

Excellent teachers in Texas: the 3Rs and 3Cs

Georgia Pashiardis

Cyprus

Abstract

This study among teachers as leaders, in Texas, aims to examine teachers' biographies through their practices and philosophies in three aspects of teacher leadership: first, through an historical account of people and events that persuaded and influenced their decision to become teachers; second, by engaging the teachers in the process of reflection so that they could identify the most important traits that teachers as leaders should possess; and third, by identifying means of professional development through which the teaching profession could be improved. The main finding in this study concerning the first aspect reveals the different factors led the participants to the teaching profession. Second, teachers identified that the three R's and three C's as the most important traits teachers should cultivate in order to help their students to reach and unveil their potential. Finally, the teaching profession, as a profession of leaders, can be strengthened significantly when teachers seek more professional development in the areas related to technology, teaching practices and mentoring.

Introduction

A century ago effective teachers were judged primarily on their kindness as persons and secondarily on their behavior in the classroom. This approach did not focus on objective standards and thus gave way to another approach which identifies specific psychological characteristics such as attitude, personality and experience that are related to teachers' effectiveness in class (Borich, 1999). Even though the psychological characteristics are important factors in determining a teacher's behavior in class, they are not related to teacher-student interaction during the learning process. Therefore, in the last two decades, the emphasis was placed on this interaction which is influenced by teachers' philosophies and practices about teaching and the teaching profession (Good & Brophy, 1997).

Teaching is a way of life and a lifetime commitment. Persons in this profession believe that all students are learners who deserve a high quality education, and therefore the teacher's role is to help each one of them discover their greatest potential and be prepared for the twenty-first century (Lezotte, 1997). In order to help students reach and unveil this potential, teachers should cultivate and model necessary traits in their classroom and become the role models for their students.

At the same time, teaching is a demanding, time-consuming profession that requires patience, commitment and continuous growth in order to face the challenges of the present century. Teachers and administrators must take the initiative to strengthen and improve the teaching profession on a daily basis and support the high standards of the profession. In-service seminars and courses about the latest best practices and strategies, peer mentoring, collaboration between new and future teachers and a number of other avenues will allow teachers to keep current on educational issues so that they can become the best teachers possible.

The teaching profession and teachers' philosophy about teaching became the key ideas in this study that took place in the state of Texas during the first months of 1999. The participants in this study were teachers who were voted as Teachers of the Year for Texas through a rigorous process. They were asked to present their own practices and philosophies, which are representative of them, as well as their ideas about improving the teaching profession. More specifically, the primary purpose of this study was to gather information from excellent teachers' profiles on issues that are related to their professional biography, their philosophy of teaching, and their views about the teaching profession. An attempt was made to:

- give an historical account of people and events that persuaded the participants in the study to become teachers,
- specify the most important personal traits a teacher should cultivate as well as the key teachers' qualities in the classroom,
- identify significant ways in which the teaching profession can be strengthened and improved.

Methodology/Sample

For the purpose of this study, an interview questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first part, teachers were asked to provide some personal information (e.g., name, address, school name, major subject, etc.). In the second part, there were three open-ended questions. The first question made reference to the professional biography of teachers (people and events that persuaded them to become teachers). The second asked respondents to identify their teaching philosophy as well as the most important traits a teacher should cultivate. Finally, the third question dealt with the topic of how the teaching profession can be further improved.

The questionnaire was sent out to forty teachers (twenty in elementary schools and twenty in secondary schools) who were teaching in public schools in Texas during the 1998–99 school year and had been nominated by their colleagues as excellent teachers. Specifically, the elementary school teachers taught all elementary school subjects, whereas the high school teachers had subject specializations such as mathematics, English, art and music.

These teachers had been employed in the public schools for several years. The vast majority of them had been teaching for over ten years. One third had between ten and fifteen years of teaching experience. About one third had between sixteen and twenty years of teaching

experience. Finally, six of the forty teachers had more than twenty-six years of teaching experience.

Their educational level varied. Most had attended a master's program and had earned a graduate degree in school administration, English, math/science or literature.

Presentation of Results

Teachers' biographies/Influences to become teachers

As previously mentioned, the participants were asked to answer three open-ended questions. The first question investigated the participants' professional biographies, and teachers identified various factors, people and events that persuaded them to become teachers. Several of the current excellent teachers had parents who had themselves been teachers. Therefore, their parents' professional lives played an important role in influencing their decision. Ms. Thompson¹ remembered:

Both of my parents were public school teachers. They had the gift of teaching and imparted that gift to their three daughters. My entire upbringing contained the message "teaching is a calling from God to make individual children, families and America better."

Some other teachers mentioned that they grew up in families where their parents instilled in them the importance of education. Their families were involved in different educational activities that took place in their communities. Here is the account by Ms. Brown:

Education was an integral part of living in our household. Mother made sure we were signed up for the summer reading program at the city's library. My father educated us through his appreciation of wildlife and nature. We spent much time outdoors learning about birds, pine trees, reptiles.

Another group of excellent teachers recalled that their teachers in junior and high schools were very influential in their decision. Those teachers inspired their students (and future excellent educators) with their teaching and their personal example and made them realize that teaching provides people with the opportunity to have a challenging and fruitful career. Ms. Jefferson mentioned:

As I attended high school, I fell in love with the sensation of learning and the feelings of success. It was here, while in high school, that I met the most inspiring teachers of all life. My teachers in junior and high school in Towncity, Colorado, encouraged me to be a teacher and they modeled good teaching.

While in their teenage years, most teachers in the study had gained early experience teaching younger children. Many had played an active role in their communities and had a long history of volunteer work including activities in church, school and other community organizations. As one teacher stated:

Every summer I was a teacher in Vacation Bible School not only in my church, but also in remote areas in Mexico where my church fellowship had built missions. I also taught Bible School to children in the impoverished areas surrounding my small towns. These rewarding and gratifying experiences honed my desire to become a professional educator.

Subsequently, their community involvement increased their understanding of the social issues that are present as well as their desire to teach. In fact, one teacher, Ms. Scott, mentioned that her

desire to teach children, to learn with them and to enjoy learning was another influential factor in her becoming a teacher. Very vividly, she remembered:

The desire to enhance a thought, to mold an attitude, to nurture a dream led me to enter the much-maligned profession of teaching. I have always loved the story of the boy and the starfish. The boy is methodically throwing marooned starfish back into the ocean from the vast shore one at a time. A stranger asks the boy why he bothers to throw the uncertain starfish into the sea. There are so many starfish. It is inconceivable that the boy could save them all. So, what does it matter. The boy serenely answers. "It matters to this starfish."

Having presented the various factors that have influenced these excellent teachers' decision to become teachers, it is time to identify the most important traits teachers cultivate in their classrooms that are representative of their individual personality.

Teachers' philosophy/Teachers' traits

The second question in the questionnaire focused on teachers' philosophy of teaching. In order to respond to this question, the participants engaged in a process of reflection to identify the most important traits that teachers possess. From their responses, it was evident that teachers considered teaching to be an honorable profession – one that sustains, perpetuates, revitalizes, develops and impacts young lives. Also, their teaching is based on the sincere belief that all children are born with gifts, talents, capacities, abilities and a desire to learn, even if it is not clearly visible. Thus, the teachers' role is to lead children to discover their talents and gifts and to impart knowledge, but most importantly, to produce lifelong learners who know how to learn. The following comment by Ms. Nance can be regarded as representative of other comments:

Teachers must be steadfast, patient, and resolute in faith that all students have the capacity, ability and the desire to learn. Learning is the right of all children who need willing teachers to be there to teach and nurture them every day and to make a difference in a child's life. A sincere belief that all children can learn is crucial because teachers not only impart knowledge but more importantly they must produce lifelong learners who know how to learn.

In order to fulfill this commitment successfully and lead students to discover their abilities, all the teachers in this study explained that they cultivate certain important traits within themselves and in their students that are necessary in a productive classroom. These important traits are those of love, trust, patience and, most importantly of all, respect and acceptance. For Ms. Anderson:

The ability to inspire love for students and teaching and to model respect and subsequently to earn respect from the students are crucial in teacher-student interaction in the classroom. Love as shown by a teacher means truly caring about all aspects of a child's life. Love is an obligation to see that all academic as well as social needs be taught and mastered to the best of each student's ability.

Another teacher explained the importance of patience that a teacher and the students need to foster in classrooms. During their instructional performance, teachers incorporate patience and tolerance in order to develop a supportive relationship with their students and be able to reach all students regardless of learning styles and social or other differences. Here is Ms. Scott's account: Patience is more than a mere virtue for an effective teacher. Patience is one of the more difficult traits to master because not all students learn at the same rate. Some students pick up material quickly and patient teachers must provide them with enrichment. Other students take more time

to learn, again requiring patient teachers who can walk these students through a challenging curriculum.

Moreover, as Ms. McDonald commented, teachers treat each one of their students with respect and teach their students that everyone is unique in their own special way. This trait is cultivated in the classroom by excellent teachers who try to establish a positive communication network between their students and themselves as they try to become aware of their students' needs. Here is her description:

Acceptance is the trait most needed by everyone in today's world. By knowing and accepting each student's strengths and weaknesses and by believing in the potential of each one, we are helping their self-imposed limits and capabilities.

However, the above traits of successful teachers are futile without nurturing their students by being fair and kind and having respect for them. By showing them kindness, by being fair with discipline and by having respect for their feelings and needs, teachers create a more positive learning environment and an atmosphere of stability that provides a feeling of safety and security and encourages student participation in whatever takes place in class and in school. When both the teacher and the student are enjoying themselves, learning becomes fun and more exciting.

Furthermore, the learning process can be more enjoyable if teachers motivate and challenge their students. Motivation and challenge are considered two very important traits by the participants, and certainly teachers try to cultivate them in their classrooms. Specifically, a group of teachers recalled that they incorporated several effective and creative teaching techniques in their classroom that add excitement and motivate students according to their individual abilities. In the following description by Ms. Hall, which can be taken as representative of other teachers in this study, she explained what she does in her class in order to keep her students highly engaged in the learning process, to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge, and consequently to achieve their goals:

The student becomes the thinker, inventor, questioner, collaborator. This requires an adjustment in the decorum of the classroom as the teacher relinquishes the role of "giver of knowledge," and adopts the visage of guide. We pose questions and then wait patiently for students' elaboration, questions and peer assessment. Important listening takes place during group conversations if the teacher creates open-ended questions and cultivates concepts. Students are encouraged to broaden their understanding of why math works, and to travel an often-erratic path to connect number concepts to the world around them. Students are required to assume authority over their explanations – or in other words: does your answer make sense? They are encouraged to unearth alternate routes, to solve problems, and to discuss possible solutions, often taking the risk for unique ideas. In our math class, we madly arrange blocks, tiles, cubes, and all of the various measurement tools to prove our points. We make noise, turn the room askew, discuss, disagree, arrive brilliantly at several answers not necessarily on cue, and all on a good day. I would not teach any other way. The students dare me to take risks I would never seize, to explore, to sacrifice to collapse and return the next day beguiled by their whimsy and endless question.

Moreover, the accomplishment of this goal, as the participants in this study argued, requires teamwork among administrators, teachers and parents and shared responsibility. Based on their responses, one can conclude that successful teachers work cooperatively with colleagues in order to be well prepared and attain the school's goals. Most certainly, teachers need to share their ideas, teaching styles and successes and failures in order to precipitate more rapid improvements

in education. A broad base of teacher training, strong communication skills and a practical maturity are considered vital in the art of teaching.

At the same time, teachers model an air of professionalism. Experts in all fields must stay current with innovative trends and practices. Teachers must continuously seek knowledge to impart to their students so they will become better equipped to function. As Ms. Anderson noted:

Teaching is human, capricious, impromptu, enigmatic and never quite the same twice. To do it well requires intense planning and commitment as well as multiple opportunities for students to succeed.

Strengthening the teaching profession/Teachers' perceptions

In the third question, teachers were asked to identify ways that the teaching profession could be improved. In their responses, the participants stated clearly that teachers today are vital role models and counselors dispensing hope, warmth, acceptance and stability. Therefore, they must stay current and successful in the classroom. To do that well, excellent teachers believe that the power and importance of the individual educator in each and every classroom should be acknowledged and legislators, administrators and teachers should work together. Teachers who participated in the study had numerous ideas and suggestions relating to technology, teaching practices, mentoring, curricula and professional development that can improve the teaching profession.

One way that the teaching profession can be strengthened is related to training (e.g., in-service). Training keeps teachers abreast of educational and global trends of the twenty-first century and helps them to acquire knowledge and skills. Ms. Jefferson, again, stated the importance of training for developing excellent teachers:

Continuing education plays an important role for developing good teachers. Teachers should take advantage of opportunities to continue to learn and master not only the content knowledge but also the skills to deliver information in a variety of ways based on students' individual learning styles.

Participating teachers believe that technology is one area of professional development that needs to be strengthened. Integration of technology in the public classrooms, learning about computers the Internet and multi-media software in workshops and seminars is necessary for improving teachers' skills. Again, Ms. Brown, explained:

Teachers should have the opportunity to become familiar with the full array of technology. Teachers need to know about the computer software that is available in their content area, the uses of the Internet, distance learning, and laser discs. Moreover, the teachers should be actively involved in the planning and selection process of hardware and software systems helping students to remain technologically current.

Also, faculty members could be given time to share their skills and knowledge with each other. Sharing knowledge and expertise about instructional and classroom management strategies and methods is a significant influence on teachers', and consequently students', learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Teachers learn tremendously from each other, and the school is probably the

most effective place for teachers to acquire new methods, knowledge and skills. Shared burdens and problems reduce stress and increase achievement. As Ms. Harris put it:

It is incumbent on teachers to share their methods, various projects and new ideas with their colleagues and to continue their professional development. This fosters good will and stimulates educational environment. It is extremely vital that experienced teachers share with new teachers. All teachers are continually learning and should never turn down the opportunity to share with their colleagues.

Another group of participants suggested that mentoring is more likely to improve the teaching profession. Mentoring is quite rewarding for new teachers as well as for experienced teachers who can bring prior knowledge and experience to all new learning situations (Cochran-Smith, 2001). Also, it is a vital aspect of promoting cohesion and collegiality in schools because all teachers are continually learning, exchanging ideas and linking previous knowledge with new understandings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Experienced teachers should be the mentors of new educators in all areas such as instructional strategies, learning styles, new creative techniques and skills and relating to students, colleagues and parents. Ms. Brown noted that a new teacher needs to feel surrounded by fellow teachers who often eagerly assist and guide them in order to succeed. Here is her account:

All beginning teachers need to be given the encouragement so that they will want to continue the journey. The achievements of beginning teachers need to be recognized and applauded, and all beginning teachers should have mentors – experienced teachers. The best teaching occurs because of some consistent sharing of ideas and strategies between fellow professionals.

Another facet of improving the teaching profession is to provide skills to teachers working with diverse populations. American classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and global, and they are composed of students with different learning styles. Therefore teachers should be able to vary their teaching so that it supports various learning styles. As one teacher stated:

Teachers are expected to educate children from many diverse cultures and economic backgrounds. Therefore, they must be familiar with those backgrounds so that they are sensitive, understanding to the many different kinds of students and their various needs. Most certainly, today's teachers should receive preparation in the areas of cultural arts, diversity, and community in order to obtain effective communication skills because training in these areas would give teachers appropriate methods and techniques to teach successfully.

Finally, excellent teachers believe that the teaching profession has many talented enthusiastic educators who could literally change the world if they worked together, shared ideas and found successful strategies to teach children. Professional development should allow teachers time to talk about the methods that work in their classrooms. Teachers who are successful in teaching particular concepts should be invited into other classrooms to assist. A school should not be many individual classrooms, but rather a community where all students, teachers, administrators and families are learning.

Discussion

Having examined these excellent teachers' biographies through their practices and philosophies and having presented their ideas about strengthening the teaching profession, it is time to summarize some of the main points that came out of these interviews. Quite simply, I would

argue that excellent teachers in Texas entail the three R's: respect, responsibility, and relationship, as well as the three C's: cognition, concern and cooperation.

In their classrooms, these excellent teachers model and cultivate respect and help their students to view themselves as persons of worth with significant contributions to make to the class, the school, the community and the world. By appreciating the uniqueness of each student, the teacher kindles the student's self-respect. The confidence that this secure self-image generates frees the student from the fear of those who are different. They can then celebrate the richness of diversity. Only if people respect themselves can they offer this respect to others. With this basic respect for each other, our humanity is nurtured.

At the same time, teachers cultivate and model responsibility for passing wisdom as well as knowledge to their students. Responsibility involves teaching students all their options so that they can make responsible choices in their lives, giving them the most satisfactory and productive results. Students of the twenty-first century must be thoughtful and rational in making decisions and accept full responsibility for their actions, behavior and the consequences. Therefore, teaching students to accept responsibility for their learning at an early stage and to be accountable has a great impact on their entire school career.

The final R is relationship. Excellent teachers in this study model responsible behavior in their classroom and cultivate respect. At the same time, they empower their students with communication skills so that they can understand each other and be ready to build meaningful relationships. While academic skills are vital because students should be equipped to execute tasks successfully, relationships allow them to speak and listen skillfully, empathetically, and with an open and accepting heart and mind. Therefore, teachers should empower students with respect, responsibility and relationship skills so that they can reclaim the compassion and humanity to which people aspire.

The first trait that excellent teachers entail begins with the letter "C": cognition. In this study, it is evident that teaching requires one of the highest levels of cognitive ability of any profession. Not only must effective educators be knowledgeable in their subject area and stay abreast of current educational theories and practices; they must also understand the character and ways of learning of the students they teach (Pashiardis and Pashiardi, 2000). The process of becoming better acquainted with each student's learning needs and style is never-ending. Thus, excellent teachers devote time to become aware and acquainted with their students' learning needs, to comprehend the complexities of their students and to continuously redesign their instruction in order to reach them.

The next important trait that excellent teachers should cultivate is concern and love for the students. Excellent teachers model genuine concern, care and love about all aspects of a child's life. The love and concern a teacher must have for his/her students should be discernible in the way each student performs in the classroom. The classroom must be a safe, friendly and effective learning environment into which the student never hesitates to enter. Love is an obligation and students who recognize the genuine concern of their teachers increase their learning and their feelings of accomplishment.

The third “C” is cooperation. Cooperation is an important aspect of the teaching profession. Excellent teachers share their ideas on instructional and management strategies and methods as well as on teaching materials because they believe that sharing increases achievement and collegiality and enhances the learning environment. Administrators, teachers and students work together toward the same goal because, in order to get the greatest productivity out of people, everyone needs to feel that he/she is part of it. At every school and in every classroom, cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1989) can be used as a tool to improve teachers’ professional development and to increase students’ desire to learn.

Finally, teachers who strive for excellence make education a number one priority – a lifelong journey that they will continue with enthusiasm and encouragement. Even though the challenges are overwhelming for teachers and the rewards (tangible and otherwise) seem to pale by comparison, teachers have committed themselves to instill in their students the love of learning and the awareness of the necessity of constantly upgrading their knowledge and skills. At the same time, teachers feel that they need to intensify their efforts and become ambassadors on what characteristics and structures the teaching profession should exhibit in order to achieve its stated purposes. As has been presented above, excellent teachers’ messages to everybody involved in the education of children are as follows:

- Treat children with dignity, respect, compassion and empathy, helping them to learn to value the unique and precious place that they and others have in the world.
- Motivate, guide and encourage children as they try to explore the rainbows of knowledge.
- Practice the techniques of teamwork and problem-solving.
- Intensify efforts in educating children in the area of technology by giving them the technological resources and skills needed.
- Expect only the best from yourself and from the class. Prepare your lessons well, be professional and organized, and be rigorous in your material.
- Support the profession and keep quality individuals as teachers.

Concluding Remarks

The present analysis of teacher profiles gives a significant amount of information that can be useful to the profession. The 3Rs and the 3Cs that excellent teachers entail can be considered the foundation of a teacher’s excellence. Excellent teachers accept responsibility to shape, mold and guide young minds, promote an atmosphere of respect – which is considered an essential element of effective teacher-student interaction – and develop a supportive relationship with their students. At the same time, they cultivate concern and love for their students, they encourage cooperation, and they exhibit high levels of cognition on educational and psychological issues in order to become the best teachers possible.

Note

The names used are all fictional in order to ensure the anonymity of the research participants.

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Author Notes

Georgia Pashiardis is a teacher in the public elementary schools of Cyprus and visiting research scientist in the College of Education, Texas A & M University. Her research interests are school climate and culture, classroom organization and management, school and teachers' effectiveness as well as recruitment of special education teachers in Texas.

Correspondence to Georgia Pashiardis should be directed to edpetros@ucy.ac.cy

Appendix

Georgia Pashiardis, Excellent Teachers Study/Survey/Profile

Part I: Demographic information:

Please complete:

Gender: ____

Major Subject Area (if any): _____

Total Years of Teaching Experience: ____

Educational History, Professional Development
(list college, universities and postgraduate) _____

Part II: Professional biography:

Please elaborate on a separate sheet and as thoroughly as you can on the following question:
What are the background people and events that persuaded you to become a teacher?

Part III: Philosophy of teaching:

Please elaborate on a separate sheet and as thoroughly as you can on the following question:
What are the most important traits a teacher should cultivate? How do you feel that your teaching reflects these traits?

Part IV: The teaching profession:

Please elaborate on a separate sheet and as thoroughly as you can on the following question:
In your opinion how can the teaching profession be strengthened and improved? What are the most significant ways?

Thank you for your cooperation