

How High School Students Perceive Effective Teachers

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Abstract

Traditionally high school students have not been given many opportunities to offer their insights and comments on education and schooling. This paper reports on a study which asked students to list the top five characteristics of effective teachers. Their perceptions are congruent with the literature and one of the several conclusions is that teachers, administrators and other stakeholders in education should pay attention to what students have to say about the characteristics of effective teachers.

There appears to be a dearth of information regarding high school students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers. In fact, according to SooHoo (1993).

Somehow educators have forgotten the important connection between teachers and students. We listen to outside experts to inform us, and, consequently, we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students. Student perceptions are valuable to our practice because they are authentic sources; they personally experience our classrooms first hand. . . As teachers, we need to find ways to continually seek out these silent voices because they can teach us so much about learning and learners. (p. 389)

Providing teachers with feedback about their teaching, whether it be from colleagues, administrators or students, is an important aspect of school improvement. Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) noted the potential role that students might play in school improvement:

Those bent on improvement in schools might usefully start by inviting pupils to talk about what makes learning difficult for them, about what diminishes their motivation and engagement, and what makes some give up and others settle for a "minimum risk, minimum effort" position – even though they know that doing well matters. (p. 31)

These researchers went on to say that

. . . pupils . . . had quite a sophisticated understanding of those aspects of the school system which obstructed their learning and those aspects that were supportive . . . [they] all had their own concerns about school, even those who were achieving well across the curriculum. Their comments showed they had ideas about how schools should be, that they were prepared to explain their views, and that teachers could learn from consultation with them." (Rudduck et al., 1996, p. 85)

In this area of effective teaching the voices of students, specifically, high school students, have been particularly silent. There have been studies conducted which involved university students

but for those keen on improving the skill set of high school teachers, those results are not all that relevant.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to give voice to high school students by facilitating their participation in a survey which investigated what they considered to be the most important characteristics of effective teachers. 451 senior high school students (Grades 10 – 12) in eight high schools throughout four school districts in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada participated in the study (see Appendices A, B, & C for specific demographic information). The study used a questionnaire (see Appendix D) which asked students for various demographic data (page one); page two involved a three column format which asked students to list the five most important characteristics of effective teachers (column one). In column two students were asked to give a reason for choosing that particular characteristic and column three asked students to rank each characteristic from one to five with one being the least important and five being the most important. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to tabulate and analyze the results.

The Literature

There were two aspects to this study: giving voice to high school students and secondly, determining their perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers.

As mentioned above, most of the studies in this area have focused on university students. Recent studies on effective teaching have provided students with the researchers' understanding of the applicable characteristics. Marsh and Roche (1997) looked at students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness as a means of enhancing university teaching. Ryan and Harrison (1995) investigated how students weight various teaching components in arriving at their overall evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

More recently, Ralph (2003) conducted a study on teaching effectiveness using how well students learn as the criterion. This study took place in a Canadian university and students represented four different instructional settings: Business, Sociology, Education, and Physical Education. The students were given 32 hypothetical instructor profiles and were asked to rank nine selected teaching factors developed by Marsh and Bailey (1993). Ralph identified five attributes of effective instructors: commitment to learners; knowledge of material; organization and management of the environment; desire to improve; and collaboration with others. Ralph concluded that "exemplary teaching is identifiable and the quality of its constituent components can be assessed" (p. 53).

Similar studies provided students with a set of characteristics from which to choose. Clark (1995) identified cognitive and affective goals of effective teaching at the university level. He developed a questionnaire covering a wide range of teaching activities associated with effective instruction and the achievement of cognitive and affective objectives. The questionnaire, administered at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba, identified qualities of effective university teaching determined by the researcher. These included four cognitive components: knowledge, organization of instruction, clarity of expression, and quality of presentation. In addition, there were four affective components: student interest; student participation and openness to ideas;

interpersonal relations; and communication and fairness. Many course evaluation questionnaires administered at university campuses across Canada, including Memorial University, include these qualities. Students are asked to identify how each course/instructor ranks in each of these qualities.

There are few studies that focus on students' perceptions at the post-secondary level and at the high school level. Devlin (2002) examined the strengths and weakness of a survey used at the University of Melbourne to identify students' perceptions of their learning environment.

The Perceptions of Learning Environment Questionnaire (PLEQ) was first used in 1994 and was developed as part of a larger project, Teaching and Learning in Tertiary Education at Queensland University of Technology. Devlin argued that the PLEQ failed to sufficiently identify student perceptions in depth. The design of the PLEQ forced students to focus on and comment on the behavior of others and "does not allow them to communicate their views on how they themselves are contributing to their learning" (p. 293). Devlin suggested that this approach was contrary to the PLEQ design to report on good teaching and contains none of the "constructivist views of learning that emphasize that learners actively construct knowledge for themselves" (p. 297). Traditional course evaluation questionnaires, she argued, assume the "student as listener-follower" (p. 298) point of view and transmission model of delivering courses. While students may have been aware in the past of their own behavior and how it helped or hindered learning, the standard course evaluation questionnaires simply did not provide the means to demonstrate or express that awareness.

This study conducted in Newfoundland and Labrador left open-ended the characteristics of effective teaching. Students were free to identify the characteristics and give their opinion as to why they considered these characteristics to be important.

Study Findings

Students listed a total of 74 characteristics (see Appendix E for a list of these characteristics). For purposes of brevity and convenience, this paper will report on the top five characteristics which were determined as a result of totaling the various weights assigned their characteristics by each of the 451 students. In descending order, those characteristics were:

1. knowledgeable;
2. humorous;
3. respectful;
4. patient; and
5. organized.

One can see that these characteristics along with the other 69 are from a combination of both the cognitive and affective domains. In the following paragraphs the writer examines the various student comments as well as the overall themes that have emerged from those comments.

Student Comments

Under knowledgeable, students cited such reasons as the following for listing this characteristic as an important attribute of effective teachers:

1. A teacher has to know about what they are to teach; they can't teach something they don't know.
2. If a student finds that their teacher does not completely understand the material, there is doubt, loss of respect, and disinterest.
3. Teachers should know a lot and not just about their own subject. They shouldn't be dead-beats who are only book smart. It's nice to see teachers who know what's going on with their students' culture.

The Category, Humorous elicited these comments:

1. If they are humorous, it sets a more relaxed environment and also makes the students interested.
2. Kids respect a teacher and will actually listen to them, if they are funny and nice. Nobody likes an old stiff!
3. Teachers who have a sense of humor generally have a better relationship with students.

The following provided insight as to how students perceived the importance of respect:

1. For students to respect a teacher, they need to be respected.
2. Students smell fear. If you can't look us in the eye, it's all over. No respect!
3. It is important for a teacher to be respectful because if the teachers give respect, they will receive respect from the students. A respectful environment will make students enjoy coming to class and learning.

Characteristic number four, patient, elicited these viewpoints:

1. Patience is a major factor in teaching. If the teacher has no patience, then they're going to find the job difficult because being a teacher can be very stressful.
2. Students like to feel like it's o.k. to not understand something and they can go to their teachers for help.
3. It is very hard for a student to go to a teacher for extra help if the student thinks the teacher will most likely lose his temper/patience.

And lastly, students stated that a teacher's being organized was important for the following reasons:

1. It's really bad when a teacher loses your work. It is also horrible when they can't give you organized notes or they write really messy on the board and expect students to pick out what is written.
2. An organized lesson plan and teacher in general can make the difference between students passing and failing a course.
3. Organization makes learning a whole lot easier. Students know that an organized teacher means getting the work done and done right.

Emergent Themes

Standard in most qualitative studies is the emerging of various themes as a result of analyzing the data collected. This study came up with a number of themes for the top five characteristics identified by the students. A listing of those themes follows along with a brief discussion on the significance of each.

Knowledgeable

By having a teacher who is knowledgeable students build up *a sense of self-confidence*.

Humorous

A teacher who uses humor in the classroom helps students *pay more attention* to what is being taught.

Respectful

Students emphasize the *reciprocity notion of respect* (i.e., you give respect, you get respect).

Patient

Students being taught by a patient teacher are more inclined to ask questions if they don't understand something, thus *decreasing frustration levels*.

Organized

Teachers who are organized have a certain *credibility with students*.

Each of these themes represents a positive aspect of school life for students at any grade level but especially so for those enrolled in senior high classes. Self-confidence is an important issue for high school students and this particular perspective identified in the data is one not necessarily associated with the "knowledgeable-ness" of the teacher(s). However, upon further reflection, it does make considerable sense that if students are being taught by teachers whom they perceive to be knowledgeable in their subject area, it stands to reason that there could be an increase in their self-confidence levels, pertaining the specific subject(s) being taught.

When thinking about the humorous characteristic, this researcher found this theme of “students paying more attention” to be quite novel and most intriguing. It was the researcher’s perception that students enjoyed teachers having a sense of humor but that was as far as its significance went. However, students are most insightful here and the more one thinks about this aspect of humor, the more credible this perception becomes.

Perhaps the one characteristic that was most congruent with the researcher’s own perceptions was the theme emanating from the respectful characteristic – that of the notion of reciprocity: you give respect, you get respect. A basic concept in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, respect is universal and certainly not unique to the needs of high school students.

In their comments on the patient characteristic, students made the point that, if they were being taught by a patient teacher and did not understand something, they would be more inclined to ask questions, thus decreasing their frustration levels. This is an extremely important characteristic for all teachers because it hits at the very core of the teaching process - having students understand the material being taught. Not understanding the material can have huge consequences for students ranging from disruptive behavior in the classroom to grade failure to eventually dropping out of school.

The fifth characteristic identified by students, organized, at first blush, would appear to most to be “motherhood” to the teaching profession. However, we all know that this is simply not so. Students were of the opinion that teachers who were organized had a certain credibility with students. Levin, Nolan, Kerr and Elliott (2009) talk about the four teacher power bases: referent, expert, legitimate and coercive. Credibility permeates the two most desirable power bases, i.e., referent and expert and is a major factor in promoting positive classroom management.

Discussion

The results of this study are highly congruent with the literature on effective teaching. Three decades ago Medley (1979) proffered the following five successive conceptions of the effective teacher:

- 1) possessor of desirable personal traits;
 - 2) user of effective methods;
 - 3) creator of a good classroom atmosphere;
 - 4) master of a repertoire of competencies; and
 - 5) professional decision maker who has not only mastered needed competencies but learned when to apply them and how to orchestrate them.
- (pp. 11-27)

More recently, McCabe (1995) stated that students’ best teachers were those who

- cared not only about their subject matter but the students as well;
- integrated the affective & cognitive domains of teaching & learning;
- were interested in their students as persons;
- respected them & were respected by them;
- were positive role models;

- had high expectations but were flexible;
- engaged them in a variety of learning activities;
- students felt a connection with;
- came across as very human yet very professional at the same time;
- were organized & prepared;
- were subject-centered but also student-centered; and
- who had a sense of humor. (p. 125)

According to Stronge (2002), many interview and survey responses about effective teaching emphasize the teacher's affective characteristics, or social and emotional behaviors, more than pedagogical practice. This was quite evident in this study as a considerable number of all the characteristics listed by students (see Appendix E) were in the affective domain or specifically concerned with social and emotional behaviors (e.g., humorous; respectful; patient; approachable; caring; compassionate; personable; kind).

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) concluded that students perceive good teachers as:

1. human, accessible, reliable and persistent;
2. respectful of students and sensitive to their difficulties;
3. enthusiastic and positive; and
4. professionally skilled. (pp. 77-78)

The above comments gleaned from the literature on effective teaching are further confirmed and validated by the results of this study. The research cited above has covered a considerable period of time and it is encouraging to be able to state that the perceptions of good or effective teaching have not really changed that much over the years. In spite of the tremendous advances in today's technology, good teaching is still good teaching.

Conclusions

As a result of this study, the researcher has arrived at the following conclusions:

1. that high school students have worthwhile and insightful comments to make about the characteristics of effective teachers and are very eager to make those comments;
2. that the characteristics they list to describe effective teachers are a combination of those found in both the affective and cognitive domains;
3. that teachers, administrators and other stakeholders in education should pay attention to what students have to say about teaching and schools;
4. that students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers are highly congruent with what the literature is saying;
5. that these student insights provide valuable and helpful information not only for beginning teachers but also for experienced teachers; and lastly,

6. that in light of these findings, beginning and experienced teachers might find it helpful to their classroom practice and to their overall role as teachers to reflect on the various behaviors they exhibit and the various strategies they utilize on a daily basis.

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APPENDIX A**Gender Breakdown of Study Participants**

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	197	43.7
Female	254	56.3
Total	451	100

APPENDIX B**Grade Level Breakdown of Study Participants**

Grade Level	Frequency	Percent
a. Level 1 (Grade 10)	107	23.7
b. Level 2 (Grade 11)	121	26.8
c. Level 3 (Grade 12)	216	47.9
d. Level 4 (part-time)	7	1.6
Total	451	100

APPENDIX C**Participating Schools' Enrolments**

	Frequency	Percent
025-200	29	6.4
201-400	91	20.1
401-600	130	28.8
601-800	133	29.4
801-1000	0	0
1001-1200	68	15
Total	451	99.7

APPENDIX D
Survey Instrument

Page 1

Please complete the following by circling the letter of the appropriate response:

1. I am:
 - a. male
 - b. female

2. I am currently enrolled in:
 - a. Level 1 (Grade 10)
 - b. Level 2 (Grade 11)
 - c. Level 3 (Grade 12)
 - d. Level 4 (part-time)

3. My current age is:
 - a. 14 years
 - b. 15 years
 - c. 16 years
 - d. 17 years
 - e. 18 years
 - f. 19 years
 - g. 20 years

4. The student population of my school is:
 - a. 025 - 200
 - b. 201 – 400
 - c. 401 – 600
 - d. 601 – 800
 - e. 801 - 1000
 - f. 1001 – 1200

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Directions: In column 1, please list the five characteristics that you believe are important for effective teachers to have. In column 2, please give a statement as to why you think this characteristic is important. In column 3, please rank the characteristics you listed in column 1 with a number from 1 – 5 with 1 referring to LEAST IMPORTANT to 5 meaning MOST IMPORTANT.

Column 1 CHARACTERISTIC	Column 2 WHY THIS CHARACTERISTIC IS IMPORTANT	Column 3 RANK

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY

APPENDIX E**List of 74 Characteristics**

1. Approachable
2. Articulate
3. Attentive
4. Authoritative
5. Available
6. Calm
7. Caring
8. Charismatic
9. Communicative
10. Compassionate
11. Competent
12. Concerned
13. Confident
14. Conscientious
15. Considerate
16. Controlling
17. Creative
18. Dedicated
19. Determined
20. Devoted
21. Disciplined
22. Easy-going
23. Effective
24. Efficient
25. Empathetic
26. Energetic
27. Enthusiastic
28. Even-tempered
29. Exciting
30. Exemplary
31. Fair
32. Firm
33. Flexible
34. Focused
35. Forgiving
36. Friendly
37. Funny
38. Helpful
39. Honest
40. Humorous

APPENDIX E (Cont'd)

41. Hygienic
42. Industrious
43. Informative
44. Innovative
45. Intelligent
46. Interactive
47. Interested
48. Interesting
49. Involved
50. Kind
51. Knowledgeable
52. Level-headed
53. Motivating
54. Nice
55. Optimistic
56. Organized
57. Patient
58. Personable
59. Polite
60. Positive
61. Professional
62. Punctual
63. Reasonable
64. Relaxed
65. Respectful
66. Responsible
67. Supportive
68. Tolerant
69. Trusting
70. Trustworthy
71. Understandable
72. Understanding
73. Well-prepared
74. Wise