

Inside the Mystery of Good Teaching

by Maisie McAdoo

Harvard professor Ronald Ferguson believes the best teachers are both demanding and supportive.

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What makes a good teacher?

Experience, some suggest. Others say high grades on the teacher exams, full certification, good professional development and advanced study.

These are all quantifiable—that is, researchers can measure these elements and at least roughly connect them to student outcomes. And indeed, each contributes to increased student achievement to some degree.

But seasoned teachers will usually say something more. They will say that high-quality teaching is really defined by something less quantifiable: what happens inside the classroom between teacher and student. They suspect that there is an art to teaching, even a bit of mystery to it, but that this unquantifiable element makes a big difference.



A Harvard University researcher thinks they're right. "Certification matters in math, experience does make a little bit of difference, teacher test scores do have some ability to predict teacher effectiveness, but in my experience it makes much more of a difference what a teacher actually does in the classroom," said Ronald Ferguson, economist and lecturer in public policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he specializes in education.

What can teachers do?

All students have the potential to work consistently, all year, to demanding standards. They also have the potential to sit slumped in the back of the room, disrupting the class and doing the absolute minimum, as teachers know all too well.

While teachers have little control over school or district policy, they can make a difference in their

classroom climate. But what is it, exactly, that they can do?

Ferguson has devoted several years to this question. In a recent conversation, he described an "instructional tripod" with course content as one leg, pedagogy (how the content is presented) as a second leg and "relationships" as the equally important third leg holding the structure together.

That relationship leg is critical and is strengthened by what he termed teacher "encouragement." Encouragement makes a difference in how students respond to instruction, Ferguson said, and "can weaken the link between past and future performance," boosting children's accomplishments beyond what was expected of them—beyond even what they themselves believed they were capable of.

"Encouragement is not just a rah-rah statement," he explained. It is not just mouthing "all children can learn" while praying for the day to end. Teacher encouragement consists of assuring all students that the teacher truly believes they can succeed; letting students know the teacher is available to help in whatever way the students need; and letting students know that it matters to the teacher's very sense of self that her students succeed.

"Encouragement is really close to caring," Ferguson said. "It tells students that I will do things for you that I don't have to do and that I won't let you give up."

It does not undermine high standards but instead supports them. Once students are convinced the teacher cares, they are much more likely to produce their best work all year.

Perfectionism and help

Ferguson's most recent research paper, took a large sample of elementary school students and broke their classrooms into four categories, based on how students described the class environment.

He used the term "perfectionism" to describe an environment in which students reported, "In our class, getting right answers is very important"; he used the term "help" to describe an environment where students said, "My teacher is nice to me when I ask questions." Then he mixed and matched the categories to create his four classroom types: high perfectionism/high help, high perfectionism/low help, low perfectionism/high help, and low perfectionism/low help.

To assess the results of each approach, Ferguson did not use test scores but rather measures of student effort and engagement. He asked the students themselves to say whether they produced their best work all year. The results? Students in high perfectionism/high help classrooms—that is, classrooms led by teachers who were both demanding and supportive—were far more likely to report that they had done their best work all year.

"Welcoming questions from students and emphasizing the importance of correct answers," Ferguson wrote, "is apparently a key determining factor in . . . whether students persist through the year."

Helping close the performance gap

Ferguson is best known for research into the performance gap between black and white students, and he is convinced that teachers are especially important to minority children. In an article last year in the journal *Urban Education*, he discussed a study that asked 8th- and 9th-graders whom they wanted to most please with their class work. "Teachers" was the answer for 81 percent of black females and 62 percent of black males, but only 28 percent of white females and 32 percent of white males. Whites were more concerned with pleasing parents.

Yet he said minority children are more apt to perceive their teachers as demanding without establishing that all-important caring relationship that would support their achievement. This is not racial bias on the part of teachers, Ferguson believes, but more likely a misjudgment about motivation and potential.

The more inviting and responsive instruction is to children's efforts to improve, the less teachers' initial perceptions and expectations will predict later success, he wrote.

Put another way, encouragement makes it more likely that students will perform beyond the expectations of even those who know them well.

But in looking at minority students in particular, Ferguson found a disturbing trend: Classes with mainly black and Latino students were more than twice as likely as majority white or Asian classrooms to be in the high perfectionism/low help classrooms. And they were only about half as likely to be in the low perfectionism/high help groups. Yet being in a high perfectionism/high help class raised black and Latino performance levels far more than few whites and Asians.

Getting classroom environment right

If he were a public school teacher in a big urban system, Ferguson said, he would build his classroom environment by establishing five principles to balance "perfectionism" and "help":

1. This is a place of mutual support (establishing caring and trust);
2. We are going to have order in here (balancing of student autonomy and teacher control);
3. We're going to have very high goals (communicating high expectations);
4. Sometimes this is going to be hard (setting conditions for student persistence);
5. By the end of the year, we will have come a long way (demonstrating faith in students' abilities).

Put that way, who wouldn't work hard for Mr. Ferguson?

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