

Twelve Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Teachers

Laura J. Colker

WHAT DOES IT TAKE to be an effective early childhood teacher? This is a question that has long gnawed at reflective teacher educators, idealistic teachers (especially those just beginning their careers), and worried families who place their young children in the care of another adult. Many educators feel that effectiveness as a teacher stems from a combination of knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics (Katz 1993).

While aspiring teachers can increase their knowledge and develop their skills, their personal characteristics—which involve the socioemotional and spiritual realms in addition to the cognitive—are likely to be more fixed. As Cantor (1990) notes, one can have both knowledge and skills, but without a disposition to make use of them, very little will happen. *Having* is not the same as *doing*.

Because personal characteristics are rooted in feelings and beliefs, we can neither observe them directly nor assess them through traditional methods (Ostorga 2003), which makes them difficult to identify.



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Nevertheless, teacher educators and administrators would benefit greatly from knowing the characteristics of an effective early childhood teacher, as they strive to improve the quality of the field. New teachers and those at a crossroads in their career would also benefit if they could confirm that the interpersonal and intrapersonal beliefs they possess are those demanded by the field.

Reviewing the literature

With these goals in mind, this article summarizes an attempt to identify some of the key characteristics early childhood teachers need to excel in their job. This is by no means a novel idea. The literature cites numerous examples of positive teacher dispositions (Ebro 1977; Smith 1980; Glenn 2001; Usher 2003; Adams & Pierce 2004). These examples often include characteristics such as enthusiasm and a good attitude.

Although they serve a definite need, the existing examples have limitations. Characteristics, or *dispositions*, as they are sometimes called, are frequently used interchangeably with traits and skills in the literature, when

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in fact they are not the same. DaRos-Voseles and Fowler-Hughey (2007) make the point that traits, unlike dispositions, are unconscious behavioral habits. Skills such as “being organized,” “having command of the classroom,” and “asking probing questions” are teacher abilities but not characteristics.

A second problem with the current literature on teacher characteristics is that most of the lists of characteristics were developed with teachers of students in grades beyond the primary years in mind. Indeed, the most common focus is on teachers in higher education; none of the lists of desired teacher characteristics apply exclusively to early childhood teachers. Such a list would certainly benefit the field. Because early childhood teachers need unique knowledge and skills, it is also likely that they need to have characteristics that are unique to them as a group.

A final limitation of the existing literature is that in most instances, teacher educators are the ones attempting to define characteristics of effective teachers. While there is value in this approach, dispositions compiled by experts working with practitioners do not necessarily represent characteristics that practitioners themselves consider important. Because characteristics involve personal perceptions, consulting the beliefs of those doing the job is essential when drawing up a master list of characteristics common among effective early childhood teachers.

In the literature, there are two exceptions in which researchers solicited practitioner perceptions. A study at Ball State University (Johnson 1980) surveyed 227 Indiana public school teachers and 14 school principals to

determine the characteristics correlated with teacher effectiveness.

Teachers reported four key characteristics. According to these respondents, effective teachers

- Have a sound knowledge of subject matter.
- Take a personal interest in each student.
- Establish a caring/loving/warm atmosphere.
- Show enthusiasm with students.

Principals offered a slightly different list of characteristics they consider most important. They said effective teachers

- Conduct thorough instructional planning/organizing.
- Are child oriented.
- Show enthusiasm with students.

A more recent study (Taylor & Wash 2003) at Lander University surveyed 3,000 K–12 teachers and administrators in seven school districts.

Participants completed a modified Delphi survey, ranking the priority of dispositions indispensable to K–12 teachers. Survey participants identified the following as the top 10 characteristics (in descending rank order) of an effective teacher: enthusiastic, an effective communicator, adaptable to change, a lifelong learner, competent, accepting of others, patient, organized, hardworking, and caring.

A new survey

To begin to address the gaps in the literature, I interviewed 43 early childhood practitioners to obtain their perceptions about the personal char-

acteristics of effective early childhood teachers. These participants represent a wide range of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and experience. Although some respondents are no longer classroom teachers (they are mentor teachers, supervisors, trainers, and the like), all were early childhood teachers for a number of years.

Because personal characteristics involve feelings and spirit as well as thought, I did not ask survey participants to simply compose a list of characteristics. Instead, I posed questions about what attracted them to the field of early childhood education, the skills they needed to do their jobs, the challenges they faced, and the rewards they reaped. By reflecting on their practice in this way, respondents described the characteristics of effective teachers.

While this is by no means a perfect approach, it provides insight into a construct that is difficult to define and describe. What follows is a qualitative analysis of the responses provided by the 43 participants. I have organized their responses into 12 themes. The content is entirely the respondents'; the analysis is mine.

What draws teachers to the field of early childhood education?

The reasons people choose a profession offer insight into the characteristics they need to do their job well. Common threads link the practitioners interviewed for this article. People do not enter the early childhood education field for monetary reward or occupational glamour.

The majority of respondents realized at a young age that they wanted to be early childhood teachers. Many, including Renee Hamilton-Jones, who taught preschool for 13 years, reported feeling that “destiny” led them to their career choice. Donna Kirsch, a supervisor of early childhood

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teachers, termed teaching a *calling*: “I had a need to make a difference in children’s lives and ensure they got all the opportunities and nurturing they needed and deserved. It was mostly a calling, much like the ministry—but I don’t say that out loud to too many people.”

The need to make a difference in children’s lives was echoed by nearly every respondent, including longtime kindergarten teacher Joanna Phinney: “I entered the field of early childhood education because I wanted to make a difference in the world. I felt that the place to start was with young children because you can make the biggest difference when children are young.”

If you ask early childhood educators who entered the field for idealistic

reasons whether they made the right career choice, you’ll find few regrets. In the group of 43 surveyed here, no one expressed regret. Here’s what two prominent early childhood educators who were once classroom teachers said:

At a certain point in my career I was offered a position that would have been a promotion, but it was not in early childhood. I debated the decision carefully because I was a single parent of two young children at the time and could have used the additional money that came with the promotion. I chose to stay in early childhood education primarily because I knew my heart was with children’s programs. In the end, staying with children’s programs was the best decision. Even at the time I did not regret the decision because

knowing myself as I do, it was more important for me to believe in the cause than to make money.

— Linda Smith, Executive Director, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

I can honestly say that I have never, not once, reconsidered my decision to be an early childhood educator. Quite the contrary, I have often marveled at my luck. This profession has never disappointed me. Sometimes it is hard and I am not always successful, but I have an abiding belief in the value of my contributions. Early childhood education has definitely been my “calling,” and because of the good match, I have been able to apply my talents and skills in an arena that both needed and valued my insights.

— Linda Espinosa, Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Missouri–Columbia

What characteristics make early childhood teachers effective?

All the survey participants felt strongly that the early childhood profession has been a good match for their personalities and life goals. What then are the personal characteristics that contributed to making early childhood education a good career match?

1. Passion. Probably more than anything else, teachers report that it’s important to have a passion for what you do. In many of the studies referenced in the literature, participants singled out “enthusiasm for children” as a key attribute. For the teachers in this study, however, something stronger than enthusiasm makes a truly effective teacher; it is closer to *drive*.

Being an early childhood educator is not always easy. There may be physical and financial challenges, for example. But if you feel that what you are doing makes a difference, that sense of accomplishment can sustain and motivate you. John Varga, a Head Start site supervisor, counsels those who do not have a passion for early childhood to find a different career. “This is not a career for someone just looking for a job working with kids because they are cute and it looks like fun. This is a career that must ignite your passion.”

2. Perseverance. This is another characteristic frequently cited. Some respondents referred to perseverance as “dedication”; others felt it was “tenacity.” Whatever term they used, what participants described is the willingness to fight for one’s beliefs, whether related to children’s needs or education issues. Teachers have to be willing to be long-term advocates for improving the lives of children and their families. Respondents in this study believe children need and deserve teachers who can overcome bureaucracy and handle red tape.



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3. Willingness to take risks. A third related characteristic is the willingness to take risks. Successful educators are willing to shake up the status quo to achieve their goals for children. Great teachers are willing to go against the norm. Taking a risk means not settling for a no answer if a yes will improve the quality of a child's education.

For example, one teacher reports wanting to team teach her preschool class with a self-contained special education program adjacent to her room. Integration of programs had never been done before at her school, and faculty and administration alike looked at the idea with skepticism. To secure administration approval, the teachers had to conduct research, do a parent survey, and bring in outside experts. They held parent meetings to convince both the families of children with disabilities and those of children without disabilities that their children would benefit. After much energy and effort, the program was initiated on a trial basis. Five years later, it is one of the most successful and popular programs at the school (Villa & Colker 2006).

4. Pragmatism. Pragmatism is the flip side of perseverance and willingness to take risks. Pragmatists are willing to compromise. They know which battles are winnable and when to apply their resources in support of children. The important point, respondents felt, is that effective teachers understand that by temporarily settling for small wins, they are still making progress toward their goals.

Indeed, any job in early childhood education demands that you be able to deal well with change and unexpected turns.

5. Patience. In line with pragmatism is the characteristic of patience. Respondents cite the need to have patience both when dealing with "the system" and when working with children and families. Not every child learns quickly. Some behaviors can challenge even the most effective teacher. Children need reminder after reminder. Good teachers have a long fuse for exasperation, frustration, and anger. They regard all such challenges as exactly that—challenges. Effective teaching requires patience.

6. Flexibility. This is the sixth characteristic linked by study participants to successful teaching. Indeed, any job in early childhood education demands that you be able to deal well with change and unexpected turns. Whether it's raining outside and you have to cancel outdoor play, or your funding agency has drastically reduced your operating budget, you need to be able to switch gears at a moment's notice and find an alternative that works.

Sometimes the challenges are both drastic and sudden. Fresh out of college, Ashley Freiberg—one of the study respondents—had been a kindergarten teacher for only a few weeks when she found herself welcoming evacuees from Hurricane Katrina into her Baton Rouge, Louisiana, classroom: "I have 28 kindergarten children in my classroom, and it is my job to work with each of my students and present them with information that will help them to become readers, to master basic math facts, to know about the world around them, and to follow the classroom and school rules. I must do this leaving no child behind, teaching each individual student in the classroom, *without* a classroom



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aide!" Despite the pressures, Ashley adapted, doing what she had to for each child. Her flexibility exemplifies a vital character trait that respondents felt effective teachers must have.

7. Respect. Surveyed teachers strongly believed that respect for children and families is basic to being a good early childhood teacher. Some identified this characteristic as an "appreciation of diversity." They described it as not only respecting children and families of all backgrounds, but also as maintaining the belief that everyone's life is enhanced by exposure to people of different backgrounds who speak a variety of languages. We know that children's self-concepts flourish in an environment of respect. Good teachers create this environment naturally.

8. Creativity. An eighth characteristic respondents cited was creativity. It takes creativity to teach in a physical environment that is less than ideal or



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when resources are limited. It takes creativity to teach children from diverse backgrounds who might not approach education in the same way. It takes creativity to teach children with differing learning styles who think and learn in different ways. And most of all, it takes creativity to make learning fun. Creativity is a hallmark of an effective early childhood teacher.

9. Authenticity. This is another frequently cited characteristic of effective teaching. Some respondents referred to this attribute as “self-awareness.” Being authentic means knowing who you are and what you stand for. It is what gives you integrity and conviction. Young children are shrewd judges of character; they know whether a teacher is authentic, and they respond accordingly.

10. Love of learning. Respondents also singled out love of learning. To inspire children with a love of learning, they said, teachers themselves ought to exhibit this characteristic. Teachers who are lifelong learners send children the message that learning is an important part of life. Several participants felt that being an effective teacher involves seeking out knowl-

edge about recent research on teaching. Respondents in this study regard both teaching and learning as dynamic processes.

11. High energy. Though it may have more to do with temperament than disposition, many teachers felt it important that teachers display high energy. Most children respond positively to teachers with high energy levels, valuing their enthusiasm. As Linda Espinosa observed, “The energy it takes to get up every day and work on behalf of young children and families is enormous.”

12. Sense of humor. A final vital characteristic of effective teaching pinpointed by respondents in the study was having a sense of humor. Learning should be fun; nothing conveys this message more than a room that is filled with spontaneous laughter. John Varga summarizes the importance of this characteristic in teaching: “All children ask is

Young children are shrewd judges of character; they know whether a teacher is authentic, and they respond accordingly.

that we love them and respect them and be willing to laugh when it’s funny . . . even when the joke’s on us.”

Conclusion

Reflecting on their practice, 43 early childhood educators identified characteristics they believe are integral to effective teaching. The resulting 12 characteristics include: (1) passion about children and teaching, (2) perseverance, (3) risk taking, (4) pragmatism, (5) patience, (6) flexibility, (7) respect, (8) creativity, (9) authenticity, (10) love of learning, (11) high energy, and (12) sense of humor.

Interestingly—and not surprisingly—some of the identified characteristics parallel those already identified in the literature (patience, authenticity, and a love of learning, for example.) In other instances, practitioners identified characteristics not typically seen in the literature (perseverance, risk taking, and pragmatism, for example). A future research study could compare the findings; perhaps practitioners have identified trends not yet picked up on by teacher educators.

As acknowledged, data reported in this article were not scientifically collected nor are they meant to represent the view of the entire field. The article does, however, report what selected early childhood educators themselves believe are important characteristics for doing their work effectively. It is the difference between an expert telling a parent how to be a good parent

and a parent giving his perspective on parenting. Thus, it is not a question of which is better. Rather, it is an attempt to honor the practitioner’s own views about this hard to define but important component of teaching.

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