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What Makes Teachers Good?

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Abstract

Over time and depending upon circumstances Americans flip-flop over what we think makes teachers good. Thus, several visions of good teachers have appeared and disappeared. In part, our inability to sustain agreement on what makes teachers good results from a belief that all good teachers are or should be the same, that one size fits all. We fail to embrace or even consider the idea that there are multiple kinds of good teachers. Here ten visions of good teaching are described. The challenge is to validate as many as possible and then permit teachers to describe, and when appropriate, document what kind of good teacher they are.

How important is it to know what makes teachers good?

When participants in a recent Gallup poll were asked, What factors are most important when choosing a school for a child?, ninety-eight percent responded, “the quality of the teaching staff” (Rose and Gallup, 1999).

At a national meeting on school choice, Mark Schneider, a political scientist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, stated, “Most parents say good teachers are the most important factor in choosing a school, however,” he added, “I’ll be damned if I know how to measure good teachers” (Fatemi, 1999).

Meanwhile, Jim Geringer, Wyoming’s governor and new chairman of the Education Commission of the States, whose membership consists of governors and top state education officials, said that he hopes to work with the states in the year 2000 to define what it means to be a good teacher (Sandham, 1999).

More unfortunately, teachers have been pilloried for almost two decades for not being “good enough.” Much, if not most of their humiliation is also a result of our inability or unwillingness to resolve the issue, What makes teachers good?

What are some ways good teachers have been described?

Over time, good teachers have been described in a number of ways. Thus, variations on the theme of what makes teachers good have emerged. Let’s take a brief look at some of them.

Variation 1: Ideal Teachers

From the beginning until the midpoint of this century, good teachers were considered to be those who had personal and professional attributes thought to be important by school principals, supervisors and education professors. These *ideal teacher* attributes appeared on hundreds of checklists and rating scales cranked out by schools, school districts and colleges. Each checklist contains a number of exemplary personal traits and teaching characteristics listed under headings such as: professional attitude, understanding of students, creativity, control of class, planning, individualization, and pupil participation.^{1,2} Thus, an *ideal teacher* was one who met stan-

dards of excellence held by selected, significant others. Unfortunately, there was little agreement on either the standards or which teachers met them.³

Variation 2: Analytic Teachers

By the early 1960s, problems associated with obtaining agreement on and measuring the attributes of *ideal teachers* were well-documented and seemed insurmountable (Cruickshank, 1990, 67-69). Consequently, a new variant of good teachers became popular. Let’s call them *analytic teachers*. *Analytic teachers* pay attention to what they are doing. They methodically examine their teaching and, if found wanting, modify it. In order to assist teachers to be good according to this approach, many instruments were developed that permitted teachers to record and then examine classroom practice from a variety of perspectives (Simon and Boyer, 1968⁴). One of the better known and most used was the observational system developed by Flanders (1960) to analyze classroom climate. Use of the instrument permitted a teacher to make (or have an observer make) a detailed record of the teacher/student interactions occurring during a lesson: how much and about what the teacher talked, how much and about what students talked, and the extent and nature of student silence or confusion. Although laudable, becoming an *analytic teacher* is difficult in that one has to be analytic by nature, willing to take the time and expend the effort first to “view” oneself and then to change what is seen and not liked. The work involved in being analytical seem to overwhelm even proponents.

Variation 3: Effective Teachers

By the time interest in the *analytic* variant of good teaching was high, another was emerging. This variant was put forth in response to the well-publicized Coleman Report finding that teachers and teaching account for less student learning than is presumed, and that other factors, particularly student’s socioeconomic background, were much more influential (U. S. Dept., 1966). Educators immediately set out to show that teachers indeed make a difference in student achievement and that some of them make a critical difference. The usual methodology was two-fold. First, teachers were identified whose students scored higher on tests than comparable students taught by others. These over-

achieving teachers were termed outliers. Second, outlier teachers were tracked and observed to record precisely what they were like and what they did. The assumption was that if effective teachers can be identified and studied to find out their attributes, then other teachers might benefit from such knowledge. Many findings from such studies were reported.⁵ The found attributes of *effective teachers* can be grouped into seven categories: teacher character traits, what the teacher knows, what the teacher teaches, how the teacher teaches, what the teacher expects, how the teacher reacts to students, and how the teacher manages the classroom (Cruikshank, 1990). Some of the more consistent findings indicate that effective teachers are clear, accepting and supportive, attend to and monitor class events, are equitable with students, and are persistent in challenging and engaging them (84-85). As was the case with the *ideal teacher* variant, the *effective teacher* model of good teaching came under fire.⁶

An aftermath of the *effective teacher* approach has been a significant increase in the amount of student achievement testing. The inference is that if kids do well on tests, the teacher must be good regardless of what they are like or do. In Denver⁷ and in many entire states, teachers, and principals as well, are deemed effective and may even be rewarded monetarily when students demonstrate “satisfactory” gains on standardized tests, another method of teacher effectiveness. Thus, now there may be less interest in the attributes of *effective teachers* and more in simply reporting teachers whose kids score well on tests. As might be anticipated, dissension to this means of determining teacher goodness is mounting (Hoff, 1999; Kohn, 1999).

Variation 4: Dutiful Teachers

One detractor of the *teacher effectiveness* approach (Scriven, 1990) proposed yet another way to look at what makes teachers good. He notes, “The real issue is simply whether teachers are competent or excellent at the duties of the teacher (26).” Are they dutiful? This *duties-based approach* takes the position that good teachers know and perform their assigned duties well. Duties include knowledge of the duties; knowledge of school and community; knowledge of subject matter; classroom skills; personal characteristics; and service to the profession.

Variation 5: Competent Teachers

By the 1970s the accountability/performance based movement in education was in full swing. Herein, the public sought disclosure from educators on what abilities teachers truly need. Furthermore, the public wanted assurance that teachers were up-to-speed. So, another variant of good teacher came into being, namely the *competent* or *accountable teacher*. The *competent teacher* had to possess *and* be able to demonstrate agreed-upon competencies stated as knowledge and skills. The competencies were obtained in a variety of ways. Among others, they were borrowed from the effective teacher research, obtained through task analyses of what teachers do, and drawn from expert educators and practitioners.⁸ Analysis of the resultant large number of

competencies suggested that they could be placed in categories including; planning instruction, implementing instruction, assessing and evaluating students, performing administrative duties, communicating, and personal skills (Dodl, et al., 1972). As a direct result of the effort to describe the competent teacher and to determine to what extent teachers measured up, the *teacher* testing movement was born. However, the movement did not take full hold until the issuance of the scathing attack on education contained in the report, *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission, 1983).

To be judged the good teacher by this *competency* standard, teachers must pass tests of some sort which would be given prior to university graduation and/or after they assume classroom duties. Most are familiar with state teacher testing, the Educational Testing Service Praxis teacher competency tests⁹, the National Board for Professional Education Standards certification procedure^{10,11} and so forth. Even the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education seems to be moving toward assessment of the competencies of students rather than their programs of study (Bradley, 1999).

Variation 6: Expert Teachers

In the ‘80s and into the ‘90s scholars put forth the notion that what makes a teacher good is expertise. Proponents of the *expert teacher* variant note that there are three basic ways that expert teachers differ from non-experts. First, experts have extensive and accessible knowledge that is organized for use in teaching and, they are able to bring it to bear more effectively. Second, experts are efficient. They can do more in less time. Finally, they are able to arrive at novel and appropriate solutions to problems (Sternberg and Horvath, 1995). Thus, expertise is more than experience. One could be experienced and have less expertise than some novices.

Variation 7: Reflective Teachers

Reflective teachers take great interest in growing in teaching. Thus, they often are referred to as “students of teaching” (Cruikshank, 1987, 1991). *Reflective teachers* are persons who have a strong and continuing interest in learning all they can about the art and science of teaching and about themselves as teachers. Among other things, they read and reflect on ideas in professional and scholarly journals and books including autobiographical accounts of teaching and key texts on teaching and learning. In addition to knowing and reflecting on the literature about teaching and learning, *reflective teachers* are introspective: they reflect on their own teaching and on themselves as teachers. They may video, audio or otherwise monitor themselves because they want to be thoughtful and wise practitioners.

Why hasn’t been so difficult to reach and sustain agreement on what makes teachers good?

Thus, since the beginning of the Twentieth Century at least seven visions or variations on the theme “What makes teachers

good?” have emerged, namely: *ideal, analytic, effective, dutiful, competent, expert, and reflective* teachers. As we know, none of these variations, by themselves, has or is proving to be just right, i.e. none satisfies all stake holders. Should we be surprised? Probably not. Finding the answer to the question, What makes a good teacher? is no less difficult than finding answers to the question, What makes anything good? An apple? A book? A marriage? A house? Music? A physician? Take the apple. What makes it good? Obviously we do not share taste in apples and consequently grocers supply a variety—Macintosh, Delicious, Jonathan, Rome Beauty and so forth. We are free to pick and choose—to find what meets our taste. Take books. In order for libraries to survive they must stock autobiography, humor, history, romance, mystery and so forth. Take physicians. One reason people avoid HMOs is because they often can’t choose their own doctor. When goodness is at issue, to each his own.

What about teachers? Can we presume there is only one or even seven good kinds? Are there others? Perhaps. Here for consideration are three additional variations on the theme. Like those mentioned already, these variations probably are not independent nor mutually exclusive.

Further ways good teachers can be described

Variation 8: Satisfying Teachers

Satisfying teachers please others who might include students, parents or caregivers, teaching colleagues, administrators and supervisors. Since they satisfy or please others, they are viewed as favorite and special teachers. *Satisfying teachers* may be formally recognize at the school and school district levels with good teaching awards presented by the school and parent organizations. More often, however, they are merely held in high esteem. For example, students may say of them, “Take her course!”, parents all may want their child in a particular teacher’s class, administrators may want to place challenging students with a certain teacher and so forth. To be seen as a *satisfying teacher*, one needs to know and be able to respond to the needs of one or more groups having a stake in education.¹² Of course, knowing and meeting the expectations of others is not it easy task—and then there are the expectations themselves which we may deem unworthy. We can all think of teachers who did or did not satisfy us or others.

Variation 9: Diversity Responsive Teachers

Diversity responsive teachers might be considered good because they take special interest in and are especially sensitive to students who are different in one or more ways: culturally,¹³ socially, economically, intellectually, physically, or emotionally. *Diversity responsive teachers* are dedicated to making the lives of such students better both in and outside the classroom. They target certain students and intervene in their lives in meaningful ways. Working with such children they demonstrate great tenderness, patience and tact. Ann Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher, is perhaps a well-known exemplar (Petersen, 1946).

Variation 10: Respected Teachers

Teachers who are respected are judged so because they possess and demonstrate qualities regarded as virtues. Es-

entially, they possess the “right” thoughts and do the “right” things. Although there would be some disagreement on specifically what makes a teacher respected, the following human virtues are worthy of consideration: caring, honesty, decency, fairness, devotion, empathy, selflessness, respectfulness, and cooperativeness. We can recall teachers we respected for such virtues. We have also read books and seen films in which virtuous teachers, real and fictional, have been depicted. Some of the real ones are Barbara Sizemore, James Escalante, and Marva Collins. Other virtuous teachers are depicted in *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, and *To Sir with Love*. Teachers whom we respected for their virtues may be the most memorable in our lives.

Now, ten kinds of good teachers have been noted and briefly described. Seven—*ideal, analytic, effective, duties-based, competent, expert* and *reflective*—have at some period and to some extent been recognized and sanctioned. Three other visions of good teaching—*satisfying, diversity-responsive, and respected*—are offered for consideration, What kind are you?

Presently, the *competent teacher* is the good teacher of choice and teachers are increasingly being tested voluntarily and involuntarily, to determine if they measure up. In a utopian world, teachers would be compleat or unparalleled in all aspects of teacher goodness. They would possess the attributes of all ten visions.

Conclusion and recommendations

Clearly, after a century of effort, the question, What makes teachers good? still begs to be answered. Toward that end, it is proposed that a systematic exploration be initiated. If the problems relating to the definition of good teaching can be resolved, if it can be shown that it is possible to reliably observe and measure good teaching, and if it can be shown that good teaching is linked to multiple, desirable outcomes, then much will have been accomplished.

How might the issue,
What makes teachers good?
be resolved?

Prior to beginning such a line of inquiry it is most important to ensure that it is carefully conceptualized since the task is so important and the path laden with potential pitfalls.¹⁴

One way to began would be to map what makes teachers good. What do various stakeholders in teaching, (students, parents/care givers, teachers, teacher educators (in the large sense), administrators and supervisors, philosophers, the public) think makes teachers good? Having obtained this low inference knowledge, next questions might be:

How do responses compare within and between groups and overall?

In what ways are the responses related to each other in some way that permits them to be grouped into families or factors of intermediate dimensionality?

And, how well do the low inference or the intermediate inference dimensions of good teachers discriminate good from poor teachers?

The answer to the first question would provide knowledge of similarities in contrasts in perceptions. The answer to the second question would tell us just how many variations on the theme exist, the ten above, more or fewer? The answer to the last question would allow cleaning up of the concept. Next, we might determine the regard with which each of the variations or families of what makes teachers good is held.

A second and parallel approach would be to inspect and analyze what could be called the contemplative literature on teaching. Many persons have thought and written about teaching and even what makes teachers good. For example, Traina (1999), the historian and president of Clark University, explored the autobiographies of some 125 prominent Americans to determine what they said about teachers whom they valued. He notes that three attributes stand out: subject matter competence, caring about students and their success, and distinctive character. Another source of ideas regarding what makes teachers good would be autobiographical accounts of teachers.

Substantiating that there are variations on the theme of what makes teachers good would serve several useful ends. First, it would forever dispel the notion that there is one kind of good teacher. Second, it would permit teachers to describe which kind of good teacher they are and, when necessary, submit evidence to that effect. Third, it would provide positive direction for nearly-good teachers and persons responsible for their continuing development. Finally, such knowledge would enable the teaching professional to identify and remove teachers who are unable to meet *any* notion of what makes teachers good.

Obviously, the size and complexity of the proposed inquiry requires a group effort, and what group is better suited to the task than MWERA? So, in conclusion, I ask the membership of MWERA, individually and collectively to consider pursuing the question, What makes teachers good? Certainly this organization has the ability and combined resources both to conceptualize and conduct such a line of inquiry. Taking on this challenge probably would have great benefit to MWERA and clearly benefit American education. Gov. Geringer is waiting for the telephone call. America's embattled teachers may be praying for it.

Footnotes

¹ One of the most popular was the Teaching Evaluation Record (Beecher, 1953). A recent attempt to create a standard of excellence for teachers is the document, *Principles of Effective Teaching and Examples of Descriptors*, (Massachusetts, Department of Education) <<http://info.doe.mass.edu/doedocs/evalregs3.html>>

² Barr and his associates (1961) synthesized the numerous lists of ideal teacher characteristics contained on rating instruments and grouped them into 15 categories: buoyancy, consideration, cooperativeness, dependability, emotional stability, ethical behavior, expressiveness, flexibility, forcefulness, judgment, mental alertness, objectivity, personal magnetism, physical drive, and scholarship.

³ Morsh and Wilder (1954) noted, "There is no general agreement as to what constitutes the essential characteristics of a (good) teacher (3)." Mitzel (1960) concluded, "More than a half century of research effort has not yielded meaningful, measurable criteria (for good teachers) around which the majority of the nation's educators can rally." (1481).

⁴ Simon and Boyer contains descriptions of 26 classroom observation instruments.

⁵ Seminal work was done by Rosenshine (1971) and Rosenshine and Furst (1971).

⁶ Among the criticism: disagreement that student gain is the sole or most important outcome variable of teaching and discord over methodology employed in the research studies (Cruikshank, 1990, 83, 86).

⁷ Select Denver teachers can receive bonuses if: their students either improve on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skill, show progress on teacher written tests and classroom projects, or if students improve when the teachers undertake professional development.

⁸ One of the most comprehensive efforts to obtain and classify teacher competencies was produced by Dodl, et al. (1972).

⁹ The Praxis approach. This approach assumes three ingredients contribute to good teaching: general knowledge, professional knowledge, and competence in putting general and professional knowledge to work in the classroom. The Educational Testing Service has developed three tests to determine the goodness of preservice and beginning teachers in the three areas. Praxis I measures a prospective teacher's competency in reading, writing, and math near the beginning of a preservice program. Praxis II, administered near or at the program's end, measures students' knowledge of their academic specialty and of pedagogy. Praxis III measures on-the-job classroom performance. This is done by trained observers and interviewers.

¹⁰ The NBPTS approach. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has developed "standards for an accomplished teacher" based upon opinions of panels of educators as to what an accomplished teacher should know or do. Experienced teachers seeking national board certification submit portfolios of their work including videotapes of their teaching, lesson plans, and samples of student work. Teachers also take a test at a regional site. A good teacher, according to this approach is one who can demonstrate she can meet the standards for an accomplished teacher put forth by discerning colleagues (King, 1994).

¹¹ In Massachusetts the Veteran Teachers Board offers up to \$50,000 over 10 years to any public school teacher who passes the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification exam. See also Bradley (1998).

¹² In Rochester, New York, parents rate their child's teacher on a two page form containing 20 questions that inquire, among other things, about the teacher's accessibility, clarity, responsiveness, and optimism (Janey, 1997).

¹³ Irvine and Fraser (1998) make the case that African-American students need to be taught by "warm demanders", teachers who use a culturally specific pedagogical style that is substantively different from the pedagogical approaches described and

prescribed in the effective teaching research. Such teachers perceive themselves as parental surrogates and advocates, employ a teaching style filled with rhythmic language and rapid intonation, etc., use students' every day cultural experiences to link new concepts to, develop personal relationships with the learners, and teach with authority.

¹⁴ Following are some questions that might be considered with conceptualizing a line of inquiry on what makes teachers good.

- a. What do various stake holders believe make teachers good?
- b. Which descriptors seem to be related to what desirable outcomes?
- c. How do descriptors differ according to subjects' age, gender, cultural background, educational level, geographic location and so forth?
- d. How do descriptors differ according to the subject area and grade level of the target good teacher?
- e. To what extent do various subjects agree on the attributes and abilities of good teachers?
- f. Which of the descriptors discriminate good from poor teachers?
- g. How are the low inference descriptors related to each other? Are their discernible families or factors of the descriptors? How many and what are the families of good teachers?
- h. How can teachers document what kind of good teacher they are? How can the documentation be validated when necessary?

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