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## Do Teachers, Students and Parents Agree about the Top Five Good Teacher's Characteristics?

### Abstract

As the most influential figure in the classroom, a good teacher has long been the object of research. His/her most important characteristics can be analysed from more than one point of view. The objective of this study was to apply Korthagen's model of levels of change in exploring the most important characteristics of a good teacher from the perspective of students, teachers and parents, and possible differences depending on elementary and high school and teachers' experience. There were 384 participants: 158 students, 78 teachers, and 148 parents. The most desirable characteristics from all three perspectives were fairness, patience and teaching skills. Some differences were found between elementary and high school students and teachers. The listed characteristics fit Korthagen's model mostly in the levels of mission and competencies.

Keywords: good teacher, characteristics, students, teachers, parents

### Introduction

There were never doubts about teachers' significant role in students' acquisition of various skills, knowledge, attitudes, motivation, beliefs, even life choices, etc. Teacher is the single most effective factor that determines the quality of education (Cooper, 2013, p. 2). For more than a century scholars have studied characteristics of good teachers (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Raufelder et al, 2016). Bakx and colleagues (2015) point out that demands on quality of education and particularly on teachers have incremented, but defining a good teacher has not reached a consensus.

Research of the most important characteristics of a good teacher from students' perspective often find descriptions of teacher's personality (e.g. friendly, caring, etc.), teaching skills (e.g. appropriate didactic methods, guidance, etc.), good relationship and authority (e.g. Alkan, 2013; Bakx et al, 2015; Raufelder et al, 2016). Minor differences can be found among younger and older students: younger students prefer teachers focused on transfer of knowledge and skills, while secondary prefer communication and relational aspect (Beishuizen et al, 2001; Bakx et al, 2015). Studies from the teachers' perspectives sometimes reflect dichotomy on personality and ability characteristics of a good teacher (e.g. Beishuizen et al, 2001), or they categorise numerous characteristics that teachers list (e.g. Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004; Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011). Although it would be expected that exploring the parental attitudes about good teachers' characteristics would be abundant, as they are important agents in their children's education, it is rarely found in the literature (Rubie-Davies et al, 2010). Tatar and Horenczyk (2000) thoroughly analysed parental expectations from teachers and divided them in three categories: help, as most expected, competencies, and lastly fairness.

However, it is rare that research of the most important characteristics of a good teacher take perspectives from students, teachers and parents simultaneously. Korthagen (2004) offered the *model of levels of change* which may be a helpful

framework for such analysis. There are six levels in the model: environment, behaviour, competencies, beliefs, (professional) identity and mission. The outermost is *environment*, which refers to the class, students or school. *Behaviour* includes teacher's actual performance. *Competencies* comprise knowledge, skills and attitudes, as a potential for behaviour. Depending on the situation, competencies are expressed in behaviour. The next are *beliefs* teachers have regarding to learning and teaching. *Identity* refers to how teachers see their role as teachers and what kind of teachers they want to be. The last level, *mission*, is about becoming aware of the meaning of one's own existence within a larger life context. Korthagen emphasizes that a good teacher will not always show good teaching.

The objective of the present research was to apply Korthagen's model of levels of change in exploring: 1) the most important characteristics of a good teacher from the perspective of students, teachers and parents; and 2) possible differences in these characteristics depending on elementary and high school and teachers' experience.

## Method

### *Participants*

Totally 384 persons took part, comprising three groups.

*Students'* group comprised 158 participants, 59 male and 98 female ( $M_{\text{years}} = 14.40$ ,  $SD_{\text{years}} = 3.08$ ). 81 student was from elementary and 77 from high schools. In Croatia elementary school is obligatory, starting at the age of 7 and lasting for 8 years. High school is optional. It starts at the age of 15 and lasts for 3 or 4 years, depending on the type.

*Teachers'* group consisted of 78 participants, 21 male and 57 female, aging from 26 to 77 years ( $M = 39.43$ ,  $SD = 10.38$ ). Forty of them worked in elementary and 25 in high schools. They were divided in three groups according to their teaching experience: a) up to six years ( $n = 27$ ); b) 7 – 14 years ( $n = 25$ ); and c) 15 years and more ( $n = 26$ ).

*Parents'* group gathered 148 participants, 76 fathers and 72 mothers, aging from 29 to 62 years ( $M = 42.81$ ,  $SD = 5.98$ ). There was 71 parent of elementary and 65 of high school children.

### *Measures and procedure*

University students of humanities and music had to find: 1) one elementary school student; 2) one high school student; 3) one elementary or high school teacher; 4) one mother of an elementary or high school student; and 5) one father of an elementary or high school student. They asked them: *What are the five most important characteristics of a good teacher? Please explain.*; wrote the answers and demographic data: gender, age, school, length of teachers' employment, and parents' highest level of formal education. They received credits for this task, which was a part of a larger research on attitudes towards teachers' competencies.

## Results

The final list comprised 85 characteristics of a good teacher. Elementary school students listed 46 characteristics, high school students 48, teachers 55 and parents

revealed 60. To identify the most important characteristics of a good teacher from the perspective of students, teachers and parents, five most frequent answers were ranked for each group. The list narrowed to 9 characteristics. The most frequent answer in all groups was *fairness*, followed by *patience* for teachers and parents, and *humour* for students. *Teaching skills* were on the third place for students and parents, while *discipline management* was for teachers. On the fourth place students listed *patience*, teachers voted for *teaching skills* and parents for *subject related knowledge*. The fifth characteristic for students was *being a good person*, teachers chose *sensitivity for students* and *creativity*, and parents picked *discipline management*.

When ranks were compared depending on elementary or high school, parents of elementary and high school children provided same answers. For elementary school teachers, the most important characteristic was *fairness*, while it was *discipline management* for their high school colleagues. These characteristics exchanged places at the 2<sup>nd</sup> position. Both put *teaching skills* on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> place and *patience* on the 4<sup>th</sup> place. Elementary school teachers chose *sensitivity for students* and high school teachers put *creativity* at the 5<sup>th</sup> position. All students agree *fairness* is the most important feature. Elementary school students continued with *humour*, *being a good person*, *teaching skills* and *patience*. High school students placed *teaching skills* on the 2<sup>nd</sup> place, then *humour* and *patience* as equally important and *discipline management* at the last place.

For the most experienced teachers the most important characteristic was *patience*, while for two less experienced groups it was *fairness*. However, *fairness* comes at the 2<sup>nd</sup> position together with *sensitivity for students* for the most experienced teachers, followed by *subject related knowledge*, and *discipline management*. The least experienced teachers put *teaching skills* and *patience* at the 2<sup>nd</sup> place, followed by *discipline management* and, finally, *sensitivity for students* and *creativity*. For the medium experienced group, *discipline management* is at the 2<sup>nd</sup> position, *teaching skills* and *patience* follow together and *humour* is at the 5<sup>th</sup> place.

## Discussion

### *The most desirable characteristics of a good teacher*

The maximal number of listed characteristics was 15 (3 groups x 5 characteristics). However, the list consisted of 9, which shows much overlapping in students, teachers and parents' views. It confirmed some Liu and Meng's results (2009). It is probably because all three groups have experience of being students. Students, teachers and parents agree that the most desirable feature of a good teacher is – *fairness*, also described as justice and objectiveness. It means that a good teacher should treat every student in the same way, especially when giving marks. Fairness is a very desirable feature of a good teacher among students (Alkan, 2013; Ciascai & Vlad, 2014; Bakx et al, 2015; Raufelder et al, 2016), teachers (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011) and parents (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2000) because it clearly relates to evaluation. Its connection with efficient teaching is confirmed (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011).

Teachers and parents then rank *patience* and *calmness*, recognising them as necessary tools to handle numerous and diverse situations they face with students and parents, but also with repeating of similar lectures. Murphy, Delli and Edwards' findings (2004) support this teachers' choice. For the students, patience is also relevant (Vlad & Ciascai, 2014; Bakx et al, 2015), but slightly less. This difference could be ascribed to the age and life experience, especially related to raising children: people with parenting and teaching experience know better than children and young people that much patience is required. Students valued *humour* as a more desirable characteristic, supporting previous findings (Alkan, 2013; Bakx et al, 2015; Raufelder et al, 2016). Humorous means that the atmosphere in the classroom is neither tense nor too serious, but comfortable for learning. Such a setting is, obviously, more important from the students' perspective than from teachers or parents'.

*Teaching skills* (described as clear explaining, using of simple language etc.) are equally rated by students and parents, and similarly by teachers. Although teacher's *knowledge about the subject* was recognised by parents as important, communicating this knowledge was listed as more relevant. Teaching skills are regularly recognised among top valued features by students (White, 2009; Alkan, 2013) and teachers (Cooper, 2013).

More than teaching skills, teachers estimate *discipline management*. Obviously they are aware of their higher responsibility to organise teaching atmosphere so learning can take place (Klassen & Chiu, 2010), not disruptions. Because of frequent behaviour problems in schoolchildren, it is important that teachers utilise effective strategies to manage the class (Clunies-Ross, Little & Kienhuis, 2008). Parents find this also relevant, but students don't mention it in the top five.

For students it is important that a teacher is a *good person* or *well-intended*. It is the basis of good relationships and it is confirmed in previous research (Vlad & Ciascai, 2014).

Teachers, on the other hand, mention *sensitivity for students* and *creativity*. They find it necessary for a teacher to understand that students have different abilities, expectations, needs, backgrounds, etc. Recognition of such diversity helps them shape their approach to achieve teaching objectives. If teachers have empathy for their students, they will be effective and more satisfied with their teaching (Cooper, 2013). Creativity can be one of the ways to approach children's diversities. There is evidence that teachers position it very highly (De Souza Fleith, 2000). As Sawyer puts it (2011, p. 15): "creative teachers are experts at disciplined improvisation".

Looking from the Korthagen's model, teachers highlighted characteristics of a good teacher mostly from the level of *mission* (fairness, patience, sensitivity for students, creativity) and fewer *competencies* (teaching skills, discipline management), parents listed more from the level of *competencies* (teaching skills, discipline management, subject related knowledge) than *mission* (fairness, patience), and students tackled *mission* (fairness, patience, being a good person), *competencies* (teaching skills), and *behaviour* (humour). The levels of *identity*, *beliefs* and *environment* were not mentioned.

### *Elementary vs. high school point of view*

Elementary and high school children's parents did not differ in their choices. Probably some of the parents in this sample had children in both schools, so they answered regardless of school. Teachers that work in elementary schools and those from high schools ranked the desirable characteristics similarly (fairness, discipline management, teaching skills and patience) with few exchanges of places. Elementary school teachers chose *sensitivity for students* and high school teachers put *creativity* at the 5<sup>th</sup> position. Elementary school teachers probably see sensitivity for students as more important than high school teachers, because elementary school students differ developmentally more than high school students. High school teachers emphasised creativity, which is maybe more necessary in work with more mature students that have more questions and requests for certain topics.

No particular trends of change in preferred characteristics were observed regarding teachers' experience. However, differently experienced groups listed some specific features. The least experienced group mentioned *creativity*, probably because they still need to articulate many lessons. The middle experienced group put *humour*, maybe because they became more relaxed and comfortable teaching. The most experienced group listed *subject related knowledge* perhaps as a necessity in a constantly changing world.

Although students of both schools agree about the importance of fairness, patience, teaching skills and humour, slight differences were found. Elementary school students strongly emphasized *humour*, explicitly by telling jokes. This was found in previous research (Alkan, 2013). They obviously cherish a more joyful atmosphere than the high school students. They also see a good teacher as a *good person*, someone who is well-intended, probably associating him/her to a person that creates a protective atmosphere. High school students recognise *discipline management* as important maybe because they better understand that lack of discipline interferes with learning. Such preference among older students was found in other research (Bakx et al, 2015).

Compared with the Korthagen's model, characteristics of a good teacher in elementary and high schools are identified mostly from the level of *mission* (fairness, patience) and *competencies* (teaching skills, discipline management) and least – *behaviour* (humour). At the level of *mission*, students from elementary schools additionally mention that a good teacher should be a good person, while high school teachers put creativity.

The results of this research contribute scientifically to Korthagen's model. They can also be used in work with teachers, students and parents to reflect on their perspectives of a good teacher and in curriculum of preservice teacher education.

### **Conclusion**

The most desirable characteristics of a good teacher from the students, teachers and parents' perspective are fairness, patience and teaching skills. According to Korthagen's model of levels of change, the listed characteristics fit mostly in the level of mission, and less in the level of competencies, proving so that the model can be used for teacher's features' analysis. The limitations of the study can be the lack of anonymity in giving answers, because participants were interviewed and the

cultural restriction only to one country. In future research the list of desirable characteristics could be categorised and compared. Other groups of participants can be included, such as student teachers and university teachers that teach them. Further analyses can be made, based on gender. It could also be interesting to explore how characteristics of bad teachers fit the same model. In addition to this cross-sectional design, longitudinal research could provide data on developmental trends in assessing desirable characteristics of a good teacher.

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