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### Abstract

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Preservice Teachers, Teacher Influences, Professional Dispositions

## **Prospective Teachers' Perceptions of Influential Teacher Qualities**

**Daniel J. Bergman**  
**Wichita State University**

### **Abstract**

While much has been written regarding elements of “good” teachers, little exists with respect to qualities of influential teachers. Prospective science teachers ( $N = 98$ ) completed a survey identifying and describing influential teachers in their own lives. In addition to demographic data, qualitative content analysis of narratives excavated common themes. The seven most frequent attributes of influential teachers were passion, rapport, pedagogy, time, high expectations, fun, and helpful. Implications for teacher education and research include synergistic combinations of these traits, alignment with literature on effective teaching, development of professional dispositions, and more.

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## **Introduction**

### **“Good” Teachers and Qualities of Effectiveness**

Research studies and publications have extensively documented elements of good teaching and effective teacher qualities. Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007, p. 112) describe several actions in their discussion of “what effective teachers do”:

1. Using various assessment tools to measure both what students learn and how they learn;
2. Organizing activities and instruction based on students’ prior knowledge and developmental levels;
3. Engaging students in active learning;
4. Conveying expectations for high quality work;
5. Providing constant feedback for student improvement;
6. Designing a well-managed classroom;
7. Collaborating with colleagues and students’ families.

Going a step further, Hattie (2003) highlights five elements that distinguish expert teachers from experienced teachers, noting that expert teachers can:

1. Identify essential representations of their subject;
2. Guide learning through classroom interactions;
3. Monitor learning and provide feedback;
4. Attend to affective attributes;
5. Influence student outcomes.

Additional studies have compared views across different cultures and report several common qualities. In a study of Jewish and Arab teachers, three “supercategories” of good

teachers were found among participants, regardless of ethnicity and gender: 1. Teaching knowledge; 2. A person of values; and 3. Maintaining good teacher-pupil relations (Reichel & Arnon, 2009). Gao & Liu (2012) found six common attribute categories among teachers in China and the United States:

1. Teachers' knowledge (content and pedagogy);
2. Professionalism (prepared, fair, accountable);
3. Versatile classroom performance (instruction and management);
4. Rapport with students;
5. Able to motivate students;
6. Personality.

In a subsequent study, Gao and Liu further investigated the attribute of personality, finding twelve common descriptors valued by American and Chinese preservice teachers: adaptability, enthusiasm, fairness, high expectations, good humor, patience, responsibility, agreeable, caring, friendly, honest, and respectful (2013).

Other studies have examined the above qualities with further investigation of particular traits (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2003; Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Kher, Mostad, & Donahue, 1999; Malikow, 2006; Nussbaum, 1992; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000). As such, the following characteristics of "good" or "effective" teaching repeatedly arise in the literature:

1. Rapport/interactions with students;
2. Pedagogy and content knowledge;
3. High expectations;
4. Use of a variety of strategies and activities;

5. Assessment and feedback to guide student learning.

### **Influential Teachers and Impact**

While much has been written regarding elements of good teachers, little exists with respect to qualities of influential teachers. The term “good” typically refers to high quality results, whereas “influential” corresponds with causing change without specifying desirability or quality of the outcome.

Literature is limited on what constitutes “influential teaching.” Nevertheless, the influence of teachers has been found in multiple capacities. The classroom teacher has historically been a primary force in student learning and educational change (Good & Brophy, 1994; Goodlad, 1990; Penick, Yager, & Bonnstetter, 1986; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Whether positive or negative, the affective qualities of teacher-student relationships have significant associations with student engagement and achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011).

Teachers often pursue a career in education because of their own teachers (Bayler & Özcan, 2014; Dick & Rallis, 1991). Preservice and new teachers’ beliefs about teaching are influenced by their previous school experiences as students, including the teachers that taught them (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Mertz & McNeely, 1991). Extensive literature concludes that teachers tend to teach in the way they themselves were taught (Adamson, Banks, Burtch, Cox, Judson, & Turley, 2003; Ball, 1988; Cuban, 1993; Goodlad, 1983; Lortie, 1995; Wilcoxson, 1998).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine what qualities exist among recognized influential teachers. Specifically, it studies the perspectives of future (prospective) teachers in an attempt to

uncover trends in traits of teachers they report being influential in their lives. Research questions include the following:

1. What kinds of teachers do prospective teachers perceive as influential?
2. How do prospective teachers and their influential teachers compare (grade level, subject, gender)?
3. What are predominant qualities of influential teachers, as reported by prospective teachers?

### **Participants and Data Collection**

Participants of this study included prospective teachers ( $N = 98$ ) enrolled in the undergraduate program for middle-level (grades 5-8) or secondary-level (grades 6-12) science education at a mid-sized Midwestern four-year university (See Table 1). Gender identification of participants was 60 females (61.2%) and 38 males (38.8%). A large majority (90.8%) of participants were white, with 9.2% of participants representing different ethnicity groups—Hispanic (5.1%); African American (3.1%); Arab (1.0%).

Table 1

*Demographic Data of Participating Prospective Science Teachers (N = 98)*

Gender		Female	60 (61.2%)	Male	38 (38.8%)
Ethnicity		White	89 (90.8%)	Non-White	9 (9.2%)
Subject	Middle Level	Biology	Chemistry	Earth/Space	Physics
Endorsement	Science* (5-8)	(6-12)	(6-12)	Science (6-12)	(6-12)
	40	21	16	9	12
	(40.8%)	(21.4%)	(16.3%)	(9.2%)	(12.2%)

\*Among Middle Level Science majors, 28 (28.6% of N) prospective teachers were seeking science with a second subject endorsement (English, history/government, math); 12 (12.2% of N) were seeking Middle Level Science only.

Surveys were given at the beginning of the semester and included the following open-ended prompt:

Please describe the teacher that has had the most influence on your life. This could be any teacher at any time in your educational experience, from kindergarten to now in college. What subject and/or grade did he or she teach? What about this teacher made him or her so influential in your life?

Multiple surveys were collected over multiple semesters of courses with prospective science teachers. Participants were typically in their third or fourth year in the undergraduate teacher education program when they completed the survey.

### Results and Analysis

Answers to the “influential teacher” question were analyzed according to several aspects, including the identified influential teacher’s grade level, subject, gender, and how these



categories compare to the responding participant. A few respondents listed more than one “influential teacher” in their answers or provided more or less detail, so in some cases the number of responses (data points) is greater than the number of participants (98). Other responses did not include as many details, so some identifying information was not present in all answers.

The influential teacher’s gender, for example, was provided in 88 responses. Compared to the responding prospective teacher, the influential teacher was of the same gender 69.3% of the time. Grade level of the influential teacher was given 97 times. Nearly half of the influential teachers taught at the high school or secondary level (44, 45.5%). Among the influential teachers whose subject/discipline was indicated (94), over one third were in science (34, 36.2%). The complete summary of influential traits—gender, grade level, subject—is found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Summary of Details about Influential Teachers Described by Responding Prospective Science Teachers (Number of Responses\*)*

Gender (88)		Same as Respondent	61 (69.3%)	Different than Respondent	27 (30.7%)
Grade Level (97)	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	College / Post-Secondary	Other
	18 (18.6%)	15 (15.5%)	44 (45.4%)	19 (19.6%)	1 (1.0%)

Subject	Elementary	English / Language Arts	Social Studies	Math	Science	Other
(94)	17 (18.1%)	11 (11.7%)	8 (8.5%)	11 (11.7%)	34 (36.2%)	13 (13.8%)

\*Participants provided varying levels of details and in some cases, listed more than one influential teacher in their response.

Qualitative methods included content analysis (Esterberg, 2002) of the participants’ written responses to the question “What about this teacher made him or her so influential in your life?” Common themes were identified, coded, and excavated among participants’ written comments. The seven most frequent traits of these influential teachers are featured below, each appearing in 20% or more of the participants’ answers. Where applicable, actual comments from participants’ writings are included to serve as exemplars of their perceptions (Merriam, 2002).

**1-tie) Passion (41.8%)**

This characteristic appeared in multiple ways, but the common theme was a teacher who displayed passion or enthusiasm. Other adjectives included in this category were inspiring, dedication, positive, and similar attitudes:

- “He had a passion for science and teaching . . . that was evident.”
- “She was unfailing in her positivity.”

The focus of the influential teachers’ passion was typically teaching, the subject, or simply “being there.”

- “[S]he loved her job.”
- “[G]ot so excited about the subjects he was teaching . . . the interest was infectious.”

**1-tie) Rapport (41.8%)**

Equally as frequent as passion was the influential teachers' rapport or relationships with students. While there may have been overlap with a positive attitude for teaching or content and a positive attitude toward students, this trait was coded whenever the emphasis was on the interactions or personal connection between the teacher and student(s).

- “She cared about us and how much we learned.”
- “He personally acknowledged each student.”
- “[T]ook genuine interest in me as a person.”

Words that frequently appeared were caring, personal, friendly, kind, interested, and connected.

**3-tie) Pedagogy (30.0%)**

The third and fourth most frequent traits were also equally present in participants' descriptions, appearing in 29 responses. One was influential teachers' effective pedagogy or teaching abilities. This theme appeared in many forms, but the underlying connection related to teachers' instructional skills and facilitation of student learning.

- “She knew how to break down the material so it was easy to understand.”
- “[K]new when students have problems and what to say to each student, if it is different words to different students.”

Using multiple examples or methods was often included in these descriptions, as was adjusting instruction to meet the needs of diverse or struggling learners. In some cases, the participants described specific topics, tools, or techniques:

- “She also had small animals in the classroom that we were allowed to hold.”
- “[He] created a simulation game about medieval Europe. It made the class very interesting.”

### **3-tie) Time (30.0%)**

Participants described how influential teachers spent additional time outside of the typical class period or school day to provide additional assistance or build positive relationships.

- “She worked with me a lot after class and kept me motivated.”
- “He gave lots of time to students after class. As much as they needed to get it.”

While some of these responses also include reference to other traits (rapport, instruction), the reference to time was coded as a separate category due to its frequent appearance. In 19 of the 29 responses dealing with time, participants described an influential teacher who taught them more than one year. This may have been multiple grades, courses, or additional activities.

### **5) High Expectations (23.5%)**

Influential teachers’ high expectations appeared in 23 participants’ response. This theme includes attention to students being challenged, pushed, and encouraged to succeed.

- “[H]e made sure I always got my work done.”
- “The way she never gave up on you and made you believe in yourself more than you could imagine. She always had high standards for us.”

In many instances, this element of high standards and expectations corresponded with difficult material and tasks.

- “He pushed me to learn from mistakes and persevere through tough material.”
- “He made high school hard, but always told students they could do it . . . . Very firm yet believed in his students. He pushed them to work.”

### **6) Fun (22.4%)**

The ingredient of fun was nearly as common in responses (22) as influential teachers’ high expectations.

- “She always made teaching look fun.”
- “He also had fun quirks that kept us entertained.”
- “[T]aught the subject in such an entertaining, fun way that I fell in love with it.”

Like time, this topic of fun often related to other aspects such as pedagogy or passion.

Nevertheless, the frequency of “fun” appearing in responses, often by itself, warranted separate categorization and analysis.

### **7) Helpful (20.4%)**

Influential teachers’ helpfulness was often described in conjunction with other attributes (time, instruction). But as with time and fun, the topic of help was also coded separately given its predominance, appearing in one fifth of all participants’ responses (20). In some cases, their help addressed personal growth and diverse needs.

- “His door was always open to his students and he was willing to help any student with whatever problems they had.”
- “[She] helped me most in my phases of self-discovery. Also, she would read my writings and listen to my songs, while providing feedback.”

## **Discussion and Implications**

Extensive literature exists regarding qualities of “good teaching” or “effective teachers.” The present study focuses instead on the less considered topic of “influential teachers’ and their attributes. The following paragraphs examine the findings of this study with respect to implications for teacher education and research, including connections to previous literature, where appropriate. The results are not meant to create a single prescription, but rather encourage reflection and application in professional development and teacher preparation. As Connell (1995) states with regard to “good” teaching, “We do not need a picture of ‘the good teacher’ in

the singular, but pictures of good teachers in the plural, and good teaching in the collective sense” (p. 226).

### **Synergistic Seven**

The seven most common attributes of influential teachers, as reported by future science teachers in this study were 1) Passion, 2) Rapport, 3) Pedagogy, 4) Time, 5) High Expectations, 6) Fun, and 7) Helpful. In a large majority of cases (79.6%, or 78 of 98 participants), influential teacher descriptions included multiple traits, or a combination of qualities. Consider the following statements found in participants’ responses, labeled according to the seven traits:

- “She was fun but strict. She was the first teacher I saw as a person and a teacher. She was friendly and cared.” (Fun, High Expectations, Rapport)
- “This teacher clearly cared about each student and did his best to get to know all of his students, while also helping them to reach their full potential in reading and writing.” (Rapport, Helpful, High Expectations)

This presence of synergistic attributes aligns with common knowledge in education that no singular method will work in every situation. Put another way, “one-trick-pony” teachers are not as likely to leave a lasting influence on their students.

### **Alliance among Influential, Good, and Effective**

Many of the influential teachers’ traits are present in past descriptions of effective or good teaching. Rapport with students (Gao & Liu, 2013) is also known as teacher-pupil relations (Reichel & Arnon, 2009), classroom interactions (Hattie, 2003), and engaging students (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Student engagement relates to the category of pedagogy, and influential teacher descriptions include attention to disciplinary thinking and diverse learning experiences (Bain, 2004), essential representations of subject (Hattie, 2003), and more generally,

teacher knowledge (Gao & Liu, 2012; Reichel & Arnon, 2009). Other common ingredients are high expectations (Bain, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Gao & Liu, 2013) and helping students (Bain, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Hattie, 2003). Although the term “influential” was earlier delineated from “good” and “effective” teaching, results of this study indicate strong alignment among these descriptors.

### **“Soft Skills’ Dispositions**

Of the seven most frequent attributes of influential teachers, few stand out as explicit abilities or proficiencies found in a typical teaching methods textbook or professional development manual. Pedagogy obviously falls into this category, but the others are commonly considered “soft skills,” ambiguous, or both. Teacher educators can easily identify and instruct techniques and fundamental concepts informing pedagogy—curricular decisions, assessment, management, etc. Such items are often found on teacher evaluation tools (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Marzano & Toth, 2013) and standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011; National Science Teachers Association, 2012). The other traits—passion, rapport, fun—at the surface appear more aligned with teacher dispositions. Some might even consider these aspects of a teacher’s unique personality and style. In fact, many echo Gao and Liu’s investigation into personality traits common among effective teachers: enthusiasm, high expectations, friendly, caring, and others (2013).

Upon further examination of some of these qualities, however, one could find alignment with teacher proficiencies and standards. High expectations and fun are certainly factors a teacher can intentionally incorporate in daily lessons and unit planning. Likewise, teacher educators can explicitly call prospective teachers’ attention to concrete actions that exhibit such attributes. Rapport with students, for example, is immensely shaped by a teacher’s interactive

behaviors with students, including types of questions, responses, and non-verbal behaviors (Abraham & Schlitt, 1973). Teachers communicate passion through these same behaviors, especially the unspoken mannerisms, voice tone, and body language that make up 93% of all communication (Mehrabian, 1968; Neill & Caswell, 1993). Kindness was a common theme in the category of rapport, and Rowland (2009) has written how students perceive kindness to be a quality of good teachers, noting how this quality relates to pedagogy:

The nature of the connection between kindness and teaching rests in the fact that both kindly acts and pedagogical acts require the actor to identify with the concerns of the other. In serving the needs of the student, the good teacher attempts to see things from the student's perspective. This is an essential prerequisite of kindness too. (p. 208)

Beyond giving overt attention to these qualities and their application, there still remains a difference in practicing the “how” and in the underlying “why” of teaching. A teacher who wishes to be influential cannot simply rely on technique and outward display. There must be an inward belief, including passion, which motivates these actions. Likewise, authentic rapport with students cannot occur unless there is genuine caring and kindness motivating the teacher's interactions.

### **Missing and Scarce Traits**

As interesting as it may be in what skills or traits were predominant in descriptions of influential teachers, it is also noteworthy to consider what elements were missing. Only two participants (2.0%) mentioned their success in their influential teachers' classes. Participants paid little attention to their final grade or accomplishments when sharing reasons why a teacher was influential. This is something to consider by teachers who may struggle with delineating



between student grades and teacher influence. As one participant put it when describing an influential teacher: “He . . . always made me work hard (even if I didn’t get an A).”

Another infrequent trait was influential teachers considered as friends. For example, consider the following response: “Not only was she a teacher, she was also a friend.” While appearing in only four participants’ descriptions (4.1%), the “friend” teacher still warrants a note of caution. Teacher-student friendships with unchecked boundaries can lead to ethical conundrums, local news headlines, and worse. Shuffelton (2011) points out several reasons to reject the notion of a teacher being friends with students: 1) the fundamental conflict between friendship and authority, 2) an obligation to impartiality, and 3) interference with student learning. Moreover, the term “friend” takes on new meaning in the current social media age (Grisham, 2014). Teacher educators and mentors can highlight the need for maintaining professional teacher/student relationships, which may be “friendly,” but never “friends.”

Only six participants (6.1%) mentioned the intelligence of their influential teachers (“He was very smart.” “. . . brilliant . . .” “. . . incredibly knowledgeable . . .”). Content knowledge and academic background are certainly key components for effective teaching (Connell, 1995; Gao & Liu, 2012), yet these attributes were not as important or memorable in most influential teachers. This aligns with research that the “best” teachers are not always the “smartest” (Stahlberg, 2014, 2015), and that teacher knowledge is secondary to other factors such as ethical character and positive relationships (Reichel & Arnon, 2009).

### **Problems with Fun**

Before leaving a discussion of common traits in influential teachers, it is critical to consider the prominent position of “fun,” which appeared in nearly one fourth (22.4%) of all participants’ descriptions. Again, this trait was often accompanied with other skills or

attributes—high expectations, rapport, pedagogy, etc. Nevertheless, teachers should avoid making “fun” the chief goal in any lesson, overshadowing learning objectives. As Harry and Rosemary Wong put it, “Education should be challenging, exciting, engrossing, and thought-provoking, but not fun. If you want fun, go to a party” (1998, p. 3).

Learning can certainly be enjoyable, of course, and teachers should find ways to incorporate meaningful, interesting ways to explore content. One way to add enjoyment (and build rapport) is using a sense of humor, which was mentioned in three (3.1%) participants’ descriptions of influential teachers. Additional literature speaks to the inclusion of humor to enhance instruction (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; James, 2007; Kher, Mostad, & Donahue, 1999; Wandersee, 1982), and teachers should consider how to appropriately apply humor, starting with a review of such research.

Regardless of one’s comedic ability or entertainment prowess, the focus should always be on learning. In many cases, the process of learning is not fun. Making pleasure the ideal outcome not only skews the purpose of education, but could also discourage individuals with particular learning disabilities. Although enjoyment and fun are wonderful byproducts of learning, teachers would better serve their students by communicating the message that learning is a worthwhile endeavor with multiple rewards.

### **A Teacher Like Me**

- “Her dedication to the education and wellbeing of her students still inspires me, and I hope I can have that effect on my students.”

As this study focused on future teachers’ perceptions of influential teachers, an added component is the connection between participants and their influences. Teachers often pursue a career in education because of the influence of their own teachers (Bayler & Özcan, 2014; Dick

& Rallis, 1991). Moreover, for better or worse, teachers tend to copy the attitudes and actions of their previous classroom teachers (Adamson et al., 2003; Ball, 1988; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Cuban, 1993; Goodlad, 1983; Lortie, 1995; Mertz & McNeely, 1991; Wilcoxson, 1998).

The impact of teachers could be further supported by results in the present study, which find that nearly half (45.5%) of prospective teachers' influential teachers were from a high school setting, more than twice any other grade level (elementary, middle, college). Although the participants—current college students—may simply have a better memory of their more recent high school experiences, one could also surmise that the high school teachers had an impact in the prospective teachers' subsequent selection of college major and career path. While this is purely conjecture, the large percentage of high school-level influential teachers could relate to the majority of participants (59.2%) that were pursuing secondary level (grades 6-12) subject endorsements.

Although not as common as the high school grade level, over one third (36.2%) of all influential teachers were in the field of science. This may stand to reason, given that the participants sharing their influential teachers were currently pursuing a degree in science education. Nevertheless, it may be more noteworthy to consider that nearly two thirds (63.8%) of the influential teachers were in a field other than science. With the majority of influential teachers being in a subject different than that of the participants, one could add to the argument that teacher-student relationships are more important than the content taught. Or to quote Muppets creator Jim Henson, “[Kids] don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are” (2005, p. 113).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Data collection was limited to the amount of information participants shared in their responses to the open-ended prompts. Some answers were brief and to the point, ten words or fewer. Others were ten to twenty times longer. The variance of detail added to the complexity of analysis and restricted comparisons among participants. Future studies could ask for additional details about influential teachers (as well as participants), such as ethnicity, age, experiences, and more. As it is, the open-endedness of the survey was intentional to avoid bias or manipulating what participants shared when thinking about their influential teachers.

Future studies could also survey prospective teachers from different subject fields or grade levels. Additional measures could be developed to analyze how participants' behaviors and attitudes are impacted by influential teachers. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, one could research the effects of influential teachers—including individuals identified by participants as well as educators whose impact went unnoticed.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Much has been said about good teachers and effective teaching. Although the focus of this study has been influential teachers, participants' perceptions of these influential educators may also indicate effective or good teaching. One would hope that good teachers become enduring, positive influences in the lives of their students. The common traits of influential teachers shared in this study—passion, rapport, pedagogy, high expectations, and more—show the lasting impact perceived by future teachers. In addition to the varied implications for teacher preparation, development, and research, this topic also merits candid discussion, reflection, and application among future—and current—teachers. Through such efforts, one can truly become a teacher of influence.

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