

<http://revped.ise.ro>

Print ISSN 0034-8678; Online ISSN: 2559 - 639X

MAPPING THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Cartografierea principalelor caracteristici ale profesorilor excelenți:
un studiu fenomenologic

Miruna Luana MIULESCU, Antoaneta-Firuța TACEA

Journal of Pedagogy, 2022 (2), 45 - 66

<https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2022.2/45>

The online version of this article can be found at: <https://revped.ise.ro/en/category/2022/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Published by:

**CENTRUL NAȚIONAL DE POLITICI ȘI EVALUARE ÎN EDUCAȚIE
UNITATEA DE CERCETARE ÎN EDUCAȚIE**

<http://www.ise.ro/>

<https://rocnee.eu/>

Further information about *Revista de Pedagogie* – *Journal of Pedagogy* can be found at:

Editorial Policy: <http://revped.ise.ro/editorial-policy/>

Author Guidelines: <http://revped.ise.ro/en/author-guidelines/>

MAPPING THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Miruna Luana Miulescu*
Antoaneta-Firuța Tacea**

University of Bucharest,
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences,
Bucharest, Romania

mirunaluana.miulescu@unibuc.ro, firuta.tacea@fpse.unibuc.ro

Abstract

Teaching is a crucial component of any sensible approach to ensuring quality education. However, there is no adequate, integrated perspective on the core qualities that make for excellence in teaching. Our study seeks to discover people who are examples of excellence in teaching in order to determine a set of excellence-associated characteristics. The participants of the present study were primary school teachers (n=11) from Romania. By making use of a qualitative inquiry, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of school lessons. The key findings suggest that there is no single template for excellence in teaching. According to the data, there are three key aspects that can be attributed to excellent teaching: a passion for teaching, authentic relationships with students, and critical reflection. Recommendations for sustaining high-quality teaching are discussed.

Keywords: excellent teachers, passion for teaching, qualitative data, reflection, teacher-student relationship.

* Assistant Professor PhD, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania. Senior Researcher, Education Research Unit, National Center for Policy and Evaluation in Education (CNPEE), Bucharest, Romania.

** Senior Lecturer PhD, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.

Rezumat

Predarea este o componentă crucială a oricărei abordări echilibrate pentru asigurarea unei educații de calitate. Cu toate acestea, nu există o concepție adecvată și integrată a calităților de bază care asigură excelența în predare. Studiul nostru urmărește să descopere oameni care exemplifică excelența în predare cu scopul de a determina un set de caracteristici asociate excelenței. Participanții la acest studiu au fost profesori de școală primară (n=11) din România. În cadrul unei investigații de tip calitativ, datele au fost colectate prin interviuri semistructurate și observații la clasă. Principalele constatări sugerează că nu există un model unic pentru excelența în predare. Potrivit datelor, există trei aspecte cheie care pot fi atribuite unei predări excelente: pasiunea pentru predare, relațiile autentice cu elevii și reflecția critică. Sunt discutate recomandări pentru susținerea predării de înaltă calitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *date calitative, pasiune pentru predare, profesori excelenți, reflecție, relația cu elevii.*

1. General background

Teaching is a crucial component of any sensible approach to ensuring quality education. According to the available data, a quality educator is perhaps the most critical component of student learning (Liu et al., 2016).

For a long period of time, there was an over-focus on student performance at high-stakes achievement tests, and educators' success was measured mainly by test scores. This one-dimensional focus on teachers' accomplishments was harmful to the profession because the measurement of teacher effectiveness should encompass the diverse characteristics necessary for an educational professional to favorably affect student learning progress (Reeves, 2004).

Generally, school teachers are expected to demonstrate a continuous broad knowledge base (Guerriero, 2017), contribute to the profession and the education community (OECD, 2021), support student growth and development (Hattie, 2009; Lei et al., 2018; OECD, 2009), design and deliver quality and effective teaching and learning courses (Johnston et al., 2019), have an extensive repertoire of instructional strategies and resources (McGonigal, 2005; Orlich et al., 2012), involve parents and communities (Coombes & Ponta, 2022; Delafield-Butt et al., 2016; OECD, 2009), create inclusive environments (Gheysens et al., 2021; Hornby, 2015; Kivirand et al., 2020; Van Mieghem et al., 2018; Ydo, 2020), act as equity agents (Guerriero, 2017), and the list could go on. This set of expectations captures a complex image of the roles that a teaching professional has to carry.

Barber and Mourshed (2007) argue that education is highly dependent on high-quality teaching and intelligently conceived policies that will enhance teacher quality. Therefore, we must turn to the matter of excellence in teaching in order to establish a list of excellence-defining qualities.

At the same time, defining exceptional teaching can be difficult, as teaching is dynamic and complex in nature. Nevertheless, a great deal of insight can be gained by exploring the literature concerning high-quality teachers' attributes and educational practices.

It is worth mentioning that the studies on high-quality teacher characteristics do not have the purpose to highlight the negative traits of poor teaching but to bring to the fore the excellent qualities that facilitate teachers' performance. As Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011) stated: "To make a difference in the quality of education, we must be able to provide ready and well-founded answers to the question, what do good teachers do that enhances student learning" (p. 351).

First of all, professionals who are examples of excellence in teaching can be found in both underprivileged and affluent communities, whether they have outstanding or substandard working conditions (Crosswell & Elliot, 2009; Hall, 2009).

Although teacher excellence as a concept is not clarified in policy documents, researchers have tried to set forth the crucial elements that excellent teachers should hold.

According to Lin (2021), who engaged in an investigation of the key factors for being excellent teachers, passion, responsibility, continuous learning, and cohesion are the top essential elements that relate to excellent primary school teachers. In an effort to establish a cultivation model of primary and middle school teachers, Li and Zhang (2017) determined the most important attributes of excellent teachers: charismatic personality, strong achievement motivation, strong ability of reflection and development, and strong ability of innovation and practice.

Researcher Colker (2008) painted a list of characteristics of good early childhood teachers: a passion for teaching, patience, creativity, a love for learning, flexibility, a sense of humour, a high level of energy, pragmatism, willingness to take risks, perseverance, respect for the other educational agents (students, parents/tutors, colleagues, etc.), and authenticity. He argued that excellence in teaching is the combined result of these personal characteristics, knowledge of the subject matter, and skills developed through formal education.

Stegemann and Roberts (2016) created a framework for the diverse attributes that people who exemplify excellence in teaching have, and they discovered the following characteristics: treating others with respect, having exceptional

content knowledge, efficiently managing distressing situations, and assisting others in achieving their aims.

Starting from the idea that there is no magic recipe for what makes an excellent teacher, Whitaker (2013) articulated that great educators actually have a set of characteristics in common that sets them apart from other teachers: superior classroom management skills, the constant need for refining their teaching practices, positivity in their relationship with students, setting high expectations for effort, learning outcomes, and behaviour, as well as seeking advice from other professionals.

Having considered all these assertions, we can corroborate that there is no adequate, integrated conception of the core qualities that make for excellence in teaching. Therefore, we sought to find the answer to the basic question: *What are the critical elements that characterize excellent teaching?*

With the purpose of finding ways of improving teaching, we sought to discover people who exemplify excellence in teaching in order to determine a set of excellence-associated characteristics.

2. Methodology

This study aimed to determine the key components of high-quality teaching using the phenomenological qualitative approach. This method was selected with the purpose of capturing the lived experiences of individuals (i.e., excellent teachers) and depicting the meanings of such unique experiences from an insider point of view (Husserl, 2013; Patton, 2015).

2.1. Research participants and sampling strategy

This study's participants were educational professionals identified as high-quality teachers by their principals. For this purpose, the best 10 public general schools were selected from Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, and Ilfov County. The list of schools was obtained using data from The National Database of Education. The selected database contained national test results

for admission to high school. Out of the 10 school principals that were contacted in order to identify potential teacher participants, only four agreed. Due to the nature of the research design and objectives, the purposive sampling method was chosen to shed light on the specific phenomenon of excellent teaching (Patton, 2015). By selecting this non-probability sampling method, the researchers could better study the target population in a purposeful way by determining the general characteristics of high-quality teachers (Creswell, 2015).

The teachers were selected based on the criterion of being acknowledged as exceptional by their principal. As one of the most common forms of teacher evaluation, principal evaluations consist of formal ones, as well as informal, unforseen, or infrequent classroom visits. Therefore, principals are a valuable source of information because they are most knowledgeable about the school context and the teacher population. In the context of our study, the principals could refer to educational professionals who must fulfill all of the following requirements: (a) have been teaching for more than five years, (b) always obtained the highest grade (i.e., very good) at the annual evaluation applied at the level of the school, (c) always obtained the highest grade (i.e., very good) at the regular inspections and class visits led by the inspectors or the school principal and (d) have been involved in various school activities (e.g., mentoring of beginning teachers, coordination of school clubs or national/international projects, etc.). By using these parameters, teachers were invited to take part in the study.

Table no. 1. Background information of the participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Grade being taught	Teaching degree ¹	No. of lessons observed
A1	32	Female	10	preparatory	2 nd degree	3
B1	45	Female	23	1 st	1 st degree	3
B2	35	Female	13	1 st	1 st degree	4
B3	32	Female	8	1 st	2 nd degree	4
C1	53	Female	20	2 nd	1 st degree	3
C2	46	Female	22	2 nd	1 st degree	4
D1	45	Female	23	3 rd	1 st degree	3
D2	44	Female	21	3 rd	1 st degree	5
D3	32	Female	7	3 rd	2 nd degree	4
E1	30	Female	10	4 th	1 st degree	3
E2	28	Female	9	4 th	2 nd degree	3

For the purpose of protecting participant confidentiality, all participating teachers and schools were assigned pseudonyms.

2.2. Data Collection Procedure

After being provided with all the necessary information regarding the research study and what their participation would imply, 11 teachers agreed to be involved in the study. Prior to the study phase of data collection, all participating teachers signed a consent form. The data collection phase consisted of a pre-observation open-ended interview with the teachers, observations of classroom teaching, and a post-observation open-ended interview for clarification. The teachers were asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy purposes. Classroom observations were documented in an observation form in which the researcher took notes focusing on instructional strategies, teacher behavior, interactions with students, classroom management, etc. The interviews and observations were carried out during specified times at the convenience of the participating teachers. The classroom observations were conducted during regular class time at the school, and the observed lessons were chosen by the teachers. In order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics that define exceptional teaching, each teacher was asked to carry out at least 3 lessons (a lesson has 50 minutes), each for a different school subject. Classroom circumstances included students arriving late at school, intercom announcements, interruptions by the principals, other school teachers or school nurses, and bathroom breaks.

Data collection began in March 2022 and concluded at the end of the school year in June.

2.3. Data analysis

The collection of data consisted of pre-observation and post-observation interview transcripts, as well as classroom observation notes. The documentation was first explored by coding the data, determining patterns in the data, arranging the patterns into themes, and then creating a system for categorizing the data. From the grouping of the 17 different categories,

three main themes emerged as the predominant ones. In order to bring clarity to the research findings, direct quotes were used in the findings report.

3. Findings

Apart from several characteristics of high-quality teaching such as mastering subject content, establishing and maintaining clear expectations, fostering parent/tutor–school partnerships, strong work ethics, and using an extensive repertoire of instructional strategies and resources, three key themes stood out in our investigation: a passion for teaching, authentic relationships with students, and critical reflection.

3.1. Passion for teaching

The concept of passion for teaching was a common theme throughout the data collected, as this topic emerged 23 times during the interviews with teachers.

“Passion” can be defined as someone’s inclination toward an activity in which they invest time and energy (Carbonneau et al., 2008), being closely associated with enthusiasm, hope, and commitment (Day, 2004). Moreover, passion for teaching is considered a pivotal factor for effective education (Zehm & Kottler, 1993), as passionate teachers can be a source of motivation for their students (Fink, 2003; Hansen, 2001). Dewey (1903) elaborated his perspective on passion, describing it as “the accompaniment of the identification, through action, of the self with some object or idea, because of the necessity of that object or idea for the maintenance of self-expression” (p. 12).

Day (2004) makes an inventory of the five attributes passionate teachers have: they show deep subject matter knowledge, as well as various teaching techniques; they are able to successfully establish a relationship built on empathy with their students; they show their students that they care and genuinely consider them as educational partners; they reflect on their practices, as well as on their goals and beliefs; they inspire and motivate students; they involve the students in the classroom decisions.

Several studies (Frenzel et al., 2009; Frenzel et al., 2016; Hine et al., 2019) have shown that student enjoyment of learning a certain school subject is related to the teacher's genuine interest in teaching when the teacher's interest is reflected through expressed passion towards the subject. In addition, Kunter et al. (2008) pointed out that educators who have a passion for teaching display higher-quality instructional practices.

Crosswell and Elliot (2004) viewed teachers' passion for teaching as a notable variable in professional engagement and dedication, which led to the following assertion: "Given the core role that 'passion' appears to play in conceptions of teacher commitment it is reasonable to assume that any reforms deemed desirable by schools and systems are only likely to be successful if such reforms are interpreted for teachers in a way that relates to their passions" (p. 11).

A research study (Hine et al., 2019) on how positive teacher emotions can impact student learning experience has demonstrated that the student's level of engagement and learning is influenced by the teacher's strong interest in the subject and the teaching process. Furthermore, some students' unfavourable attitudes toward the subject were counterbalanced by favourable attitudes toward the learning context.

Another study that has provided evidence of the idea that teachers' passion directly influences students' motivation and school success is the one led by Gilal et al. (2019). Also, Greenberger (2016) argues that these influences hold true both in face-to-face and online instruction.

It can be postulated that experiencing a subject taught by a teacher who delivers the lessons with passion and a genuine interest in the topic can lead to high levels of intrinsic motivation to learn among students. As shown in various studies (Güvendir, 2016; Thomson et al., 2014), intrinsic motivation in learning a specific subject is an important goal in and of itself and can lead to self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996) which is a clear predictor of students' academic performance (Mousoulides & Philippou, 2005).

In our study, data shows that passion is experienced by teachers to varying degrees. Nevertheless, passion for teaching plays a major role in the educators' day-to-day work with children and other educational agents (other

teacher colleagues, school managers, other school professionals, parents, etc.).

“... sometimes I feel that it is not a job, but a hobby. I wouldn't stand to go to work by force, just to earn some money. [...] I really believe that I have found the ideal job for me. It has everything that I wished for. [...] I have worked for more than 10 years as a teacher and I never felt that I should quit my job.” (B2, interview)

Emerging from the interview analysis, resilience was indicated as being highly connected to a passion for their profession. Most of the respondents associated their passion for teaching with the ability to pull through difficult circumstances and tense contexts. Therefore, passion acts as a protective factor that can help teachers adjust to various obstacles.

“Let's be honest... teaching is a highly demanding profession. Even I wonder sometimes why I stayed a teacher when I could have chosen to leave and do something else... something less demanding. But I stayed because I really like working with children, seeing them discover something new every day, talking to them, and being able to see them light up their faces when an interesting idea pops into their heads. I don't think you could ever find such an invigorating environment anywhere else.” (A1, interview)

“I love doing my job. I really do and it brings me so much joy. It is never easy to work with children, but I seem to always find a way to work with them. [...] It thrills me to find out that students are motivated to come to school to learn.” (E2, interview)

“Even if it is demanding and sometimes exhausting, teaching can be very fulfilling.” (C1, interview)

Passion, as implied by most of the interviewed teachers, is at the heart of excellent teaching. It is one of the primary factors that excellent teachers have. A passionate professional, as observed in the school lessons, loves what he/she does and creates a richly stimulating environment for children. *“I can say that I feel satisfied with my work. [...] Whenever I meet a*

student who is not enthusiastic about coming to school and learning, I feel the need to change that. I take it as a challenge.” (E3, interview)
“I would love to be an inspiration to my students. [...] I enjoy engaging with them and finding out their thoughts and experiences. You will be surprised how mature they can be in many ways. I guess I can learn from them as well.” (A1, interview)

3.2. Authentic relationships with students

Learning is not always only about the content knowledge or the best teaching strategies. It is also about the relational part of teaching, which, in fact, can have a big impact on the entire learning process, as studies have shown numerous times (Lin et al., 2022; Longobardi et al., 2021; Roorda et al., 2011). For instance, a relationship based on respect, closeness, and affection is a good predictor of positive developmental outcomes and greater adjustment to the class environment (Roorda et al., 2011; Longobardi et al., 2019, 2021).

The importance of creating and maintaining relationships with students emerged 28 times during the interviews. Also, all 11 teachers observed displayed strong indicators of positive teacher-student relationships.

As described by teachers and observed throughout the lessons, a desirable student-teacher relationship is based on the efforts to gain respect and trust from each other. In practice, it translates to creating opportunities by the teacher in an effort to better understand his/her students, by being polite and respectful of each other’s choices, and by motivating the students to be their best selves every day. Teachers strongly believe that such an environment, based on real human connections, makes the classroom a safe and welcoming learning context for all.

“A major key is, in my opinion, being able to connect on a more personal level with the children, like learning their interests, their likes and dislikes, etc. [...] If I would have to give a piece of advice to new teachers this would be it: listen to them and show them that you care; try to build a strong connection with your class because classroom management can be a hassle sometimes.” (B2, interview)

“I trust my students. I am positive that they can be better and I always try to show them this. [...] I think it is critical to show your students that you believe in them and that you will always be there to support them.”
(A1, interview)

Based on the observed lessons, the strongest indicators of positive teacher-student relationships, also confirmed by research (Pérez-Salas et al., 2021; Wang & Eccles, 2013), are:

- *open and consistent communication*, in which the educator is able to understand his/her students’ problems in order to shape the teaching strategy so that to engage better with the pupils, not only through observation but actual communication;
- *true equity* – equity extends to the relationship between teachers and learners. The animosity between those who lead the learning environment and those who are being led can easily be created if teachers pick favorites (sometimes unconsciously) and give the spotlight to certain individuals as the others are feeling marginalized. For this reason, an excellent teacher concentrates on treating all his/her students equally and knowing that every student counts;
- *body language*: excellent teachers are fully aware of the ways the language of their body communicates to their students and that it can have a big impact. Most of the time, professionals who truly connect with the learners are able to establish a relationship through eye contact, which could be easily observed throughout the lessons observed for the purpose of this study;
- *humor*: the ability to joke around is not such an easy feat for all teachers. Because not all types of humor work well with the students, some professionals are not very comfortable making jokes in class; nonetheless, humor is a great way to loosen up the atmosphere and bring a smile, if done right;
- *understanding and compassion*: excellent teachers are conscious of the fact that students have needs outside the classroom which can influence their academic progress; compassion can work as a fantastic trust builder and can make all the difference with relationships;
- *an emotionally-safe learning space*: having your opinions respected is at the foundation of any lasting relationship. Excellent teachers are fully aware of the taunting and criticizing that can happen between peers in

the class environment; for this reason, they are keen on making the students feel safe when asking questions and by answering their questions with respect and patience;

- *knowing that every pupil counts*: in order to be most impactful with students, teachers are aware that they must connect with all learners, irrespective of the fact that some are easy to bond with, while others are not.

It is indeed true that teaching professionals cannot fully grasp every single problem or hardship that a child encounters but he/she can grasp a general idea and begin the process of shaping genuine two-way communication. There are many aspects that could stifle true relationship-building between those who lead the learning environment and those who are being led, but it all depends on how the educators manage the process and trigger a drive among students to learn, all while maintaining healthy boundaries:

“Respect and trust are built over time. A teacher has to be very careful with how he reacts, he behaves with the students all the time. [...] I always try to be patient and understanding. Of course I also experienced some tough days in my profession, but I always cheer up and instantly become motivated when I meet with my students.” (D2, interview)

“I think you have to see this profession as one that can heavily influence the child’s entire life. You need to be extra careful and responsible all the time because all you say and do influence them.” (E3, interview)

3.3. Critical reflection

The concept of critical reflection emerged in the data 14 times during the interviews with educators.

Reflection can be described as a process of self-evaluation and self-examination that educators consistently undertake in order to enhance their teaching practices. Historically, the roots of reflective teaching can be traced to the works of Dewey (1933, 1938), who argued that reflection is a critical aspect of learning from various experiences.

In the last 30 years, there has been burgeoning research interest in understanding the role of reflection on educators' practices (Brookfield, 2004; Cranton, 1996; Reagan et al., 2000; Willis, 1999).

McKnight (2002) argues that "reflective thinking is a multifaceted process. It is an analysis of classroom events and circumstances. By virtue of its complexity, the task of teaching requires constant and continual classroom observation, evaluation, and subsequent action. To be an effective teacher, it is not enough to be able to recognize what happens in the classroom. Rather, it is imperative to understand the "whys", "hows", and "what if's" as well." (p. 1).

Furthermore, Reagan et al. (2000) explain the power of active reflection by its positive effects on changing behaviour in the classroom.

Based on the data retrieved from interviews, reflective practice, especially when it is an intentional process, can have the primary benefit of better understanding the teaching practices. When provided the opportunity to practice critical reflection, educators can learn a great deal for their professional development.

"I try to always be prepared for my classes [...] after each week I try to write a few reflections regarding the strategies used and their effects on the children's learning. It's been a habit of mine for a few years now because I also tutor students preparing to become teachers and I try to lead by example. I encourage them to keep a journal to write in reflections on the observed and implemented lessons." (D2, interview)

"I have set up together with two other colleagues from my school a learning support group, as we call it, where we talk about our teaching experiences, struggles, and learning opportunities. We are colleagues in the same Master's program so it is easy for us to meet and discuss." (C1, interview)

In the course of reflection on their practices, professionals get to clarify certain aspects of their teaching process and produce new knowledge and insights. Through practicing self-reflection, educators call into question their own teaching practices and become aware of the need for change.

“Each year I set a goal for myself and at the end of the school year, I always assess my progress. For example, I try to organize as many collaborative activities as possible because I noticed that my students enjoy working together.” (B2, interview)

“When I look back at how I used to deliver the lessons 15 years ago I become embarrassed because I know that I used to make many mistakes when teaching and in my relationship with students’ parents. Now I am much more aware of my practices and how I should handle each situation in class and outside of class. [...] I have years of experience and hard work...” (D1, interview)

“I hope I never stop growing as a teacher [...] I always try to be the best version of myself and be better than the day before. That is what I always tell my students, that we never stop learning and growing as individuals. [...] I just hope that I am a good example for them”. (E1, interview)

3.4. Limitations

Despite our study’s encouraging findings, limitations should also be addressed. First of all, our research was carried out in Romania, therefore generalization of results to other educational contexts is barely possible. Nevertheless, we presume that other countries are confronted with similar issues. Second of all, we used a sample of convenience, not a representative sample; thus, the relatively small teacher sample cannot lead to the generalization of responses. Third of all, the teacher participants were chosen solely based on the school’s national test results for admission to high school and selection done by principals. Also, it should be noted that variables such as parents’ socioeconomic background, occupation and cultural capital could have played a part in the school’s selection; thus, the students’ academic achievements could have been influenced by this. Needless to say that there are certainly many other professionals that exemplify excellence in teaching in other educational institutions, but to whom we did not have access due to our school selection criteria.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The key figure for any successful development in education is the teacher who directly impacts the student. His/her enrichment as a thinking human being cannot be avoided.

With the purpose of finding ways of improving teaching, this study sought to discover people who exemplify excellence in teaching in order to determine a set of excellence-associated characteristics. The results, which are predominantly focused on the relational-emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship, are consistent with a variety of other views and research findings on the topic of excellent teaching.

According to the data, there are three key aspects that can be attributed to excellent teaching: a passion for teaching, authentic relationships with students, and critical reflection.

Data shows that passion is experienced by teachers to varying degrees. Nevertheless, passion for teaching plays a major role in the educators' day-to-day work with children and other educational agents (other teacher colleagues, school managers, other school professionals, parents, etc.).

Concerning the relationship with students, the strongest indicators of positive teacher-student relationships are open and consistent communication, true equity, body language, humor, understanding and compassion, an emotionally-safe learning space, and showing that every pupil counts.

It is needless to say that every student can become a struggling one if his/her needs are not met. Unfortunately, it is very common for teachers to fall victim to surmising their students' needs prior to addressing them with the students. For this reason, it is paramount to build positive teacher-student relationships, where the students are trusted and their voices are heard. Good rapport between learner and teacher is essential to success.

Excellent teachers have the ability to engage learners and meet their unique needs and preferences through differentiation and universal design. The educators should select topics to suit the learners, include them in lessons,

create space for constructive feedback, guide the learning process, and celebrate even the smallest achievements so that every student knows they are cared for and valued.

We consider that the results of this study are worthy of serious consideration from educators, school managers, members of the academia, and policymakers. The awareness of excellence-associated teacher characteristics would help design more appropriate policy initiatives with the purpose of enhancing teacher excellence.

Nevertheless, as the study results have shown us, in order for educators to grow professionally they need to work in an actively encouraging and welcoming educational setting that sustains high-quality teaching. Therefore, while it may be too hard to point out the fundamental elements of such a setting, it seems feasible to assume that the educational community will encompass the following conditions:

- it will identify individuals who have the necessary attributes that make for excellence in teaching and encourage them to share successful teaching practices with other colleagues;
- it will empower and motivate exceptional teachers to search for meaningful arenas in which to grow professionally, such as workshops, seminars, conferences, courses, platforms for sharing good practices with other colleagues, etc.;
- it will ensure that educators are properly supported financially in order to participate in various educational events; it will ensure that excellent teachers are valued for their contributions and hard work, through both symbolic and practical rewards;
- it will identify individuals who have high potential to become exceptional educators and encourage them to foster those unique practices and behaviors that enable positive results;
- it will build and facilitate a professional learning community for teachers inside the school, in which educators come together on a regular basis to learn through collaborative work and knowledge sharing, thus initiating a professional dialogue to strengthen teaching competences and student outcomes; in this context, the school's main function would be to give the community a direction and objectives to achieve.

Sustaining high-quality education through exhibiting high-quality opportunities and assistance for teachers' professional development is no easy feat for educational institutions. Nevertheless, schools should be passionately involved in the educators' professional development process.

We hope this study's results would be a useful guide in strengthening the field of professional teacher training. The study of excellence in teaching can be considered a point of departure for highlighting the critical role of teachers as an indispensable foundation of quality education. Excellent teaching should be exhibited on a regular basis, as a product of a thoughtfully designed process of initial and continuing professional training.

NOTES

- ¹ After graduation, Romanian teachers who work in schools can obtain firstly a second degree and then a first degree as part of their further education and career development

References

- Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top: A McKinsey report*. McKinsey & Co.
- Brookfield, S. (2004). *The getting of wisdom: What critically reflective teaching is and why it's important*.
- Carbonneau, N., Vallerand, R.J., Fernet, C., & Guay, F. (2008). The role of passion for teaching in intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 100*(4), 977-987. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012545>
- Colker, L. (2008). Twelve characteristics of effective early childhood teachers. *Young Children, 63*(2), 68-73.
- Coombes, A., & Ponta, O. (2022). Building community engagement and teacher support in education: qualitative findings from process evaluations in two exceptional settings. *Journal of Development Effectiveness, 14*(4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2022.2067889>
- Cranton, P. (1996). *Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives for teachers of adults*. Jossey Bass.
- Creswell, J.W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed). Pearson Education.

- Crosswell, L.J., & Elliott, R.G. (2004). *Committed teachers, passionate teachers: The dimension of passion associated with teacher commitment and engagement*. Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference.
- Crosswell, L., & Elliot, B. (2009). *Committed Teachers, Passionate Teachers: the dimension of passion with teacher commitment*. Post Pressed.
- Day, C. (2004). *A Passion for Teaching*. Routledge Falmer.
- Delafield-Butt, J., Dunlop, A.-W., & Trevarthen, C. (Eds.). (2016). *The child's curriculum: working with the natural values of young children*. Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1903). *Interest as related to will*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. Jossey Bass.
- Frenzel, A.C., Goetz, T., Lüdtke, O., Pekrun, R., & Sutton, R.E. (2009). Emotional transmission in the classroom: Exploring the relationship between teacher and student enjoyment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 705-716. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014695>
- Frenzel, A.C., Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Daniels, L.M., Durksen, T.L., Becker-Kurz, B., & Klassen, R.M. (2016). Measuring Teachers' enjoyment, anger, and anxiety: The Teacher Emotions Scales (TES). *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 46, 148-163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.05.003>
- Gheysens, E., Consuegra, E., Engels, N., & Struyven, K. (2021). Creating inclusive classrooms in primary and secondary schools: From noticing to differentiated practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103210>
- Gilal, F.G, Channa, N.A., Gilal, N.G, Gilal, R.G, & Shah, S.M.M. (2019). Association between a teacher's work passion and a student's work passion: a moderated mediation model. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 12, 889-900. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S212004>
- Greenberger, S. (2016). A comparison of passion and teaching modality. *Journal of Educators Online*, 13(1), 172-193.
- Guerriero, S. (2017). *Pedagogical Knowledge and the Changing Nature of the Teaching Profession*. OECD Publishing.
- Güvendir, M.A. (2016). Students' Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Level and its Relationship with their Mathematics Achievement. *International Journal for Mathematics Teaching and Learning*, 17(1), 1-21.
- Hall, S. (2009). *How to maintain a passion for teaching*. Center for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.
- Hansen, D.T. (2001). *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching: Toward a Teacher's*

Creed. Teachers College Press.

- Hattie, J.H. (2009). *Visible learning*. Routledge.
- Hine, H., Blackley, S., & Cooke, A. (2019). Mathematics Education Research: Impacting Practice. *Proceedings of the 42nd annual conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia*, 612-619. MERGA.
- Hornby, G. (2015). Inclusive special education: evidence-based practices for children with special needs and disabilities. *British J. Special Educ.*, 42, 232-252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12101>
- Husserl, E. (2013). *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Springer Science and Business Media.
- Johnston, O., Wildy, H., & Shand, J. (2019). A decade of teacher expectations research 2008–2018: Historical foundations, new developments, and future pathways. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(1), 44-73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944118824420>
- Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., Lepp, L., & Malva, L. (2020). Kaasava hariduse tähendus ja tõhusa rakendamise tegurid Eesti kontekstis: õpetajaid koolitavate või nõustavate spetsialistide vaade [The meaning of inclusive education and factors for effective implementation in the Estonian context: A view of specialists who train or advise teachers]. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri. Estonian J. Educ.*, 8, 48-71.
- Kunter, M., Tsai, Y.M., Klusmann, U., Brunner, M., Krauss, S., & Baumert, J. (2008). Students' and mathematics teachers' perceptions of teacher enthusiasm and instruction. *Learning and Instruction*, 18(5), 468-482. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2008.06.008>
- Lei, H., Cui, Y., & Chiu, M.M. (2018). The Relationship between Teacher Support and Students' Academic Emotions: A Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02288>
- Li, Y.-F., & Zhang, Y.-C. (2017). Study on the Cultivation Strategy of Excellent Teachers in Primary & Middle Schools based on the Connotation and Characteristics of Excellent Teachers. *2017 International Conference on Modern Education and Information Technology (MEIT 2017)* (pp. 37-41).
- Lin, C.T. (2022) The key elements for being excellent teachers: a case study of Her-Herng Primary School. *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 2265-2279.
- Lin, S., Fabris, M.A., & Longobardi, C. (2022). Closeness in student–teacher relationships and students' psychological well-being: the mediating role of hope. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 30(1), 44-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106342662111013756>
- Liu, S., Liu, C., Stronge, J., & Xu, X. (2016). Teacher characteristics for success in the classroom: Chinese principals' perceptions for hiring decisions. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 17(1), 107-120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-015-9412-7>
- Longobardi, C., Settanni, M., Lin, S., & Fabris, M.A. (2021). Student–teacher

- relationship quality and prosocial behaviour: The mediating role of academic achievement and a positive attitude towards school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(2), 547-562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12378>
- Longobardi, C., Settanni, M., Prino, L.E., Fabris, M.A., & Marengo, D. (2019). Students' Psychological Adjustment in Normative School Transitions From Kindergarten to High School: Investigating the Role of Teacher-Student Relationship Quality. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1238. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01238>
 - McGonigal, K. (2005). Teaching for transformation: From learning theory to teaching strategies. *Speaking of teaching*, 14(2), 1-4.
 - McKnight, D. (2002). *Field experience handbook: A guide for the teacher intern and mentor teacher*. University of Maryland.
 - Mousoulides, N., & Philippou, G. (2005). Student's motivational beliefs, self-regulation strategies and mathematics achievement. In H.L. Chick & J.I. Vincent (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 9th Conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education*, (Vol. 3, pp. 321-328). Melbourne, Australia.
 - OECD. (2009). *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First Results from TALLIS*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/43023606.pdf>
 - OECD. (2021). *Teaching as a Knowledge Profession. Studying Pedagogical Knowledge across Education Systems*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e823ef6e-en>
 - Orlich, D.C., Harder, R.J., Callahan, R.C., Trevisan, M.S., & Brown, A.H. (2012). *Teaching strategies: A guide to effective instruction*. Cengage Learning.
 - Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4), 543-578.
 - Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE.
 - Pérez-Salas, C.P., Parra, V., Sáez-Delgado, F., & Olivares, H. (2021). Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships and Special Educational Needs on Student Engagement and Disengagement: A Correlational study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 708157. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.708157>
 - Reagan, T.G., Case, C.W., & Brubacher, J.W. (2000). *Becoming a reflective educator: How to build a culture of inquiry in the schools* (2nd ed.). Corwin.
 - Reeves, D.B. (2004). *Accountability for learning: How teachers and school leaders can take charge*. ASCD.
 - Roorda, D.L., Koomen, H.M.Y., Spilt, J.L., & Oort, F.J. (2011). The Influence of Affective Teacher-Student Relationships on Students' School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493-529. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793>

- Stegemann, K.C., & Roberts, W.L. (2016). Teaching Across the Grades: Dispositions of Ideally Competent Teachers. *The New Educator*, 13(3), 271-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2015.1063178>
- Stronge, J.H., Ward, T.J., & Grant, L.W. (2011). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectiveness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(4), 339-355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487111404241>
- Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L.J., & Buckley, S. (2014). *PISA 2012: How Australia measures up*. Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Van Mieghem, A., Verschueren, K., Petry, K., & Struyf, E. (2018). An analysis of research on inclusive education: a systematic search and meta review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(6), 675-689. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1482012>
- Wang, M.-T., & Eccles, J.S. (2013). School context, achievement motivation, and academic engagement: a longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective. *Learning and Instruction*, 28, 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2013.04.002>
- Whitaker, T. (2013). *What great teachers do differently: 17 things that matter most*. Routledge.
- Willis, P. (1999). Looking for what it's really like: Phenomenology in reflective practice. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 21(1), 91-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037990210106>
- Ydo, Y. (2020). Inclusive education: global priority, collective responsibility. *Prospects*, 49, 97-101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09520-y>
- Zehm, S.J., & Kottler, J.A. (1993). *On Being a Teacher: The Human Dimension*. Corwin Press.

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://revped.ise.ro/category/2022-en/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Versiunea online a acestui articol poate fi găsită la:
<http://revped.ise.ro/category/2022-ro/>



Această lucrare este licențiată sub Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Pentru a vedea o copie a acestei licențe, vizitați <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> sau trimiteți o scrisoare către Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, SUA.