

Qualities of Effective Teachers

by James H. Stronge

Chapter 2. The Teacher as a Person

I just wanted to write you a little thank you note for everything that you have done for me over the past two years. I have learned a lot and had a whole lotta fun doing it. I loved the labs, and basically everything we did in your class because you made it fun. You made it so we learned without even realizing we were learning anything, but when it came time to show that we knew it, we were like, "Whoa! I guess I really did learn something!" Not only did you teach us about science, you put us in real case scenarios and helped prepare us for high school and even college. But even further than that, you were like a friend to me. That might scare you a little, but you really remind me of myself, and I hope I grow up to be at least a little like you. I feel like you genuinely care about your students and sincerely enjoy your job ... Thank you for being such a great teacher and friend. You have sincerely contributed to the "awesomeness" of these years. Thanks 1,000 times!

—Student letter to a middle school science teacher with four years of teaching experience

Much of the recent research on teacher effectiveness focuses on relating teacher behaviors to student achievement. Quite a bit of the research, however, has delved into stakeholders' perceptions of good teaching—what students, administrators, and teachers themselves think makes an effective teacher. Studies suggest that instructional and management processes are key to effectiveness, but many interview and survey responses about effective teaching emphasize the teacher's affective characteristics, or social and emotional behaviors, more than pedagogical practice. Moreover, the teacher's psychological influence on students has been linked to student achievement in various effectiveness studies. This chapter explores what we know about teachers' affective characteristics as they relate to effectiveness and to perceptions of effectiveness. Figure 2.1, at the end of the chapter, lists the major characteristics with key references for additional reading.

Role of Caring

Effective teachers care about their students and demonstrate that they care in such a way that their students are aware of it, as we see in the classroom example at the beginning of this chapter. Several studies exploring what makes a good teacher show the importance of caring in the eyes of teachers and students. Also, supervisors who rate teachers place priority on how teachers show students that they are caring and supportive.

Caring is a broad term, maybe as broad as effectiveness itself. One study defines caring as an act of bringing out the best in students through affirmation and encouragement.

Obviously, the characteristics of caring go well beyond knowing the students to include qualities such as patience, trust, honesty, and courage. Specific teacher attributes that show caring include listening, gentleness, understanding, knowledge of students as individuals, warmth and encouragement, and an overall love for children.

Listening

Effective teachers practice focused and sympathetic listening to show students they care not only about what happens in the classroom, but about students' lives in general. These teachers initiate two-way communication that exudes trust, tact, honesty, humility, and care. In the act of listening, these teachers actually pay attention to and understand what the students say. They are dedicated to bettering student lives and demonstrate their understanding through tenderness, patience, and gentleness. Moreover, research indicates that children want to be nurtured, and they value teachers who are kind, gentle, and encouraging. Particularly for elementary students, gentleness in a teacher is a sign of caring and an important element in perceived effectiveness.

Understanding

Students highly value teachers' understanding of their concerns and questions. Interviews with students consistently reveal that students want teachers who listen to their arguments and assist them in working out their problems. They want teachers who hold them in mutual respect and who are willing to talk about their own personal lives and experiences. Through appropriate self-disclosure, teachers become human in the eyes of students. Being available to students, and the depth of the teacher's understanding of students, legitimizes the teacher as a person when demonstrating genuine concern and empathy toward students.

Knowing Students

Effective, caring teachers know students both formally and informally. They use every opportunity at school and in the community to keep the lines of communication open. Many educational stakeholders emphasize that effective teachers know their students individually, not only understanding each student's learning style and needs, but also understanding the student's personality, likes and dislikes, and personal situations that may affect behavior and performance in school. Effective teachers care for the student first as a person, and second as a student. They respect each student as an individual.

Research on caring teachers yields the following important points:

- Caring teachers who know their students create relationships that enhance the learning process.
- Effective teachers consistently emphasize their love for children as one key element of their success.

- Teachers who create a supportive and warm classroom climate tend to be more effective with all students.
- Caring teachers are intentionally aware of student cultures outside the school.
- Caring teachers truly believe that each student has a right to a caring and competent teacher.
- Caring teachers appropriately respect confidentiality issues when dealing with students.
- Caring teachers regard the ethic of care and learning as important in educating students to their full potential.

Role of Fairness and Respect

Beyond a demonstration of caring, an effective teacher establishes rapport and credibility with students by emphasizing, modeling, and practicing fairness and respect. Respect and equity are identified as the prerequisites of effective teaching in the eyes of students. In fact, students interviewed for their views on effective teachers consistently note the importance of fairness and respect at all levels of schooling—from elementary through high school.

The elements of fairness and respect are highlighted in many studies. Students stated that effective teachers respond to misbehavior at an individual level rather than holding a whole class responsible for the actions of one student or a small group of students. They know and understand the facts before responding to any disciplinary situation, and then tell students specifically what they did wrong. Moreover, they tell students what they need to do right. Furthermore, students expect teachers to treat them equitably—when they behave as well as misbehave—and to avoid demonstrations of favoritism.

Effective teachers continually demonstrate respect and understanding, along with fairness regarding race, cultural background, and gender. Students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness emphasize racial impartiality with equitable treatment of all students. The students expect teachers not to allow ethnicity to affect their treatment or expectations of students.

Interviews and surveys of perceptions of fairness in the classroom indicate the following key points:

- Students associate respect with fairness and expect teachers to treat them as people.
- Students perceive effective teachers as those who avoid using ridicule and who prevent situations in which students lose respect in front of their peers.
- Effective teachers practice gender, racial, and ethnic fairness.
- Students associate fairness and respect with a teacher being consistent and providing opportunities for students to have input into the classroom.

- Effective teachers offer all students opportunities to participate and to succeed.

Social Interactions with Students

Teachers and students spend much of their day interacting academically. However, social interactions and those that give the teacher opportunities to demonstrate caring, fairness, and respect have been shown to be an important element of teacher effectiveness. A teacher's ability to relate to students and to make positive, caring connections with them plays a significant role in cultivating a positive learning environment and promoting student achievement.

Effective teachers use a wide variety of strategies to interact with students. However, the basis for these interactions goes beyond the four walls of the classroom. In fact, students revealed that effective teachers demonstrate interest in students' lives beyond the classroom. Teachers who attend sporting events, concerts, and other special programs in which their students participate are valued by their students. Additionally, researchers contend that constructive social interactions between teachers and students not only contribute to student learning and achievement, but also increase student self-esteem by fostering feelings of belonging to the classroom and the school.

Teachers who are aware of their own style of interacting with their students are able to provide a more favorable learning environment for all students. Through social interactions with students, effective teachers are able to individually, realistically, and successfully challenge each and every student to succeed.

Aspects of effective teaching related to social interaction involve the following:

- Effective teachers consistently behave in a friendly and personal manner while maintaining appropriate teacher-student role structure.
- Effective teachers work *with* students as opposed to doing things *to* or *for* them.
- Productive interactions involve giving students responsibility and respect; also treating secondary students as adults when appropriate.
- Teachers who are considered effective allow students to participate in decision making.
- Effective teachers pay attention to what students have to say.
- Students indicate that effective teachers spend more time interacting and working directly with them than ineffective teachers.
- When interacting with students, effective teachers demonstrate a sense of fun and a willingness to play or participate.
- Effective teachers have a good sense of humor and are willing to share jokes.

Promotion of Enthusiasm and Motivation for Learning

The teacher's enthusiasm for teaching, learning, and for the subject matter has been shown to be an important part of effective teaching, both in supporting positive

relationships with students and in encouraging student achievement. Based on student interviews, teachers can effectively motivate most students by encouraging them to be responsible for their own learning, maintaining an organized classroom environment, setting high standards, assigning appropriate challenges, and providing reinforcement and encouragement during tasks. These students see effective teachers as motivational leaders.

Research indicates that effective teachers have residual positive effects on their students' willingness to work to their potential and beyond. Consequently, less effective teachers may actually extinguish students' interest in the subject. Good teachers realize and deal with the fact that some students prefer to sit quietly on the sideline; however, they do not stop involving them.

By finding a way to motivate a student to learn, a teacher contributes to a student's evolving attitude toward a particular subject or activity. In other words, the teacher can bring out the best in that student. An effective teacher recognizes that students vary in their motivation levels. An effective teacher knows how to support intrinsically motivated students and seeks ways to provide extrinsic motivation to students who need it. Motivating students consists of making students receptive to and excited about learning, as well as making them aware of the importance and value of learning itself. By establishing positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, the effective teacher makes the learner feel comfortable in the classroom. As a particular example of establishing positive attitudes, teachers who provide mastery learning techniques for their students improve the attitudes of their students. They also increase academic self-concept, interest in the subject area, and the desire to learn more about the subject. Emphasizing higher mental processes along with mastery learning strategies tends to create a learning environment that is exciting and constantly new and playful.

Researchers have investigated the influence of teacher enthusiasm on student motivation and learning, with the following results and conclusions:

- High levels of motivation in teachers relate to high levels of achievement in students.
- Teachers' enthusiasm for learning and for the subject matter under study has been shown to be an important factor in student motivation, which is closely linked to student achievement.
- A teacher's involvement in graduate studies, which indicates enthusiasm for learning, may be a source of motivation and may translate into higher achievement among students.
- Some studies indicate that the enthusiasm factor is more significant with older students than younger ones, but effective primary teachers also have demonstrated enthusiasm for their work as part of their overall effectiveness.

Attitude Toward the Teaching Profession

An important facet of professionalism and of effectiveness in the classroom is a teacher's dedication to students and to the job of teaching. Through examination of several sources

of evidence, a dual commitment to student learning and to personal learning has been found repeatedly in effective teachers. A common belief among effective teachers, which reveals their dual commitment, is that it is up to them to provide a multitude of tactics to reach students. In essence, effective teachers view themselves as responsible for the success of their students.

The effective teacher truly believes that all students can learn—it is not just a slogan. These teachers also believe that they must know their students, their subject, and themselves, while continuing to account for the fact that students learn differently. Through differentiation of instruction, effective teachers reach their students and together they enjoy their successes.

Effective teachers also work collaboratively with other staff members. They are willing to share their ideas and assist other teachers with difficulties. Collaborative environments create positive working relationships and help retain teachers. Additionally, effective teachers volunteer to lead work teams and to be mentors to new teachers. Effective teachers are informal leaders on the cutting edge of reform and are not afraid to take risks to improve education for all students. These informal leaders are the ones administrators typically call on for opinions and help in effecting change.

Effective teachers invest in their own education. They model to their students that education and learning are valuable by taking classes and participating in professional development, conferences, and inservice training. Additionally, they discuss their participation in these activities with students in a positive manner. Effective teachers learn and grow as they expect their students to learn and grow. They serve as powerful examples of lifelong learners as they find ways to develop professionally.

The relationship between teachers' attitudes and effectiveness can be summarized:

- Effective teachers exude positive attitudes about life and teaching.
- Extra hours spent preparing and reflecting upon instruction are well worth the student outcomes—specifically achievement.
- Promoting and participating in a collegial, collaborative work environment results in more positive attitudes in teachers.
- Effective teachers do not make excuses for student outcomes; they hold their students responsible while also accepting responsibility themselves.

Role of Reflective Practice

Another element of professionalism often cited as part of effective teaching is a teacher's reflective practice, or careful review of and thoughtfulness about one's own teaching process. The role of reflection has been described repeatedly in studies of teacher effectiveness. Those studies include interviews and surveys of teachers judged effective according to their students' achievement rates, studies of teachers certified under the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and case studies of effective schools. Effective teachers continuously practice self-evaluation and self-critique as learning tools. Reflective teachers portray themselves as students of learning. They are curious

about the art and science of teaching and about themselves as effective teachers. They constantly improve lessons, think about how to reach particular children, and seek and try out new approaches in the classroom to better meet the needs of their learners.

Some researchers define reflective teachers as introspective. They seek a greater understanding of teaching through scholarly study and professional reading. Through reflective practice, effective teachers monitor their teaching because they want to be better teachers and to make a difference in the lives of students.

Effective teachers are not afraid of feedback; in fact, they elicit information and criticism from others. Additionally, in the interest of improving their ability to have a positive impact on student learning, these teachers readily accept constructive criticism and reflect upon it. Reflective practice can initially result in confusion for the teacher; the process requires open-mindedness, honesty, and sufficient time to change teaching behaviors.

Thoughtful questions generated by research can guide teachers in reflecting on practice. Effective teachers realize that reflective practices are more than simply preservice or inservice exercises. Indeed, reflective practices are crucial to lifelong learning and a professional necessity.

Thoughtful reflection translates into enhanced teacher efficacy. And a teacher's sense of efficacy has an impact on how she approaches instructional content and students. While efficacy does change for teachers as they encounter new experiences, such as materials and grade levels, they are more likely to have additional positive experiences as they reflect on these new experiences. Educators' confidence in their ability to facilitate the learning and understanding of material by students is observable by others. In particular, when teachers are confident, they communicate the belief of their own efficacy to students.

Additional findings on the value of reflective practices include the following:

- Effective teachers may reflect on their work formally or informally; for example, they may review a day's work mentally, keep a journal or portfolio, meet regularly with a mentor or with colleagues, or assess a videotaped recording of their teaching. Regardless of the mode, the key is reflection.
- Teachers whose students have high achievement rates continually mention reflection on their work as an important part of improving their teaching.
- Belief in one's efficacy and maintaining high expectations for students are common among teachers who reflect.