

# Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher

## A Longitudinal, Qualitative, Quasi-Research Study of In-service and Pre-service Teachers' Opinions

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by Robert J. Walker

### Abstract

For fifteen years, the presenter has engaged college students in discussions and writing assignments that pertain to the outstanding characteristics of their most effective teachers—"effective" meaning that these teachers made the most significant impact on their lives. Based on those recurring themes, the conclusion is that effective teachers share at least twelve clear characteristics. Those characteristics consistently affected students in positive ways.

This article results from a longitudinal, qualitative, quasi-research study of students in education, including in-service as well as pre-service teachers. An out-of-class essay assignment asked this question: *What were the qualities of the most memorable teacher who encouraged you to teach?*

### Participants and Courses Involved in the Study

This study utilized both traditional and nontraditional students the author taught in the past fifteen years. The undergraduate students (pre-service teachers) in the study were working toward bachelor's degrees in teaching and not actually teaching when they wrote their essays. Most of the graduate students were in-service education professionals who had returned to school for advanced degrees.

"Traditional" students were defined as on-campus students with tuition support from parents or student loans. "Nontraditional" students were defined as those living off campus and working or raising a family.

The students were enrolled in various courses, some held during the day, others at night. The courses included Methods of Teaching Science; Methods of Teaching Math; Methods of Teaching Social Studies; Curriculum Development; Child Development; Introduction to Special Education; Problems in the Elementary School; Educational Technology; and Teaching in the Urban Setting.

More than one thousand students matriculated through these undergraduate and graduate classes, held in the United States, Canada, Bermuda, and the Caribbean. Several students from Africa participated. The courses were taught at both predominately white and historically black institutions, including two private colleges; three public universities; a junior college; and a technical college. The multiplicity of institutions and courses over the years provided the study with a diverse student population: young and old, black and white, Hispanic, those of Asian nationality, males, and females. The students were mainly early childhood majors, training to teach nursery to grade three (N-3); elementary education majors, training to teach kindergarten to sixth grade (K-6); and secondary education majors, training to teach seventh to twelfth grades (7-12) in specific subject areas such as physical education, mathematics, science, history, and music. The elementary education majors formed the largest contingent.



Besides the undergraduate and graduate students, there were also students working on alternative master's degrees. Those students had obtained bachelor's degrees in other fields such as social work, psychology, mathematics, and biology and later decided that they wanted to teach. Some alternative master's degree students were changing careers after working in other professions. Many had already begun teaching using emergency teaching certificates.

### Definition of Terms

*Effective* described a particular teacher who had been the most successful in helping respondents to learn.

*Characteristics* described a particular teacher's special personal qualities that the respondents felt had enabled the teachers to achieve success.

### Research Instrument

During the first week of each course taught at the various institutions (listed above in "Participants and Courses Involved in the Study"), I assigned students an essay on their most memorable teachers: those who had the greatest impact on their lives and who were most successful (effective) in teaching the subject matter; the teachers they most wanted to emulate and who might have had the greatest impact on their decision to enter teaching. I asked the students to explain their selection of particular teachers by providing examples of how those teachers inspired them and by describing special personal qualities or characteristics.

### Data Analysis

Over the years, students described their favorite and most memorable teachers with statements such as

- "She was always prepared."
- "He was very positive."
- "She had high expectations for me!"
- "She was the most creative teacher I have ever had!"
- "He was so fair!"
- "I liked her personal touch!"
- "I felt that I was a part of the class."
- "She showed me compassion when my mother died."
- "He was so funny!" . . . "She taught her class in a fun way."
- "I was never bored in his class."
- "He gave all the students respect and never embarrassed me in front of the class."
- "She did not hold what I did against me!"

- “He was the first teacher I had who admitted that he had made a mistake.”
- “She apologized to me.”

Semester after semester, year after year, a common theme emerged in the essays and class discussions of what makes a good teacher: students emphasized the personal (qualitative) traits of memorable teachers rather than academic (quantitative) qualifications. Students seldom mentioned where teachers attended school, what degrees they held, or whether they had been named a “Teacher of the Year.” Instead, students focused on these teachers’ nurturing and caring qualities.

For fifteen years, I listened closely to class discussions about memorable teachers and read compositions on the topic, and in later years I retained copies of their essays as qualitative data. The student essays pointed to several personality traits prevalent among their favorite and most memorable teachers. Such teachers

- came to class *prepared*
- maintained *positive attitudes* about teaching and about students
- held *high expectations* for all students
- showed *creativity* in teaching the class
- treated and graded students *fairly*
- displayed a *personal, approachable touch* with students
- cultivated a *sense of belonging* in the classroom
- dealt with student problems *compassionately*
- had a *sense of humor* and did not take everything seriously
- *respected* students and did not deliberately embarrass them
- were *forgiving* and did not hold grudges
- *admitted mistakes*

## Findings

The essays, combined with pre- and post-class discussions of the assignment, led me to formulate twelve identifiable personal and professional characteristics of effective teachers:

### *Characteristic 1: Prepared*

The most effective teachers come to class each day ready to teach.

1. It is easy to learn in their classes because they are ready for the day.
2. They don’t waste instructional time. They start class on time. They teach for the entire class period.
3. Time flies in their classes because students are engaged in learning—i.e., not bored, less likely to fall asleep.

### *Characteristic 2: Positive*

The most effective teachers have optimistic attitudes about teaching and about students. They

1. See the glass as half full (look on the positive side of every situation)
2. Make themselves available to students
3. Communicate with students about their progress
4. Give praise and recognition
5. Have strategies to help students act positively toward one another

### *Characteristic 3: Hold High Expectations*

The most effective teachers set no limits on students and believe everyone can be successful. They

1. Hold the highest standards
2. Consistently challenge their students to do their best
3. Build students' confidence and teach them to believe in themselves

### *Characteristic 4: Creative*

The most effective teachers are resourceful and inventive in how they teach their classes. They

1. Kiss a pig if the class reaches its academic goals
2. Wear a clown suit
3. Agree to participate in the school talent show
4. Use technology effectively in the classroom

### *Characteristic 5: Fair*

The most effective teachers handle students and grading fairly. They

1. Allow all students equal opportunities and privileges
2. Provide clear requirements for the class
3. Recognize that "fair" doesn't necessarily mean treating everyone the same but means giving every student an opportunity to succeed
4. Understand that not all students learn in the same way and at the same rate

### *Characteristic 6: Display a Personal Touch*

The most effective teachers are approachable. They

1. Connect with students personally
2. Share personal experiences with their classes
3. Take personal interest in students and find out as much as possible about them
4. Visit the students' world (sit with them in the cafeteria; attend sporting events, plays, and other events outside normal school hours)

*Characteristic 7: Cultivate a Sense of Belonging*

The most effective teachers have a way of making students feel welcome and comfortable in their classrooms.

1. Students repeatedly mentioned that they felt as though they belonged in classrooms taught by effective teachers.
2. The students knew they had a good teacher who loved teaching and preferred it to other occupations.

*Characteristic 8: Compassionate*

The most effective teachers are concerned about students' personal problems and can relate to them and their problems. Numerous stories established how the sensitivity and compassion of caring teachers affected them in profound and lasting ways.

*Characteristic 9: Have a Sense of Humor*

The most effective teachers do not take everything seriously and make learning fun. They

1. Use humor to break the ice in difficult situations
2. Bring humor into the everyday classroom
3. Laugh *with* the class (but not at the expense of any particular student)

*Characteristic 10: Respect Students*

The most effective teachers do not deliberately embarrass students. Teachers who give the highest respect, get the highest respect. They

1. Respect students' privacy when returning test papers
2. Speak to students in private concerning grades or conduct
3. Show sensitivity to feelings and consistently avoid situations that unnecessarily embarrass students

*Characteristic 11: Forgiving*

The most effective teachers do not hold grudges. They

1. Forgive students for inappropriate behavior
2. Habitually start each day with a clean slate
3. Understand that a forgiving attitude is essential to reaching difficult students
4. Understand that disruptive or antisocial behavior can quickly turn a teacher against a student, but that refusing to give up on difficult students can produce success

*Characteristic 12: Admit Mistakes*

The most effective teachers are quick to admit being wrong. They

1. Apologize to mistakenly accused students

2. Make adjustments when students point out errors in grading or test material that has not been assigned

## Conclusions

The findings of this study were drawn from essays of college students majoring in education. Students also read their essays and discussed their most memorable teachers in class, where they shared their opinions about effective teaching. They identified twelve characteristics of an effective teacher and in turn committed themselves to becoming effective teachers themselves.

It is my hope that educators will recognize the validity of these twelve characteristics of an effective teacher and will seek to adopt them as their own.

## Further Reading on the Twelve Characteristics

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### 12. *Admit Mistakes*

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