fair—demanding the appropriate levels of performance and behavior from everyone.

Second, "reasonable expectations" overlapped the principals' observation that good teachers have expertise and are knowledgeable. Such expertise allows them to "know" the capabilities of their students, and thus to hold reasonable expectations for them. This expertise comes from knowing both the developmental capabilities of children and the nature of the educational demands being made on them. Third, enthusiasm is a characteristic mentioned by both groups, though the principals see it as characteristic only of the best teachers.

Fourth, knowledge of subject matter is identified by both the literature and the principals as a characteristic of good teachers while (fifth) best teachers establish rapport with individual students. This corresponds to "responding to students as individuals" in the literature.

Sixth, in expressing concern for individuals, best teachers encourage and challenge their students. Certainly, encouragement and challenge do not exhaust the ways in which best teachers demonstrate this concern, but then the

literature's view is more narrow than the principals who made the initial observations.

Seventh, giving appropriate feedback, as noted in the literature (an aspect of communication skills) is an attribute of good teachers. Similarly, communication skills could also cover another of the literature's points, providing study guidelines.

The literature also noted that effective teachers maintain positive rapport with their students, an attribute similarly noted for best teachers.

Finally, flexibility is noted in the literature, but not identified as such by the principals. It is possible that flexibility is covered by other attributes (e.g., going the extra mile—as attributed to best teachers; expertise—as when a teacher tries something new).

A question remaining is whether teachers and principals agree on the characteristics of effective teachers. Grant and Carvell (1980) present evidence showing how teachers and principals agree on "evaluation criteria," defined to include desirable behaviors and attributes. Their findings encourage us to believe that the attributes identified here would also be valued by teachers.

This information can be used by principals in a variety of ways. First, it could help in the development of an awareness as to their individual values, and the implementations of those values. Related (and second), inservice programs might help principals identify their personal values, and determine the appropriateness of those values (e.g., by comparing them to the literature, by comparing them to the goals of the school district). Thirdly, because some of the desirable teacher characteristics are teachable, a principal can develop an instructional plan of action that would encourage teachers to develop in those areas. Also, a principal, when employing new personnel, could be cognizant of personal and professional traits characterized by good teachers. Colleges of education would do well to be aware of the values of the future administrators of their preservice teachers and inform their students accordingly.

Given the data and procedures described in this paper, we have drawn the following conclusions.

1. Elementary principals view the attributes of good teachers as including basic professional skills and positive personality traits.
2. Three of four attributes of best teachers concern working with individuals while the fourth describes enthusiasm.
3. They also see attributes common to both "good" and "best" teachers as a mixture of those described in (1) and (2).

4. Elementary principals' perceptions of the attributes of "good" and "best" teachers generally agree with the effective teacher literature.

Perhaps one of the principals described best teachers succinctly when he said:

Her pupils would rather be in school than at home.

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