

Teaching more than Academics

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Abstract

The impetus for this research stems from the perceptions of practicing teachers. Challenges teachers face mirror societal shifts. Teachers' competency in their discipline alone won't assist them in navigating educational reforms and addressing social, emotional, and academic needs of students to succeed in formalized schooling. Are youth facing the negative realities of society earlier and losing their childhood innocence? Do teachers seek employment at lower grades to compensate for that loss? How can pre service teacher's best be prepared for and retained in a teaching career? 210 K-12 teachers from 64 schools provide a realistic view of teaching in today's schools and working with today's students. They provide suggestions for improving Teacher Preparation Programs that should assist with teacher retention. Views expressed are realistic and both positive and negative in painting the picture of challenges to teachers and advice for self-efficacy to navigate and retain careers in teaching.

Keywords: school environment, teacher preparation programs, K-12 schools, social development, teacher retention.

1. Introduction

What do teachers in public schools believe about today are students? Have changes in local communities been mirrored in classroom behaviors and thus impaired teachers' abilities to prepare students with knowledge, skills and values students need to succeed in formalized schooling? Are today's children and youth facing the negative realities of society earlier and losing their childhood innocence? If so, does that loss influence the grade level at which a teacher seeks employment?

Teaching in public schools is no longer a matter of just competent academics or through understanding one's subject matter. Teachers must also be able to navigate the challenging world of academic reform and the restructuring of the public school system. How can preservice teacher's best be prepared for this future? What kinds of experiences, skill, and advice can be provided for them so they can confidently succeed in their careers? These and similar questions formed the impetus for this research.

Kersaint, et. al. (2007) explored the concept of the joy of teaching in relation to retaining teachers in the profession through developing strategies and an intervention program. They examined drivers that influenced teachers to stay, move into another assignment or leave the teaching profession. Because of the high attrition rate of teachers in the first five years, Fisher (2011) studied the role of stress in burnout and retention. Both these studies indicate many variables about the quality of life internal and external to the teacher's role in the classroom impact retention. Doney (2013) promotes developing resilience as a skill for novice and experienced teachers. Coping strategies need to be taught. Some areas include safety nets in the institution, personal, family, and social arenas. Strong and Yoshida (2014) studied the teacher's need for autonomy in their educational climate especially the classroom. Greenberg, Walsh & McGee (2014) found that 50% of the USA teacher preparation programs were failing to adequately prepare new teachers. They reviewed recruitment, admission, program content, and support for new teachers.

Levine (2010) includes this conversation into a larger view of suggesting teacher preparation programs change in light of changes in America. The role of a teacher has changed in this shift to an information age of globalization, digital technology and scientific advances including advanced brain discoveries on how people learn. Swanchak (1969) discussed apparent social changes in his time such as the lessening of rigid social standards, parental desire to win their child's approval, which changes the view of parenting, the importance of the peer group, the growth of a youth sub-culture without adult transmission of values and goal-setting techniques for youth. Arguments could contend these issues have intensified today. Malin (2011) warns that as youth grow in an environment where individualism is gaining strength, identifying an American civic identity becomes more complex including multidisciplinary areas such as philosophy, sociology, history, and developmental psychology. She notes that "differences have taken their toll on unity and civility in our society". (page 59).

And lastly, the students need to be viewed in terms of contemporary changes. Gardener & Davis (2014) examine youth development in a digital world including identity, intimacy and imagination. They review the myriad of apps as enabling or disabling for this App Generation. Essentially, they argue both sides but state they are missing quiet time for introspection and self-identity and developing narcissism. They are developing an app worldview and hiding any vulnerability behind a screen. Youngbauer (2013) supports K-12 media literacy and cultural studies. Approaches include historical, empirical, interpretive and critical with his recommendation that these studies be included in social studies. Damon, Menon & Bronk (2003) state that youth who develop a purpose beyond themselves carry this drive beyond adolescent life into adulthood. Through case studies, Reilly (2009) discusses supporting youth set purposes, goals and intentions to assist in focusing their talents.

Teachers were asked through a survey format to share their perceptions about children having to face adult and societal problems at earlier ages, positive aspects and problems of teaching, exciting teacher methods, and important skills and recommendations for teacher preparation programs. The underlying premise of this research was that experienced classroom teachers have perceptions about students and the teaching profession that need careful consideration for teacher preparation programs. By providing the teachers an open-ended questionnaire, the teachers identified issues important to them and their profession. With all the stresses that may be placed on students, Brokenleg (2010) promotes the model Circle of Courage which includes generosity, belonging, mastery and independence to support resiliency. Koller and Bertel (2006) promote including teacher preparation training on mental health needs of students and their families since more children with social and emotional needs as well as learning disabilities are placed in general classrooms.

This overview and sampling of concerns, parameters and dimensions facing teachers, schools, and society led to this study which asks teachers their opinions in an open-ended questionnaire format. The educational environment remains important for both teachers and students to accomplish the develop and processes of learning.

2. The Research

A random sample of 100 public schools was selected in California. The principal of each selected school received a packet containing an explanation of the survey, five survey questionnaires, and was asked to distribute the five questionnaires to a representative group of teachers using different grades, years of service, genders and ethnicities as criteria. Thus, 500 teachers from 100 public schools were potential recipients of the survey questionnaire.

Two hundred ten teachers from 64 schools responded to the survey, a 41 percent response rate for teachers and a 64 percent response rate for schools. Participating schools represent a cross-section of communities throughout the state, including urban, suburban, and rural school districts from the north, south, east and west. Sixty-three percent of the responding teachers were from elementary schools (grades K to 6), 16 percent from Junior or middle schools (grades 7 and 8), and 21 percent from senior high schools (grades 9 to 12). The teachers reported an average of 14.5 years of teaching experience.

Sixty-nine percent of the teachers were female and 31 percent male. Females dominated in the lower grades (80 percent of all elementary teacher respondents were female), and males dominated the higher grades (59 percent of all secondary school teacher respondents were male). Eighty-three percent of teachers identified their ethnicity was White American, six percent as Hispanic American, four percent as African American, two percent as Asian American and one percent as Native American while four percent indicated other ethnicities or did not respond to this question. The responding teachers reported an average school size of 612 students and an average class size of 27.6 students. Both school and class size varied with grade level.

Elementary school teachers reported a smaller school size (average 523 students) and a larger class size (average 28.2 students), while secondary teachers reported a larger school size (average 899 students) and a smaller class size (average 24.6 students). The teachers report both ethnic (37 percent average non-white per school site) and language diversity (24 percent spoke English as a second language) among their students.

The participants responded to an open-ended questionnaire. Due to the lack of constraints of their answers, the content varied. Results were tabulated on a percentage of frequency of terms. Since the possibility of multiple answers from respondents existed, percentage figures do not add up to 100%. A typical survey question followed the same format as this sample question. "What are some of the positive things a teacher at your grade level can expect from his/her students these days?"

2.1 Loss of innocence

The survey questionnaire asked the teachers, "Some observers have noted that the age of childhood has changed; that children are beginning to lose their innocence at an earlier age. Would you agree or disagree with this observation?" Ninety-six percent of the respondents agreed with this statement. Teachers who agreed were asked to provide possible contributing factors, which are shown on Table 1. For each of these factors, the teachers were asked to indicate whether they thought the factor contributed to the loss of innocence and whether they had personally observed the factor among students at their own grade level.

Table 1 reveals two patterns of interest. First, familial factors (Unstructured family, Latch-key supervision, Child abuse, Poverty, Homelessness) seem to be more strongly implicated as contributing factors in the loss of innocence than non-familial factors (Media violence, Drugs/alcohol, Actual violence, Gangs, Consumerism, Peer groups). Second, the effects of familial factors are somewhat more often observed at the elementary school level (K to 6), while non-familial factors are more often observed at the junior high, middle school and senior high school levels (7-12).

It may be hypothesized that the loss of innocence observed by the teachers would lead many of them to want to teach at a lower grade level where innocence may be preserved. Data did not support this hypothesis. The survey questionnaire asked the teachers if any of factors which they had observed among their students had made them change or want to change the grade level at which they taught. Twelve percent of the teachers indicated that the loss of innocence factors had made them change or want to change their teaching grade. When asked to explain their answers, most of described difficulties of teaching at their current grade level and implied a desire to move down to a less "difficult" grade.

2.2 Positive aspects of teaching

The loss of innocence factors involve more than simply "growing up" or facing the same problems adults face but at an earlier age. Many of these factors are likely to affect classroom behavior as well. In order to gauge the teachers' experiences in the classroom, the survey questionnaire asked all teachers what they considered to be the positive and negative aspects of teaching. The survey defined terminology in the context of the questions. For instance, negative aspects were actually difficulties or barriers to teaching.

The teachers were asked, "What are some of the positive things that a teacher at your grade level can expect from his/her students these days?" An examination of the teachers' responses to this question reveals a variety of behaviors to be pleasing for teachers. For example, 44 percent of the respondents said that teachers can expect enthusiasm (willingness, eagerness, wanting, excitement desire for learning). Teachers were inspired by the joy children felt while making daily discoveries about the world around them and by the hope expressed in their eyes when they discussed real-world issues.

The need for affection and/or the desire to please were mentioned by 17 percent of the teachers. They felt that most students wanted to be "good", to please, and be accepted by others. Their eagerness to please translated into a willingness to try and an absorption in new things and ideas.

Students' humor, openness, concern for others, and creativity were also mentioned with some frequency (ten percent of the respondents). Teachers felt that students were compassionate for others who had fewer worldly goods and opportunities than themselves and they were generous with what little they had to share. Many felt that when students became involved in issues that both their academic accomplishments and classroom behavior improved. One teacher stated, "It's great to be involved with some kids that really care about others' feelings and the future of our planet when it comes to homelessness, pollution deforestation, etc."

They are looking for structure and positive role models and real ways to solve the problems. They show a great sense of humor and the ability to bounce back from adversity.” It seems clear from the above that today’s teachers are receiving some pleasure from their work. Teachers are pleased by students’ enthusiasm for learning, as well as their need for affection, humor, openness, concern for others, and creativity. These positive aspects help in retaining teachers in the teaching profession. See Table 2 for percentages of responses.

2.3 Negative aspects of teaching

Following the question on “positive things”, the teachers were asked, “What are some of the negative things that a teacher at your grade level can expect from his/her students these days?”

An examination of the responses to this question reveals a plethora of behaviors that are troublesome to teachers and are likely to interfere with the educational process. For example, 28 percent of the respondents said that teachers can expect disrespect from their students. Students use language disrespectful of both people and school property. Along with disrespect, students express anger and blame. Teachers feel that students who are disrespectful do not take personal responsibility for their learning nor are their parents visibly involved in the students’ learning.

Non-parental involvement was also mentioned by 23 percent of the teachers who focused on student apathy or irregular attendance/homework. Four typical comment this area follow:

- (a) High mobility, high absence and tardiness. Unstructured, dysfunctional families, stress/anxiety about parents and family.
- (b) Tired, hungry, listless, not much support from home, tattling, absenteeism.
- (c) More learning problems, more attention problems, less and less at home help or follow through with regard to homework, bringing books back to school, etc. This is a very significant problem. Parents can’t or won’t spend ten minutes a day helping/listening to their child practice reading is increasing.
- (d) Failure to do homework. Careless attitude toward school.

Poor manners, rudeness and/or foul language were mentioned by 14 percent of the teachers. They felt that inappropriate comments and behavior by students indicated a need for schools to teach appropriate school behavior and language usage plus manners for interacting with peers and adults.

Short attention span, unkindness to others, lack of discipline, lack of values, and preoccupation with sex, gangs, and violence were also mentioned with some frequency (10 percent of respondents). This category was a kind of potpourri of items that frustrate teachers. They included student behaviors such as low attention span, low self-esteem, rebellion, violence, rudeness, lack of confidence, lack of respect for education and others, hostility, and student attitudes that decried a willingness to learn, “you can’t make me...”

While these behaviors may always have been experienced by and have long been troublesome to teachers, there are three important patterns in that data that is worth noting. First, the negative aspects mentioned above are occurring with substantial frequencies and not just for some teachers. For example, only three of 210 respondents indicated that they had no negative expectations for their students. Every other teacher named at least one, and over half of the teachers named at least three negative things they expect from students. Several gave shopping lists of problems: low reading and math skills, lack of critical thinking skills, lack of problem solving abilities, increasingly short attention span, hyperactivity, and apathy intolerance of diversity, passivity, lack of intellectual curiosity, anti-intellectualism, tardiness, truancy, no energy, and listlessness.

Second, while most of the troublesome behaviors mentioned might have once been characteristic of older students, they are now found among younger students as well. For example, elementary teachers reported as much disrespect as senior high school teachers. Lower grade teachers made the following comments:

- (a) Tired, disrespectful undernourished students. (Grade K)
- (b) Being unaccountable at home so they don’t feel a need to be accountable here at school. Saying everything is boring or too hard. Verbally hurting others, being unkind. (Grade 3)
- (c) Disrespectfulness, rudeness. An “I don’t care” attitude toward education. (Grade 1)
- (d) Swearing. Sadness. Confusion from divorce. Violent behavior (choking, “ninja” kicking). Name calling. A huge range in ability levels; I have non-readers (no help at home) and those reading at the 4th grade level. (Grade 2)

A third noteworthy pattern is the frequency with which dysfunctional families are seen contributing to the difficulties experienced by teachers. Thirty-seven percent of the teachers identified families or parents as the source of student problems. Areas mentioned included both “under-parenting” and “over-parenting”. All teachers felt students brought difficulties stemming from the home to school that required teachers to understand and enjoy the whole student and not just the student’s academic interest. But many felt they had taken on the role of parent/guardian in dealing with students’ emotional problems, problems with friends, search for values, search for goodness in families and society, and a sense of belonging. See table 3 for summation of this category.

Effective teaching has never involved just academics; it has always required an ability to reach the whole student. A child who is distracted by his/her environment and who is unprepared by his/her parents/guardians is not going to be an easy child to reach. Effective teachers must be prepared to stimulate their students and to help manage distractions for them.

2.4 Most exciting teaching methods

The teachers were asked, “What teaching methods most excite your students these days?” As a group, the teachers supported discovery learning and encouraged their students to help generate ideas and create the learning environment. Clearly stated was the notion “involved students learn” and involvement comes from interactive lessons with students as part of the instructional decision-making process. Real life issues and helping students relate their lives to a subject or issue were noted as highly successful methods. Sixty percent of the teachers said that hands-on (active participation, interactive learning) methods most excited their students. This percentage was highest for elementary school teachers, 72 percent and lowest for senior high school teachers at 34 percent. Cooperative or group learning methods were mentioned by 34 percent of the teachers. Nearly 20 percent of the teachers mentioned games, simulations or computer and online methods excited their students. Ten percent mentioned visual aids or video communication and ten percent mentioned the real life relevance of the material as a method for exciting their students. Ten percent of the teachers mentioned the use of projects and manipulative as effective methods. See Table 4.

2.5 Most important skills

The teachers were asked, “What are the most important skills new teachers of your grade level can be taught these days?” Classroom management (discipline, control of content) was suggested by 48 percent of the respondents as Thirty percent of the teachers mentioned flexibility and/or patience. The ability to accept and communicate with students was mentioned by 29 percent of the teachers. Eleven percent mentioned communication with parents and ten percent mentioned cooperative techniques as important skills. Other teachers mentioned knowledge of subject matter and sense of humor as important skills.

Embedded in the comments were other suggestions for teachers such as presenting yourself as an organized person to students using a kind, non-evaluative voice, providing adult guidance to students rather than taking the role of their friend, and modeling an honest understand and caring attitude. One teacher suggested, “Catch and ride the teachable moment while retaining curricular flow.” Many reinforced building the curriculum around the student. Another teacher suggested, “Be serious about what you teaching. Have a sense of humor about everything else. Leave your ego at home.”

Although several negative aspects of teaching were mentioned previously, the positive aspects of teaching and the positive remarks about the profession and suggested methodology reflect the overall enthusiasm and love of teaching evident throughout the survey participants’ comments. See Table 5.

2.6 Teacher recommendations for teacher preparation

Teacher Preparation programs need to carefully examine their curriculum in order to be sure they are adequately preparing their pre service teachers for the future. The survey questionnaire asked the teachers, “Can you offer other recommendations for preparing new teachers for the future?” Many of the teachers reiterated the need to provide explicit training in the skills mentioned above (classroom management, flexibility, acceptance of students, parent communication, etc. One new suggestion emerged related to the need for increased classroom exposure for student teachers. Eighteen percent of the teachers recommended that Teacher Preparation programs offer more and/or earlier classroom exposure to their students. These teachers suggested that the reality of the contemporary classroom cannot adequately be communicated through textbooks. See Table 5 for an overview of categories and some of the comments specifically listed below.

1. Early exposure to the classroom, even as a freshman to know this is what you want to do. Every semester should have some kind of observation-participation in a school setting.
2. Should do one year student teach (the way it used to be); a semester isn't sufficient.
3. There is entirely too much emphasis on content and not enough on dealing with children's behavior and their parents. My ideal college course for teacher prep would be: (a) Actual classroom experience (aide, volunteer) from freshman year on 'til graduation with on-going consultation with master teachers. (b) Courses as an undergrad dealing with child/adolescent psychology, growth and development. (c) Courses as an undergrad dealing with human psychology to help with communicating with parents/grandparents and other community adults. (d) As a graduate, intensive teaching experience with a master teacher. Anyone can learn to teach a subject—not everyone can teach children well!
4. As with any career choice, experience is the best teacher. My suggestion for preparing new teachers is more classroom time for observation and interaction prior to student teaching, so the prospective teacher receives some indication of handling real situations, i.e. an injury, a discipline problem, a crisis that may affect several children at once, etc.

In addition to the recommendations for new skills acquisition and increased classroom exposure, a number of teachers offered advice to new teachers. This advice is both poignant and instructive.

5. Make sure you want to teach before you go through the education process. Every obstacle and roadblock imaginable will litter your days. Lack of funds, limited supplies, outdated books/materials, nonexistent equipment, ignorant parents who have never worked a day but know how you should do your job, c0-workers who are counting days to retirement, pay cuts, ever increasing class size, more and harder learning and social problems among the students; with all of the demands, this job is only worth it if you know you want to teach. People going into this job should know that these problems, and more, are the rule—not the exception.
6. Give them theory, guidance, and practice in different discipline models. Give them knowledge and practical advice on how to deal with the defiant child, the angry child, the sullen child, the abusive child, the child who steals and lies, the child who can't walk past anyone without bothering them, and the child who is always unhappy.
7. I have the philosophy that teachers need to model being a “whole” person. Because of the intensity of the continued expectations being put upon us, I see more and more teachers losing touch with the other aspects of their lives. Teachers are averaging 60-70 hours a week. This does not leave time for family, personal health (exercise, healthy eating) or recreation (stress reduction, etc.) Don't expect to have a perfect classroom the first year. Do the best that you can do, but create limits for yourself and prioritize your time.
8. Be sure this is what you want to do because it will consume you in many ways. Children need to be, in your mind, the most important resource for the future. It helps if you have a supportive family who can help you at home because you will be very busy!
9. It is a profession for those who still have a vision of hope for the future. It is a profession where you will constantly doubt your worth. It is a profession where few have the courage, determination and faith to succeed before giving up.
10. Prepare them for the fact of life that “teaching” is only half of the job.
11. New teachers face a very bright, very exciting, and very challenging future. Student awareness is at a high level—the student of today is learning how to question, and therefore, does not just blankly absorb information like a sponge. Today's student wants to know how and why also.
12. Really go into teaching because you want to make a difference and NOT for the money. I quote Iacocca: “in a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teacher and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the rest ought to be the highest honor and highest responsibility anyone could have.”
13. Patience...compassion...love of young people. Teaching is a difficult job—not everyone is “meant to be” a teacher, no matter what their skills and knowledge of subject. It is, I think, getting more difficult and complex—even without considering the economic conditions. It's one of the most important jobs in the world.

3.0 Summary

According to the 210 teachers included in this survey, teachers can expect enthusiasm for learning, affection, the desire to please, openness, creativity, humor and a concern for others from their students.

But teachers can also expect substantial amounts of disrespect, apathy, irregular attendance and homework, poor manners, rudeness, foul language, short attention spans, unkindness to others and preoccupation with sex, gangs, and violence. It may be the case that teachers of the future will experience more of these types of problems than teachers of the recent past. These problems may be occurring with greater frequency and at earlier grades. Teachers may be particularly troubled by the lack of parental support in the educational process.

Teacher Preparation programs need to be cognizant of these problems in preparing student teachers for the future. They must provide their student teachers with the methods and skills necessary to navigate successfully the challenges. Important methods include active hands-on learning, cooperative or group learning, using games, simulation and computer online learning, visual aids and video communications, and methods for bringing relevance to the subject matter. Essential skills would seem to include classroom management and control, flexibility, patience, a sense of humor, the ability to understand, accept, communicate with students of diverse abilities, and the ability to deal/communicate with diverse parents and parenting styles.

Teacher preparation programs may want to review their curriculum in light of the experiences and recommendations reported by the practitioners of teaching surveyed in this research. They need to be sure that they are adequately preparing their students for the gritty reality of the profession, a reality of student resistance, frequent work overload, lack of appreciation and support, frustration, disappointment and burnout. A teacher preparation program that honestly forewarns its students of the challenges ahead, and allows students who prefer to not face those challenges to choose another profession, may ultimately provide the best service to the public school.

4. Discussion

This study was limited to 210 teachers in one state. It could be repeated with a larger sample in multiple states. The most important factor is that teachers need to be included in conversations regarding the educational environment, teacher preparation, students and the professional challenges. The issue of teacher retention and value added areas to preparation remain important. Professional development topics need to address current issues related to schools.

Although today's digital age shapes learning in new and different formats, the teachers in this survey seemed to take it for granted and not highlight it which most likely indicates how common its usage has become. Student sophistication in using media and digital measures may have influenced their earlier loss of innocence. This factor does not seem to influence the participants in this study to move to lower grade levels where student innocence still exists.

The digital age has created a different world for K-12 students than just a generation ago. Besides the technology, the social environment includes more time with peers, weakening of adult authority, and more freedom for children and teens. The mass media plays a strong influence on students as well. Stressors for both students and teachers have increased and so have the need to teach the skill of resiliency for both groups.

Teachers need to have a voice in their profession and promote as well discussion-based learning and collaboration with stakeholders and students in this digital age. Although the results of the survey are condensed into categories in this research, the open-ended survey questions were answered thoroughly with specific, detailed information. Teachers are prepared and ready to make contributions to the further development of the educational environment. That environment has become more complex requiring teachers and parents to define their roles in assisting youth develop not only academically but socially and emotionally as well.

Table 1: Percentages of Teachers Who Identified

And Observed Factors Contributing to the Loss of Innocence

Loss of Innocence Factor	Identified as Contributing (N=210)	Observed at grades K to 6	Observed at grades 7 & 8	Observed at Grades 9 to 12
Unstructured family	96%	99%	97%	93%
Media violence	95%	91%	90%	90%
Drugs/alcohol	89%	47%	82%	80%
Latch-key supervision	87%	90%	97%	65%
Child abuse	83%	75%	70%	55%
Poverty	82%	89%	60%	62%
Actual violence	79%	60%	47%	62%
Homelessness	77%	62%	44%	32%
Gangs	77%	34%	48%	66%
Consumerism	67%	66%	77%	82%
Peer Groups	65%	69%	77%	89%

Table 2: Percentages of Teachers Who Identified Positive Factors of Teaching

Positive Factor	Identified as Contributing (N=210)
Student enthusiasm	44%
Affection and desire to please	17%
Student humor, caring, openness, creativity	10%

Table 3: Percentages of Teachers Who Identified Negative Factors of Teaching

Negative Factor	Identified as Contributing (N=210)
Student disrespect	28%
Student apathy, irregular attendance	23%
Poor manners, rudeness, foul language	14%
Problems with attention span, discipline, gangs	10%

Table 4: Percentages of Teachers Who Identified Teaching Methods

Teaching Method	Identified as Contributing (N= 210)
Hands-on activities	60%
Comparative learning	34%
Games, simulations, computers, technology	20%
Visual, video communications	10%
Projects and manipulative	10%

Table 5: Percentages of Teachers Who Identified Important Skills for New Teachers

Skills for New Teachers	Identified as Contributing (N=210)
Classroom management	48%
Flexibility and patience	30%
Accepts and communicates with students	29%
Communicates with parents	11%
Cooperative learning	10%

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