What Makes a Good Teacher?

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This past semester we conducted research as a group in an attempt to answer the question of what qualities make a good teacher. We interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators in order to ask them a series of questions to get their perspective. Our data was collected from elementary schools and high schools in Midlothian, Virginia; Goochland, Virginia; Glen Allen, Virginia; Northern Virginia; Prince Edward, Virginia; and Henrico, Virginia. After conducting these interviews, we transcribed them and then as a group coded the material to find key ideas that connect them. From our data, we compiled a list of key qualities that relate to successful educators along with examples from the interviews that are detailed in this paper.

**Teacher Findings**

The insights we gained from the teachers themselves were invaluable to our research. We reached a consensus that running trends throughout the interviews of emphasized qualities were high expectations, a student-centered outlook, a collaborative attitude, frequent communication, equity, and organizational skills.

One mentioned quality among teachers was the importance of setting high expectations, whether it be for themselves or for their students. Each individual teacher that was interviewed had a different perspective on what having high expectations for their students meant. The commonality among all the perspectives on high expectations was that each teacher that mentioned it in their interview discussed what it meant for the students. Having set expectations are important for the students because they know what to expect from the teacher, and they are able to be held accountable. One idea of setting high expectations that stood out among the rest is that the teacher mentioned holding high expectations for themselves and holding the same expectations for his/her students. This idea was incorporated in how lesson plans are adapted to the individual student, “So a lot of times I think that naturally because of my personality I have high expectations of myself and so I translate that to my students which I think ultimately is a good thing you don’t want a teacher that has low expectations of you, but I think that um with certain students even seniors I have to realize that they come to me from very different places and that could be in the county that could be within our school and I really have to give them more time to figure out how to do writing on the college level whether its AP or a Dual Enrollment class. Um and so because of that I have to slow down my pace and you know I’m happy to do that” (Teacher, Perez). Being able to set high expectations for students and oneself is an important aspect of the quality of being a good teacher.

Another commonly mentioned quality among teachers was a student-centered approach to teaching. The teachers we interviewed seemed to understand that because students are the ones that need to learn the material, that lessons should cater to their individual needs and this idea colored the majority of their responses. This concept was even embedded in one educator’s teaching philosophy, “Uh, my teaching philosophy is to make sure that my students' needs are met, uh, based on their needs, and I strive to reach all students no matter their abilities” (Teacher, Weber). The interviewed teachers emphasized the fact that school is for the children and thus educators should put the students’ needs above their own in order to be successful. A key aspect of being able to do this is possessing an understanding of the students in any given class in order to assist them as needed and collaborating with other educators is a great way to improve this skill.

In addition to the first two qualities, collaboration is one of the qualities mentioned among teachers. The interviewed teachers encourage collaboration in their classroom is some shape or form. One of the teachers interviewed stated that collaboration is where the students “feed ideas off of each other and learn from each other,” which results in the students learning how to work together as a group (Teacher, Williams). Teachers encourage their students to grow as learners in the classroom; however, this collaborative approach also occurs outside of the classroom environment. In one of the interviews conducted, a teacher describes a good teacher colleague as someone “who is willing to interact and collaborate with others” (Teacher, Johnston). As teachers, it is essential to bounce ideas off each other to develop lessons and activities that suit the individualized needs of the students.

Communication was a huge component that made up what qualities make a good teacher. Teachers communicate with parents, administration, and/or students every single day, so it is an important skill to be good at within the job. Communication is a constant during the school year for all teachers, however, it can even start before the academic year begins. In one interview conducted, a teacher explained his forms of communication by saying, “... before school starts, I sent postcards to all of my students. Tell them, hey, you know, excited about you, here’s what we’re going to do,” when it comes to the upcoming school year (Teacher, Weber). This is a great example of how teachers can use their communication skills to be proactive in building relationships with their students really early on in order to help those students grow over time. Communication is also important with parents as it allows for parents to know how their students are doing within the school. Teachers can make positive connections with parents by calling parents at the beginning of the school year to create a good foundation with them so that if there was a problem in the future, it won’t be the first time they have communicated with each other. Lastly, teachers also have to make sure they properly communicate with the administration. They need to collaborate and communicate with the administration to make sure they are showing them that they are fulfilling their responsibilities accordingly as a school teacher.

Equity was a key component that kept recurring throughout the interviews with the teachers. Equity is meeting the individual needs of every student. It is very similar to adaptability except that equity is the action and following through with ideas. Teachers understand that each student should have the opportunity to learn and grow as an individual inside and outside of the classroom. Every student does not learn the exact same way, so teachers may assist different students in different subjects. For example, while interviewing a teacher, the question “Have you ever had to adapt your lesson plans to meet the needs of a certain class?” The teacher was very open in elaborating on how her class this year is very different from last year and has had to change many aspects of her teaching this year. For example, “One thing that I've had to do is because I have so many students that are struggling in both math and reading, I've had to assess them way more frequently. For example, like Last year, I would literally be like, okay, here's the lessons, we take the quiz, I grade the quiz. And that was it. Whereas this year, I'm giving an exit ticket like every day, just so I can see where they're I want things that they are doing and strategies like that. And also just, I have students with disabilities that can't take like read for example. So I've had to change a lot of like, written directions, which you wouldn't really think about to pictures to so they can see that like visually, and then just doing a lot more things that have movement in it because my class is like super wiggly this year. So I've had to do a lot of like total body moves and things like that for them to adapt” (Teacher, Sotelo). Through this quote, it can be shown that the teacher has the passion for her students to succeed in her class.

Organization was a key concept consistently brought up in our interviews with the teachers about what makes them and their colleagues good teachers. Teachers have a number of things to juggle at one time such as the daily schedule, content, lesson plans, schedule changes, individual student needs, consistently monitoring the behavior of students, and meeting the standards set by administration to name a few. If a teacher is disorganized, it is clear to the students and ultimately ends up hindering the quality of education that they’re receiving. If a teacher is unorganized, that means there is probably a large amount of instructional time that goes unused which allows students to misbehave because they are not engaged. In the following quote, one of the teachers we interviewed outlines all of her responsibilities is a day and how she ultimately has to be organized if she wants to thrive as a teacher.

“This year I teach 1st, 2nd, and 3rd on even days and then I have 4th period planning and on odd days I teach 1st, 2nd and 4th, and 3rd period I have a duty and then I have planning. I really, I plan, I photocopy, I grade because I teach 5 writing classes that’s usually my biggest hurdle, getting all of my grading back in a timely manner. So I really try and use my planning period also to go back and rewrite lessons or search for um new ideas or articles depending on what it is that I’m teaching I spend a lot of time doing that too.” (Teacher, Perez)

As mentioned in the teacher’s hectic schedule, there is no time in the day to be unorganized. Teachers have to be constantly using their time effectively so that they are prepared for the time they have with their students and are not wasting time trying to get organized. Due to the negative impact being unorganized can have on your students’ education and atmosphere between colleagues is why we found organization skills to be a key quality when deciding what factors make a good teacher.

**Parent Findings**

The second target interview group was parents in an attempt to get an idea of the impacts of teacher behaviors on children and families outside of the school system. We found that parents placed an emphasis on high expectations, student-centered mindsets, passion, communication, organization, and flexibility as valued qualities in teachers.

A teachers' expectations of their students have a powerful impact on the growth and demonstration of knowledge that tends to be overlooked or forgotten. We found that a common theme about parents was how they wanted their students’ teachers to have high expectations for their child. Teachers should be challenging and pushing students toward growth, which only happens if the teacher has high expectations for their students. In fact, setting low expectations limits and disrupts a student’s potentiality for learning. In the following quote, a parent mentions how the teacher kept pushing their child to meet the expectations they had for them and didn’t sugar coat it. “They were interested in their quality of work-if it was good, or if it was bad, they would provide a little more support kinda like a cheerleader-like “you can do it!” “study harder and you’ll do better!” (Parent, Johnston). While some parents may value their child always being told they do everything right, that is often not the case and is not reflected here. This parent wanted the teacher to be honest in her feedback so that if the student wasn’t limited by the low expectations a teacher has for their students if they are constantly telling them “Good job!”, even if their work doesn’t merit that. Parents want the teacher of their students to believe in them. Part of believing in their students is setting high expectations for them because it stems from the mentality that their students are capable of anything that they put their mind to.

Through being a parent, their child is their main focus. At times it may be necessary to advocate for the child and their needs. Also, many parents brought up that a good teacher to them requires advocating for their students. During one of the interviews, parents brought up an example of how the teacher advocated for their child and instilled a passion for learning in him. “She also runs their talented and gifted program, which is essentially their honors program, and um, advocated for him when uh based on an administrative error, he was not allowed to participate in the programmed despite the fact that he had never had anything less than an A in his entire life and um he tested well above everything required there was an administrative clerical error and he was not placed in the program and so she placed him in it and I think um uh inspired a real passion for learning in him that only a teacher can do” (Parent, Sotelo). The teacher was able to see that there may have been an administrative issue as to why the student was not allowed in the program when he had received nothing less than an A in class and was a hard worker. If the teacher had not taken action into her own hands the student may have a different outcome and perspective toward school and learning.

Another highly brought up trait by the parents interviewed was passion. Passion for the students, lessons, and more is seen as essential in being a good teacher. The parents seemed to want a teacher whose passion took the form of going above and beyond to help their students succeed. One parent commented, “I think a teacher who they feel have their best interest. A teacher who’s willing to go the extra mile like when they finish their work” (Parent, Williams). When a teacher is passionate, they are more likely to engage students with their enthusiasm and grow their confidence. A teacher’s passion can also extend to the parents of students, particularly in the form of communication.

Another quality that was common among parents that were interviewed was communication. Communication is an important skill and quality for a teacher to possess because it’s a huge part of their job. Teachers have to be able to communicate with their students and other colleagues. The way they communicate contributes to their students’ success as well as shows their affection. Communication is an important quality for parents because they like to know what’s happening and if problems or issues arise, they can be some of the first to know. One parent commented, “Uh, she was very organized, communication with us as parents was fantastic. Um, she let us know immediately if there were any issues or concerns, um, and then also let us know when we did meet with her, uh, occasionally through parent-teacher conferences, um, exactly what he had going on” (Parent, Weber). Without communication skills, the teacher would not be able to do their job. Communication is a driving force within the classroom and promoting collaboration among students as well as keep parents updated on the happenings.

From a parent’s point of view, having a teacher for their students that is organized is extremely important. The teacher serves as a role model for all of the students in the classroom, so by being organized, it allows for structure each day for the students. Students, especially at young ages need “to know what’s coming next, and not be surprised with projects or quizzes. Students like to know what’s coming up, even if it’s just short-term like what we're doing this week” (Parent, Johnston). It also helps to set long term goals for the class and students in the future so that the teachers can make sure they stay on track to be able to give the students the best educational opportunities possible.

One of the last characteristics parents believe makes a good teacher is the teacher’s flexibility to meet the needs of their child. Parents believe that teachers should be flexible when it comes to their child’s educational needs. From the perspective of parents, a flexible teacher knows how to balance between work and play to challenge and develop their students. One of the parents interviewed stated that a good teacher is “who is down to earth, who is warm, [and] who can be fun when it’s appropriate” (Parent, Perez). This quote illustrates that a flexible teacher can make learning fun for their students but also acknowledges that there is a time to a serious to ensure that the students understand the material they are learning in the classroom. Also, a good teacher who possesses the characteristic of flexibility continues to have the child’s best interest at heart. The teacher can adapt their lessons to satisfy the needs of their students in the classroom. One of the parents interviewed asserted that a good teacher is “willing to go the extra mile” for their students (Parent, Williams). The teacher understands how their students work in the classroom, so they can readjust their curriculum to ensure the success of their students.

**Administration Findings**

Our final group of interviewees was administrators in order to see what qualities the people actually hiring educators looks for when making those decisions. We found that the most frequently mentioned traits were having high expectations, a student-centered outlook, passion, communication skills, organizational skills, and flexibility.

As an administrator, it is necessary to hold students and teachers to a high standard to help them succeed and strive to their best. One administrator elaborated on how she holds her teachers and self to a high expectation of constantly updating grades for students and parents. “We need to update and grades more often, you know, that kind of thing. Just because that's kind of their, that's their payday, you know, seeing how well they're doing in class and just keeping kids informed and keeping parents informed and just um emails, phone calls, letters home, you know” (Administrator, Turner). Through the administrative role, it is necessary to hold their teachers to a high expectation of keeping grades and students informed as much as possible to help the students succeed the most.

When the administration is looking to hire new teachers, one of the most important aspects they look for within them is if they are student-centered. The principal we interviewed explained that if he typically “doesn’t hear the word ‘student’ anywhere mentioned [in the interview], odds are the way that they conduct their classroom instruction is probably going to be about the same” (Administration, Weber). Student-centered teachers put the students first in the classroom and make sure that they are providing their students with the best opportunities possible. By having student centered teachers, it also allows for students to have the freedom of choice within the classroom and helps make sure the students get the individualized instruction each child needs. Every student is different in their own way, so by having administration hire teachers who have student-centered teaching philosophies, it allows for these students’ needs to be met in order to help them become successful with their education in the future.

We gathered from our administrative interviews, that administrators want a teacher who has a passion for education, teaching, and their students. Education and teaching is a profession that requires energy and passion to have a greater impact on a students education. When talking with one of the administrators about personal and professional qualities she said, “I will say when I have interviews I think that your personal qualities help create your professional qualities. What I mean by that is who you are as a person, if you’re caring, if you’re um sympathetic or empathetic, if you are you know somebody who goes above and beyond in your own personal life you’re going to tend to carry that into your professional life as well” (Administrator, Sotelo). If passion is present in a teacher's personal life, then it should and will carry over into how they teach. Passion is so important to engage students in the content and class which is why those teachers who have a passion for education and teaching make a great teacher.

One of the qualities that administrators highlight as a good teacher is communication. The administrators that interviewed emphasized the importance of communication between teachers, parents, and them. Communication contributes to the success of the relationship between the school and the parents. One of the administrators interviewed stated how “keeping [the] lines of communication open” results in building trust and relationships with parents to have difficult conversations regarding the students (Administrator, Williams). By maintaining an open communication line it helps teachers, administrators, and parents “tackle a problem” sooner rather than later (Administrator, Turner). Additionally, when teachers, administrators, and parents communicate with each other, it serves to better the educational experience for the students, which is an essential aspect at the end of the day.

Organizational skills are seen as being important qualities of a teacher to have. When a teacher is organized, it allows for a classroom that is well run. Organization is also important in that the teacher has everything prepared and the students know what is expected of them. Lack of organizational skills makes teaching less effective. There needs to be consistency, not having something new every day. Organization is a skill that in some of the interviews was emphasized because the organization of the teacher impacts the students and their learning environment. One administrator commented, “Um… organization, um- it’s something… It seems like one of those lesser qualities, but honestly, um if they’re organized they’re gonna have their lesson plans, going to be diligent about their lesson plans” (Principal, Johnston). A teacher needs to possess organizational skills to be effective in their teaching and how well run their classroom is.

Flexibility is also seen as essential by administrators. Children are constantly changing, and so are their needs and thus teachers have to be able to adapt to meet diverse groups of students. Whether that is through changing a lesson plan last minute, providing different activity choices, or simply keeping up with current research, most administrators would agree that the ability to be flexible is highly sought after in a teacher. One principal stated, “Because, you know, we, we get older, the teachers get older, the kids don't. Does that make sense?.... Even though we might not like what's going on with fashion or with music or anything like that. That's their era. And we need to have that understanding of that with the teenagers. You know, because, you know, I always say if I start complaining about these youngins, that's what I need to get out because, you know, then I'm not understanding them” (Turner, Principal). Flexibility extends beyond being able to change a lesson, it is about seeing the students holistically and attempting to understand them on a deeper level.

**Perspectives**

It is crucial to discuss our perspectives as researchers in order to acknowledge potential biases that may stem from it. The majority of us are future teachers, while the rest are future nurses, which did have an impact on the lens we view this research through.

As future educators, the research we conducted was eye-opening to what teachers, parents, and administration think makes a good teacher. We found that as we were listening to the responses of our participants, a lot of what we were learning in our education classes lined up with the qualities that were named. We are constantly taught to follow best practices, and many of the aforementioned traits are often found in best practice educators. We can utilize these insights in our field to better ourselves as teachers.

As future nurses through this research, we were able to gain more insight into the educational system. This is important because we both hope to work in a pediatric unit. We will need to understand how children are learning in schooling systems because it helps nurses to determine if the child is cognitive developing correctly. Also, as nurses, we will need to be teaching our patients about their diagnosis. Key components to teaching are communication and student-centered. As nurses, we will need to be able to communicate appropriately and effectively.

**Conclusion**

While there was some variance among parent, teacher, and administrative perspectives, there were overarching themes that remained consistent throughout. Qualities of a good teacher that were brought up frequently by each group were high expectations of students, a student-centered approach to teaching, frequent communication, and organizational skills. An overall passion for the profession was also an underlying theme to these responses. Thus, we have concluded that in order for a teacher to be successful in the eyes of parents, teachers, and administrators, these are the most important traits they can possess, all of which are encompassed and encouraged by a passion for teaching.