

1 Introduction

What Makes a Skillful, Caring Teacher?

Richard B. Traina, former president of Clark University, is a research historian who asked “What makes a good teacher?” (1999, p. 34). He looked through biographies and autobiographies of prominent 19th and 20th century Americans, focusing on what they had to say about qualities their best teachers possessed. Traina saw a thread that ran through their stories. First, the best teachers—the memorable ones—were remembered as being skillful and enthusiastic, having such a solid command of the subject matter that students could “pick up on their excitement” for the subject. They were knowledgeable. Second, these teachers were caring—they cared “deeply about each student and about that student’s accomplishment and growth.” Third, Traina said these teachers had “distinctive character. . . . [T]here was a palpable energy that suffused the competent and caring teacher, some mark-making quality.” In short, memorable teachers he identified were knowledgeable, skillful, enthusiastic, caring, and special. Certainly, there is nothing unbelievable about these findings. If any of us reflect back on our best teachers’ qualities, I am sure we would come up with a similar list. In 1895, Daniel Putnam (pp. 254–255), professor of psychology and pedagogy at the Michigan State Normal (teacher-training) School, said the following:

Three things are necessary to the greatest efficiency of the work of the teacher . . . first, a thorough knowledge . . . second . . . is

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a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the science of education and of the application of these principles to methods of teaching . . . [and] the third requisite . . . is genuine personality.

Over the past 100 years, many investigators have examined teacher skills and qualities that are essential to student achievement and to student socialization. For example, Charlotte Danielson has made an enormous contribution in her *Framework for Teaching*, in which she identifies and classifies aspects of teachers' responsibilities that promote student learning. She divides these responsibilities into four domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities (Danielson, 1996). As a result of her work and the work of others, today we have a clear idea of what teaching behaviors matter most in promoting student achievement. We also know that teachers can identify and develop these skills and qualities, whether they are beginning teachers, student teachers, or experienced teachers.

GREAT TEACHING IS STILL GREAT TEACHING (AND IT'S THE TEACHING THAT MATTERS MOST!)

Sometimes teachers get bogged down. So much fills teachers' plates that it is hard to think clearly. School days are filled with reports, student needs, parental wants, administrative paperwork, curriculum meetings, standardized assessments, and many other issues. Teachers also get bogged down by distracters. For example, in looking over educational materials, books, new programs, and the like, it's easy to forget the most important factor in how well students learn is not the specific textbook a teacher uses, whether the student is placed in a single-age or multiage classroom, or how new the computer is. Educator and author Bruce Marlowe has a favorite saying whenever these types of extraneous issues and matters threaten to take on more importance than they deserve. He says, "Hey, good teaching is still good teaching." In other words, what teachers do with their students is still the most important factor in terms of student achievement. Numerous other factors, of course, also influence how well students learn. These factors include the student's innate ability, temperament, parents, home life, and socioeconomic status. Teachers and schools can't directly influence these, but having a skillful and caring teacher gives students their best shot at being successful. A teacher's skills and qualities are a variable that both teachers and school systems can address, and we should thus work toward improving the access all children have to high-quality teachers. According to Kati Haycock (1998a), director of The Education Trust, "The research could not be more clear, consistent

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or compelling. It supports what parents have known all along: teacher quality matters a lot. Effective teachers can help students achieve enormous gains.”

Is *Highly Qualified* the Same as *High Quality*?

Haycock and others use the term *effective* as synonymous with *teacher quality*, and she frames *teacher quality* in terms of teacher effectiveness. However, this differs from what the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 defines as a *highly qualified* teacher. The act defines it as a teacher who has met three requirements. The teacher (1) holds a bachelor’s degree, (2) obtains full (state) certification, and (3) can “demonstrate subject matter competency in the core academic subjects the teacher teaches” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 12). This federal definition of *highly qualified* addresses a teacher’s content knowledge and his or her compliance with regulations. Yes, a teacher’s knowledge is important, and, yes, teachers should comply with rules for certification, yet there is a whole lot more to quality teaching than knowing a lot and being compliant! As important as knowledge and compliance are, a teacher’s skills and qualities are far more significant *in terms of their effect on promoting student success and achievement*. Linda Darling-Hammond states that “measures of pedagogical knowledge, including knowledge of learning, teaching methods, and curriculum are more frequently found to influence teaching performance and often exert even stronger effects than subject-matter knowledge” (2003, p. 391). Fortunately, each state has its own requirements for teacher certification, and these requirements typically exceed the federal requirements (degree and content knowledge). Teacher skills and qualities, for example, are embedded in state-approved teacher preparation programs. These skills and qualities are also emphasized in preservice student teaching, as well as in inservice mentored teaching experiences, both of which are typical requirements for initial and permanent state certification.

In addition to its teacher-quality shortcomings, the NCLB Act is also notorious for its promotion of dire consequences for public schools characterized as *low scoring*, justifying the closing of schools as opportunities for parents to choose higher-scoring schools for their children. But identifying low-scoring (“failing”) schools may be simply a pretense to reduce government spending on public education. The No Child Left Behind Act has been called “No Child Left Untested” (Ross & Mathison, 2002) due to the act’s near-total reliance on identifying failing *schools* instead of failing *students* and for its broad and expensive mandate for standardized testing to legitimize that determination. As such, the act places its sights on the wrong target. Author Jonathan Kozol speaks of the damage to the teacher–student connection that is fostered by such

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quantitative, non-learner-centered emphases in our schools: "I'd like to see schools have no loyalty higher than their loyalty to children. I'd like to feel that the unpredictable potential of children is what we value most" (as quoted in Houston, 2000). Calling the NCLB Act little more than "empty rhetorical phrases," educators M. Donald Thomas and William L. Bainbridge (2002, p. 781) say that slogans never taught a child to read and

neither did [sayings such as] "All children can learn." But the most preposterous of these empty rhetorical phrases is "No child left behind." The simplicity and stupidity of this statement prevent us from doing what we ought to do: Provide sufficient resources to educate all our children successfully.

This situation suggests yet another reason why focusing on becoming a better teacher is all the more urgent. Speaking pragmatically, a teacher with a reputation as a skillful and caring teacher, no matter how tight the job market may become, will always be a desired candidate, because schools are always on the lookout for the best teachers they can find. From a nobler perspective, one that will always rise above bureaucratic initiatives such as the NCLB Act, good teachers are valued because they guide students to think, and thinking people make wise decisions on matters that affect them, their families, their communities, their states, and their nation. Teachers and schools are essential to the continuance of any nation's democratic system, relying on the power of people's minds instead of the power of brute force. One of my teacher friends says she will "go through the motions with this testing frenzy" but will not lose sight of what is really important, both for her in her teaching and for her students in their learning.

"BUT WE HARDLY HAVE THE TIME!"

As I said above, teachers often have too much on their plates. But the good news is that to sharpen the skills and qualities of excellent teaching does not mean that more gets added onto that plate. Improving at teaching means that teachers should continue doing what they already do, only doing it with focus, while minimizing the time-stealers. Time-stealers are matters that wind up taking so much of a teacher's time that they do not give a good return on the investment of time and labor and do not pay off in terms of student benefit. Three quick examples are spending hours on bulletin boards, on preparing activities that are more sizzle than substance, and on troubleshooting computers. Am I saying that bulletin

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boards, creative activities, and computers are a waste of time? Not at all. But I am saying that these are but three of maybe hundreds of ways of spending time that do not strongly help student learning or do not help it enough to warrant the amount of time one may spend on them. Our culture today pushes a full-plate message, saying American teachers should do it all, from classroom multitasking to standardized testing and from doing a designer classroom makeover to creating all these wonderful materials, Web pages, and e-mail and telephone links with parents. Looked at separately, each is a good idea. But taken together, they can be highly stressful, they may not yield much of a return in terms of student achievement, and they move teachers further from the essence of excellent teaching. That essence is about quality, not quantity.

Axiom: Good Teaching Is Not About Quantity but Quality

Having enough time for instruction is a serious issue in today's classrooms, and the problem becomes compounded when teachers ask, Should I do *more* in order to be considered an excellent teacher? The reality is that each teacher should *not* do more, but *less*, which means shifting focus from the *quantity* to the *quality* of what is done. There's nothing worse than feeling that a lot of time was spent doing what matters not very much. Time-consuming (and time-wasting) factors cause stress. On the other hand, qualitative endeavors are less stressful (and usually make life more interesting and more fun for both teacher and student). Plus, they also make for a less-stressed classroom and better student achievement and socialization. Shifting focus from quantity to quality will not be difficult, but remember that American culture has grown accustomed to placing emphasis on the quantitative, on what can be measured, such as test scores, teachers' college degrees, number of years teaching, and other items easily tallied. These are used as quality indicators, but they are not about quality. How so? Well, for example, there is not really clear proof that the sheer amount of time students spend in classes directly results in higher academic achievement. The same is true with regard to the number of days spent in school. Increasing the total number of days students spend in school does not necessarily increase student achievement (Gijselaers & Schmidt, 1995; Walberg, 1988). Student achievement depends more on how students' time in class is used—the quality of the instructional time—than on the number of hours or days they attend (Marks, 2000). To repeat: Student achievement is a product of the *quality* of instruction far more than it is a product of the sheer *quantity* of instruction.

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Given the value of instructional quality, it's particularly important for teachers to get in the habit of self-assessing. This involves reflecting on what they and their students did during the time they spent together during the school day and year. It stands to reason that as more and more stuff is placed on teachers' plates, reflection and self-assessment become more and more crucial for teachers to use to be able to move stuff *off* their plates to preserve room for what they are already doing. Otherwise, there is a danger of overload, high stress, and early burnout.

FIRST SELF-ASSESSMENT: WHAT CAN BE TOSSED AND WHAT MUST BE KEPT

There is an expression known to professional writers that helps them decide what to keep and what to do away with. Good writers know they must edit their work, and when the decisions as to what to remove become difficult, they may have to "kill their baby" and remove a phrase or section they really like, yet simply does not fit. Ouch. A harsh-sounding expression, but it applies here. Close examination and contemplation (and a good editor) help a writer realize that a section of writing must be removed entirely. It can't simply be moved elsewhere, because it just doesn't belong in the work. This removal may be painful, thus the strong expression "kill their baby." However, this process results in a stronger, more coherent work. Similarly, teachers must make an honest self-assessment and identify for removal what may be a cherished, long-standing personal practice that, upon closer examination, is not really benefiting the students or teacher. It may have once served a purpose but is now more of a time-waster, or it may be a *huge* time-waster. To make this cut calls for reflection, honesty, and courage. But the payoff will be astounding: It not only will free up more time both in preparation and in teaching but can also allow nourishment of a teacher's strong qualities and skills. As a result, students' success will be enhanced, and the teacher will be refreshed, too.

There are three opportunities for self-assessment in this book. One introductory, quick self-assessment is just ahead, with two in-depth self-assessment checklists that address key teacher skills and qualities at the end of Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The self-assessment that lies just ahead is relatively simple and will provide insight into how to get more time out of each teaching day and how to focus on what really helps students. In other words, what can be tossed and what must be kept.

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Instructions

When you have a quiet moment (or a moment to share with a mentor or colleague), take a piece of paper and list in no particular order what you did today in your role as a teacher. Brainstorm a list of at least 10 items. Do not cross out anything; there are no incorrect answers. It's important for this to be an open brainstorm, free of self-criticism and judging. Just jot down the items as they come to mind; don't elaborate, and don't explain why you did something. Allow enough time to do this, and, if needed, use another sheet of paper. (Overachievers: Stop at 100 items!)

When finished writing the list, assess it in the following way: Read each item on the list and place a plus sign (+) next to each item that involved teaching or learning and was necessary (also, mark + if it was something you were required to do, even if you did not agree with its value—for example, administering a standardized test). Place a minus sign (–) next to those items that did not directly or primarily involve teaching or learning or something you did that was not necessary to do during your school day. For example, setting up a classroom bulletin board would be a plus, since it involved teaching or learning. On the other hand, spending an hour trying to come up with an *unusually creative* bulletin board might be given a minus for being too time-consuming, as might also those personal telephone calls you made that ran longer than expected, causing you to dash to meet your students!

Here is a sample brainstormed list of a teacher's first 10 items. The list was then reviewed by its author to score each item:

| LIST OF ITEMS | SCORE |
|---|-------|
| Showed students how to make up note cards | + |
| Met with principal during morning break to discuss student | + |
| Volunteered for committee (said yes, but I meant to say no) | – |
| Took down bulletin board (students assisted) | + |
| Reviewed procedures and permissions for field trip | + |
| Made book covers for my teachers' editions | – |
| Set up a class debate | + |
| Wrote health office referral for student | + |
| Wrote long letter to parent (should have called, instead) | – |
| Listened to and assessed students' group presentations | + |

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Interpretation

How many items that you coded + or – gives a rough idea of the proportion of time used that directly influenced students and their learning and how much time was spent on nonessential endeavors. Hopefully, pluses outnumbered minuses.

Set up your results as follows, in a two-part format:

Give yourself a grade showing the percentage of pluses.

1. “I spent about ____% of my time in necessary or teaching- and student-related activities and about ____% of my time on matters that did not affect students’ success or learning, or they were unnecessary.”

My sample teacher above spent about 70% of her time in necessary or teaching- and student-related activities and about 30% of her time on matters that did not affect students’ success or learning or were unnecessary.

2. “Of what I did that did not directly affect students’ success or learning, or were not necessary, I could most easily dispense with the following” (list up to three items).

My sample teacher above could have declined to be on yet another committee; she could have made book covers later, at home, or not at all; and she might have telephoned the parent instead of writing a long letter.

Now come up with your percentage scores and jot down a short list of items you do that might be dispensed with. This would allow more time for instruction and learning. Repeat this self-assessment again in the near future. Having done it more than once will help make your awareness of time management more second nature. Even if you save only 20 minutes per school day, that’s about 7 hours saved per month, which is *the equivalent of one full school day’s worth* of extra time per month!

THE COMPLETE TEACHER: KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND QUALITIES

Most teachers are skillful. They know their stuff and convey expectations for student achievement. Some expect students to rise to a high level of mastery. Others may be seen as being hard markers or even as hard people but are skillful teachers nonetheless. On the other hand, there are teachers who may be less skillful, yet they are quite caring human beings. They may show their caring in many ways, from being interested and kindhearted to wanting to be buddies with their students.

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The problem is that each type of teacher in my made-up illustration is lacking what the other possesses: Some technically skillful teachers must show students their caring side, and some warm, loving teachers must sharpen their classroom teaching skills. No teacher is completely devoid of both skills and qualities, of course. If students are lucky, they will have had several skillful and caring teachers in their school experiences. They are remembered as nice people but also as complete teachers from whom students learned a lot. To be considered *complete* in most occupations, certain essentials are implied: knowledge, skills, and qualities. Whether we are talking about a hockey player, a surgeon, a chef, or a teacher, to be complete means being capable in usually more than one of these three areas. In most occupations, skills are necessary and usually so is knowledge. Hockey players, chefs, and surgeons must have both skills and knowledge. But qualities? Not necessarily. In fact, none of these three occupations requires a positive quality such as caring. Star hockey players, master chefs, and renowned surgeons can be unfriendly, obtuse, or rude; they can grow wealthy yet have an awful attitude. In the course of their employment, they are judged more on their skills and knowledge than on their caring. A teacher, however, must have all three: knowledge *and* skills *and* qualities. All teachers must possess knowledge specific to their content area. No argument there. Yet, knowledge alone—even a lot of knowledge—is never sufficient for a teacher to be considered complete. Teachers also must possess skills and qualities that help them work successfully with students. Thus, as I move ahead in this book, I will trust readers have acquired the content knowledge relevant to their teaching area, and I will focus on the other two areas: key teacher skills and key teacher qualities.

KEY TEACHER SKILLS AND QUALITIES

According to Robert Slavin, “In the past twenty years, research on teaching has made significant strides in identifying teaching behaviors associated with high student achievement” (Slavin, n.d.). These teaching behaviors include what some call “essential teaching skills,” which are “basic abilities that all teachers, including those in their first year, should have to promote order and learning” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004, p. 579). These skills are drawn from a body of educational research from the 1970s and 1980s that showed “there are specific instructional procedures which teachers can be trained to follow, and which lead to increased achievement and student engagement in their classrooms” (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986, p. 376). Contrasted with the traditional lecture, which is a

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one-way monologue, there are more interactive teaching styles (Gettinger, 1995). These interactive styles foster student success, because the teacher is engaged in a continuous manner with students in an interactive fashion (Gettinger & Stoiber, 1999). The most important of these continuous-engagement behaviors of interactive teaching have a positive effect on student achievement and are what I call *key teacher skills*. These key teacher skills are *preparation, attention, clarity, questioning, monitoring, feedback, summarizing, and reflection*. Each key teacher skill is within the learning radar of new and experienced teachers, who can develop each to a moderate- to high-degree of proficiency. Although the key teacher skills are presented here separately, they work together in an integrated fashion with other skills. For example, a *prepared* teacher helps students focus their *attention* by asking *questions* and then provide *clear feedback* to students while *monitoring* their work. On the following pages, these skills will be described in detail, with examples provided for each skill. At the end of the next chapter are the key teacher skills checklists, developed to help teachers examine, identify, and address each personal skill area.

Although skills are important, teachers also need attitudes: frames of mind or *qualities* that predispose teachers to work well with students, which help students work well with each other and the teacher. While there are of course many qualities that can be conjured up that are relevant to teaching (such as flexibility, patience, and firmness), there are two fundamental qualities—both interrelated—that are strong predictors of student success. These are the key teacher qualities of *efficacy* and *caring*. Teacher self-efficacy (or, simply, teacher efficacy) is a teacher's belief that he or she will be effective in teaching, that is, in being successful at helping students learn. Robert Slavin calls teacher efficacy "one of the most powerful predictors of a teacher's impact on students [which] is the belief that what he or she does makes a difference" (Slavin, 2003, p. 8). Because these teachers believe their efforts will be successful, they are more resilient, persisting in the face of obstacles, and do not give up easily, trying new strategies when old ones fail.

The belief in one's efficacy is not simply wishful thinking, mind over matter, or positive self-talk. Self-efficacy is a reciprocal process of confidence: After being successful at a task, it is likely that one will approach that same task in the future with a surer sense that one will again be successful. Conversely, lack of success weakens confidence and reduces feelings of efficacy. Teachers who have been successful working with students, or even those who have simply *observed* other teachers working successfully with students, will act in ways that show they will themselves be successful. Conversely, teachers who have not been very successful, or those who have made *observations* of unsuccessful teaching, will have a

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weaker sense of efficacy and will act accordingly. In both cases, the beliefs that teachers hold as to the likelihood (or unlikelihood) that their teaching will be a successful endeavor will influence how teachers feel, think, and behave when actually in the act of teaching.

The second key quality is *teacher caring*, which is an interest in the student as a person, as an individual. We may see caring as affection for students, but it is more than that. Caring is concern for students that is deeper than a concern for their academic achievement, yet caring is never exploitative or directed toward the teacher's best interest. Caring respects the boundaries of intimacy, which never serve any student's (or any teacher's) best interest. Caring teachers show caring in many ways. For instance, caring teachers build and maintain a personal relationship with students individually and as a group in setting up a classroom community. Here, caring also implies the teacher taking responsibility for the classroom and then sharing that ownership with students, plus actively seeking out parents as partners, long before parents must be contacted due to a problem. In 1999, researchers Astor, Meyer, and Behre saw a striking connection between high-quality, caring behaviors by teachers and non-violent student behavior in school. Students told researchers that teachers who showed caring did so by making "efforts to ensure students' attendance, [they] expected students to do quality work, and went beyond what the students expected in terms of personal support" (p. 24). The key teacher qualities of efficacy and caring are presented as separate entities, but the qualities work together and are woven into and expressed through teachers' skills. For example, the quality of *caring* influences the impact and value of *feedback* and *monitoring* provided by teachers to students. In a similar fashion, teachers' *efficacy* will influence how they use their *questioning* skills with students.

Chapter 2 is devoted to an examination of the eight key teacher skills and includes a key teacher skills checklist at the end of the chapter. Chapter 3 examines both key teacher qualities, with a teacher qualities checklist at the end of that chapter. Chapter 4 provides an opportunity to interpret the checklist results, with a guide to several possible self-assessment strategies.