

**Stoking the Fire: What Makes a Teacher Inspirational?**

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**Abstract**

This essay uses qualitative elements to examine characteristics of inspirational teachers through the eyes of teacher candidate autobiographical essays. Based on narratives written by 35 college students, three teacher educators examined the responses through several lenses, including: the characteristics the inspirational teachers had in common, and the impact the teachers had on the students. Seven emerging themes indicate that truly inspirational teachers go beyond the normal call of their duties, sometimes in intangible ways. Also indicated is the notion that knowledge and instructional strategies are not sufficient for making a teacher inspirational. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

## Introduction

Some years ago, one of the authors of this article taught in an urban elementary school that was undergoing demographic changes. Mrs. Adams, a seasoned teacher who was nearing retirement, was having a great deal of trouble adjusting to the raucous fifth grade boys who were assigned to her classroom that year. Her main frustration involved three little guys who were basically non-readers. Energetic and “rascally,” they led Mrs. Adams on a merry chase that made her days frustrating and ineffective. A reading teacher who taught down the hall from Mrs. Adams struck a deal to take the three mischievous students for the entire afternoon every day. With a bit of tweaking, she tried to meld the boys’ abilities and interests with the activities and lessons they needed. Fortunately, the children responded well to being included in the new reading class. The boys settled down, developed confidence, and all three of them learned to read before the year was over.

Several years later, the teacher heard that one of the boys, Sam (now almost ready for high school) had developed a melanoma and consequently much of his right arm had been surgically removed. Struck with grief for the young man, she went to the hospital to visit him. She was not sure whether the boy would remember her as clearly as she remembered him. When she entered his hospital room, she saw Sam propped up in his bed, one arm bandaged around the elbow. She could see that he had been reading a book. The boy glanced in her direction, and his face lit up as he grinned. The conversation went something like this:

Sam: “I was just thinking about you!”

Teacher: “You were thinking about me?”

Sam: “Sure. I was thinking about that guy you dated in college. Remember him? The one who had one arm?”

Teacher, surprised and confused: “What?”

Sam, ignoring her expression, “You know, the guy who could sing so well? He played semi-pro football for a while, and he worked construction in the summer. Remember? He could do anything he put his mind to. Don’t you remember him??”

Teacher, hesitant: “Of course I remember him. I just don’t remember telling you about him.”

Sam: “Well, you did. –And I figure if he could do those things, I can learn to do them too.”

That is when the teacher noticed the book Sam was reading. It was the Guinness World Book of Records, and the boy was thumbing through it to find all of the athletic records broken by disabled athletes, who had not let their handicaps stop them from doing what was important to them.

The teacher wondered why Sam still remembered that particular, seemingly random, story several years after it was told. Most of us have had the experience of running into a former student who told us that they remembered us and what we taught them, or remembered something specific that stuck with them. Some of us have had students call or write us years later to tell us something we said or did that had a personal impact on their lives. We teachers say many things to children over the time we have them in class, and in retrospect, we hope they were positive statements. Often, we don’t remember those comments. Still, those comments sometime stick with students in extraordinary ways. Could it be that almost all teachers have inspirational teaching moments.... moments we may not remember ourselves, but flashes of inspiration that affect our students forever? Do we sometimes unknowingly change our students’

lives in ways we could never imagine? What makes a teacher inspirational? Can we, through our own hard work and attitudes, become inspirational teachers most of the time? Can inspirational abilities be defined, let alone taught? Questions like these prompted three teacher educators in a Midwestern university to carefully examine an assignment that was completed by 35 college students in a course offered by the university's teacher education program.

### **Theoretical Framework**

“Inspirational” is one of those slippery, descriptive terms that is frequently overused. In fact, in the United Kingdom, so many advertisements for teachers contained the word “inspirational,” it has been suggested that the term may have lost meaning (Warnes, 2006). Yet it is the very word “inspirational” that keeps popping up in when people describe the teachers who made a difference in their lives. The word appears in a multitude of written tributes, speeches, obituaries and essays that attempt to describe the essence of a great teacher. Such a teacher provides that often intangible “something” that influences students, and sometimes creates a shelter for the soul and a passionate blueprint for living. It is also the “something” that may change the lives of students.

The past decade has been one in which the acquisition of specific knowledge, and how assessment determines appropriate instruction, has been well addressed by many well respected educators (Marzano, 2009; Fountas & Pinnell, 2010; Dorn & Soffos, 2011). The Common Core Standards (corestandards.org) encourage incorporating a variety of text topics into English Language Arts curriculum. The Disciplinary Literacy movement is strong and positive (Shannahan, 2014). Clearly, students, assessments and instructional approaches are very important to our endeavors to move children forward academically. Nevertheless, despite those important academic foci, it is just as important that teachers think about how to encourage and motivate students' desire to learn the material and go beyond it (Miller 2010; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Atwell (2007); Donalyn, 2014). Cloninger (2006) states that standardized testing can assess neither the students' worldviews nor their passions; yet these are fundamental forces in learning. He illustrates this by pointing out Einstein's comment about his genius, when he said, “The only real valuable thing is intuition.” Besides being instructional leaders, if we teachers can support and encourage the development of students who are inspired and eager to learn and create, we will have done our jobs, and done them well.

### **What Makes a Good Teacher?**

Good teachers know how to help children learn. Nearly every workshop that one hears about today seems to be about how data, but there currently appears to be a dearth of workshops that deal with the inspirational part of teaching. It is generally agreed that a teacher's skills and knowledge alone may not be sufficient to allow the teacher to be as effective as he or she could be. In fact, the teacher may have fine academic attributes, but his/her personality may not allow those attributes to be properly implemented or shared. What is often suggested as the missing piece is the notion of teacher dispositions (Penn State, 2013; L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Young, 2007; Thornton, 2006).

Johnson & Reiman (2007) defined dispositions as "characteristics of a teacher that represent a trend of a teacher's judgments and actions in ill-structured contexts"(p. 677). Jung & Rhodes (2008) distinguished dispositions as related to personal traits, not just dispositions related to professional competencies and suggested that both types of dispositions should be assessed in

teacher education. Not only do we need “teachers who are certainly morally and ethically disposed as well as good citizens and effective persons,” but “more importantly... [teachers who] possess the dispositions to be highly competent in a variety of spectra...” (Jung & Rhodes, p. 656). Osguthorpe (2008) contends that the scope of a teacher’s dispositions should be broadened to include “all matters of the classroom life and teacher effectiveness.”

Thornton (2006) suggested that it was more important to study dispositions “beyond personality traits and minimal behavior expectations ... toward ... how they manifest themselves through the actions teachers subsequently take in the classroom” (p. 56). His study found that the teachers who had a lasting impact on students “were those who exhibited key dispositions that impacted, even determined, how content knowledge and pedagogical skills came to life within the classroom” (p. In a similar vein, Sanger (2008) argued for a clear articulation of the moral nature of the teachers’ work. He distinguished between three types of moral work. The first pertains to a teacher’s activities or behaviors that are of moral value. The second kind of moral work consists of a teacher’s practice that contributes to the moral development and functioning of his or her students. “A teacher may be a moral saint and have little positive influence on students’ moral development...” (p. 175). The other type of moral work that a teacher can produce is to “instantiate discourse and practice that is moral in form or function” (p. 178). The differentiation helps to illustrate the need for teachers to go beyond doing something moral in nature, so that it makes a difference in the students.

Desirable teacher dispositions may vary across areas. Miranda (2012) found that urban science teachers do well when they possess teaching dispositions that include “professionalism, a passion for science and teaching, and a dedication to student learning.” L’Allier et al (2007) focused on the assessment of dispositions for teacher candidates in an advanced literacy program. They developed a list of seven dispositions to be targeted for evaluating candidates in this program: collaboration; reflection; openness and flexibility; professional ethics; oral and written communication; diversity, and commitment to learning and profession.

A growing number of educators and educational theorists are making the argument that dispositions can be taught and cultivated. Ritchhart (2002), for instance, considered dispositions acquired patterns of behavior that can be achieved through learning. Thornton (2006) suggested that the teachability of dispositions can be found in Dewey’s work, which “emphasizes the importance of the acquisition and development of dispositions, differentiating them from innate characteristics, traits or temperament” (p. 67). According to Carroll (2007), teacher education programs play an important role in shaping the developing dispositions of teacher candidates: “a candidate’s dispositions are influenced implicitly and explicitly by the interactions she has with other persons and the institutional character of teacher education” (para. 17). For a similar reason, Schussler (2006) encouraged teacher education programs to tailor their courses and experiences to develop dispositions for the candidates.

The argument for dispositions to be teachable has been receiving empirical support in the research literature. For instance, Cummins & Asempapa (2013) studied whether teaching interventions in a course changed the knowledge and understanding levels of students related to dispositions. The study concluded that “knowledge and understanding related to professional dispositions can change through the experiences candidates have during their training” (p. 110). Brewer, Lindquist, & Altemueller (2011) used the case study method to examine how teacher candidates with problematic dispositions improved their dispositions using a special intervention process. The process was shown to be effective in addressing the candidates’ problematic dispositions.

### What makes a Great Teacher?

When discussing the effectiveness and the impact of a teacher, it is important to differentiate a *good* teacher from a *great* teacher. In a discussion of what makes teachers of gifted students great (instead of merely good), Hargrove (2005) mentioned the creation of critical learning environment, the provision of challenge for students, setting high expectations, and the willingness to help students outside of class.

A truly great teacher often inspires students. Inspiration represents a kind of motivation that “gives those who are inspired reason to act in a particular way” (Van der Zee & De Jong, 2009, p. 12). Van der Zee & De Jong made the following comment on the nature of inspiration:

Inspiring someone does not mean that the person will act or choose in precisely the same way as the person inspiring him, although it does prompt a similar kind of action or choice. What is peculiar to inspiration, however, is that it motivates very powerfully and very positively because of the remarkable character of its source, at least in the eyes of those who are inspired by it. (p. 12)

In spite of the powerful energy or fire that may be ignited in students by their inspiring teachers, the teachers do not necessarily know that they have made such an impact on the others (Thompson, 2007). Thompson also points out that students who have been inspired do not think every day about the people or things that have given them the inspiration.

One key element of teacher disposition that could make a teacher inspirational is the love a teacher has for students and for the job. Bullough & Pinnegar (2009) suggested that there is a strong relationship between loving and learning. “When students know that we love them they do, in fact, reveal themselves...they clearly remember how they felt, how they were treated and how we interacted” (p. 251). “...being loving ought not to be forgotten nor taken-for-granted, that loving is at the center of what teachers do and are.” (p. 252). The importance of a teacher’s love for the job and for the students is also echoed by Van Manen (1986), who postulated that truly successful teachers are those who embody learning, and who model not only a love for subject matter but how that subject has moved the teacher to share what is so beautiful about it in his/her life. He also stressed the need for teachers to be thoughtful and tactful:

Thoughtfulness, tactfulness, is a peculiar quality that has as much to do with what we are as with what we do. It is a knowledge that issues from the heart as well as the head....And unfortunately (or fortunately) there are no rules that will ensure the right kind of thoughtfulness and tact. Pedagogic thoughtfulness is sustained by a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding. Out of this basis of thoughtfulness, tact in our relationship with children may grow. (p. 15).

The types of qualities or behaviors that make a teacher inspirational to the students, however, have seldom been documented in the literature except in a few selected areas such as church-related schools (Van der Zee & De Jong, 2009); the gifted class (Hargrove 2005); the class for students at risk (Mitchell & Jacob, 2011); in music education (Ingle, 2005), or in journalism (Bliss 1985). It is not clear what characteristics or behaviors of teachers inspire and ignite the powerful energy in students in the regular K-12 classroom. The identification of those characteristics or modes of behavior has important implications for the preparation of teachers.

### Method of Study

As an assignment and a prerequisite to a classroom conversation about teaching, a group of 35 pre-service teaching candidates were asked to go home and write about what they remembered about their teachers before they were in college. The students were to write about any teachers who may have inspired them when they were in elementary, middle and high school. They were just asked to “take a little trip down memory lane,” and they were not given specific parameters except to write from their hearts about what they remembered. Students had several weeks to think about past teachers and put their thoughts on paper. They were told that they should speak freely and they were assured that the names of teachers, schools and towns would not be revealed to anyone. Indeed, when the assignment was first given, it was simply a way to spur conversation in class about inspirational teachers and teacher dispositions. It was never meant to be more than that. The papers that were submitted, however, cried for sharing. They were so rich in detail and commentary that the professor who had assigned the paper asked the students if it might be shared with colleagues. Students couldn’t wait to share what they remembered, and they said it was a fascinating time for them. They remembered things they had no idea were still in their minds. The students readily agreed to share their work with others outside the class, and at that point the papers were examined to make sure there was no identifying information re: the students, or their subjects, school or locations. The professors submitted a proposal to The Human Subjects Committee at the University for permission to read, parse information and learn from the papers, and to possibly publish any important findings.

### **The Qualitative Approach**

The assignments were written by 35 undergraduates enrolled in a night class of a Content Area Reading course. They were all Caucasian females, and their ages ranged from twenty one to over fifty. The professors did not attempt to approach the analysis of these papers from the viewpoint of systematic research. It was apparently that the writing was not done with the idea of it serving as research, and it was not controlled or quantifiable. Since the writing was rich and autobiographical, the professors viewed the papers through “qualitative eyes” of teacher educators who wanted to see what these long remembered teachers had in common with each other, what they did that made the students remember them so well, and what types of long-term impact they have on the students.

### **The Coding Procedure**

Several coding templates were developed to try to capture similar traits, activities, or intangible “things” that the students wrote about each teacher. They began with four categories, but later developed five, and finally finished with eight categories in an effort to more accurately categorize the remembrances into themes. The final template consisted of the following eight coding categories: 1.) non-disposition related instructional strategies; 2.) disposition related instructional strategies; 3.) disposition related teacher personality; 4.) relationship outside of the classroom environment; 5.) physical attributes; 6.) teacher expectations; 7.) general impact; 8.) specific impact. The eight categories were selected because the researchers felt they were adequate to summarize the discourse students used about their inspirational teachers.

Summaries of the writings were shared in subsequent meetings in an attempt to identify themes that help to answer the research questions. From the responses on the template, seven themes were eventually identified.

## **Results of Study**

The refinement of the eight coding categories, along with the repeated readings and sharing of analyses of students' writings about their inspirational teachers, led to the identification of seven themes that seemed to define the characteristics of inspirational teachers. The seven themes were: strategies, attitude, nurturing, passion, personal relationship, expectations, and legacy.

### **Strategies...those things we often preach and teach in Teacher Education Programs**

Most teachers perceived as inspirational in the study employed instructional strategies that made a lasting impact on their students. Some of the teachers were described as artistic, inventive, and alert to multiple modes of learning. For instance, a teacher was remembered as having made test review questions into a game for the students while they traveled from gymnasium to restroom and back to the classroom. One student, Kelly, recalled a teacher bringing audio tapes of multiplication songs to class. It made learning multiplication tables fun and easier for her. "Even now in my college level classes, I find myself singing the songs", she said.

Students also seemed to value teachers who used creative instructional strategies to keep students engaged. For example, Averie had a favorable impression of her fourth grade teacher: "One thing I liked about her class was that when we would talk about science, we got to read articles in the newspaper and then act them out so the class learned about them too." Other engaging strategies mentioned by students included using graphic organizers; asking students to wear pajamas to read on certain days; decorating classrooms with appealing student artwork, posters, mobiles and "found" objects. Some teachers created inviting spaces for children to read, work, play and study, such as a big bubble in which to read, or creating an Egyptian "town" while studying the history of that culture. Memories incorporated the employment of creative, cooperative learning strategies, such as using catchy and odd vocabulary words to look up and use in conversation.

Several students pointed out that their inspirational teachers employed strategies that aligned learning to real world experience. The teachers provided such authentic learning experiences as field trips to places the children had never been and taking children outside to look at the environment in their own communities. They remembered teachers inviting public speakers who were expert in content areas, and using authentic materials to support student observation, such as chicks in an incubator, or butterflies hatching in special nets in the classroom. They remembered building models of habitats that reflected multiple cultures and time periods, and they appreciated those teachers who noted a student's strength and encouraged an extension of ability- such as suggesting that a student join the yearbook club, or marching band.

There were also students who mentioned their inspirational teachers using strategies to accommodate learning. They cover such strategies as differentiated instruction, differentiated assessment, and opportunities for students to expand on their strengths. The teachers engaged in making adjustments in assignments and offering choices for students.

### **Attitude ....that all important disposition...**

"Attitude" was the second theme that emerged from the study. Although the personality traits of the inspirational teachers varied widely (some were relatively quiet, while others could be quite dramatic) they exhibited some common attitudes about and towards their students.

Students fondly remembered teachers who showed respect for students while also *expecting* respect from students, and who showed genuine interest in student opinions. Many respondents posited that the positive attitudes of their inspirational teachers contributed to their comfort and success in the classrooms. As one student pointed out, "...attitude sets the mood for the day. I want my class to experience that too," she said. Some of the descriptions used by respondents that reflect the attitude of their inspirational teachers included, "When she had to redirect a child, she did it very gently;" "...he was a very enthusiastic man;" and "...made us feel super intelligent... I remember that she taught me the word 'chutzpah,' and that she certainly had a lot of it herself!"

### **Passion...what really ignites interest...**

The passion inspirational teachers demonstrated about their subject area ignited curiosity and interest in their students. The passion might be for a specific subject, or the love of teaching in general. "He was the first teacher that inspired me because you could tell that he loved teaching", one student said. "She showed us her love of reading", remembered another. A third student recalled: "She inspired in me her passion for science."

Passion for the subject can be a contagious, consuming love that can inspire students to develop a new avocation, if not a vocation. Several students suggested that the passion their teachers showed for a subject, and/or for teaching, had a profound impact on them. Over one third of the students said the fervor of their inspirational teachers made them want to be teachers themselves. One student said, "I want my students to fall in love with the material. I want to see my students' eyes sparkle when they put the pieces together. I want to hear them discuss and debate with peers, and watch their projects turn into passionate hobbies. Students wrote a great many examples of their teachers' passions for their subject areas. They included comments such as, "She was a music teacher, and she was so passionate about it that everyone who had contact with her knew it. ... I pray that I have as much passion for my students as she did... Her passion made most other students have the same passion." One teacher was fascinated by her history teacher, "Mr. D. was a passionate teacher who loved history and loved teaching. I feel if a teacher is passionate and interested in the subject, it rubs off onto the students." Even a teacher who was not especially accessible to his students was mentioned, "Mr. M. was a 5th grade teacher who was not warm and fuzzy, but he LOVED math and history. He made history come alive for me! ... I owe Mr. M. my gratitude for my love of history.

### **Nurturing ... still needed at all ages...**

Another theme that emerged from the study is the nurturing and support provided by inspirational teachers to help students grow and develop, especially during difficult times. Jane remembered having an accident during recess (wetting her pants) and being upset and embarrassed. The teacher comforted her by sharing that as someone who had been teaching for a long time, she had seen a lot of first graders have bathroom accidents. She assured Jane that it was nothing to worry about.

Alicia recalled missing three months of her second grade due to a leg injury. Her teacher would go to her house every week to help her catch up on the class work. Felicia noted that her teacher made it a priority to help a friend of hers, who had recently been put into foster care, and who was having trouble fitting into the class. The teacher even spent time after school with both the student and her friend, inviting them to her Vacation Bible School, and spending extra time with them. Rachel recalled having a hard time in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and her teacher being supportive.



The teacher provided her with “memorable comments and encouragement”. “He made me feel special [during] that difficult year”, she said.

Some teachers really went out of their way when providing support and nurturing to their students, for which their students would feel forever grateful. Ashley recalled a teacher who visited her when she was hospitalized for bronchitis and pneumonia. The teacher visited the student the second day she stayed at the hospital, bringing “all my lessons for the entire week and then some extra fun projects for me to do.” She got another visit from the teacher the day before her hospital release a week later. Jane had a high school guidance counselor whose door “was always open for students who had trouble in their lives”. After the death of a close friend, the student went to the counselor’s office for comfort. “She allowed me to come get a hug from her...sit in her office and get composed before going back to class....Her office was truly a refuge for me.”

### **Personal Relationship ...the memories that last**

Personal relationship is a theme that stands out when students recalled their inspirational teachers. It refers to the type of relationship that exists between the instructor and the student outside of the classroom and school. Beth said one of her teachers would stay before and after the normal school hours in case her students needed help. Helen said one of her teachers lived several streets up from where she lived. She would go to the teacher’s house with her sisters to “have tea cookies and hot tea on her white wicker coffee table.” “To this day I can remember seeing her big white beautiful house with its big huge porch,” she said. Jane had a high school home economics teacher who attended many student activities, such as ball games and concerts.

Students consider this type of personal relationship important. Beth said that her teacher, who went above and beyond by staying at school before and after school, was not just a teacher, but a friend. “If I had any problems or was upset, she would try and comfort me. She was not only an amazing teacher, but an amazing woman,” she said. Susan really enjoyed being with her teacher outside of school. “This way I was able to tell that teachers were actually real people, and they could actually relax.” Helen remembered that it was a lot of fun for her to join the tea party on her teacher’s front porch. Allie noted that her high school history teacher had her babysit her kids. She said this was the first time “that someone gave me that kind of responsibility.” “Thinking back, this meant the world to me that someone thought that much of me,” she said. She was later invited to the teacher’s wedding. She said to this day, the teacher was like a mother to her and a best friend. Another student, Ashley, said this of her teacher:

“The thing that had amazed me the most was that this teacher cared enough about me to take extra time out of her day to get all of this together for me and personally visit with me at the hospital that was an hour from her home and family and where she taught... This teacher ...went above and beyond to make sure one of her students was receiving the best education she could provide for her even outside of the classroom.”

### **Expectations ... the key to excellence....**

An impressive number of respondents reported that their favorite teachers explicitly held them to high expectations, and urged them to do more than they believed they could achieve. High expectations were mentioned by several students in the study:

“[The teacher] was never afraid to challenge our class - demanded that students be hard workers.”

“She had to hear the right sounds as we sang and if not, then we had to repeat the song over and over again. She was the teacher who wanted to hear the best of the best.”

“Mr. O encouraged me not to give up... [He] helped me break out of my comfort zone.”

“There was no messing around in her class. She demanded excellence when turning in anything written.”

“I had a baby when I was in high school. One of my teachers came to the hospital to visit me. Ignoring the fact that I was an unwed teenage mother, she asked me what I planned to do with my life and when I was going to apply for college. That was a turning point for me.”

The high expectations of teachers made students realize their full potential, for which they seemed to be thankful. Several students suggested this in their narratives.

“[He] taught me to push myself beyond my limits. [It] turns out [that] my limits weren't as tight as I thought. He instilled mental toughness [in me].”

“She was demanding ... [we found out] we could do more than we thought we were capable of....”

The high expectations that the inspirational teachers set for their students were also coupled with the support that students needed to successfully meet expectations. This is evidenced by the following comments the students made of their teachers:

“The teacher had high expectations but also put strong efforts into helping students reach those expectations.”

“[The teacher had] high expectations, but made learning enjoyable - pushed us to do our best and expected our best; wanted us to be prepared for college and the [state] test.”

### **Legacy ....the impact for a lifetime**

Legacy is a theme from the study that refers to the long lasting impact the inspirational teachers had on the students. The impact ranges from specific inspirations such as the way to treat other people or regained confidence in oneself, to more broad influences such as career choice.

There are several examples where the legacy of a teacher came in the form of some specific inspiration or impact. For instance, Kim, who was a very quiet student, was facing some challenge when she moved to a different state in the first grade. Her teacher made her feel comfortable in the new classroom. “This meant the world to me when I was younger,” she said. The legacy carried to the later stages of her life. “As I grew older Mrs. Smith’s actions have continued to influence me, not only in my daily life but in my work as a prospective teacher as well.” A similar inspiration was recalled by Isabella, who considered herself “a very average student” until she met her fifth grade teacher. “After the year with her I knew I was capable of more than what I had been doing before.”

Sometimes the legacy came from special challenges and high expectations from a teacher. For instance, Jennifer found inspiration in her gifted class teacher who constantly challenged her class: “I believe the challenges and experiences she presented broadened my horizons. Her class really inspired me to do the same in my classroom.” Christy considered her college prep teacher as “one of the most bizarre teachers.” The teacher would pull his hair if one of his students did not answer the question correctly. This very teacher, said Christy, inspired her “to not take anything less, but the best from my students and to never give up on them.”

The legacy may also take the form of long term interest and career choice due to the passion that the students witnessed in their teachers for their subject, their job, and their students.

Iris said that she had a love for history due to her teacher's passion for the subject in high school. In the case of Allie, three high school teachers who showed care and kindness towards their students made a lasting impact on her. "With the combination of the three teachers who impacted me so much through high school, I believe I am a well-rounded educator. I know what kindness can do for a person." Kim considered her high school biology teacher as the person who "has inspired me the most and greatly influenced my decision to become a teacher." Noni said that the teachers who cared about their job and their students were the reason why she wanted to be a teacher.

### **Conclusions and Discussions**

The identification of the seven themes from the study helps to shed light on the making of an inspirational teacher. The repeated mentioning of innovative strategies by the students when recalling their inspirational teachers points clearly to the importance of pedagogy in the preparation of teachers, which has been a traditional focus in teacher education.

While students emphasized the importance of pedagogical strategies, they also enthusiastically talked about other characteristics that did not fall under the pedagogical domain. The themes of attitude, passion, nurturing, personal relationship, and expectations fall clearly under the dispositional field. Some of these characteristics have been found to be associated with effective teaching in the literature. For instance, in the Thornton (2006) study teachers who were perceived as more effective were those who demonstrated "enthusiasm for learning" and that those who were perceived as less effective "while not attributed to personality differences...were attributed to a lack of commitment" (p. 61).

Based on the individual themes and the rich descriptions of the students regarding their K-12 inspirational teachers, the researchers were able to identify two overarching themes from the study. First of all, inspirational teachers go above and beyond the expectation. This was evident not only when a teacher spent time with students after school was over, or when a teacher traveled back and forth for more than a year to visit a student in hospital, but also at moments of more traditional student/teacher interactions, such as when a teacher urged a student not to give up. It is during those moments that the care and passion of a teacher shine through; it is during those moments that a teacher leaves a permanent impact on a student; it is during those moments when a teacher becomes inspirational. Those moments are not easy to dispose of in the mind of the students, although they may be forgotten by the teacher herself.

The second overarching theme from the study is that positive dispositions are indispensable to the making of an inspirational teacher. The following account given by one student could ring true of many inspirational teachers:

"The memory I still have of [this teacher] is the softness of her spirit and the kindness of her touch. If there is a section in heaven for loving teachers, she is there with many awards...She was not a yeller, she was not one to humiliate children; her room was well organized and students enjoyed the learning experience..."

Although inspirational teachers vary greatly in terms of their temperaments, looks, and strategies, they invariably display such "softness" and "kindness" when dealing with their students. It is true that the pedagogical knowledge and skills still make a big difference. However, without the care, the passion, the personal relationship, and the high expectations, a teacher would not leave a permanent legacy with a student.

Two things struck the professors as being of major importance when reading these papers. One is that passion, which can be the love of teaching, and/or the passionate love of a specific topic, turned some students from reluctant learners into people who later developed either a vocation or an avocation related to the passion of the teacher that was remembered. The other powerful force that was clear in the elicited memories was that of a direct, personal connection that developed between the teacher and the student. It was an intangible emotion that the students often feel even today. Students remembered teachers' long dead who made a direct connection with them that still "sticks with them". The combination of passion for a topic and the direct personal connection with a student seemed to provide an incredibly powerful synergism that could be life changing.

The findings from the current study confirmed the importance of teacher dispositions for teacher education programs. Traditionally, teacher preparation focuses its attention on pedagogical knowledge and skills, and only relatively recently have we started to pay closer attention to dispositions. Current efforts are mostly directed at defining and assessing dispositional attributes of teacher candidates through surveys. Few efforts have been made in terms of incorporating the dispositions into the curriculum of teacher education programs, nor has there been much focus on how dispositions can be taught to or enhanced for pre-service teachers. Varella & Veronesi (2004) suggested that teachers' values and knowledge that directly affect the quality of experience they bring with them into a classroom are formed during their pre-service years. This assumption has significant implication for teacher education.

A 2012 extensive literature review by Vishal Arghode found that "empathy plays a role in instruction; students feel connected with instructors if they receive support and encouragement...and instructor's empathy skills are crucial" (p. 128).

Based on multiple studies Arghode examined, a definition of empathy was "a caring and nurturing attitude...a concern for student progress and...ability to accurately communicate feelings and understanding of students' perspectives" (pg. 130). The author cautions, however, that "evaluating empathy skill is difficult to assess and measure" (p. 132). The overarching theme of the essay is that instructors who are empathetically skillful do not judge.

Van Manen (1986) long ago identified the importance of relationship between adult and students, commenting "By knowing this child, a teacher can hold back superficial judgment about him or her. The word "observing" has etymological connections to "preserving, saving, regarding, protecting." (p. 19)

Van Manen's ideas about the importance of tact in the teaching/learning relationship ties into Arghode's observations, but Arghode suggests that empathy cannot be taught, although it can be modeled as a tool. Van Manen maintains the importance of a teacher's passion for his or her subject, noting "There is a deep truth in the statement "you are what you teach." (pg. 45). It may also be important to note that teacher educators themselves can model the dispositional attributes for the teacher candidates, just as the teachers recalled in the study modeled for the pre-service teachers when they were younger. If dispositions that really matter receive the same amount of attention as pedagogical knowledge and skills, more of our teacher candidates will be inspired.

Van Manen (1986) remarks:

"There is much to be learned from what students say about outstanding teachers they have had. Or from hearing them describe the teachers they learned best from, the ones they would like to be themselves. Certain themes will begin to emerge, themes hidden behind

stories and anecdotes that easily lead to generalizations about such teachers being fair, patient, able to communicate, keeping good discipline, having a sense of humor, being interested in and knowing children, knowing what to teach.” (pg. 46).

As these inspired candidates leave teacher education programs and enter their own classroom, they will more likely to ignite the fire in their students and make a profound impact on their lives.

### **Recommendations for Teacher Educators**

The authors of this paper have a number of recommendations for teacher educators across this nation as we prepare effective teachers. The recommendations particularly pertain to the incorporation of dispositions in teacher education.

1. Incorporate discussions of the importance of dispositions into teacher preparation courses whenever possible. Read articles about dispositions, and make sure that the pre-service teachers understand the impact of teacher dispositions upon children.
2. Use autobiographical assignments, such as the one described in this article, to help pre-service teachers review their own experiences with former teachers. Ask them to record which teachers made a difference in their lives and why.
3. Review the teacher disposition forms that are used at your teacher institution. Use those forms at least once a year for pre-service self-evaluation, and for student and faculty conferences to review which dispositions are currently exhibited, and which ones need additional attention.
4. Closely monitor all students in field placements for dispositions as well as for instructional strengths and challenges. Ask them to notice dispositions of their mentor teachers in dealing with their students. Discuss both dispositions and instruction, relative to student engagement and achievement, with pre-service teachers on a regular basis.
5. Most cooperating teachers are good, strong teachers but it is unlikely that most of them are exceptionally inspirational. As often as possible, colleges should place pre-service teaching candidates with teachers who have the reputation of being inspirational. That is a difficult task for an institution with many students. Even if the cooperating teachers are not especially inspirational, it is possible that pre-service teachers who have already been exposed to the concept of inspirational teaching will be more inclined to note the importance of becoming nurturers who show a passion for teaching, have high expectations and work to develop personal relationships with students.
6. If our goal is to help create inspirational teachers, teacher educators should pay close attention to what may create the dispositions that inspire others. More research on this topic is needed if we want to know how much influence teacher educators and collaborating teachers may have in helping pre-service teachers develop these dispositional traits, and whether those traits can really be taught.
7. In addition, more research is needed to see which inspirational teachers learned their dispositions from their own teacher models, and which ones developed their traits from their own personalities and belief structures. Perhaps their role models were their parents, rather than their teachers. On the other hand, it is possible that some inspirational teachers never had a truly inspirational model at all, but instinctively knew what would make a difference for students. These and other facets of inspirational teaching are ripe for research and important for teachers and teacher education programs.

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