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DEFINING TEACHING EXCELLENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF SEVEN NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SECONDARY EDUCATORS

by

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A THESIS

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DEFINING TEACHING EXCELLENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF SEVEN NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SECONDARY EDUCATORS

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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Change has been an integral part of the American education system since the 1830s (Lucas, 1999) when universities began preparing students to teach. Over the past 20 years, changes including federal mandates (Disabilities Education Act, 1990; No Child Left Behind, 2003) and increasing diversity in school populations require a responding sensitivity from classroom teachers. In the midst of challenges that these changes present, teachers are increasingly asked to do more.

Research shows that nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching, citing issues such as lack of preparation and mentorship, working conditions, pay, and issues with parents as reasons for leaving (Guarino, Santibaez, & Daley, 2006; Imazeki, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Ingersol, 2001). Traditional education pre-service programs and school administrators are at the center of a discussion regarding how well new teachers are being prepared for careers in education and how current teachers are equipped to adapt to changing requirements (Levine, 2010).

The results of numerous studies have shown that experienced, effective teachers are the single most influential factor affecting student achievement (Stronge, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Traina, 1999). In order to recruit and retain effective teachers, it is critical that institutions of higher learning provide essential pre-service experiences

and that school administrators provide effective support programs and in-service opportunities for new and early-career educators to stimulate performance and invigorate internal motivation. One way to better understand experiences and support systems that are important to developing effective teachers is to learn from teachers of excellence.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of seven national award-winning teachers. Seven themes which define teaching excellence emerged: *teacher-student relationships, safe learning environment, active participation, teachable moments, high expectations, real-world experiences, and honoring your personality*. Implications for research, universities, school administrators, and teachers come from the findings and add to the literature on teaching and leadership.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The results of numerous studies have shown that experienced, effective teachers are the single most influential factor affecting student achievement today (Stronge, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Traina, 1999). These studies also show that effective teachers have the ability to adapt to change. Change has been an integral part of the American education system since the 1830s (Lucas, 1999) when universities began preparing students to teach. Over the past 20 years, changes including federal mandates (Disabilities Education Act, 1990; No Child Left Behind, 2003) and increasing diversity in school populations require a responding sensitivity from classroom teachers. In the midst of challenges that these changes present, teachers are increasingly asked to do more. Traditional educational programs for teachers and school administrators are at the center of a discussion regarding how well new teachers are being prepared for careers in education and how current teachers are prepared to adapt to change (Levine, 2010).

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 17 percent of teachers left the elementary or secondary school where they had been teaching in 2003-2004. Of that 17 percent, 9 percent (333,000) left the profession. Research also points to the fact that 30 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years, and 50 percent leave within the first five years of teaching (Johnson, 2004). Additional research shows that teachers younger than 30 years of age were three times more likely to leave teaching and more than four times more likely to change schools than teachers who were 50 years or older (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009, pp. 446-447).

Studies of beginning (0-5 years of experience) and early career (5-10 years of experience) teacher attrition identified several reasons for teachers deciding to leave the profession. Several studies cited salaries and working conditions as the primary reasons (Guarino, Santibaez, & Daley, 2006; Imazeki, 2004; Ingersol, 2001). However, other studies have found additional factors that influence teachers' decisions to leave. Darling-Hammond (2003) added lack of preparation and mentorship to the factors that influence leaving, and a 2005 MetLife survey added relationship (or lack thereof) with parents to the list.

The exodus of teachers from the teaching profession is a costly phenomenon to both schools and students who lose the opportunity to be taught by experienced teachers. In 2005, the Alliance for Excellent Education estimated the cost of replacing teachers who left the profession at \$2.2 billion per year. If the cost of teacher movement between schools is factored in, the cost is \$4.9 billion per year. Ultimately, teacher unpreparedness and attrition has a decided impact on student learning in the classroom. In an effort to better understand what can be done to curb the high rate of teacher turnover in the first five years and to learn what reinvigorates and motivates teachers at the 5 to 10 year level, this study focuses on the experiences of mid-career (more than 10 years of experience) secondary teachers who have not only surpassed the first five years of teaching but have been recognized at the national level for their teaching excellence.

This study provides a look at seven teachers in a midwestern state who have been recognized by the Milken Family Foundation. The Milken Foundation award provides public recognition and individual financial rewards of \$25,000 to elementary and

secondary teachers, principals, and specialists who are furthering excellence in education. Milken Award recipients are heralded in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish. The selection criteria for the award include:

- demonstration of effective instructional practices and student learning results inside the classroom and out;
- exemplary educational accomplishments that provide models of excellence for the profession;
- possessing strong long-range potential for professional/policy leadership; and
- an engaging and inspiring presence that motivates and impacts students, colleagues, and the community (<http://www.mff.org/mea/mea.taf?page=criteria>).

Purpose of the Study

Understanding how these teachers experience teaching excellence may provide insight into changes that can be made to improve experiences for beginning and early-career teachers. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the essence of experiencing teaching excellence as described by seven national award-winning secondary teachers in a midwestern state. The results of the study relate to pre-service, in-service, classroom, and outside-of-classroom experiences related to teaching. An additional aspect of the study is to understand what stimuli have motivated these award-winning individuals to continue teaching.

Research Questions

Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional. They restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms and start with a word such as “what” or “how” rather than “why.” They are few in number, typically five to seven (Creswell, 2007, p. 107). When using phenomenology, the central question or questions address the meaning of the phenomenon. Subquestions are typically either issue oriented or procedural (Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, two broad general questions were asked of participants. The first asks what participants have experienced in terms of the phenomenon, “experiencing teaching excellence.” The second asks what contexts or situations have typically influenced their experiences with the phenomenon. The two main questions gather data that will lead to a rich description and an understanding of the common lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The following central and sub-questions were developed:

Central Questions

- What is the meaning of teaching excellence to you?
- In what context does teaching excellence occur?”

Subquestions

- Tell me about major events when you have experienced teaching excellence and in what context did they occur?

- What factors, events, or individuals have contributed to your development as a teacher?
- How would you describe a perfect class?
- What do you need from students in your classes?
- What do you believe students need from you?
- In what ways do you see yourself as a leader and model of excellence?
- Was there ever a time when you thought about leaving the teaching field (if so, what was the situation)?
- What recommendations would you give to individuals interested in a teaching career?"

Additional probing questions were used as needed.

Significance of the Study

It is anticipated that the themes and descriptions developed through this study will identify practices, perceptions, and motivations of nationally recognized teachers. These findings will add to the literature informing development of educational pre-service experiences and support programs for new teachers and in-service and support programs for early-career teachers that foster realistic expectations and equip them with tools to become effective teachers and realize the rewards of teaching early in their careers. The findings will also add to the literature on teachers as leaders, an area of study that is evolving.

Limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged in the design of this study. The participants chosen for the study are secondary teachers who are Milken Award recipients from one midwestern state. Milken Award recipients were chosen as they have, by virtue of the Milken selection criteria, been identified as exemplifying teaching excellence. Interview and observation data were collected from single one- to two-hour classroom visits rather than multiple visits over an extended period of time. Six of the seven participants in this study taught elective courses which do not have federal standards mandating competency demonstration. However, two participants teach courses in which students can receive Advanced Placement (AP) college credit. As such, performance standards are built into the AP exams.

Implications for Pre-service Educational Programs

Results of this study provide data for pre-service educational programs. The descriptions that these award winning teachers share of the beliefs that guide them and their classroom management practices, teaching methods and styles, understanding of both the students and their needs, and experiences that have influenced their development as teachers can serve as guides for possible changes in pre-service teacher experiences.

Implications for School Administrators

The results of this study will provide data to school administrators on practices and programs that may assist new teachers in being successful earlier in their careers. It will also provide information to administrators on measures that can be taken to motivate and stimulate experienced early-career teachers to continue teaching.

Implications for Literature

The results of this study will add to the literature on effective teaching. The participants in this study are all teacher leaders by definition as leaders outside the classroom (York-Duke & Barr, 2004). The results of this study will also reflect findings that add to teachers as leaders in the classroom.

Biases

Moustakas's (1994) psychological phenomenology is focused on describing the experiences of participants rather than the interpretations of the researcher. The researcher's experiences with the phenomenon are acknowledged and as much as possible set aside, or "bracketed" in order for the researcher to take an unbiased or "fresh" perspective toward the phenomenon.

In this case, the researcher has included experiences related to the phenomenon in the Methods section. Although these experiences may unintentionally affect the study, the researcher has set aside any biases or preconceived beliefs regarding teaching excellence.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

In qualitative research, the purpose of the literature review is to provide background information for the research topic. While it does justify the importance of studying the research problem, it typically plays a minor role in suggesting a specific research question to be asked (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 68).

The initial literature review in this study focuses on research of award-winning teachers. After conducting interviews and observations and studying the findings, three additional literature areas were added in the discussion section to provide background information for interpreting the results and making recommendations.

Award-Winning Teachers

A review of the literature focusing on attributes of award-winning teachers yielded a number of qualitative, quantitative, and one mixed method study on which this study builds. The focuses of the different studies vary but most include one or more of the following: identifying characteristics, best practices, perceptions, beliefs, classroom management techniques, program planning, motivations, and/or attitudes of award-winning teachers. One study investigated award-winning teachers to determine how many were still in the profession. While all of the studies begin with exploring and/or defining the experiences of award-winning teachers, the purposes of each differed. Several studies planned to transfer what was learned to at-risk or low-performing school settings. Others sought to use findings to make recommendations for enhancing pre-

service or in-service educational experiences. The quantitative studies primarily reported progress on how mandated or desired curriculum changes had fared for award-winning teachers.

Several studies focused on improving teaching for low-performing or at-risk populations. Branch Goodwin (2004) conducted a qualitative study on what award-winning teachers perceived that teachers should know or be able to do and what curricula and practices should be included in pre-service programs in order to be effective in urban schools. Those results stated that teachers should know: course content; current research and professional literature, and culture/learning styles theory. It showed that teachers should be willing to seek out and use support systems, use formal and informal assessment means and be able to differentiate instruction (including consideration of ethnic differences, classroom environment, consistency and order, and assign active learning experiences), build rapport with students and families (be caring, approachable, and nonjudgmental), and maintain a positive world view (be optimistic, use humor, laugh at themselves, and look for good in others). Recommendations for pre-service teacher preparation included: real time in classrooms, supervision by “master” teachers, being able to reflect on own values and those of others, thorough training in coursework embedded with strategies for building relationships and meeting needs of diverse learners, and strategic program planning that includes diverse environments. In a mixed method study Grant, Stronge, and Popp (2008) examined what constitutes effective teaching (as recognized by national and or state awards) with at-risk and highly mobile students and what the best teachers do to make a difference in working with students at

risk. Their findings indicated the following are important: affective and academic needs are intertwined (personal connect with teacher kept students coming to class), assessment as integral to meeting student needs, high expectations of students and themselves, meeting “technical” needs (food, supplies, etc.), and that success should be measured holistically (for life, not for an achievement test). In making a difference, the results showed that having a “teacher as person” viewpoint, caring for students, creating a positive classroom environment, and teacher sense of self-efficacy (belief that teaching changes lives of students that the teacher has the skills needed to make this difference) are needed. Effective practices included: use of questioning, expecting students to think beyond recall level, engaging with content at comprehension level and beyond, making meaningful connections, and using mostly teacher-directed instruction.

Stone (2007) profiled award-winning teachers. Findings on the topic of best practices for teaching in inner-city schools were that a good teacher: (a) sells students on why they need math or other subjects; (b) takes the child wherever he or she is and moves forward (uses pre-tests and clusters students at different learning levels to best meet student needs); (c) is a risk taker and disciplines with “tough love;” (d) motivates and builds up a student’s self-esteem; and (e) takes a holistic approach to dealing with students.

Neubert and Binko (2007) conducted a qualitative study to identify characteristics common to STARs (outstanding student teacher award winners). Nine characteristics were identified: outstanding content knowledge, excellent pedagogical skills (able to adjust teaching strategies to reach students), reflective about performance, have a passion

for teaching, have a positive attitude about students, demonstrate hard work in and outside the classroom, have outstanding interpersonal skills, are leaders in their school, and are committed to remaining in education.

In a study of TOYs (Teachers of the Year), McKay (1997) used a case study approach to identify key individuals who influenced TOY attitudes, values and beliefs. McKay's study also sought to identify ecological characteristics of TOY classrooms. Results showed that TOYs' attitudes, values, and beliefs about teaching were primarily influenced by their parents and that TOYs are committed to student success and have high expectations of their students. The research showed that TOYs believe that support systems are non-existent in the teaching profession (creating isolationism) and that community expectations contribute to teachers' excellence. TOYs describe themselves as active agents in their teacher roles and are directly influenced by pupil responses to them as teachers.

In their quantitative study that compared practices of award-winning teachers, teachers with masters degrees, and other teachers, Wendler, Samuels, and Moore (1989) found that award-winning teachers allocated significantly more time than the other two groups to giving [reading] comprehension-related instruction and to giving individual assistance to help students complete those assignments. Thompson and Schumacher (1998) conducted a similar quantitative study which identified characteristics of award-winning agriculture teachers who emphasized agriscience technology in their curriculum. They found that these award-winning teachers were more successful at recruiting

students into their courses and more likely to seek instructional in-service to stay up-to-date on new information.

Richard Goodman (2009), a national award winning chemistry teacher identified five personal characteristics and seven qualities that characterize a great teacher. Personal characteristics include: genuinely caring about students-academically and personally, recognizing achievements beyond the classroom, use of humor in the classroom, bringing positive attention to students for studying and appreciating chemistry, and making files and resources available to students. Qualities that characterize a great teacher include: knowledge and comfort level with subject; being able to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them; showing a passion for teaching; develop repertoires of examples, practical applications, and interesting stories to motivate learning; student engagement; and differentiated learning based on student needs—even for the best students.

The purpose of most of the studies of award-winning teachers relates to identifying characteristics, practices, beliefs, and other qualities of these effective teachers that can be modeled in an effort to demonstrate increased student learning. While this is the ultimate goal for teaching, implications for further research in two of the studies suggested changes in pre-service and in-service education. The recommended changes focus on more effectively preparing teachers to enter the profession when they graduate and making support and resources available to them so they can become effective teachers. McKay (1997) recommended that: (a) pre-service teacher education emphasize group work on unit plans presented as a team, (b) teacher educators model practice of asking for advice and consulting with colleagues, and (c) in-service

opportunities be provided for teachers to observe and learn from colleagues who have been identified as “exemplars of excellence” (p. 437-438). Wendler et al. (1989) recommended that finding the best comprehension teachers and discovering what has influenced these teachers to such excellent instruction is critically important in order to introduce the best practices (pp. 396-397).

Teachers as Leaders

Teacher leadership is a concept that is often used in the educational field, but as an emerging field what it encompasses is not clearly defined. Study and development of the teacher leadership area has been undertaken largely in the past 15 years. There are three generally recognized phases of teacher leadership. The first is of teachers who move from being a teacher into educational administration. The second is of teachers who become curriculum specialists, perhaps at a district level. The third was that of teachers who lead outside of the classroom in areas such as school-wide committees which establish policy and interact with the community (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). More recent literature backs effective teaching in the classroom as being the fourth wave of teacher leadership (Pounder, 2006).

This study provides an opportunity to inductively study classroom teacher leadership through the lens of public school teachers who have been lauded as teacher leaders under the teacher leadership model as it is currently defined in phases two or three.

CHAPTER III

Methods

Introduction

This chapter provides an understanding of the research approach chosen for this study. The focus of this study was to define the lived experiences of seven secondary teachers in a midwestern state who are all recipients of a national educator award. The purpose of the study is to understand how their common experiences may inform change in pre-service and in-service programs for beginning to early-career teachers.

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human issue or problem. The process involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p. 4).

Philosophical Assumptions and Qualitative Approach

In choosing a qualitative research approach, a researcher makes five philosophical assumptions. These assumptions, the questions they address, their characteristics, and the implication for this study are listed in Table 1.

Worldview

Guba (1990) defines worldview as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 17). Several factors shape the worldview that a researcher brings to a study, including the

Table 1. Philosophical Assumptions and Implications for This Study

Assumption	Questions	Characteristics	Implications for This Study
Ontological	What is the nature of reality	Reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study	<i>Quotes and themes in the words of the teachers interviewed and observed are used and different perspectives are evident</i>
Epistemological	What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	Researcher attempts to lessen distance between himself or herself and that being researched	<i>Researcher observed and interviewed teachers in their natural setting (high school classrooms) and as such became an “insider”</i>
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present	<i>Researcher discussed values that shape narrative and included own interpretation with that of teachers in the study</i>
Rhetorical	What is the language of the research?	Researcher writes in a literary, informal style using the personal voice and uses qualitative terms and limited definitions	<i>An engaging style of narrative was used, at times in first-person pronoun, using the language of qualitative research</i>
Methodological	What is the process of research?	Researchers uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design	<i>Researcher reviewed data in details numerous times before developing general themes, described the context of the study, and used probing questions when needed to obtain rich detail</i>

Modified from Philosophical Assumptions With Implications for Practice (Creswell, 2007, p. 17).

academic area of the researcher and research methods and approaches commonly used in the academic discipline; the specialization, experiences, and beliefs of the faculty in his or her area; and past experiences of the researcher. The four worldviews and their associated elements are shown in Table 2.

This study is grounded in select elements of two worldviews—in postpositivism and constructivism (Creswell, 2007). These worldviews guide the research.

Table 2. Four Worldviews

Postpositivism	Constructivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Determination ▪ Reductionism ▪ Empirical observation and measurement ▪ Theory verification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding ▪ Multiple participant meanings ▪ Social and historical constructions ▪ Theory generation
Advocacy/Participatory	Pragmatism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political ▪ Empowerment issue-oriented ▪ Collaborative ▪ Change-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consequences of Actions ▪ Problem-centered ▪ Pluralistic ▪ Real-world practice oriented

Source: Creswell, 2009, p. 6.

Postpositivism involves conducting research using a series of logical steps, multiple perspectives of participants, and has elements of reductionism. Elements of constructivism are used in this study in that interview questions are broad and rely on participants' lived experiences and interpretations to describe meaning.

Rationale for Using Phenomenology

Creswell (2007) details the five most commonly used qualitative approaches in social, behavioral, and health science literature: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. The focus and unit analysis of each of the approaches are listed in Table 3 (p. 78).

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach was used for this study. In this approach, the researcher focuses on a concept or phenomenon and seeks to understand the meaning of experiences of individuals who have experienced or "lived" the phenomenon (Creswell,

Table 3. Characteristics of Five Qualitative Approaches

Type	Attributes of Approach	
	Focus	Unit of Analysis
Narrative Research	Exploring the life of an individual	Studying one or more individuals
Phenomenology	Understanding the Essence of the experience	Studying several individuals who have shared the experience
Case Study	Developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases	Studying an event, a program, an activity, more than one individual
Ethnography	Describing and interpreting a culture-sharing group	Studying a group that shares the same culture
Grounded Theory	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field	Studying a process, action, or interaction involving many individuals

Source: Creswell, 2007, p. 78.

2007). Phenomenology also employs the use of bracketing where a researcher sets aside his or her knowledge of and experiences related to the subject in order to “see things as they appear, free from prejudgments and preconceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p.90). The researcher is also present in the research in that he or she introduces his or her personal understandings into the study.

Approval

This research study was submitted for review to the institutional review board and permission was granted.

Research Questions

Phenomenological studies typically involve asking participants two broad general questions involving what they have experienced in terms of the phenomenon and the contexts that surround participants’ experiences related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended sub-questions may also be asked, but the understanding of how and in

what context respondents experience the phenomenon is derived from the two main questions.

Central Questions

- What is the meaning of teaching excellence to you?
- In what context does teaching excellence occur?"

Subquestions

- Tell me about major events when you have experienced teaching excellence and in what context did they occur?
- What factors, events, or individuals have contributed to your development as a teacher?
- How would you describe a perfect class?
- What do you need from students in your classes?
- What do you believe students need from you?
- In what ways do you see yourself as a leader and model of excellence?
- Was there ever a time when you thought about leaving the teaching field (if so, what was the situation)?
- What recommendations would you give to individuals interested in a teaching career?"

Additional probing questions were used as needed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following approval of the study proposal by the institutional review board and the administration of all six schools where the award-winning teachers currently teach [two participants are in the same school], the teachers were asked to participate in the study. All seven teachers agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted mid-point into the semester for two different semesters at schools where participants taught. After obtaining informed consent from participants, audio recordings were made of interviews and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was asked first to tell the researcher about his or her teaching career (educational background, years teaching, teaching locations, etc.) followed by the two primary questions, sub questions and probing questions when deemed appropriate to obtain greater detail.

Participants were observed in the classroom. Observational notes were made before, during and following the time the class was taught.

In addition to interview and observation transcripts, information on each participant's feature page on the Milken Family Foundation website listing of accomplishments was used (Milken Family Foundation, <http://www.mff.org/mea/mea.taf>).

Interview transcripts, observational notes, and web articles on participants were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. Documents were reviewed multiple times. The first review was conducted to develop an overall sense of the data. Significant phrases and statements that related directly to experiencing teaching excellence for participants were identified and recorded. The significant statements and

phrases were then used to formulate meanings using in vivo coding (exact words of the participants) to the extent possible. The meanings were clustered into units or themes that were common experiences of all of the participants. A resulting in-depth description of the meaning of experiencing teaching excellence from the perspective of seven nationally recognized secondary teachers was developed.

Validation

Two validation methods were used in this study. First, the use of member checking was employed in that interview transcripts were shared with participants. Participants were asked to make changes or add information if they wished. No changes were made by the participants. Triangulation was the second validation method used, wherein corroborating evidence from different sources sheds light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007). In this case, evidence from multiple sources--interviews, observations, and web information describing each recipient's Milken recognition—was reviewed for inconsistencies. No inconsistencies were found.

Role of the Researcher

My interest in education and effective teaching involves a number of perspectives that I have with relation to the subject.

From a career standpoint, I have always been interested in teaching, but the experiences that have been part of my changing perception have not always been positive. I started my college career as an elementary education major. The first semester of my freshman year, I was required to begin observing and helping in classes at a nearby elementary school. I went the first day and discovered that the “open classroom”

environment used in the third grade class was totally foreign to the way I had experienced education which was 20 students sitting in desks pointed toward the front of the room where the teacher taught the class. The open classroom seemed chaotic to me. The students were in groups of four, and one group at a time was at the reading table under the direction of the teacher. The rest of the groups worked on their own at tables called “centers.” Over the course of the semester, I found students who could not read the word “that” three times in the same paragraph, and what I perceived to be a lack of structure and discipline in the class was disconcerting. Without adequate background to understand what should and could be done, I decided to switch majors by the time we registered for spring classes.

From a parent standpoint, I have had two children go through a school system with a student center approach similar to the one that seemed so foreign to me in college. I volunteered in the classroom and have seen the system work well in some cases and less than optimal in other cases. Overall the teachers handled it well, but I was amazed at how much is required of teachers with students of varying needs in one classroom.

From a student perspective, I have taken undergraduate courses in leadership, educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, teaching methods, and organizational behavior, to name a few. Every course provided an opportunity to observe teaching styles, methods, how professors chose to bring (or in some cases not bring) their personality into the classroom experience, and their effectiveness in guiding students to achieve learning outcomes for the respective courses.

I currently work with three college courses, with students ranging from freshman to senior level. I lean heavily toward participatory classroom style and favor activities that convey broader understanding rather than memorization of facts. The class primarily works in small groups and has a high-discussion, interactive design. Because of this I must work to create an environment in the classroom where students feel “safe” in offering comments in discussion. If they don’t feel safe, they will not offer their perspectives and the quality of the discussion in the course suffers. In one of the years working with a marketing team course, I believe I experienced teaching excellence in that our team which competed at the national level made it to the final round for the first time in the history of our university. It was a very involved, arduous journey to get a presentation group of individuals, several of whom were not friends outside of class, to work in unison toward a common goal. Other years, I have had a number of talented individuals on a team, but that “magic” doesn’t always happen. It is truly a group effort with a lot of trust and relationship building beyond what is required to develop an outstanding marketing plan and presentation.

Finally, from the standpoint of being married to an award-winning teacher who has had students win competitions at the international level, I am a firm believer that there is no one prescriptive style, personality, or method that must be used to be an effective or excellent teacher. As my husband and I discuss activities and happenings in our daily lives as educators, we bring very different perspectives and interpretations to the discussion. Because of this, my perception of excellence in education is more

inclusive of varying styles, methods, and desired outcomes within the contextual framework in which the teaching occurs.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Participants

A purposive sample of seven secondary teachers who were Milken Foundation award winners participated in this study. The midwestern state where the study was conducted has had eleven Milken Foundation award recipients in secondary teaching over the past 15 years. Of those, one teacher is currently teaching in another state, one has retired, and two have moved into education administration. A table listing demographics of the purposive sample, reflecting gender, subject(s) taught, and school size is below. A range of subject areas provided contextual diversity in the sample. The discipline areas in which they teach are psychology, computer-aided design, architecture, science, music, computers and business, and theater. Three of the participants interviewed are male and four female. It is also important to note that all but one of the participants teach elective courses, a factor that is important to the findings of the study.

Table 4. Demographics of Sample

Academic Discipline	Urban	Rural
Architecture	1 Female	
Computer-Aided Design	1 Male	
Computers and Business		1 Female
Music	1 Male	
Psychology	1 Male	
Science		1 Female
Theater	1 Female	

Following are profiles of the participants.

Ann has been teaching for 14 years. She taught the first three years at a middle school in a smaller town. She taught English and journalism and started a theater program in the school. Ann is currently a teacher of theater and literature at a metropolitan secondary school where she has implemented curriculum, adding two theater classes and expanding literature to a full-year program that incorporates reading, writing, and speaking. She did not start her career in teaching. She has a bachelor's degree in Journalism from the state university but chose to go back to school at a nearby university to get certified to teach. She has since completed a Masters degree in curriculum and instruction. Ann shared that she was very involved in theater and speech in high school, and every year when she was in college, her high school speech and drama coach asked her to come back and help her coach and direct. Based on this experience, she says that she instinctively knew that someday she would be teaching. Ann's accomplishments cited for winning the award include that she "employs instructional techniques that raise students' interests while holding them accountable for remaining actively engaged. Her drama students perform in English and literature classes regularly, tying their portrayal to the literature being studied school-wide. Ann's large-group techniques have been used as a model for all incoming first-year teachers in the district."

Kate is a secondary computer, technology, and business teacher in a rural town. She has been at her current school for 25 years. Kate's accomplishments on her award nomination noted that she "spearheaded curriculum integration efforts at her school fostering collaboration and technology literacy in the process. In an entrepreneurial

program, her students create, advertise, manufacture and distribute products ranging from school apparel to business Web pages, showcasing their artistic talents as they learn real-world business practices. Kate helped develop a program in which the entire student body travels to a nearby river following a week of multi-disciplinary instruction on the connection between the river and their daily lives. As the district's technology coordinator, Kate implemented a comprehensive technology plan that included salary advancement for staff members who acquired certification in using technology.”

Jean has been teaching for over 20 years. She is a secondary biological science teacher in a rural town. She teaches biology, chemistry and physics. According to her award accolades Jean is “known for using technology to provide students with access to the world beyond their small town. At her former school, we was a member of the NASA Explorer School. Her team was selected to participate in NASA's weightlessness experiments. In conjunction with her program, students at her school also developed density experiments that were conducted at Johnson Space Center. Jean has conducted workshops for the State Math and Science Initiative.”

Alex is the director of bands at a large secondary high school in a metropolitan city. He has been there over 28 of his 30 years in teaching. The accomplishments associated with his award recognition include that “he not only helps his students express themselves musically but allows them to make decisions on everything from class work to the grading system. His innovative teaching techniques include a program which guides students in recording, editing and evaluating a recording of a solo performance and a senior final product, in which a student videotapes a solo performance and provides

program notes containing historical information and musical analysis of the piece being played. Alex’s bands have performed around the country and have received national recognition for their consistently outstanding achievement.”

Sue is an industrial technology teacher at a secondary school in a metropolitan city. She began her career as a civil engineering technologist for nearly eight years before going into teaching. Her award accolades include that she “uses video and computer technology to teach her students about such events as the collapse of buildings and structures due to damaging vibrations. In her unit on structures, students create computer simulations and work on three-dimensional models to study how the devastating effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes may be minimized. Each year, through a cooperative community-school program called Ventures in Partnership (VIP), Sue’s advanced architecture students work with a local architectural firm to devise a solution to a design problem which they then present to professionals in fields related to the project theme.”

Chris has taught social sciences for 11 years—three years at a middle school and eight in secondary school, both in the same metropolitan city. He began coaching track at a secondary school in his second year of teaching and is the head track coach at his current school. Accomplishments listed on his award include that, “his class centers around the practice of primary research and data evaluation based on statistical analysis. The description sounds more like a college course, but in fact, he teaches AP psychology, as well as several other psychology and social studies courses. Chris developed the school's psychology curriculum and is known for his captivating classroom style as he

shares it with his students. His students have one of the highest mean scores in the school on Advanced Placement (AP) exams, a 90 percent success rate of three or higher [a score of 3, 4, or 5 is required to receive college credit]. Chris uses an electronic interactive performance system to provide immediate feedback on class comprehension, illuminating students' areas of need quickly and giving him the tools to adapt class lessons to accommodate student needs. As director of his department's professional learning committee, he also presents district and building level staff development on methods to measure and improve student achievement.”

Seth has been teaching eighteen years in computer-aided drafting at a high school in a metropolitan city. He also teaches classes at the state university. Accomplishments cited on his award nomination include that “students in Seth's classes not only volunteer to build houses for Habitat for Humanity--they even design them. Through the partnerships that he has formed with local architecture and design firms, every project his students undertake represents a “real-world” product. For example, in one class he required each student to design and build a comfortable life-sized chair out of cardboard that could hold the weight of a normal person. At the same time that he builds his students' knowledge of technology, he keeps his own expertise current and cutting-edge by spending each summer working in a business-related occupation. Seth requires his students to perform rigorous math and science calculations and develop critical thinking skills. The advanced level of his class allows students to receive Advanced Placement (AP) credit for taking his class. When it comes to national design competitions, Seth's students have maintained an impressive track record, capturing first place in an annual

home design contest for eleven years, even against college students. Many of his pupils pursue careers in the field and receive job offers even before graduating.”

Discovering Themes

In the process of identifying themes, the researcher first read and then coded seven verbatim interview transcripts, six observation transcripts, and seven web documents which highlighted participant accomplishments. From the data in the documents, significant statements were identified. The significant statements were assigned meaning units which were then reviewed to eliminate duplication and grouped in to seven themes and three other relevant finding areas. The other relevant finding areas were findings that are relevant to the purpose of the study but were not common experiences for all participants. Table 5 contains a listing of the themes, meaning units, and quotes taken from data to support the themes. Table 6 contains a listing of the themes, meaning units, and quotes taken from data to support the other relevant findings.

Seven primary themes were identified through analysis of interviews, observations, and documents on participants' accomplishments as teachers. They are: *teacher-student relationships, safe learning environment, active participation, teachable moments, high expectations, real-world experiences, and honoring your personality.* Three “relevant findings” emerged as well: *early influences, drawbacks to teaching, and motivations for staying.* These findings describe how the participants came to be teachers, reasons they may have considered leaving, and what keeps them in the classroom.

Table 5. Themes, Meaning Units, and Supporting Quotes

Theme	Quotes Supporting Theme
<p>Teacher-Student Relationships</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Caring Rapport Advocation</p>	<p>You can make a difference—you can take a kid that you see was starting to go down the wrong path and tell him, “Hey, you don’t have to do this. You can be successful.”</p> <p>You can make mistakes in curriculum, but if you don’t really care about the kids, I don’t know how far you are going to go—probably not very far at all.</p> <p>It gives them a kind of “He’s going to pay attention to who I am and he’s going to call me by name.” The name is golden to them. It’s that early rapport that you can build on later.</p> <p>I try to remember when I’m having one of those days and see kids who are struggling and resistant to help. It’s typically not their own baggage they come with—it’s the “crap” they have at home, the “crap” they haven’t had. All in all, they are really great people. (advocation)</p> <p>I love that I know my kids. I know their families and they know me. I think that helps a great deal with rapport.</p> <p>Especially in a building this big, it’s easy for kids to fall through the cracks. I want them to know that for that semester I am their advocate. I want them to know that I know who they are.</p>
<p>Safe Learning Environment</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Trust Consistency</p>	<p>It’s hard work—organization, teamwork, understanding that not everybody is as talented, not everyone can run as fast or jump as high, so to speak. As a team, you have work through differences to be successful.</p> <p>They need the boundaries I create.</p> <p>The teacher needs to build a sense of trust, not just between the teacher and students but also create an environment where they can trust their peers. I spend two full weeks just doing exercises to build a sense of trust and camaraderie before we do anything academic.</p> <p>Building a sense of community, a sense of trust—students must feel they are a part of something—that they are noticed in order to feel secure enough to participate and learn. That’s very important.</p>
<p>Active Participation</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Engagement Interaction</p>	<p>If you don’t have questions and curiosity—because to me, that’s learning—and the enthusiasm (the drive to learn), it’s difficult to work with the rest.</p> <p>Things happen when kids are engaged. I can walk out of a room feeling like I’m six inches off of the ground just because they were engaged, found meaning in it, and related it to their lives.</p> <p>In a perfect class, the interaction level between the teacher and students is high. The rapport between the teachers and students is positive.</p>

<p>(continued)</p> <p>Active Participation</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Engagement Interaction</p>	<p>I'm not a teacher who wants a class that sits down and is quiet and passive. Ask the students. They'll say, "Yea, he lectures," but I want a class that's involved, that's interactive, that's curious.</p>
<p>Teachable Moments</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Respond to students Adjusting</p>	<p>I think an excellent teacher responds to students in the moment. They need to be able to gauge what additional information students need.</p> <p>I have a general idea in my mind what I want to accomplish during a class, but if they are interested in a particular subject, then let's explore that. If they have good content knowledge in this area, then let's go to something else.</p> <p>When I come across a teaching moment, when something happens, you are like "Oh, good, everyone needs to know this." It may not be what I planned to cover that day but they need to know. So, we take time out to cover it</p> <p>You're always adjusting--get a little feedback, make adjustments on the fly, you make adjustments with the lesson and constantly look for that feedback—is this working or not.</p> <p>I'll always check for understanding and if I still have blank faces, I will tell them, "Okay, ask me a question specifically, so that I can explain it in a different way because clearly I'm not getting through to you and teaching you the way you need to learn it."</p> <p>We constantly do Q and A, constantly do demonstrations and presentations—a variety of things to see if kids get it [understand]. If you get to where they trust you enough, they'll say "Let's go on to something else," or "I have no idea what you're talking about, So you say, "Let's go back and review."</p>
<p>High Expectations</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Responsibility for Learning Taking Risks in Learning Performing, not practicing</p>	<p>I want to see my students perform quality work. I want to see application. In Bloom's Taxonomy, I want to see the higher levels of learning—to learn the skill and then apply it in a real live situation. Once kids see the practical application—how or what this means for them—their effort level and motivation skyrockets.</p> <p>They know that if you care about them you will hold them accountable. When they get upset because I ask them to do better, I say, "That's because I care about you enough to not let you just get by. I want something more for you than that."</p> <p>I want them to take risks—not be afraid to fail. That's how they learn. I just need to get out of the way. At points where I see a frustration level, I try to guide them in a way that allows them to discover an answer—not totally give them the answer.</p> <p>When they come in [to class] they are performing—this is an event. We try to perform every day—not practice—with the idea that someone is there in front of them listening.</p>

<p>Real-World Experiences</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Life-long Learning Real-world Application Student as Teacher</p>	<p>I have created a mentor system—students teaching students. We have leadership camps for students who have some of the jobs in marching band and in other bands. For example, the students are required to run a sectional and rehearse by themselves once a week.</p> <p>In one case, [other] teachers were working with Photoshop and the digital camera. They were asking all kinds of questions. I didn't have time to answer every question, so I had the students build a podcast addressing issues and questions or had them go help the teachers directly.</p> <p>When you deliver a core information knowledge base. When they take that and then solve a problem or deliver a project, start to finish. You tie that project to a community-base level—to community members, to business, to industry—when you take it to that level, you see learning taking place at that spot.</p> <p>Seeing all of the students graduate and many of them choosing careers in sciences is an indication that I'm doing the right things.</p> <p>When it [project] comes together and they can stand up in front of a group of jurors [professionals judging an architectural design competition] and tell them in a mature, logical sequence what they did, why they did it, and justify it—having grown in that regard, that's when it's very much like being a parent and being extremely proud of something your own child did.</p>
<p>Honoring your Personality</p> <p><u>Meaning Units:</u> Teaching style Learning from students Role model High self-expectations</p>	<p>Good teachers need to honor their personalities. I use a ton of active participation. I throw myself into the very activities I ask my students to do. So, they see me in theater in vulnerable positions. That doesn't mean the teacher down the hallway needs to do that to be successful.</p> <p>I really believe there is no one right way to teach. You can be the stand-up lecturer everyday and be really good. You can be the "We're going to talk about feelings and emotions" type. There are so many ways, but you have to teach to your personality, so I picked and chose what I saw applied to me.</p> <p>I never pretend to know everything. I always try to be sincere and genuine. I'll say, "You find out on your end and I'll find out on my end." Usually we come up with answers together and it has been very effective.</p> <p>I'm constantly trying to stay on the cutting edge—learning new things, speaking at national conferences. I try to give back to the profession. I think they [students] see me staying active professionally, not afraid to admit I need to keep learning. Again, high expectations and accountability...</p> <p>I feel guilty when I'm not the best I can be. The kids are shortchanged when that happens. I want that for them—they need that from me. I expect the best from them. I'd better be giving it in return.</p>

Table 6. Other Relevant Findings and Supporting Quotes

Relevant Finding	Quotes Supporting Finding
<p>Early Influences</p> <p><u>Codes:</u> Mentors Teachers Experience Calling to Teach</p>	<p>He [high school teacher and coach] has been a true mentor to me. He's been there when I've said, "I don't know if I want to do this anymore." He's been there when I've slipped up and made mistakes, and he's been there when things have gone really well. He's been someone I can always bounce ideas off.</p> <p>I got interested in teaching in high school by working pretty closely in a small school with teachers, even the principal. The principal was actually one of the better teachers I had. He taught a psychology class. You could sense that passion for teaching in these people.</p> <p>She [teacher] pushed us to our limits and saw potential in her students. That impacted me because she made me feel successful and helped me discover where my talents lied. She gave me an opportunity to help her coach [speech/drama]. Having that chance to be a leadership position or position of facilitator was empowering.</p> <p>The first year was a fabulous experience mostly because of the principal. She knew exactly what we were supposed to do in the class and gave us direction on the class. She was a great, great help for a first-year teacher.</p> <p>I knew instinctively that someday I would be teaching. I fought it because of the money—which seemed to be like nothing. But, whenever I was in the classroom working with these high school students, it was just a natural fit. I loved the relationship with students, so I got certified to teach.</p>
<p>Drawbacks to Teaching</p> <p><u>Codes:</u> Early and Mid-Career Challenges Commitment Family Salary</p>	<p>I was one day ahead on planning. I'd sketch out units, but I didn't have the details down and I was struggling. I thought it [instruction on a topic] was going to take one day and it took four. I thought about not teaching.</p> <p>I was the only teacher in the building under 40. I'm there at the school all the time and I didn't form a good professional bond with anyone in the school the first year.</p> <p>I thought about leaving about after the seventh year. Before it got to the point that I understood that it was going to take some flexibility and some different approaches, it felt kind of stagnant, felt kind of blah.</p> <p>Teaching is not an unselfish job. You are putting everybody else's lives first. It hurts your family. It hurts your marriage. It hurts a lot of things if you are not careful. You have to have a very understanding family, which I do.</p>
<p>Motivations for staying</p> <p><u>Codes:</u> Impacting Students Autonomy Seeing the Results</p>	<p>[Considered leaving]...about that time I started to get feedback from students who had gone on to college. It made a difference. They talked about what a difference it [my class] made. It became a bit more tangible, and for me the intangible stuff makes me crazy.</p> <p>It's a bigger picture—where are these kids going, and how do we get them to be good citizens giving back to the community.</p>

<p>(continued)</p> <p>Motivations for staying</p> <p><u>Codes:</u> Impacting Students Autonomy Seeing the Results</p>	<p>I have a lot of autonomy here. I am the department chair. If I want to implement change, I think I can do that quickly because of the size of the school.</p> <p>I know they [students] surprise themselves sometimes but the facial expressions when they are “Wow, this is really pretty good, and I did it.” That self-gratification when they know, they see that, and the sense of accomplishment—that’s priceless. That’s what keeps me where I’m at.</p> <p>When you are putting in more time than administration, you start looking and saying, “This isn’t worth it.” For me, I can’t make that choice. I love my kids too much. Sure the money is nice, but I don’t know if I could come to my job and like it as much.</p> <p>I stay in teaching because I love kids. That’s why I stayed. It’s the students themselves. They are why we are here. They’re the ones that make me feel fabulous some days...and some days not so good.</p>
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Theme One: Teacher-Student Relationships

Participants indicated that a critical factor in facilitating an environment where teaching excellence can occur is the importance of *teacher-student relationships*.

Participants described *teacher-student relationships* in several ways—through *caring*, *building rapport with students*, and *being an advocate* for students. As part of her answer to the main question on describing teaching excellence, Ann articulated her thoughts,

It's very important to *build strong relationships* with your students. I do. Within three days of meeting them, I make sure I know their names. I make it a point to use their names as often as possible because I find that if I get to know them very quickly, they are more willing to share. They are more willing to ask questions because they feel--they know--that I am interested in them and interested in their learning.

All participants cited *caring* and showing students that you care as the most basic, foundational premise of building a strong *teacher-student relationship*. As Chris stated near the beginning of his interview, “If you don’t really care about the kids, I don’t know how far you are going to go...probably not going to go very far at all.” Other participants related *caring* to its importance in establishing expectations for students. Kate notes,

I've always felt when they know that I genuinely *care* about them and want only what's best for them, they sense that. Kids are very, very smart. They know who is playing them and who really has their best interest at heart. So they need me to treat them with dignity and respect, to hold them accountable. They like that whether they admit it or not. They will cross the line but they want you to bring them back--they need that. They know that if you *care* about them you will hold them accountable.

Chris compared *caring* about students to a parent-child relationship in that children get angry when they are asked to do something they don’t want to do but love their parents anyway because they know the parents want them to do it because they *care*. He adds,

If they know you legitimately *care*, I think that you can demand a lot of them [students]. You can get on their case when they are slacking a little because in the end they know that you *care* about them.

In describing how she experiences teaching excellence, Sue reflected,

I think the bottom line is that it has to be something that comes from inside of you—a passion, a *caring* about kids, a believing in the future, wanting to be able to guide the future, I guess, in essence.

Building rapport with students was another strong current that flowed through the interviews. For several of the participants *building rapport* meant knowing their [student] names early in the semester and making sure to call them by name both in and outside of class. Seth focuses on the importance of *building rapport* and connecting with students on a daily basis.

I think *rapport* is critical. I always joke with students my first week of class every semester. I say, “I’ll have your names down by the fifth day,” even if I have a class of 25. By the fifth day, I purposely tell them, “Sit wherever you want,” and by the fifth day I’ve got it. That always catches them. It gives them kind of a...It’s like he’s going to pay attention to who I am a little bit more and he’s going to call me by name.” And, the name is “golden” to them. And, it’s that little *rapport* you can build on.”

Other participants noted that *building rapport* with students is important to classroom discussion and students’ willingness to communicate with teachers, Chris gave the following example,

If you have good *rapport* in the classroom, you can get from kids [when asking for feedback on understanding], “Yea, we get this.” Sometimes kids just want to sit and move on, but you get it to where they trust you enough they’ll say they get it, “Let’s go on to something else,” or “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” In that case, you say, “Let’s go back and review.”

A surprising term used by some of the participants when they spoke about building strong *teacher-student relationships* was being an *advocate* for the students. In

several cases they gave examples of this in settings outside the classroom. Ann prefaced her comment saying that there were nearly 2000 students in the school.

When I walk down the hallways, I look for my students and I make sure I use their names when I see them. Especially in a building this big, I think it's easy for students to fall through the cracks. Some students are only in my class one time in their four years. I want them to know that for that semester I am their *advocate*. That's just so important to me. I want them to know that I know who they are. I also try to attend some of the things these kids do outside of school.

Researcher note: I noted in three of the observations, teachers recognized individual students at the beginning of class for their involvement in school activities that had happened that week—sports, theater, and music events.

Theme Two: Safe Learning Environment

Providing a *safe learning environment* was emphasized by participants. The term “safe” in this context relates to the emotional and social well being of students in the classroom setting and valuing what each member brings. This is probably best described by Alex in his discussion of the importance of the environment to learning, “It’s about understanding that not everybody is as talented. Not everyone can run as fast or jump as high as you, so to speak. As a team, you have to work through differences to be successful.” Participants communicated what *safe learning environment* meant for them in terms of building *trust* and providing *consistency*.

Building a *trusting* environment was voiced by nearly all participants. They emphasized the need to create an environment that fosters open discussion and shared

learning. Ann stresses that this step is one of the most important for students in her theater classes,

The teacher needs to build a sense of *trust*, not just between the teacher and students but also create an environment where students can *trust* their peers. I spend two full weeks each semester just doing exercises to build a sense of *trust* and classroom camaraderie before we do anything academic. We do things in class that make you feel vulnerable when you are put in the hands of others, but by the end of the semester the bonds between the students are strong.

Several participants noted that a *safe environment* meant that they as teachers need to provide *consistency* in the way of a strong foundation or guidelines. Chris offered that it's important that students know what to expect from him, "In building a *trusting* environment, you need to demonstrate that you respect them and you are willing to provide them with what they need."

Jean noted "What students need most from me is *consistency*—in everything that I do." In the same vein, Ann added, "They need the boundaries that I create."

Theme Three: Active participation

Active participation was mentioned many times with relation to teaching excellence. Participants noted that they needed to foster it both in how they run their classes and how students respond. In the interviews they communicated that *active participation* is expressed through *engagement* and *interaction*.

Seth described how he plans courses to encourage *active participation*,

They need to know where we're at now and where we're going. They want to know how it's going to affect presentation day, or my grade, or the project as a whole. And they need to get information from a variety of sources, delivered in a variety of ways—see it, do it, hear about it, watch about it. It makes a big difference.

Engagement was a common term used in conjunction with *active participation* when participants described what they need in order for teaching excellence to happen. Alex described what is happening when he experiences teaching excellence,

It is full *engagement* on the part of everyone in that classroom--enthralled and truly emotionally excited--whatever is appropriate for the piece you are playing. It's being on the edge of your seat literally and producing what we're trying to produce.

Sue emphasized how it makes her feel when her students truly *engage* in the classroom, "Things happen when kids are *engaged*. I can walk out of a room feeling like I'm six inches off the ground just because they were *engaged*, found meaning in what we were discussing, and related it to their lives."

Small group settings were often used by the participants, and direct instruction was a necessary part of most of the classes. Participants noted the important role that *interaction* plays when used in conjunction with direct instruction. Chris describes how he encourages *active participation* through *interaction* in class in discussion and problem solving when lecturing to students,

Ask these guys, they'll say, "Yea, he lectures," but I want a class that's involved, that's *interactive*, that's curious. I want students in the class who are willing to challenge me. If I say something that they don't agree with, I want them to say "I don't believe that," or "I think you are wrong there." What's your evidence?"

That's what I want.

Interaction between teacher and students is important, but Seth also discussed the importance of students *interacting* with the topic,

I definitely feed off students' desire to want to explore and do more beyond the base level. In order for excellence to happen, they need the desire to *interact* with the topic, whatever it might be. I need to see that desire to *interact*--to question, to ask, and want to know.

Theme Four: Teachable Moments

For each of the participants, *teachable moments* were the epitome of teaching excellence. Their mastery of this theme indicated deep understanding and competence in their respective subject content which gave them an amazing flexibility to take advantage of *teachable moments*. *Teachable moments* were expressed through discussion of *responding to student interest* and *making adjustments* in class based on feedback from students on whether they were "getting" what was being taught. Several participants referred to making *adjustments* as formative assessment. While one aspect is student generated (expressing interest) and the other teacher generated (making adjustments), they are not independent of each other, as the supporting quotes will demonstrate.

In response to the main question on experiencing teaching excellence, Ann noted that *responding to students in teachable moments* was a practice of excellent teachers,

I think an excellent teacher needs to *respond to students in the moment*. Teachers need to be able to gauge what additional information students need. For example, in a particular moment pausing to articulate what you are trying to achieve.

Kate noted that when students come to her with a question or suggestion, she sees it as an opportunity for everyone to benefit,

When I come across a *teaching moment*, when something happens, and you are like “Oh, good, everyone needs to know this.” It may not be what I planned to cover that day but they need to know. So, we take time out to cover it.

Chris mentioned *teachable moments* with respect to student interest and exploring those interests,

I have a general idea in my mind of what I want to accomplish during a class, but if they are interested in a particular subject, then “Let’s explore it.” Or, if they have good content knowledge in the area we are covering then let’s go on to something else.

Sue noted that she looks for opportunities to have students present *teachable moments*,

When you are approaching architectural engineering and your tool is the software, we all approach it differently. We’re going to get to the endpoint a little bit differently, and if they can show—and share with the rest of the group and me—a different way to do that, maybe somebody else thinks differently than I do in those terms.

On *making adjustments* “on the fly” in Seth’s words, participants offered insight into how they informally assess students’ understanding of the topic or the piece they are performing. On *adjusting*, Ann shares, “I guess, in a sense of being very in tune with students, I’m always looking at their faces for cues.” Sue counts on expressions on student faces for cues as well,

I’ll always check for understanding, and if I still have blank faces, I will tell them, “Okay, ask me a question specifically, so that I can explain it in a different way because clearly, I’m not getting through to you and teaching you the way you need to learn it.”

Seth noted the importance of feedback and *adjustment* on the part of both the instructor and students,

Feedback is important. You’re always *adjusting*...get a little feedback, make *adjustments* on the fly. You make *adjustments* within the lesson and are constantly looking for and giving feedback—is this working or is it not.

Chris added that he, too, continuously checks for understanding, “We constantly do simple questions and answers, constantly do presentations and demonstrations. You can do a variety of things to see if kids really get it.”

Seth noted that he often uses more of what may be considered formative assessment in teaching design.

Formative assessment--we talk a lot about that. The quick hitters--ask a question, what kind of response do you get? Maybe a little 5-question note card quiz kind of thing, or show of hands, or give me some feedback. Tell me what you think

about this. Those almost informal, but formative things...say “where are we going with this?” Because you need to *adjust*, day by day. The first four or five years of teaching, I probably said, “That’s the way we’re going to do it and that’s the way it is.” That *adjustment*—or lack of *adjustment*—resulted in a lack of product, or a lack of process.

Theme Five: High Expectations

A very strong theme that emerged from the interviews and observations of participants was the *high expectations* for learning that these teachers of excellence hold for their students and the systems they employ which enable students can achieve these levels.

High expectations were articulated through [students] *taking responsibility for learning, taking risks, and performing—not practicing.*

Participants discussed students *taking responsibility for learning* in the spirit of learning through discovery and being accountable for learning, without having to be “spoon fed” information. Jean described how this happens in her classrooms, “They probably do more in that environment, learning on their own. This classroom was ideal. We had a great time--got to try new things and learn through discovery. It was a time when we could try new things.”

Kate articulated her emphasis on students’ need to *take responsibility for their own learning.*

I’m looking at quality. I want my students to perform quality work. I don’t want them to just memorize and spit it back...that’s not true learning. I want to see application. In Bloom’s Taxonomy, I want to see the higher levels of learning—to

learn the skill and then apply it in a real live situation. Once kids see practical application—how and what it means for them--then their effort level and their motivation skyrockets. I'm always encouraging kids to be the best they can. I get frustrated because I think we could become a society of "good enough" or "getting by" or "I did the assignment and I got it done." I know they get upset with me a lot of times, but that's not acceptable...you need to revamp the quality. You need to make this your best effort. Sometimes they're like "You always say that." I say, "You'll appreciate it someday." I think there needs to be that stress on quality--not just getting by.

Several participants noted that they believed that excellence in teaching happens when students learn through *taking risks in learning*. In a safe environment, they encourage their students to not be afraid of making mistakes or failing, because those experiences are often the ones that provide the greatest learning. Ann related her students “*being willing to take risks*” with getting what she needs in her theater classroom to move learning to high levels. Kate discussed how she approaches “risky learning” and the role she needs to play in providing support, “I want them to *not be afraid to take risks*--not be afraid to fail. There are times when I know, ‘Oh you are going to do that and it's not going to work,’ but I have to keep my mouth shut. I want them to go through that process.”

Sue articulated similar beliefs about the value of *risk taking* to student learning.

I need students to have that thirst for learning. I teach a subject area where most of the kids in my classes are there because it's an option. So they are there because

they think there is something to gain. They want to learn, so that's a bonus. I want them to be open-minded, to be willing to try new things, to not be afraid to *be risk takers*. I want them to be "out of the box." It's okay to do something different and not typical.

Chris offered an example of how he encourages students to *take risks* in developing hypotheses,

We had groups going through perception...explaining what they thought were the two to three biggest concepts of the chapter." I said I don't care what they are, but be able to explain why you think that—what those concepts are, why they are important and be able to give your own examples. I had a couple students just give me a definition of a term. And I said, "Okay, why is that important, why does it work, and how does it work?" A few of them struggled with that. I really impress one thing. It's not a formal written rule, but it's that you can't say, "I don't know" to things. I want you to think about it—not just randomly guess—but put forth an educated hypothesis, maybe, on what the answer is because it's always better to do that. I always tell kids, "Don't ever be afraid to fail." You won't be successful if you are afraid to fail.

The two participants whose academic disciplines involve performance—music and theater—emphasized the need for students to approach every class as *performing, not practicing*. This "standard" establishes a continuous high level of learning, "When they come in [to class], they are *performing*. This is an event. We try to *perform every day—not practice*—with the idea that someone is there in front of us listening."

Theme Six: Real-World Experiences

Participants emphasized the importance of connecting learning to *real world experiences*. This was communicated several ways through their perceptions about preparing students for success as individuals and as community members, from a more holistic viewpoint. Others described culminating projects connected with professionals in the community. Some even noted how processes and learning in the classroom foster realistic expectations of what it would mean to be a career professional. Terms used to communicate connection to *real-world experiences* were *life-long learning*, *real-world application*, and *student as teacher*.

In describing teaching excellence, participants noted that it was important to bridge learning to community issues and needs in a broader sense. The focus of this application of learning was not necessarily in the area that the participant taught. It was noted earlier in the introduction of participants that Kate helped develop a program in which the entire student body traveled to a nearby river following a week of multi-disciplinary instruction on the connection between the river and daily lives. Alex also shared the importance of *life-long learning*,

It's important that they are prepared not just academically, but being able to be successful dealing with life, having the tools to problem solve. Basically, it's giving them enough tools to be able to deal with living beyond high school, living beyond college. That includes experiences both in and out of school. It's about understanding what it is to be a very human, human being, so to speak.

Chris noted that hearing from students that they are successful after high school because of their experiences in his classes is very positive feedback to him on teaching excellence,

To me, those are the biggest rewards because I would much rather reach a kid how to learn to love *learning*, to understand that it's okay to aspire to excellence rather than just to fit in. That's far more important than having them memorize a bunch of psychology facts that they can always go look up.

Several teachers cited experiencing pride and satisfaction when a group of students they taught were finding meaning through *real-world applications*. Seth, who teaches computer-aided design described the experience when his group presented a project to a group of architects:

When they [students] can take that knowledge and then solve a problem or deliver a project, start to finish. You tie that project to a community-base level, tie it to community members, tie it to business, and to industry. We sometimes we call it PVL project-based learning. When you take it to that level, you see learning taking place. You really feel like there is some excellence taking place.

Alex, who teaches music, described a similar *real-world application* experience at a national meeting of school superintendents where his jazz band was invited to perform.

My goal is to get them to reach their potential. That particular performance was such a culminating experience. Not only did they play well, but also because our Board of Education was there and they took us out to dinner. You should have seen how well my students sat down various places with these board members

and their spouses and how they talked back and forth with the board members-- much better than I would have at their age. I was very proud of their ability to handle themselves.

Sue, who teaches architecture, experiences teaching excellence when her students master *real-world application* through a community project:

Every year we have a culminating project where we team with a local design company. They have a hypothetical design problem. This year it happens to be the new events center. Last year it was redesigning the city mission. When it comes together and they [students] can stand up in front of a group of jurors and people related to that project--people from the community, and they can tell those people in a mature logical sequence about what they did and why they did it and justify it—and having grown in that regard. That’s when, for me, it’s very, very much like being a parent and being extremely proud of something your own child did. You sweat bullets for them and it’s kind of the same animal, just different animals.

Participants shared the importance of giving students experiences in roles other than just being students. Because participants’ classrooms often include group instruction or collaborative learning, students begin to see their own value as teachers. During my observation time in Chris’s classroom I noted a schedule for presentations. Two groups of students presented nearly every day. When I later saw how all of his students were presenting and facilitating psychology concepts and experiments as part of a psychology fair for undergraduate students, I saw practice in action. Teams of two to three students

set up attractive booths and interactive experiments to illustrate a concept they presented to five or six younger students. It was a very positive environment—presenters smiling, interacting, and *teaching others*. Students who visited the fair booths completed evaluation slips, so presenters received feedback on how they did. Chris was also a participant at each of the seven to eight booths. When I asked Chris about it, he said that students present nearly every day. It was obvious they had developed confidence in their abilities to *teach*. Kate also shared her thoughts on how this happens in her classroom,

Teaching excellence is not my teaching. I think it's when my students are showing other students how to do things. When peer teaching happens, when they know how to do something so well that they can explain it and show others, they've got it. I think sometimes they even explain better than I may. I overhear them saying, "I know that she says that's one way to do it, but I think it's easier to do it this way." They are taking that knowledge, finding other ways to do it, and explaining it to peers.

Alex emphasized the importance of *students teaching students* in his classrooms, bands, and the different ensembles he teaches, "I created through the years a mentor system—*students teaching students*. This includes requiring groups such as the jazz band to run a sectional by themselves and rehearse by themselves once a week."

I asked if he rotated leadership or had students who had gone through leadership camp serve as leaders. He responded,

I don't appoint a leader. There is usually someone who steps up to the plate and helps direct them on what way to go. Usually, it's the lead player, but not always.

I don't usually designate a leader because a lot of times the leader that I would pick may not be the one the students pick.

Theme Seven: Honoring your Personality

Honoring your personality and allowing it to come through in your teaching style and sharing with students was cited by all participants as a key to teaching excellence. This theme was communicated with terms such as *teaching style*, *learning from students*, *being a role model*, and *high self-expectations*.

Teaching style was an undercurrent throughout the interviews and observations. Participants discussed what students learned about their personality from their *teaching style* and in many cases, their personalities were reflected in their classrooms. Jean shared how her personality is reflected in her teaching,

I'm very organized and so they recognize that, maybe within the first week of school, that this how I am. I guess what I'm getting at is that the *personality* is the most important aspect of the relationships that you can form with students but still keep a distance. That seems to work best for me.

Seth articulated his experience being what he perceived to be less outgoing than other teachers,

Some people think that it's about being very social and outgoing which I'm not. Seems like it's innate to them [outgoing people], but when you see people who are just average people get on that stage, you can see there is a lot of heart to it. And when you saw that heart in action, it made you think, "Yea, I could do that." I don't have to be the life of the party, but I can still convey that...get that

information across and I can do it in an artful way. It's almost an expression of yourself and there are so many ways to do it that. You talk about the one-to-five year teacher—they have to recognize they have to express themselves in a manner that is appropriate, of course, to the school or the school setting. If you can find the manner of expression and get comfortable with it early, realize that you have to be who you are and express it. When you find that common ground you can find success early. It just makes it a lot more fun.

Chris reflected on how he learned about different methods and styles that seemed to fit how he perceived teaching and what would work for him,

I really believe that there is no one right way to teach. You can be the stand-up lecturer everyday and be really good. You can be the “We’re going to talk about feelings and emotions,” or “We’re going to do interpretive dance.” There are so many ways you can do it, but you have to *teach to your personality*, so I picked and chose [from teachers he observed] what I saw that applied to me. I learned some stuff--I remember when I was volunteering, a kid came in and was kind of being a jerk. I’m a junior in college—maybe 19 or 20—I’m thinking like, “I’m going to get in this kids’ face.” She [teacher] looked at him and says “Jason, why are you being mean; would I be mean to you?” “Well, no.” “Okay, well, why are you being mean to me?” The kid says “I’m sorry,” and sits down. It’s great. She diffused it, and I’m like “wow.” I was thinking, “I was going to battle and teach this kid.” I would have made the situation ten times worse. He apologized and

then he was great. And it was like, “Wow!” To this day, it’s one of those lessons I remember.

Ann contrasted how her teaching style differs from another teacher in her school who is very effective,

Teachers need to *honor their own personalities*. I don't think there's a blanket strategy or format for teaching. I use a ton of active participation. I throw myself into the very activities that I ask my students to do. That doesn't mean that a teacher down the hallway needs to do those things to be successful. Another effective teacher I know well is a lecture-based teacher. His students love his lectures because he is passionate about his content. He is very different than me but he is very successful because he *honors his own personality*. He does those very things we talked about--gets to know his students, has a lot of depth and knowledge about his content so when he's talking he's not just giving information, he exposing some of himself. I think that's important.

A few of the teachers reflected on how they adjust what they bring from their *personality* to the classroom depending on the *personalities of the students*, what they need from the students, and what the students need from them. Ann noted,

Every class is different—each has a different *personality* and it just seems to come out. You might have one that seems more academic and another one where they are really hyper. The class you'll see today, they are really high energy. They demand a lot, so the way I question or the way I have kids volunteer is different based on the *personalities* of class. So I’m figuring out the *personality* of this

group and how I have to modify myself in order to keep these kids in line, engaged, and focused.

Sue shared that part of *honoring her personality* is that she values *learning from students*, and she lets them know that she values it,

The days that the kids can teach me something are the days that I revel in—it's just fun. I always tell the kids that, "If a day goes by when I haven't learned something from you guys and it's good (I learn a lot from them but it's not always good). Those are the days that are good." I walk out feeling that way and it's typically because some student has taught me and the rest of the class.

All of the participants are leaders outside the classroom. They serve on national, state and local boards related to their subject area. They are involved in curriculum development at school and district levels. They are leaders in professional learning communities in their schools. They are also very connected to the community. Through this involvement, they invest time, energy, and resources in staying current in their academic areas and bringing new learning into the classroom. As such, they serve as *role models* for students. Kate reflected on the importance of serving as a *role model*,

I'm not afraid to admit I don't know--that I need to learn how. I am constantly going to technology conferences, constantly learning myself. I hope that they [students] see that *model*--that I am constantly trying to stay on the cutting edge, trying to learn new things, speaking at national conferences. I try to give back to the profession.

High self-expectations were expressed by participants. This is very tied to serving as *role models* and the time, energy, and resources that they invest in leadership and staying current in their field. Sue expressed it from a different point of view,

I feel guilty when I'm not the best I can be. The kids are shortchanged when that happens. I want that for them—to be the best I can be. They need that from me. I expect the best from them. I'd better be giving it in return.

Other Relevant Findings

There were three additional findings that are relevant to this study but not expressed by all participants or directly part of experiencing teaching excellence. However, they deserve attention in the discussion in that they impact teaching excellence. The three areas are early *influences* on teachers of excellence, *drawbacks to the teaching profession*, and *motivations for staying in teaching*.

Relevant Finding One: Influences

Participants were each asked about who or what influenced them to pursue a career in education. Four influences emerged from the interviews—*mentors*, *former teachers*, *experience*, and *a calling to teach*.

Chris noted that a high school *teacher* and coach was an *influence* on his decision to teach and continued to serve as a *mentor* in his early teaching years. Chris had planned to become an engineer or astronaut but decided to pursue teaching at the encouragement of his teacher,

He has been a true *mentor* to me. He's been there when I've said, "I don't know if I want to do this anymore." He's been there when I've slipped up and made

mistakes, and he's been there when things have gone really well. He's been someone I can always bounce ideas off.

Alex and Jean both shared experiences about supportive principals and how they made a difference in their first year of teaching that encouraged them to continue. Alex shared his experience,

The first year was a fabulous experience mostly because of the principal. She knew exactly what we were supposed to do in the class and gave us direction on the class. She was a great, great help for a first-year teacher.

As you might expect, outstanding high school *teachers influenced* participants to pursue a career in teaching. They saw qualities in the participants that indicated they would be good teachers and encouraged them to pursue a career in education. Ann shared how she was influenced by a *teacher*,

She [teacher] pushed us to our limits and saw potential in her students. That impacted me because she made me feel successful and helped me discover where my talents lied. She gave me an opportunity to help her coach [speech and drama]. Having that chance to be in a leadership position or position of facilitator was empowering.

Seth had a similar experience and was influenced by a principal's (also a *teacher*) passion for teaching,

I got interested in teaching in high school by working pretty closely in a small school with *teachers*, even the principal. The principal was actually one of the

better *teachers* I had. He taught a psychology class. You could sense that passion for teaching in these people.

Four of the seven participants did not start their careers in teaching. They had *experience* prior to teaching in professional positions in business, pharmacy technology, engineering, and journalism before heeding a call to teach. Ann described her decision to succumb to *the call to teach*,

Each year when I was in college my high school and speech drama coach would asked me to come back and help her coach and direct. So, I did. I instinctively knew that someday I would be teaching. I fought it because of the money—which seemed to be like nothing. But, whenever I was in the classroom working with these high school students, it was just a natural fit. I loved it. I love the relationships with students, so I got certified to teach.

Alex had been involved in music since middle school and thought it was important to explore other options outside of music. When he graduated from college, he worked in business. After nearly two years in the business world, he decided that teaching was where he needed to be,

I felt like I was a cog in a big wheel and that whatever I did really didn't make that much of a difference. So, I said, "I'm going back to music." You are very important if you are a teacher. You have so much responsibility, and it makes you feel that you are of use. I really need to feel that I am contributing to something—making a difference at something—that is more important than whether we make money or not.

Relevant Finding Two: Drawbacks to Teaching

Participants relayed many very positive experiences in teaching, but they were careful to say that there are days when teaching excellence does not happen. When asked if they had ever considered leaving, their responses were reflected in terms of *early and mid-career challenges, family, and salary*..

Three of the teachers indicated that they had considered leaving the profession at different points in their career. Chris shared that he did not have a good understanding of what teaching involved even though he had invested time in observing and volunteering in several school classrooms. He also discussed the importance of peers with whom you can share experiences.

I was the only teacher in the building under 40. I was at the school all the time and I didn't form a good professional bond with anyone in the school the first year. I was one day ahead on planning. I'd sketch out units, but I didn't have the details down and I was struggling. I thought it [instruction on a topic] was going to take one day and it took four. I thought about not teaching.

Seth shared that he considered leaving after two years following the critical fifth year, "I thought about leaving about after the seventh year. Before it got to the point that I understood that it was going to take some flexibility and some different approaches, it felt kind of stagnant, felt kind of blah."

Participants also discussed issues related to *family* and *salary*. Most of the teachers acknowledged that they knew what to expect when it came to *salaries* but that the impact on *family* was not something they had considered when they started. Alex shared,

Teaching is not an unselfish job. You are putting everybody else's lives first. It hurts your family. It hurts your marriage. It hurts a lot of things if you are not careful. You have to have a very understanding family, which I do. And, yes, I guess when you are in a house and a neighbor who is next to you is about 15 years your junior. He has a house twice as big as yours and it's his second or third house, and your house is the first one that you could barely afford, it just kind of bothers you sometimes.

Ann reflected on the question about leaving, saying "If I do ever leave—and I don't see that happening in the near future—it will be because of family."

Relevant Finding Three: Motivations for Staying

As mentioned earlier, each of the participants is a leader outside of the classroom in different ways. Given their talents and leadership, it is interesting to hear why they stay in the classroom. Many have the credentials and could be administrators; others could be very successful in other professions. Two of the participants noted that they enjoyed the *autonomy* that being a teacher provides. Three participants said they were motivated to keep teaching when *prior students* came back and told how much their experiences in participants' classes helped them be successful in college or in their new careers. However, participants' motivations for staying were primarily communicated in terms of *impacting students*. They convey the sense of pride, caring, and commitments they have to students. They stay in the classroom because that is where they can impact the most. Kate articulates her commitment,

I know they [students] surprise themselves sometimes but the facial expressions when they are “Wow, this is really pretty good, and I did it.” That self-gratification when they know they see that and that sense of accomplishment—that’s priceless.

That’s what keeps me where I’m at.

Sue notes that, “It’s a bigger picture—where are these kids going, and how do we get them to be good citizens giving back to the community.” Kate is a department coordinator in her school and has been asked why she hasn’t gone into administration. She shared,

When you are putting in more time than administration, you start looking and saying, “This isn’t worth it.” For me, I can’t make that choice. I love my kids too much. Sure the money is nice, but I don’t know if I could come to my job and like it as much.

Alex summed it up well in his comments regarding why he stays in teaching, “I stay in teaching because I love kids. That’s why I stay. It’s the students themselves. They are why we are here. They’re the ones that make me feel fabulous some days—and some days not so good.

Summary of Themes and Other Relevant Findings

Table 7 lists the seven primary themes that emerged from the data collected through interviews, observations and award nomination information: *teacher-student relationships, safe learning environment, active participation, teachable moments, high expectations, real-world experiences, and honoring your personality*. These seven themes

Table 7. Listing of Themes and Other Relevant Findings

Themes	Other Relevant Findings
Teacher-Student Relationships	Early Influences
Safe Learning Environment	Drawbacks to Teaching
Active Participation	Motivations for Staying in Teaching
Teaching in the Moment	
High Expectations	
Real-World Experiences	
Honoring Your Personality	

combined are the core of the essence of the phenomenon of teaching excellence as perceived by seven national award winning teachers. Other relevant findings which are critical to understanding teachers' reflections on and motivations for continuing in teaching. They include *early influences*, *drawbacks to teaching*, and *motivations for staying in teaching*.

The Essence

The essence of experiencing teaching excellence is defined by seven national award-winning secondary teachers as interconnected, planned, and unplanned occurrences that happen in a dynamic environment of engaged students, teachers, and others. Teaching excellence happens in a variety of contexts—in the classroom where teachers and students interact, in small groups where students work independently and teach each other, in the busy school hallways where teachers and students are connecting,

in teachers' lounges where stories are being shared, and in culminating presentations where students perform at national conferences or relay solutions to real-world problems.

Teaching excellence happens in a system under the guidance of a teacher who operates at a continuously high affective level. The teacher brings his or her personality to the classroom which, combined with caring, respectful, trust relationships and high interaction between members, creates enhanced learning opportunities and a structure where high expectations are communicated and attainable. Real-world experiences provide application venues for the learning process and add greater meaning for students. This application allows a student to see him or herself in a new light—as teacher, scientist, designer, architect, computer scientist/technologist, psychologist, musician, or actor. This added meaning provides greater motivation for students—and for teachers who believe that teaching changes the lives of students and that they [teachers] can make a difference. The process is dynamic.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of teaching excellence for teachers who have been recognized at the national level for excellence in teaching. The focus of the study was to develop meaning through the voice of the participants. Several other studies of award-winning teachers were found in the literature review. Several were quantitative. A few were qualitative but more likely to be case study as opposed to phenomenological in their approach. Most studies focused on teaching in specific populations or academic disciplines. Despite differences in approach and context, parallels were found between the results of this study and those in the literature review.

Six of the seven themes that were findings of this study substantiate what was found in the literature on award winning teachers.

Aspects of the first theme, *teacher-student relationships* which included *caring*, *building rapport*, and *advocating for students* were found in three of the studies in the literature review. Branch Goodwin (2004) found that building rapport and caring were practices that teachers working with low-performing or at-risk populations should be able to do. Grant et al. (2008) found that effective teachers who meet needs of diverse learners must be caring and provide a positive learning environment. Goodman (2009) also cited providing a caring environment and recognizing activities outside the classroom (advocating) as traits of outstanding teachers.

The second theme, *safe learning environment*, which includes *consistency* and *trust* had no parallels in the studies in the literature review. For the third theme, *active participation* which includes engagement and interaction, a parallel of student engagement was found to be a characteristic of effective teachers by Goodman (2009).

The fourth theme, *teachable moments*, which includes *responding to students* and *adjusting* teaching based on feedback was found in four of the studies cited in the literature. Branch Goodwin (2004) noted that the ability to use formal and informal assessment is a necessary trait of effective teachers. Grant et al. (2008) noted that in order for teachers to be effective in diverse environments, they need to make assessment integral to meeting student needs. Neubert and Binko (2007) found that star teachers need to be able to adjust teaching strategies to reach students. Goodman (2009) found that good teachers need to be able to differentiate instruction based on student needs.

The fifth theme, *high expectations*, which includes *taking responsibility for learning*, *taking risks in learning*, and *performing-not practicing* was supported by two studies in the literature. Grant et al. (2008) found that effective teachers have high expectations of students, and McKay (1997) found that Teachers of the Years had similar findings.

The sixth theme, *real-world experiences* which includes *life-long learning*, *real-world application* and *student as teacher*, was found in two studies with related findings. Stone (2007) and Grant et al. (2008) both cited holistic approach and measuring success holistically as practices of award-winning teachers. It should be noted that the life-long or holistic learning associated with *real-world experiences* does not include the application

aspects of *the real-world application* and *student-as-teacher* meaning units in the sixth theme.

Elements of the seventh theme, *honoring your personality*, which includes *teaching style, learning from students, serving as a role model, and high self-expectations* were found in three studies in the literature review. Grant et al. (2008) found that effective teachers have teacher self efficacy (a belief that teaching changes lives of students and that the teacher has the skills needed to make this difference). Neubert and Binko (2007) found that award winning teachers must have a passion for teaching. A study by McKay (1997) on Teachers of the Year (TOYs) found that TOYs have high self-expectations. Thompson and Schumacher (1998) found that National FFA Agriscience Teachers of the Year were more likely than other teachers to bring current literature to their classes because they stay current on literature in their field and take advantage of in-service opportunities.

Some parallels were found between studies in the literature review and the other relevant findings noted earlier in this study. Branch Goodwin (2009) and McKay (1997) noted the positive impact of others (supervision of master teachers and relationships with parents) on teachers. This is consistent with findings on *early influences* in this study.

In this study, the literature review provided a basic understanding of research related to award-winning teachers. While parallels were found with each of the literature review studies in some respect, only one study reflected nearly all of the findings of this study. Grant et al. (2008) study of effective teaching of at-risk/highly mobile students had parallels to all but one of the findings in this study, *safe learning environment*. Their

finding, positive learning environment, focused on the teacher's ability to manage the classroom which "grew out of knowing their students and providing effective instruction" (p. 61). Of note in the Grant et al. (2008) study is the finding that affective and academic needs and learning were intertwined. This finding is consistent with the findings in this study and will be addressed in the discussion section.

Additional literature was reviewed to test the validity of the findings of this study. Two works that confirm the findings are Chickering and Gamson's *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (1999). The principles are: encourages student-faculty contact, encourages cooperation among students, encourages active learning, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. A second resource was Stronge, Tucker, and Hindman's (2004) *Handbook for Qualities of Effective Teachers*, has parallels to nearly all findings in this study as well—influence on background and professional training, teachers as a person, importance of caring, fairness and respect, social interactions with students, promotion of enthusiasm and motivation for learning, and high expectations. The one finding in this study that is not found in these two works is the participants' very strong emphasis on applying learning to real-world experiences and issues.

Implications for Research

As noted earlier in the discussion, the Grant et al. (2008) study finding that affective and academic needs and learning were intertwined is consistent with the findings in this study.

Affective Domain. All participants in this study have been teaching over ten years. It is apparent from their accomplishments in being recognized for excellence in teaching and from the interviews and observations that they have very deep knowledge of their content area, and all participants mentioned the importance of staying up to date and continuing to learn in their content area. Given this, it is not surprising that knowledge of content was not a primary theme that emerged in the findings. However, what did emerge was the very strong emphasis on practices that relate to operating in the affective domain.

One model that we can look to for a greater understanding of what differentiates the perceptions and practices of the participants in this study is the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Mesia, 1964), commonly referred to as Bloom's Taxonomy. The Taxonomy has three domains: cognitive (mental skills or knowledge), affective (growth in feelings or emotional areas or attitude), and psychomotor (manual or physical skills).

The perceptions and practices of the teachers in this study differ from the other studies in that they fall into consistently high ranges in the affective domain. The affective domain levels are depicted in Table 8 with quotes from the study to illustrate expectations and learning across all levels. The themes that emerged from this study can

Table 8. Affective Domain Levels and Examples from Study.

Category	Example	Quotes from Study
<p>Receiving Phenomena: Awareness, willingness to hear, selected attention.</p>	<p>Examples: Listen to others with respect. Listen for and remember the name of newly introduced people.</p>	<p><i>I know students' names within the first five days of class.</i></p> <p><i>We build a sense of trust and camaraderie before we do anything academic.</i></p>
<p>Responding to Phenomena: Active participation on part of the learners. Attends and reacts to a particular phenomenon. Learning outcomes may emphasize compliance in responding, willingness to respond, or satisfaction in responding (motivation).</p>	<p>Examples: Participates in class discussions. Gives a presentation. Questions new ideals, concepts, models, etc. in order to fully understand them. Know the safety rules and practices them.</p>	<p><i>We constantly do presentations and demonstrations...to see if kids really get it.</i></p> <p><i>Learning happens when they question me and say, "I don't agree, what is your evidence?"</i></p>
<p>Valuing: The worth or value a person attaches to a particular object, phenomenon, or behavior. Valuing is based on the internalization of a set of specified values, while clues to these values are expressed in the learner's overt behavior and are often identifiable.</p>	<p>Examples: Demonstrates belief in the democratic process. Is sensitive towards individual and cultural differences. Shows the ability to solve problems. Follows through with commitment.</p>	<p><i>When peer teaching happens, when they know how to do something so well that they can explain it and show it to others, they've got it.</i></p> <p><i>When they see the practical application, or what it means to them, their effort level and motivation skyrockets</i></p>
<p>Organization: Organizes values into priorities by contrasting different values, resolving conflicts between them, and creating an unique value system. The emphasis is on comparing, relating, and synthesizing values.</p>	<p>Examples: Accepts responsibility for one's behavior. Explains the role of systematic planning in solving problems</p>	<p><i>If you care about them you will hold them accountable.</i></p> <p><i>When they take the knowledge base and solve a problem and then tie that project to a community-base level, that's when you see learning taking place.</i></p>
<p>Internalizing values (characterization): Has a value system that controls their behavior. Instructional objectives are concerned with the student's general patterns of adjustment (personal, social, emotional).</p>	<p>Examples: Shows self-reliance when working independently. Cooperates in group activities. Uses an objective approach in problem solving. Revises judgments and changes behavior in light of new evidence.</p>	<p><i>Students built a podcast to address questions and issues.</i></p> <p><i>Students are required to run a sectional and rehearse by themselves once a week.</i></p> <p><i>It's a great environment when students can work as a group, not be afraid to fail in finding the answers.</i></p>

Note: Modified from Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Vol. 2): Affective Domain.

be reflected in the different levels of the affective domain with *teacher/student relationships*, *safe learning environment*, and *teachable moments* demonstrating coverage of the first two levels. *High expectations* (of students and self), *real-world experiences*, and *active participation* examples demonstrate coverage of the top three levels (valuing, organization, and internalizing values).

Compared to the other studies in the literature, the participants in this study demonstrated continuous operation in the affective domain for both themselves and the students in their classes. The importance of teachers and students operating in the affective domain is that it has an impact on how well students can operate in the other two domains—cognitive and psychomotor. Duncan-Hewett (2004) notes that,

Individuals who learn to recognize and engage their emotions are ready to grow affectively so that they can respond to challenges appropriately and explore their values. At higher levels in the affective domain classification, growth involves managing oneself, managing one's performance, and making commitments.

Maslow (1970) calls this “self-actualization (p. 81).

Findings in the literature review studies do not demonstrate coverage of all levels or consistent operation at high levels in the affective domain as is demonstrated in this study. Findings in this study that are absent in others may expose gaps in affective domain operation that may decrease teaching effectiveness and learning. These include:

- *Safe learning environment* or trust environment is necessary for risk-taking (no fear of failure) in learning and for effectively implementing high participation and group interaction.

- Participants in this study bridged learning to *real-world experiences* through application and problem-solving. Holistic learning was a finding of two studies, but real-world application was not evident in any of the studies.

The question to be studied related to teaching and learning in the affective domain is, “What allows or enables these teachers to operate continuously at the high levels in the affective domain?”

One answer to this question may involve the influence of others on participants to go into or stay in the teaching field. It is possible that teachers or mentors who taught or influenced participants operated at high affective levels. Another possibility is that the connection with community and industry through prior experience or community-school based programs may guide this tendency. Four of the teachers were in professional positions outside of education before beginning teaching. They are more likely to understand the value of students making a connection to real-world careers, problems, and issues in preparation for life after high school and college. This is an area that merits further study.

Teacher as Leader. A second area that emerges from the study is the concept of teacher as leader. The perceptions, practices, and motivations of the participants in this study could be viewed under at least two different traditional leadership models. The first is servant leader. Four of the seven participants cited “a calling” or a felt need to teach, one of the tenets of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). After trying out other careers, they submitted to the calling and became teachers. Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko

(2004) offer the following description of servant leadership based on the works of Greenleaf (1977), Spears (1998), Spears and Lawrence (2002), and Laub (1999).

Servant leadership views a leader as a servant of his and her followers. It places the interest of followers before the self-interest of a leader, emphasizes personal development and empowerment of followers. The servant leader is a facilitator for followers to achieve a shared vision (p. 80).

A study of effective teachers who remain in the classroom instead of moving into administration or into careers outside of education can add to the literature on servant leadership.

The second leadership model is transformational leadership. There also appear to be some very strong parallels with the perceptions, motivations, and practices of these teachers of excellence with those of transformational leaders. Smith et al. (2004) provides the following description of transformational leadership based on the work of Bass (1996) and Bass and Avolio (1988, 1994).

Transformational leadership occurs when a leader inspires followers to share a vision, empowering them to achieve the vision, and provides the resources necessary for developing their personal potential. Transformational leaders serve as role models, support optimism and mobilize commitment, as well as focus on the followers' needs for growth (p. 80).

Implications for Secondary Administrators

Several implications for secondary administrators came from this study.

- The need to connect with peers or mentors for support and guidance was noted as especially important for pre-service and beginning teachers. One participant shared that one of the primary factors that caused him to consider leaving teaching after his first year was the lack of peers or mentors with whom he could connect. Effective mentor programs are a key to keeping beginning teachers in the field.
- Mentor programs are important for early-career teachers who have been teaching from five to ten years as well. One participant in this study noted that teachers need to adjust their teaching style and become more flexible. Mentors who can help them bridge this change are critical to keeping teachers who have surpassed the critical five-year mark in the classroom.
- The evidence from this study indicates that practices of these teachers of excellence are effective in facilitating students learning at high levels. Using these teachers and others who are noted for their skills in these areas as models of excellence for master workshops can be an effective way to build these skills in other teachers. Many schools have discipline-specific professional learning communities. This could be a topic that is explored as a possible focus in those communities.

Implications for Pre-Service Educational Programs

Recommendations for institutions of higher learning are offered based on the findings of this study.

- The primary finding in this study is the participants' operation in the affective domain, especially at the higher levels. This is important to the literature and the experiences that are traditionally required of pre-service students. This deserves further investigation as a curriculum development focus.
- This study points to the importance of supervising teachers during the student teaching block. One teacher shared his experiences in his first year regarding lesson planning challenges (and lack of peers with whom he could share planning and teaching experiences) which nearly caused him to leave teaching. Student teachers need to be given more responsibility in order to foster more realistic expectations of what is required for effective teaching. Requiring or facilitating additional observational and teaching experiences for education students at all levels was advised by all participants.
- With advanced technology, the idea of setting up supportive teaching networks where new teachers (and later as current teachers across experience levels or by discipline) can share experiences has merit and could be coordinated when students graduate and take teaching positions in different communities. These networks could also serve as a forum for introducing new topics, both in respective disciplines and in pedagogy. Master workshops and opportunities for development in summer or masters level credit could also be conceptualized and communicated through these networks.

Implications for New Teachers

Participants mentioned a number of needs that are essential to teachers being able to experience teaching excellence.

- The need to connect with peers for support and shared learning was noted as especially important for pre-service and beginning teachers.
- Mentors were cited as important to beginning teachers. Mentors mentioned were school principals who helped primarily with lesson planning but made themselves available as resources for beginning and early-career teachers.
- Honoring your personality in your teaching style and deciding how you will bring your personality to the classroom is important to success as a teacher.
- Patience and persistence in course planning is important. Participants noted that within three or four years they were very comfortable with this aspect of teaching. Experience and self-reflection are important to becoming efficient at being able to gauge student learning “on the fly” and adjust curriculum and teaching to take advantage of “teachable moments.”
- As noted in implications for pre-service educational institutions, the concept of virtual communities for students who graduate together (and others) could provide networking and sharing. This may be critical for new and early-career teachers in small schools. This can also be valuable for all teachers at different stages in professional development.

Future Research

Based on the discussion in the implications for research, the following areas of research are suggested:

- Review pre-service curriculum to determine how and where instruction on using affective learning resides. Based on the findings, determine if there is a need to enhance the curriculum and, perhaps more importantly, offer graduate-level courses or seminars on affective learning skills to current teachers.
- Conduct similar studies using participants in core subject areas. All but one of the participants in this study taught elective courses.
- Studies which examine how beginning teachers transition to early-career teachers deserves exploration. Data show that teachers with five to ten years of experience leave at higher levels than teachers with more experience (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009, p. 447). Participants in this study indicated that this transition was critical to becoming more flexible and being able to enhance the learning environment for both students and themselves.
- From a leadership standpoint, studies should be conducted to explore the concept of teachers as leaders for both the servant and transformational leadership models. Some studies have been done in this area but others are needed to build evidence of how teachers fit into traditional leadership theory.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand and define the experience of teaching excellence through the voice of national award-winning teachers. Teaching excellence was conveyed *through teacher-student relationships, safe learning environment, active participation, teachable moments, high expectations, real-world experiences, and honoring your personality*. Other relevant findings provided a framework for understanding what influenced the teachers in this study to enter the teaching field, considerations and challenges of being a teacher, and why they stay in teaching.

Current literature on award-winning teachers was reviewed. Additional literature was reviewed after the study was completed. Both sets of literature were compared with the findings to determine differences that came from this study. The most important result of the study is identifying the tendency of these teachers of excellence to operate at continuously high levels in the affective domain which facilitates high level learning and transfer of learning for students. Implications for secondary administrators, teachers, and institutions of higher learning were discussed. Implications for research were discussed and future research directions included at the end of the study.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study, the following definitions apply:

Beginning teacher: Teacher with 0 to 5 years of experience.

Early-career teacher: Teacher with 5 to 10 years of experience.

In vivo coding: Coding meaning units or themes using the words of study participants

Mid-career teacher: Teacher with 10-20 years of experience

APPENDIX B: Observational Protocol

Project: Defining Teaching Excellence: Perceptions of Seven National Award-Winning Teachers

Date _____ Length of Activity: _____

Observation Site: _____ Participant: _____

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

APPENDIX B: Observational Protocol (continued)

<u>Descriptive Notes</u>	<u>Reflective Notes</u>
<p data-bbox="332 1472 829 1507"><u>Include drawing of area of observation</u></p>	

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol



INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP
EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

Interview Questions

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Rosalee Swartz-Primary Researcher

TITLE: *The meaning of teaching excellence to award-winning secondary teachers*

Interview Time: Arranged with respective teacher

Date: Determined by teacher and researcher

Place: On-site or as determined by teacher/researcher

Interviewer: Rosalee Swartz

Interviewee: Milken Award recipients in secondary high schools in Nebraska (7 actively teaching)

QUESTIONS:

The following questions relate to experiences as a secondary teacher. Some questions are general; others relate to being recognized as a national Milken Award winner.

Milken Criteria:

- *Effective instructional practices and student learning results inside the classroom and out;*
- *Exemplary educational accomplishments that provide models of excellence for the profession;*
- *Possess strong long-range potential for professional/policy leadership; and*
- *Engaging and inspiring presence that motivates and impacts students, colleagues and the community.*

1. Tell me about your teaching career (educational background, years teaching, teaching locations, etc.).
2. What is the meaning of teaching excellence to you?
In what context does it occur?
3. Tell me about major events when you have experienced excellence in teaching.
In what context did they occur?
4. What factors, events, or individuals have contributed to your development as a teacher?
5. How would you describe a perfect class (room, students, teaching, interaction, etc.)

What do you need from students in your classes?

What do you believe students need from you?

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol (continued)

6. In what ways do you see yourself as a leader and model of excellence?
7. Was there ever a time when you considered leaving the teaching profession?
If so, what was the situation?
8. What recommendations would you give to individuals interested in a teaching career?
9. What other factors that I have not asked about are important in teaching?

APPENDIX D: Informed Consent



INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP
EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

INFORMED CONSENT FORM



IRB# 20100310440 EX
Date Approved: 03/29/2010
Valid Until: 12/15/2010

Identification of Project:

Defining excellence in education: What it means to be a national award-winning secondary teacher

Purpose of the Research:

Currently, over half of teachers leave the profession by the end of their fifth year (National Education Association, 2003). While pay and working conditions are often cited as reasons, new teachers are too often unprepared for the challenges of teaching. Teacher unpreparedness and turnover has a decided impact on learning in the classroom. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore/define what it means to be a national award-winning secondary teacher. It is anticipated that the themes developed through this study will identify practices, beliefs, and motivations of award-winning teachers which will inform development of educational pre-service or in-service programs for secondary teachers that foster realistic expectations and equip them with tools for realizing the rewards of teaching early in their careers.

Procedures:

As a recipient of the Milken Foundation Award, you are being asked to participate in this study. The primary researcher requests your participation in three ways:

- (1) Personal interview: 30-45 minutes of your time, in your classroom or office, to answer interview questions regarding your experience in secondary teaching (audio recording will be used with your permission);
- (2) Permission to observe you teaching in a class for 30-45 minutes (audio and video recording—with no identifiable student faces—will be used with your permission); and
- (3) If possible, I would also like to obtain copies of documents that you believe would provide insight to your experiences in teaching—feedback from parents, students, administrators, course plans, etc.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to participation.

Alternatives:

If, for some reason, you are not available for a personal interview, using telephone interviews or questions asked/answered via email may be considered.

APPENDIX D: Informed Consent (continued)



Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. Although the study will use participant language and quotes, names of participants (5-9) will be changed, Nebraska will be defined as a "midwestern state," and schools will not be identified. Data will be stored in a locked file in the investigator's office at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and will only be seen by the primary and secondary investigator during the study and for three years after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study will be used as the basis for a Masters thesis in Leadership Studies and may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. Audio files will be deleted after transcription and verification/validation by participants.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may contact the investigators at the numbers listed below. If you have any questions about being a participant in the research or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, your school district, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____ Check if you agree to be electronically recorded in audio format during the interview.

_____ Check if you agree to be electronically recorded in video format during the observation.

Signature of Participant:

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Rosalee Swartz, MS Candidate, Principal Investigator
Lloyd Bell, Professor

Office: (402) 472-5234
Office (402) 472-8739