

Foundational Teacher Skills Are Soft Skills

Crucial skills of the most effective teachers today are very different from those twenty years ago. Long gone are the days of one room school houses with a handful of students. Reading, writing and arithmetic was enough back then. It takes more than expertise in an academic field to be an effective teacher. Knowledge is still important, but it is less important today than soft skills.

The complexity and rapid evolution of knowledge teachers are expected to convey and the “[bundles of habitual action tendencies](#)” (Foldes et al. 2008) that teachers are expected to communicate in order to be effective are growing exponentially. In today’s world, a different breed of teacher is required. In this paper we will review recent research literature and summarize findings about the skills possessed by the most effective teachers. The results may be surprising.

Dr. Todd Whitaker is professor of educational leadership at Indiana State University and one of the nation’s top thought leaders in staff motivation, teacher leadership, and principal effectiveness. He has authored over 30 books including the national best seller - [What great Teachers do Differently](#). In his research he found that accurate self-reflection and awareness of how one is perceived by others are the most important skills of effective teachers. According to [Whitaker \(2013\)](#), It’s not about knowledge, degrees or experience, “instead it is about what they do, especially people skills, consistently. Great teachers know their students and connect with them.” Knowing your students is more important than knowing your subject. Students care more about how they are treated than how they are taught.

There has been a shift in the research findings since the 1990’s. Previously, research reported that the most important aspects of teachers were classroom reward structure ([Ames & Ames, 1984](#)), ([Ames, 1990](#)), classroom organization ([Rosenholtz & Wilson, 1980](#)) and curriculum ([O’Keefe & Linnenbrink, 2014](#)). More recently, researchers are focusing on the quality of the teacher–child relationship. For example, the concept of “pedagogical caring” ([Wentzel, 1997](#)) has been the subject of more recent research. [Carol Murray \(2016\)](#) wrote that “nothing drives learning as powerfully as eye contact, touch and voice – the essential elements in the pedagogy of care.”

Researchers are now highlighting the importance of caring and closeness in student–teacher relationships (Birch & Ladd, [1996](#), [1997](#), [1998](#); [Murphy, 2016](#); [Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991](#); [Goldstein, 1999](#); [Niemi & Ryan \(2009\)](#); [Wentzel, 1997](#)). [Furrer and Skinner \(2003\)](#) reported that “Relationships to teachers are considered especially potent because of the many roles teachers play, for example, as a potential attachment figure, as a pedagogue, as a disciplinarian, and as the final arbiter of a student’s level of performance.”

[Linton \(2016\)](#) writes that his research found one teacher quality referenced more than any other – effective teachers are “highly relational and invested meaningfully with students on multiple levels – academically, socially, and spiritually...ineffective teachers often struggle to bridge the gap between being a teacher-authoritarian or teacher-friend figure to that of

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becoming a student-centered-authority/adult-mentor/advocate.” The best teachers are those who are both very human and very professional, both student-centered and subject-centered.

Dr. Dale Linton, Associate Professor of Education in the [School of Education](#), wrote: “Effective teachers seamlessly blend together positive personality traits, content knowledge, and pedagogical skillfulness coupled with an in-depth understanding of their students and their learning needs.” Studies of student opinions of positive teacher qualities have found that students “want teachers who are qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable about their content areas, who possess a set of desired relational skills, and who know how to teach and to create and manage a safe and effective learning environment.” He found that the number one teacher quality repeatedly referenced and desired involved teachers who were highly relational and invested meaningfully with students on multiple levels - academically, socially, and spiritually.

The Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship in collaboration with Georgetown University (The Center) identified seven [top qualities](#) of effective teachers. While there are numerous different ways to teach effectively, the most effective teachers have certain characteristics in common. They recognize that they are a role model for their students. They know how to interact with integrate the learning style needs of their students with the material to be taught. The top qualities are:

- Positive - They are confident enough to view students as teammates, not adversaries. They realize the importance of keeping students motivated and recognize that different students are motivated by different things. Teaching is a serious and important profession, but they know how to have fun in the classroom. Knowing how to balance focus on lesson plans with being creative and innovative.
- Prepared – They understand that, in the same way students are expected to do homework and prepare for class, teachers are responsible to do the same. If they are unclear about a concept they review it prior to class. They do not procrastinate until the morning of the class to prepare.
- Organized – The most effective teachers prioritize the content they will communicate in order to cover the most important concepts in class. They facilitate the integration of their work, including reading, labs, exams, papers, lectures, etc. Helping students synthesize information and experiences from each of those contexts helps them to learn how to think about the subject rather than simply memorize the facts.
- Clear - The most effective teachers become experts in their subjects so that, while they probably know more about the subject than most, they can simplify it and present it in a way that is easily digestible by their students.
- Active - The most effective teachers recognize that lecturing is not the best way for students to learn material. They allow time in class for activities other than traditional lectures. One example is using small groups to problem solve and engage with the material.

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- Patient - The most effective teachers realize that teaching is a process, not an event. It's much more than presenting content and moving on to the next thing. Both teaching and learning is hard work. What makes the light of learning come on in one student is unlikely to work with every student. Being frustrated when it feels like the light will never come on for a particular student only short circuits the teacher's ability to teach and the student's ability to learn.
- Fair - The most effective teachers know the importance of setting clear expectations, applying them consistently, and being willing to admit when they are wrong. Once the standards are set they know it is essential to apply them equally and consistently. They do not play favorites.

According to Jacqui Murray, Effective teachers all have certain [classroom management](#) characteristics.

- They Care – students know that their teachers are there because they want to be and they are invested in their students' learning.
- They Listen – We were born with two ears and one mouth. Often, teaching uses that ratio. It shows students you care and that what they think is important.
- They Are Knowledgeable – When a teacher knows the subject matter, best ways to teach it, and how to follow tangents that students raise without getting completely off track.
- They Are Flexible – Different students require different ways of teaching, correcting, and relating in order to bring out their best.
- They Are Committed to a Student's Success – They own responsibility for students not learning rather than place all of the blame on students. At the same time, they are attuned to other circumstances that may interfere with learning.
- They Teach Students in Ways that Communicate to Them – This means striving to connect with all students not just most of them.

In an article appearing on TeachHub.com, [Janelle Cox](#) called attention to 21st century skills that teachers should possess.

1. Adaptability – This includes the ability to flex with the ways that students learn best. If the teacher does not connect with a student's learning style is not only will their learning be impaired, but their classroom behavior may deteriorate.
2. Confidence – Believing in yourself as a teacher inspires students to be confident as well.
3. Communication – The ability to be clear and concise in communication with parents, administrators and students facilitates relationships and learning.
4. Team Player – Networking and collaborating with other teachers facilitates innovation and effective problem solving. Doing so also fosters a sense of community.
5. Continuous Learner – The world in general and the field of education in particular is constantly changing. New research about best practices is being published. The effective teacher stays in touch with advances in the profession.

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6. Imaginative – More than ever, creativity and imagination are important to education, career and life in general. The requirements of Common Core Learning Standards leave little time for the fun of learning and finding creative ways to teach.
7. Leadership – Knowing how to mentor and guide students facilitates learning. Leading by example and communicating caring provides a good role model for students to follow.
8. Organization – Planning for unknown contingencies such as needing a substitute helps to maintain the learning flow and maintain good classroom management.
9. Innovative – This involves staying abreast of advances in educational technology and maintaining a creative, curious mindset.
10. Commitment – Remaining fully engaged and committed to the education profession communicates that the teacher wants to be in the classroom with his/her students.
11. Ability to Manage Online Reputation – Teachers need to be cautious of the social networks they utilize. LinkedIn is geared to professional, Snapchat is not. Avoiding social networks that students visit is a good practice.
12. Ability to Engage – Engaging with students requires staying up to date with resources and materials that will keep students interested. Always be on the lookout for ways to keep things interesting for students.
13. Understanding of Technology – Teachers need to know which digital tools are right for their students. While it takes time, it will have positive impact on student success.
14. Know When to Unplug – Making time to refuel is essential for teachers. Not only is it healthy for teachers, it allows them to bring their best to the classroom. Included in maintaining balance is taking time away from social media themselves.
15. Ability to Empower – Several benefits are included under this skill, including empowering students to be innovative, creative, adaptable, think critically, and to be passionate and flexible. Great teachers know how to empower students to self-direct self-reflect and lead. In other words, they know how to pass on the 21st century skills that effective teachers have.

The columns in following table lists the skills that each author believes effective teachers exhibit. The rows reflect the skills with similar content. Mapping of the skills is based on the entire content of the authors' explanations of skills, not the brief description alone. Note that each of the skills identified by the authors are soft skills. PAIRIN measures each of the soft skill attributes listed in the table as well as some that are not included by Cox, Murray and The Center.

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Foundational Skills of Effective Teachers		
Janelle Cox	Jacqui Murray	The Center
Adaptability	They Teach Students in Ways That Communicate to Them;	Positive; Organized; Active; Patient
Confidence	They Are Flexible; They Are Committed to a Student's Success	Positive; Patient
Communication	They Teach Students in Ways That Communicate to Them; They Listen; They Are Knowledgeable	Prepared; Positive; Clear; Active; Patient; Fair
Team Player	They Care; They Are Flexible; They Are Committed to a Student's Success	Clear; Active; Fair
Continuous Learner	They Care; They Are Knowledgeable	Active
Imaginative	They Are Flexible; They Are Committed to a Student's Success	Prepared; Positive; Active; Patient
Leadership	They Are Committed to a Student's Success	Organized; Clear; Active
Organization	They Care	Prepared
Innovative	They Listen	Active
Commitment	They Teach Students in Ways That Communicate to Them	Prepared; Organized; Active; Patient; Fair
Ability to Manage Online Reputation	They Are Knowledgeable	Organized
Ability to Engage	They Care; They Listen	Positive; Clear; Active; Patient
Understanding Technology	They Are Knowledgeable	
Know When to Unplug	They Care; They Listen; They Are Flexible	Positive; Organized; Patient
Ability to Empower	They Care; They Listen; They Are Flexible	Positive; Clear; Active; Patient; Fair

Conclusion

There has been a shift in the foundational skills associated with effective teachers. In the past, the skills that distinguished effective from ineffective teachers were classroom reward structure, classroom organization and curriculum. Today the focus has shifted to the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Put simply, today's students care more about how they are treated than how they are taught. Effective teachers communicate important aspects of caring

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and being invested in their students' success. This summary of the foundation skills of effective teachers confirmed that numerous researchers agree on the skills that are required for effective teachings. In fact, the skills presented from three sources presented in the table above overlapped completely. There is no disputing that the foundational skills required of today's effective teachers are soft skills.

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