

EFFECTIVE TEACHER STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to quantify student evaluated teacher effectiveness in order to ascertain the grade level, subject, and characteristics of exceptionally effective teachers as reported by 361 Le Moyne College students. In this study the students were provide with the following definition of *exceptionally effective*: showing the ability to go beyond the ordinary in producing desired results. The students were instructed that they could select one of their teachers from any grade level or subject.

The distribution of selected teachers is as follows: 315 secondary teachers, 34 primary teachers, 11 college professors, and 1 parish priest. Subject areas of frequently selected secondary teachers are: social studies (89), English (89), mathematics (55), foreign language (33), and science (27).

Personality characteristics most often cited by the students were: challenging/had reasonably high expectations (82), sense of humor (59), enthusiastic (56), creative (39), caring (39), explains complicated material well (39), and flexible instructional style (33).

Who are exceptionally effective teachers and what are their characteristics? This is a study conducted at Le Moyne College from 1998-2004.

I. Introduction

A. Statement of the Research Question

The purpose of this study is to quantify student evaluated teacher effectiveness in order to ascertain the grade level, subject, and characteristics of exceptionally effective teachers as reported by 361 Le Moyne College students. In this study the students were provided with the following definition of *exceptionally effective*: showing the ability to go beyond the ordinary in producing desired results.

Teacher preparation programs, as part of their accreditation process, are increasingly attentive to any information to assist in making adjustments and modifications to improve the outcome. Formal evaluations of graduates and students are useful. I have attempted to

undertake a continual form of information gathering from classes I teach that ultimately may be useful for this purpose.

B. Rationale for the Research

The value of this study is that the accomplishment of the research question would make a contribution to the Le Moyne College teacher education program. “The goal of this department is to prepare effective teachers for tomorrow’s schools” (Le Moyne College Catalog 2004-2005, p.91). The result of having identified the grade levels, subjects, and common characteristics of over 350 teachers assessed by their students as *exceptionally effective* serves to better inform the Education Department faculty of the qualities that make teachers memorable as instructors who are effective in their work. Therefore the department members will be better equipped to evaluate their own program in the light of this information.

II. Methodology

A. EDU 215 Writing Assignment

EDU 215: *Learning in a Sociocultural Context* is a required course for Le Moyne College education majors who are preparing to teach at the secondary level (grades 7-12). “It involves students in examining, analyzing, and developing theories of how students learn within a social, cultural, and political context ...” (Le Moyne College Catalog 2004-2005, p.97).

One requirement of the EDU 215 classes I teach is a reflective paper. I encourage the students not to begin this writing assignment early in the course. I explain that they would find the paper easier to write if they first experience at least half of the fifteen weeks of the material. The learning outcome associated with this assignment is for students to organize and articulate their thoughts and experiences concerning the characteristics and behaviors of *exceptionally effective teachers*. The students are required to select one of their own teachers from any grade or subject who could be described as an *exceptionally effective teacher*. An in-class presentation to the students elucidates an *exceptionally effective teacher* as one who demonstrates extraordinary ability in the following areas of teaching:

1. Communication of material
2. Motivation of students
3. Provision of an environment conducive to learning
4. Maintenance of student interest
5. Classroom management (discipline)
6. Appropriate relationships with students

The following is the assignment’s specifications as they appeared in the EDU 215 syllabus.

An Exceptionally Effective Teacher

The instructions provided to the students is fairly standard, with the paper no less than four and no more than six pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and compositionally flawless. It must include all of the following:

1. The teacher’s name and subject/grade level
2. A synecdoche
3. His/her methodologies (repertoire of instructional strategies)
4. His/her means of testing and evaluation

5. His/her teaching environment (physical and psychological-emotional)
6. His/her administration of discipline
7. His/her personality (including a sense-of-humor)
8. Scholarship (i.e. evaluate the selected teacher as a scholar)
9. His/her use of relevancy in instruction
10. His/her preparedness for class (i.e. organization)
11. His/her ability to motivate students
12. An interview with this teacher or someone who is familiar with this teacher (optional)

I explain to the students that a synecdoche (specification number 2) is a figure of speech in which a part is used for a whole. The example I use is the phrase *to break bread* in which bread is used but an entire meal is understood. In the context of this assignment, the students are required to describe one incident featuring the selected teacher that would communicate a substantial understanding of the teacher's style and philosophy of teaching. A colloquial way of expressing the rationale for the synecdoche is: *it is one story that communicates what this teacher is all about.*

B. Description of the Sample

The number of the students in the sample is 361 ($n = 361$). Since the sample consists of students from classes taught by me this is a *convenience sample*. Specifically, the students are from sixteen EDU 215 sections ranging from the fall semester of 1998 to the spring semester of 2004. As previously stated, EDU 215 students are preparing for careers in secondary teaching. With few exceptions, the students are sophomores. Also, as previously stated, the writing assignment is a course requirement. Consequently, all students who complete EDU 215 for credit accomplish the assigned paper. In the sample, all of the students addressed the assignment's specifications sufficiently to have earned a grade of *C* or better.

C. Procedure for Analysis of Archival Data

From the fall semester of 1998 to the spring semester of 2004 a total of 361 essays were written by the students in the EDU 215 classes taught by me. This archival was organized by first categorizing teachers by grade level (if K-6) or subject (if 7-12). College teachers were grouped in one category. This distinction is made to accommodate for selected secondary and college

teachers who students had more than once. For example, some science teachers taught the students in both biology and chemistry. The categorization of the teachers in this manner resulted in a total of 21 subcategories of teachers: seven primary grade subcategories, ten secondary subject categories, three subcategories of college professors, and one parish priest. This data answers the following research question: *Of the 361 selected teachers, what is their distribution according to grade level or subject?*

In-class discussions with the students on the day the assignment is turned in includes the following question: *From the assignment's specifications or your own thoughts, what are the two characteristics that most contributed to your selected teacher's effectiveness?* All students are asked the question with their responses recorded by me. Nine characteristics were possibilities from the assignment. Due to 16 student absences on the days of these discussions, 690 responses were recorded rather than the 722 responses that would have resulted from perfect attendance. The record of the student responses provides the answer to the following research question: *What are the characteristics of exceptionally effective teachers most frequently cited by the students in this study?*

III. Presentation of the Findings

A. Textual Presentation

The teacher category most frequently selected is an equal number of students (89) who selected either a social studies or English teacher. These two categories combined for 49.3 percent of the *exceptionally effective teachers* in this study. Other secondary teachers selected are in the disciplines of mathematics (15.2 percent), foreign language (9.1 percent), science (7.5 percent), physical education (2.4 percent), health (1.7 percent), technology (1.1 percent), art (.5 percent), and music (.3 percent).

In total, elementary teachers represent 9.4 percent of the selections. The two grade levels with the highest representation are third and fifth (8). The 11 college professors chosen constitute 3 percent of the selections. The college professors are in the disciplines of English (7), history (3), and mathematics (1). One student selected a parish priest who taught a confirmation class. For a tabular presentation of the distribution of the selected teachers see Table 3.1.

The total number of characteristics cited by the sample was 36. The *exceptionally effective teacher* trait most frequently expressed by the students was *challenging with reasonable expectations* (11.9 percent). The percentage of response was computed by dividing the number of citations for this trait (82) by the total citations in the study (690). *Sense of humor* is the

second most frequently cited characteristic (8.5 percent). Three characteristics are tied for third place in the frequency standings: *explains complicated material well*, *caring*, and *creative* (each 5.6 percent). Other frequently cited traits are: *flexible instructional style* (4.8 percent), *approachable*, *available*, *interested in students*, and *organized* (each 4.2 percent). For a tabular presentation of the selected characteristics data see Table 3.2.

B. Tabular Presentation

Table 3.1: Distribution of Selected Teachers

Kindergarten	5
First Grade	1
Second Grade	1
Third Grade	8
Fourth Grade	4
Fifth Grade	8
Sixth Grade	7
Grades 7-12	
Social Studies	89
English	89
Mathematics	55
Foreign Language	33
Science	27
Physical Education	9
Health	6
Technology	4
Art	2
Music	1
College	
English	6
History	3
Mathematics	2
Other	
Priest	1

Table 3.2: Cited Characteristics

1.	Challenging/Had Reasonably High Expectations	82
2.	Sense of Humor	59
3.	Enthusiastic	56
4.	Creative	39
	Caring	39
	Explains Complicated Material Well	39
5.	Flexible Instructional Style	33
6.	Approachable	29
	Available	29
	Interested in Students	29
	Organized	29
7.	Flexible to Classroom Situations	23
8.	Dedicated	21
	Inspiring Practical	21
9.	Made Material Relevant	17
	Optimistic About Students	13
10.	Energetic	10
	Engaging	10
	Exciting	10
	Learned/Brilliant/Scholarly	10
	Warm	10
11.	Humble	9
	Good Listener	9
	Patient	9
12.	Authentic/Real/Appropriately Autobiographical	5
	Confident	5
	Empathic	5
	Encouraging	5
	Fair	5
	Professional	5
13.	Honest	4
14.	Insightful	3
15.	Moral	2
	Nonjudgmental	2
16.	Optimistic About Life	1
	Protective	1

IV. Analysis of the Findings

A. Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

As previously stated, the sample is drawn from a course that consisted entirely of students preparing for a career in secondary teaching. If the sample had been drawn from a comparable course for prospective elementary school teachers the distribution of *exceptionally effective teachers* might have been different. It would be interesting to see if a sample of students preparing for teaching at the primary level would select more primary teachers as *exceptionally effective*.

The study did not include a reckoning of the intended teaching area of the students and their selected teacher. For example, there may have been a high representation of prospective social studies and English teachers in the sample. It would require an interview with the students to determine if their intended subject influenced their teacher selection.

An examination of the cited characteristics demonstrates redundancies. For example, *caring* is a characteristic cited 39 times and *interested in students* 29 times. Arguably these two traits constitute a verbal distinction without a meaningful difference. My decision to record the words and phrases actually used by the students' accounts for perceived redundancies.

As with any study that employs a convenience sample, this study's results cannot be taken as representative of nonparticipating individuals. However, this limitation does not render this study inconsequential. The sample size is substantial and a methodology for future studies has been formulated and tested.

Six students in this study stated that their selected teachers are responsible for their decision to pursue a teaching career. These statements were not solicited either as a requirement of the writing assignment or in the class discussions. This implies that there may be more than six students who were so influenced. It would be interesting to know how many students opted for

a career in teaching because of a teacher. A future quantitative study could generate the data to address this curiosity.

As with many studies, while this study answered questions it gave rise to others: *Why were so many social studies and English teachers selected? Is there something about the content of these subjects that accounts for the perceived effectiveness of those who teach social studies and English? Do social studies and English attract individuals with personalities that are conducive to the work of teaching? Is there a gender correlation between the students and selected teachers?*

B. Value and Application of the Study

A well known psycho-lexical study reveals that there are 17,953 words in an unabridged English dictionary describing personality characteristics (Allport and Odbert, 1936). Individuals involved in teacher training, hiring, and mentoring are beneficiaries of studies that document the personality traits that correlate with teacher effectiveness. These individuals are engaged in significant work. An awareness of the characteristics that correlate with and contribute to effective teaching should be nurtured in training and mentoring as well as recognized in hiring. Concerning employment, an implication of this study is the use of personality assessment instruments like the M.M.P.I. (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) as part of the employment process.

REFERENCES

Allport, G.W. & Odbert, H.(1936):Trait-names: A Psycho-lexical Study. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 47, 171-220. (1, whole number 211).