**The Good Teacher**

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Good education, from preschool to graduate school, depends on good teaching. For better and for worse, the quality of teaching defines the quality of education. And the quality of education limits or enables the good that the next generation of teachers can do.

This portrayal of the good teacher draws on three sources: 1) 60 years of empirical research on teaching, 2) the voices of teachers themselves, and 3) what children have to say about good teaching. I hope that this analysis will create a composite picture of the good teacher that will inspire but that may not be reproduced exactly—a heroic form on which we can project our own best qualities and aspirations, through which we will come to a deeper appreciation of our own best moments as educators.

Knowing something of the good teacher will not, by itself, solve the many problems of teacher education, certification, professional development, and life-long learning that we are all concerned about. But coming to a better vision of good teaching may serve to encourage each of us as we address specific local and national problems in our own creative and context-sensitive ways.

In the end, good teachers equip their students for confident, independent thought and action in an uncertain world. Good teachers prepare us for a world of difference. Good teachers know when to let us go. And this is almost always before we feel ready to be on our own.

The question “What makes a good teacher?” is fundamental in research on education. This is particularly true for three approaches to research on teaching conceived and led by educational psychologists. The three approaches are: The Process-Product approach, The Teacher Thinking approach, and The Teacher Knowledge approach.

The Process-Product approach to research on teaching began in the early 1950s. The young educational researchers of that time were fresh from designing emergency training programs for soldiers, sailors and airmen in World War II. Naturally, they drew on their experiences with task analysis, behavior reinforcement, and testing and measurement when they turned their attention to teachers and schooling. Their goals were to discover the most effective teachers’ secrets of success and then to create teacher training programs that would transform *all* teachers into very effective teachers.

The reason this approach is called the Process-Product approach is that the researchers concerned themselves with two classes of variables. “Process” refers to the visible and audible behavior of teachers during classroom teaching. “Product” refers to the objectively measurable results of teaching, usually expressed as pupil achievement test scores.

In this framework, the good teacher is one whose students, after receiving instruction, achieve the highest scores on tests of knowledge and skill. The research program is dedicated to describing the teaching skills and behaviors that reliably distinguish between the most effective teachers and less effective ones.

During sixty years of Process-Product research, many developments have taken place in the tools and technologies used to study teaching. Observation systems for describing teacher behavior and classroom interaction have become more sophisticated and complex. Most importantly, thousands of researchers have spent tens of thousands of hours in school classrooms, carefully attending to teachers and teaching, students and learning. A scholarly community of research on teaching has developed internationally—a community of dedicated and intelligent professionals that has come to consensus about what makes a good teacher.

**What Good Teachers Do**

What do these Process-Product researchers say to us today about the good teacher? According to Brophy and Good (1986), the most reliable findings about effective teaching depict a classroom teacher who is well organized, efficient, task oriented, and businesslike. They describe this form of active, direct instruction as follows:

*“Students achieve more in classes where they spend most of their time being taught or supervised by their teachers rather than working on their own (or not working at all). These classes include frequent lessons…in which the teacher presents information and develops concepts through lecture and demonstration, elaborates this information in the feedback given following responses to recitation or discussion questions, prepares the students for follow-up seatwork activities by giving instructions and going through practice examples, monitors progress on assignments after releasing the students to work independently, and follows up with appropriate feedback and re-teaching when necessary.”*

So, the image of the good teacher offered by Process-Product research is of a teacher who is an efficient director and manager of a three-part instructional process that involves lecture and demonstration, recitation with feedback, and supervised practice. This body of research also offers more detailed guidance about which behaviors constitute most effective recitation or feedback, or appropriate seatwork[[1]](#footnote-1).

The global image of the good teacher supported by this research is of a businesslike person who is clearly in control of the flow of academic work in an orderly, efficient classroom. Such a person is clear, well organized, enthusiastic and direct. The culture of control, efficiency and convergence of learning outcomes defines the world of the Process-Product teacher.

**Teacher Thinking**

Partly as a reaction to the behavioral and managerial focus of Process-Product research on teaching, a second approach to the question “What makes a good teacher?” began in 1974. This approach has come to be called research on teacher thinking, and researchers in this field concern themselves with the mental lives of teachers—the planning, decision-making, beliefs and theories that invisibly guide and influence teacher action.

This field of research began with the image of a good teacher as a diagnostician who is responsible for observing, categorizing, and acting in response to a complex array of cues and situations that describe self, students and the learning environment. The metaphor of the teacher as decision-maker is central to this work, along with the assumption that teachers behave rationally almost all the time. The challenge to the researchers was to describe and underlying the rationality of good teaching.

With my colleague Penelope Peterson, I published a review summarizing 40 studies of teacher thinking. Our review concludes with this portrait of the good teacher:

*“The maturing professional teacher is one who has taken some steps toward making explicit his theories and beliefs about learners, curriculum, subject matter, and the teacher’s role. This teacher has developed a style of planning for instruction that includes interrelated types of planning and that has become more streamlined and automatic with experience.*

*“Much of this teacher’s interactive teaching consists of routines familiar to the students, thus decreasing the collective information-processing load. During teaching, the teacher attends to and intently processes academic and non-academic…events and cues.*

*“These experienced teachers have developed the confidence to depart from a planned course of action when they judge that to be appropriate. They reflect on and analyze the apparent effects of their own teaching and apply the results of their reflections to their future plans and actions. In short, they have become researchers on their own teaching effectiveness.”*

We leave research on teacher thinking with the impression that the good teacher’s effective action depends as much on his or her thoughts, plans and decisions as on efficient behavior and management ability. The mental lives of teachers are at least as important to understanding and supporting good teaching as are their visible behaviors.

**Teacher Knowledge**

Let’s now consider a third approach to research or teaching, research on teacher knowledge. This approach takes the position that what is most important and most neglected in teaching is the teacher’s knowledge of the subject matter.

Logic and common sense suggest that one cannot teach what one does not know or understand. But how many of us have had the experience of being taught by a teacher or professor who is clearly the master of a discipline, yet is unable to communicate that knowledge to struggling students?

This paradox has led Lee Shulman and his colleagues to do a series of case studies of the knowledge held by high school teachers, and, most importantly, of the ways in which these teachers transform that knowledge for their students. What these detailed case studies depict, in the teaching of history, literature and mathematics is what anthropologists call “a conversation with the situation.” This conversation takes place in the mind of the teacher as he or she reorganizes academic knowledge about Hamlet or photosynthesis to accommodate to local knowledge about the lives and minds of the students to be taught.

A delicate balance must be struck each day between appropriate transformation of academic knowledge and the danger of distorting what will be taught. In this framework, the teacher is both an expert representative of an academic discipline and also a translator who can faithfully express the big ideas of history or biology in the language of 16-year-olds.

This would be difficult enough if all 16-year-olds spoke the same language. But according to these researchers, the teacher is faced with many dialects and variations in students’ ways of understanding.

One of the best-known reports of this research effort is entitled “150 Different Ways of Knowing” (Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987). This title is intended to emphasize the claim that a high school teacher who teaches 150 students each day ought to aspire to a repertoire of 150 variations in ways to represent academic content.

In an article that describes the philosophy and assumptions of research on teacher knowledge, Shulman (1987) lists seven constituents of the knowledge that good teachers have. These are:

* Content knowledge
* General pedagogical knowledge
* Curriculum knowledge
* Pedagogical content knowledge
* Knowledge of learners and their characteristics
* Knowledge of educational contexts
* Knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values.

In my view, the central contributions of the teacher knowledge approach to research on teaching are the coining of the concept of pedagogical content knowledge and the descriptions of particular cases of teachers acting on what Shulman calls the “special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is the unique province of teachers.”

The good teacher, then, must know how to manage, give feedback, make practical plans and wise decisions. She must be more than a performer, more than a thinker. The good teacher must also be a practical scholar, a student of the academic disciplines, and a fluent translator. The good teacher becomes a life-long learner. The journey toward becoming a good teacher has barely begun on graduation day.

**What do Teachers Say?**

So now we have a picture of the good teacher from the points of view of the educational research community. You probably know teachers who fit these descriptions. You and your children may have been taught by teachers who express these qualities. You may know yourself to be a good teacher in these ways.

But is it *good enough* to demonstrate comprehensive mastery of subject matter, exhibit skills in managing a classroom and explaining its complexities, and to be an effective planner and decision maker? Is it *good enough* to score high on teacher evaluation checklists developed from research on teaching?

For some answers, let’s turn to what teachers have said about what it takes to be a good teacher, to what good teachers have said about themselves, and to what ordinary teachers have said about times when their teaching was exceptionally good.

To teachers, the heart of good teaching is not in management or decision-making or even pedagogical content knowledge. No, the essence of good teaching, for teachers, is in the arena of human relationships. Teaching is good when a class becomes a community of honest, nurturing and mutually respectful people. Experienced teachers treasure the moments and memories of times when laughter, compassion and surprise describe their day or year.

Cultivation of the self-esteem of young people is very high on the list of goals of the good teacher. “Better to leave my class having learned a little mathematics and loving it than knowing a lot of math and hating it.” Good humor was mentioned again and again as a quality in the best teachers.

Enthusiasm for teaching, fascination with content and openness to admitting mistakes are important in good teachers. The good teacher is capable of expressing love, care and respect in 150 different ways. The good teacher is an adult who takes children seriously. The good teacher, they say, “is the colleague who supports me and is open to my support.”

When experienced educators speak of the good teacher, the word “good” takes on a richer meaning. The good teacher is one who finds the good in students, individually and collectively. The pedagogical challenge becomes celebrating and elaborating the noblest human qualities in the context of a school, for teaching is a social and a moral enterprise.

Teaching is more than the transmission of information. Intentionally or not, teachers shape the character of their students and influence the character of society for years after they retire. The good teacher attends to this human, social, moral dimension of life in schools as much as to the technical and academic. Good teaching is a vocation, a calling, as much as it is a profession.

**What Do Children Say?**

The final voice to speak about the good teacher is, perhaps, the most important: the child’s voice. What do the children say? I have listened to little children, to adolescents and to adult students. I urge you to listen for the voice of your own children, to imagine or to remember what they know to be true of their experiences of good teaching.

Almost invariably, their thoughts and stories about good teachers have to do with four fundamental human needs: to be known, to be encouraged, to be respected and to be led. [These four human needs are the positive side of the four primal fears that children and adults labor against throughout life: fear of abandonment, despair, ridicule and fear of being lost.]

In the words of children, good teachers nurture students by treating them as intelligent people who can become even more intelligent, by taking the time to learn who they are and what they love, by treating them fairly by treating them differently. The good teacher explains why he teaches and acts as he does, tells stories of his own life outside school and listens to his students’ stories, and lets his students have a bad day when they can’t help it.

The good teacher is both funny and serious. Students say “We can laugh together, and this makes us feel happy and close.” “She surprises us in ways that we will never forget.” “He draws pictures that show how ideas are connected.” “We don’t feel lost or afraid that we will be sent away or humiliated.” “She loves what she’s teaching but doesn’t show off or put distance between us.”

The good teacher sets things up so that children can learn how to learn from one another. The good teacher knows how to be a friend while still being a responsible adult. Very often, the good teacher does not know of the good he has done at the time. A letter from a gifted, high achieving student written five years after college graduation closes with these words:

“*You were a good friend when I needed one. You listened to me ramble on. You said encouraging things at the right times. When I was a confused student, you made time for me. There were times when I was ready to burst that I came and took comfort from your confidence and your soothing voice.”*

The good teacher puts people first, say the children. The good teacher acts from love and caring and is loved and cared for in return.

**Putting the Picture Together**

Now we have heard from researchers, from teachers and from children about the good teacher. The composite picture may seem overwhelming—too much for any human being to become, too much for any teacher preparation program or national plan to guarantee. Yet I am optimistic. For these voices that speak of the good teacher describe real people, actual classrooms, true stories, powerful experiences. This is not wishful thinking, fantasy, or groundless idealization. These are the voices of inspiration and encouragement. One high school student whom I talked with estimated that 10 of the 30 teachers she had were good teachers in these ways.

Perhaps now it is time to change the question. Let’s turn away from asking “What makes a good teacher?” Instead, let’s ask “When is teaching good?” How can we each do a better job of acknowledging the good teaching that is already happening every day in our schools? How can we improve policy, conditions and support systems so that ordinary teachers can have good moments and good days more often?

We should begin to build an ethos of good teaching by learning to tell stories, even sagas, of heroic but invisible good teaching. We need help from minstrels, poets, biographers, historians and YouTube producers to create a vivid literature of good teaching. We also need help from clinical psychologists and from one another to heal our childhood wounds and to prevent us from unthinkingly passing on our pain to the next generation. We, as teachers, need to learn to respect the children by learning to respect and love the wounded child within each of us. We must begin with ourselves.

Good teaching will never be easy. Nor will it ever be easy to be a good parent, a good nurse, a good scientist or a good school principal. The essence of these callings is a courageous willingness to form moral relationships, to embrace uncertainty, to do what seems right at the time, to lead but not control. In these ways, good teaching happens every day in our schools and in our homes, in our workplaces and communities. We cannot change the past, but we can celebrate contemporary goodness in teaching, in large ways and small, every day.

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1. A recently published book by John Hattie (2008), *Visible Learning,* synthesizes the results of more than 800 meta-analyses of the effects of teacher behavior on student. Go to these two YouTube links to view a comprehensive presentation by Hattie: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sng4p3Vsu7Y&feature=youtube\_gdata\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sng4p3Vsu7Y&feature=youtube_gdata_player" \t "_blank) and   
   [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pD1DFTNQf4&feature=youtube\_gdata\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pD1DFTNQf4&feature=youtube_gdata_player" \t "_blank) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)