

Characteristics of STAR Secondary Social Studies Teachers: Relating Reality to Theory

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Abstract

Teacher recruitment and retention are recurring topics of investigation. To clarify this topic at our own university, we conducted a study of 10 graduates previously selected as the stars, (i.e., outstanding, social studies student teachers in our program from 1994 to 2004). The following questions guided the study: Did they enter teaching, and did they remain? What, if any, are the characteristics they have in common and distinguish them as star teachers? Using qualitative processes involving guided interviews with the graduates as well as their supervisors, transcript analysis, triangulated data, and case analyses meetings, we were able to pose cogent answers to both questions, including nine characteristics related to content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as professional dispositions.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the teaching profession has a problem attracting and retaining teachers. A 2006 study in a major American city showed that only 42% of teachers in that city's public schools were "highly qualified," (i.e., certified and teaching in the field in which they are certified) (Palmer, 2006). The 2004 report from the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 7.4% of teachers left the profession between 1999 and 2001 (Luekens, Lyter & Fox, 2004). Thirty percent of teachers who leave do so within the first three years of their teaching careers, and 50% leave within five years of beginning teaching (Johnson, 2004).

To investigate the dynamics of this issue at the local level, we initiated a study with selected graduates who prepared to become middle and high school teachers. The graduates

selected for the study were those who were *stars* of our secondary education social studies program and had been chosen as annual recipients of the department's Outstanding Social Studies Student Teaching Award. The subjects of this study were the recipients of the award from 1994 to 2004. More recent recipients were not included because they had not yet achieved tenure status in the schools.

Purpose of the Study

We set out globally to find out what had happened to our star secondary social studies graduates and specifically to answer two questions:

1. Did these student teachers enter and remain in teaching?
2. Do these teachers have common distinguishing characteristics?

Method

One student teacher is selected annually for the award from a pool of 20-40 potential university graduates eligible for social studies certificates. Each honoree is selected by the 10 members of the Secondary Education Department faculty using multiple criteria: (a) at least a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) earned in the social studies or history major, (b) at least a 3.5 GPA earned in professional education courses, (c) outstanding evaluations from the mentor teachers and university supervisor in his or her middle and high school student teaching experiences, and (d) recommendation by the student's faculty adviser.

To collect data relevant to the study, each award winning graduate was interviewed (Van Maanen, 1979) by the same team of three faculty members from the Secondary Education Department. Each interview was conducted as a guided interview (Patton, 1990) using a 23 items questionnaire and lasting 1 to 1.5 hours. One faculty member was the primary interviewer, and the two other team members scribed the interviewee's responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With the subject's permission, each interview was also recorded and a written transcript prepared. At the conclusion of each interview, the three researchers independently wrote reflective notes (Wolcott, 1992). Ten items on the questionnaire dealt with basic demographic data, such as name, area of certification, school, years of service as a teacher, grade levels taught, and the like. The final 13 items dealt with information and opinions relevant to the two primary questions of study. Examples include the following: (a) What do you do best as a teacher? (b) In what areas of your teaching are you working to improve? (c) What evidence do you collect to demonstrate your success as a teacher? (d) In what ways have you grown as a teacher? (e) Do you plan to remain in teaching? (f) What have you learned about yourself through your teaching? (h) Have you begun or completed an advanced degree?

With each subject's permission, we interviewed two of his or her supervisors (usually an administrator and department chair) using three grand tour questions: (a) What are this individual's outstanding features as a teacher? (b) What is this individual's greatest challenge as a teacher? (c) This individual was our star student teacher the year of his or her award (criteria for the award were explained to each supervisor). Is he or she a star teacher at your school?

These interviews with supervisors were conducted by telephone by one of the three researchers who scribed the supervisors' responses to the three questions. The purpose of these two interviews was to corroborate the responses given by the teacher and to determine if the teacher was, indeed, in the view of these two supervisors, a star among his or her colleagues.

Results

In order to enhance the reliability of our interpretations, each researcher separately conducted content analyses. Using an inductive approach, we each read the notes scribed by the two researchers during the teacher interviews, listened to recordings of these interviews, read the transcripts of the interviews, read the reflective notes written by each of the three researchers at the conclusion of each interview, and read the duplicated interview responses from the administrators, coding the data to answer the two research questions. Next, we came together, shared our individual interpretations to the two research questions, and looked for commonalities among our findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We required each conclusion to be data-based for each subject and data sources were revisited for counter-evidence (Kvale, 1996). The degree of agreement among our independent findings, the availability of supporting data, and the absence of disconfirming evidence was startling; consequently, we were able to construct coherent and relevant responses to both research questions.

Question 1: Did These Star Student Teachers Enter and Remain in Teaching?

Of the 11 award winners from 1994 to 2004, 9 were included in the study. (Two award winners had moved out-of-state and could not be located.) Seven of the winners (78%) entered and remained in teaching, with years of service ranging from 3 to 11 years. The first award recipient taught for six years and had been an assistant principal for five years. At the time of the interview, four of the seven teachers were assigned to low-performing secondary schools ("low performing" based on No Child Left Behind testing), and two had taught for four and five years at low-performing schools prior to their current assignments in average- or high-performing schools. Two award winners had left teaching. One taught for two and a half years and then moved into educational television. He reported enjoying teaching but felt overwhelmed with the time required to complete mandatory paperwork and discouraged that decision making on the part of teachers was minimal. A second award winner left teaching after four years due to disillusionment with the school climate and leadership team.

Question 2: Do These Teachers Have Common Distinguishing Characteristics?

Yes. Nine characteristics were found in this study to be shared by all subjects. They are, indeed, the attributes which, in the aggregate, most clearly and decisively distinguish these teachers as stars. We readily acknowledge that there is no precise connection between "explanation" and "causality" (Kim, 1981); that is, it is not enough to conclude that one or more of the attributes shared by members of a group accounts for the success of their efforts individually or collectively. For instance, in this study, the "cause" of a teacher's perceived outstanding performance cannot be attributed to one or more characteristics shared by the group of teachers. The relationship, at best, must be inferred. We are confident, however, after thoughtful and collective consideration of the characteristics identified in this study, that they are positively associated with the outstanding (i.e., star) performance of the teachers in this study.

So vital and common are these qualities to the perceived success of these teachers that we labeled them the "Nine Cardinal Attributes of Star Social Studies Teachers." They are enumerated below in no specific order of rank or relative importance.

1. Outstanding content knowledge. In addition to their high grade point averages from undergraduate study, all of the teachers in this study either had already completed a Masters' degree or were enrolled in an advanced degree program related to education. The Masters' programs were instructional leadership, instructional technology, school counseling, secondary education, and history. The supervisors interviewed cited these teachers as extremely well grounded in their content knowledge. Six of the teachers had participated as content specialists in curriculum writing workshops, one even as a probationary teacher.

2. Excellent pedagogical skills. The ability to engage all types of students in learning was cited by every supervisor interviewed as a major strength of the award winners. One supervisor, in describing his teacher, said, "She knows what hooks her students' interests, and she never fails to adjust her teaching strategies, or choose the correct teaching strategies, to reach them and maintain their interest. She's absolutely the best classroom strategist I have ever seen!"

3. Reflective about their performance. These star teachers view teaching and learning as a reciprocal process. They left no doubt about it; in every interview, the teachers were deeply concerned about how their teaching was related to student performance. One teacher described her disposition this way, "If [they] don't learn, I haven't really taught." Other respondents echoed her sentiment. The outstanding teachers included in this study displayed a reflective disposition, that is, a persistent curiosity about their effectiveness or ineffectiveness as evidenced in their students' performances. The significance of this attribute in our findings is consistent with emphasis in current theory and research regarding teacher preparation and teacher success (see comments in response to Question 2 in the Discussion section of this paper).

4. A passion for teaching. The personalities and performances of these teachers were distinguished by enthusiasm for teaching, in general, and for social studies content, in particular. "When I teach [social studies], I am unaware of everything around me. The subject is so rich, and I want my students to share my enthusiasm for understanding the world we live in." One department chair commented about another teacher in our study:

She majored in history, but in just the two years she has been at our school, she has become the shining light among teachers in the social studies department. More than anyone, she is always bringing fresh ideas to her classroom every day. It must take her hours every evening to prepare for the next day. I don't know how she does it all.

Such statements were typical of the passion these teachers bring to their craft.

5. Positive attitude about students. Without exception, these teachers described their students and their relationships with students as the most important and enjoyable aspect of their teaching. "I love the kids," explained one teacher, "even when they do goofy things. They're also capable of some brilliant ideas, some that just leave you amazed." Supervisors likewise cited the teachers' obvious enthusiasm about their students and positive attitudes in working with students as a common and observable attribute.

6. *Hard work in and outside the classroom.* These teachers admit that they work long hours and work very hard at their jobs, giving time to meet with individual students, complete committee work, grade papers, sponsor extracurricular events, schedule parent meetings, prepare lessons, select differentiated teaching strategies to meet the needs of students of varied abilities, fill out reports—the list goes on. “The thing that surprised me most about teaching is how much work it is,” explained one teacher. “It wears me out sometimes. . . , but I am pleased when I see the results in student performance.” This statement is typical of the teachers identified as stars.

7. *Outstanding interpersonal skills.* It was obvious during the interviews with the teachers, as well as from comments about them from their supervisors, that they were very skilled in interacting with people in general, and students, colleagues, and supervisors, in particular. During their interviews, they listened attentively, answered questions directly, displayed positive attitudes, asked relevant questions, and invited constructive comments. They did not appear upset or frustrated by challenges facing them in the classroom. One supervisor said about her teacher:

He is a wonderful person, but he is especially good in the school in dealing with students, other teachers and parents. You can see how special he is by the way he and his students treat each other. I would say he is a real ambassador for our school.

8. *Leadership in their school.* The seven teachers who remained in classroom teaching were unanimously viewed as stars by the 14 supervisors interviewed. The supervisors appeared to intuitively translate “star” into “leader,” because they supported their positive responses with examples of leadership that each teacher demonstrated in and outside the school. The most often cited examples were writing curriculum, writing assessment items, developing technology, mentoring other teachers by sharing lesson ideas, and sponsoring extracurricular student activities. Several teachers were already being mentioned by their supervisors as likely candidates for formal leadership positions in their school or school system.

9. *Commitment to remain in education.* All seven teachers, regardless of the academic success or lack of success of the schools in which they taught, reported plans to remain in teaching for the remainder of their careers. Even the teacher who moved into educational television volunteered that he had not completely closed the door on returning one day to the classroom.

Discussion

Question 1: Did These Star Student Teachers Enter and Remain in Teaching?

Fewer of these star social studies graduates left teaching than the national average (23% versus 50%), and the reasons given for leaving by the two teachers in this study—mandatory paperwork, minimal teacher decision-making, and disillusionment with the school climate and leadership team—are among the leading causes cited in national studies for teachers leaving the profession (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkland, 2003). Further investigation would have

us query these star social studies teachers about the strategies they use to deal with these sources of discontent.

Question 2: Do These Teachers Have Common Distinguishing Characteristics?

In order not to bias our interpretations of the data, we waited until the conclusions were reached in this study before immersing ourselves in historical studies and theoretical positions on the traits of good teachers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The results of this process were encouraging; that is, we found a high degree of relationship between the characteristics of teachers in this study, on one hand, and those knowledge, skills and dispositions cited elsewhere as essential to successful teaching.

For example, characteristic #1 (outstanding content knowledge) and characteristic #2 (excellent pedagogical skills) coincide with the positions of Shulman (1986), Gudmundsdottir and Shulman (1987), and Darling-Hammond (2003; 2006). They contend that mastery of subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge (i.e., how knowledge is taught to students) are characteristics of teacher competence. (It should be noted that much of Shulman's research was conducted with social study teachers.)

Green (1971) determined two elements of good teaching: the logical and the psychological. Logical activities include "defining, demonstrating, explaining, correcting, and interpreting;" the psychological acts of teaching include "motivating, encouraging, rewarding, punishing, planning, and evaluating" (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005, p. 195). The first two characteristics from our study—content and pedagogical knowledge—parallel Green's logical and psychological acts of teaching.

Fenstermacher and Richardson added a third element of good teaching to Green's two: moral acts of teaching, which include courage, tolerance, honesty, compassion, and respect (p. 195). Other writers (e.g., Wasicsko, Wirtz, Callahan, Erickson, Hyndman, & Sexton 2004; vonEschenbach & Gile, 2007) refer to such "moral acts of teaching" as *dispositions*. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) added dispositions to their current edition of standards for evaluating teacher education candidates' performance (NCATE, 2006). NCATE uses the following definition:

[T]he values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. (p. 53)

We classify the following characteristics found in this study as teacher dispositions: characteristic #4—a passion for teaching; characteristic #5—positive attitude about students; characteristic #6—hard work in and outside the classroom; characteristic #7—leadership, and characteristic #8—commitment to remain in teaching.

Characteristic #3—reflection—is also a key aspect of a teacher's disposition and deserves special attention in our discussion. Dewey (1933) believed that examining experience (i.e., reflection, not just the experience alone) results in learning. Reflective practitioners engage in this self-regulating process because they value their students' growth, want to improve their teaching, and see the connection between the two.

National Council for the Social Studies' Program Standards for the Initial Preparation of Social Studies Teachers (2004), the standards required of colleges and universities seeking NCATE accreditation, use the following language: Candidates in social studies should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of . . . a thematic standard or disciplinary standard (e.g., see p. 20.) However, the evidence required is only what social studies candidates should know and be able to do, that is, content and pedagogical knowledge and skills. No evidence of a candidate's professional dispositions is required. Obviously, the language of the standard needs to be brought in line with evidence required, or the evidence needs to be required in order to comply with the standard.

We found one research-based study that appears to counter one of the characteristics of our star social studies teachers. Haberman (1995) studied star teachers working with children of poverty in urban schools. Although six of our star teachers had taught in low-performing schools, none of them had taught in urban schools with children primarily of poverty. Haberman identified multiple characteristics that mirror eight of our identified characteristics. However, he found that his star teachers, unlike ours, did not necessarily assume leadership roles. They focused primarily on their individual students, and they did not typically choose leadership activities aimed at transforming schools (Haberman, 2004, p. 54).

So what has become of our star social studies teacher candidates? The majority are teaching, perceived by themselves and their supervisors as good teachers and educational leaders, and committed to teaching as a lifetime profession, which is good news for the profession. They are real-life, real world evidence of the essential characteristics of a good teacher—content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and positive dispositions.

Good teaching, however, cannot be characterized as successful teaching without including a characteristic about the success of the learner, that is, the degree to which students master the content. Consequently, this study will be continued with a minimum 5 additional years of award winners, bringing the total number of social studies teachers included in the study to 15. The focus of this second episode of our study will be those measures of student success which can be attributed to these 15 teachers. For example, our state has recently initiated a standardized examination in government required of all prospective high school graduates. Can we show that students taught by these 15 social studies teachers performed better than other students statewide?

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