Personality Traits: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Prospective Elementary School Teachers: Are They Out There?

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Professor Paul Marchbanks

English 12

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ABSTRACT

This study, conducted from October 18 to October 23, 2000, examined the personalities of sixty students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill through a 110-question questionnaire. The traits of passion, patience, cooperation, authoritativeness, and creativity were studied in particular because these are the essential personality traits of an effective elementary school teacher. Results showed which characteristics were most common and which were the least attainable. Also, correlations were developed between the traits themselves, between the subject’s gender and his/her qualities, and between the subject’s background information and the characteristics. The purpose of this study was to identify which subjects possessed these five personality traits, and then to determine what factors might have influenced these findings.

INTRODUCTION

It is often thought that all a good elementary school teacher needs is a basic yet well-rounded knowledge of the subject he/she is teaching. However, there is much more to be taught by a public school elementary teacher than simply the three R’s of reading, writing and arithmetic. As co-authors of the book *Teaching and Learning in the Elementary School* (1985), John Jarolimek and Clifford D. Foster comment, “Today the personal growth of individual children, concern for each individual’s potential for development, and the broadening of school goals to include emotional, social, and physical growth as well as intellectual development are seen as major purposes of elementary education” (p. 8).

Teachers in the twenty-first century are responsible for the overall well-being of their students, as well as educating, disciplining, and stimulating their developing minds. Because teachers have these additional duties, many more requirements are needed to be an effective teacher than simply an education and a certificate. Certain personality traits are necessary to be
able to accomplish all of these tasks and duties. One must be passionate, patient, cooperative, authoritative, and creative in order to be an effective teacher. A true passion for both the profession and the children is indispensable; a teacher must look forward to his/her job every single day, having the desire to instill in the students all the knowledge and skills needed to lead a happy, healthy life in today’s world. Patience is needed to maintain that passion and desire for teaching. In order to interact with the children and other teachers most effectively, an overall cooperative personality is needed. A degree of authoritativeness is necessary to preserve order and discipline in the classroom. Finally, teachers have to be creative in their approaches to instruction to earn the most successful results in educating their students.

Thousands more teachers are needed in the United States today, and the best people need to be selected for the job. The purpose of this study was not only to prove the point that much more is involved in teaching than simply knowledge and to show that not everyone with an education would be an effective teacher; it was also to get a feel for the number of prospective teachers in our nation. By pin-pointing these particular people with the necessary personality traits, elected officials and leaders of our schools and nation will be able to figure out how to target and recruit these future professionals.

METHODS

This study was conducted from October 18, 2000 to October 23, 2000. The subjects of this survey were college students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Out of sixty people completing the questionnaire, there was almost a perfect mix of males and females, with the females outnumbering the males by about 3%. People from a variety of racial backgrounds were surveyed, including Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. Ages of the
subjects ranged from 16 to 24, with the average age being 18.8, and two-thirds of the subjects stated that they came from a suburban social background.

The next seven questions gathered information regarding the subject’s experience with children and his/her involvement with various activities. Students were asked if they had any experience babysitting, mentoring or counseling children, or coaching youth. This information provided a general view of how many young adults played some role in children’s lives. Only 8.3% of the sixty polled reported no involvement in any of these three activities. Finally, subjects selected which activities they were participated in, choosing among sports, performing arts, writing or publishing, and visual arts. These activities might be connected with the personality traits they possessed.

The core part of the questionnaire was composed of one hundred questions. There were eighteen questions that pertained to each of the five traits, giving ninety questions, and then ten irrelevant questions were included. The purpose of these ten questions was twofold: first of all, to keep the subject guessing as to what we were looking for in this survey and secondly, to serve as a sort of comic relief, or a break from the “serious” questions. The ninety core questions were formulated by me and three of my distinguished colleagues. After discussing what we understood these five traits to mean and entail, each person created approximately seven questions for each characteristic that would determine whether or not the subject possessed that particular trait. The most clear, focused, and simple questions were used in the survey.

Passionate had several meanings. First, a passionate person was described as being enthusiastic and having a dedication for what he/she does. Therefore, we asked questions such as “Is there one activity/faith/person that you would defend the importance of no matter who was challenging you?” A “yes” answer would indicate that there is at least one thing that the person strongly believes or supports and is passionate about.
The characteristic of patience meant that the person was able to repeatedly maintain composure throughout pressing situations. Patience often entails being understanding and supportive, providing encouragement no matter how frustrating the circumstances. In several questions a scenario was depicted and the person’s chosen action was interpreted. For example, a true/false question asked, “When there is a thirty minute wait for your favorite restaurant, you do not wait and decide to go somewhere else.” A patient person would have answered “false” because they are able to tolerate the inconvenient situation.

A person considered to be cooperative is easy to get along with; he/she is often outgoing and gregarious, not bothered by other people or groups. This type of person is characterized as a “people person” and has good social interaction skills. For instance, the preference of having a social job rather than an office job would imply that the person does not mind working with others and would rather do that than work mainly by him/herself. A person who is easy to get along with is certainly more agreeable in a school environment than one who is stubborn or not compassionate.

Teachers must be able to control their classes and maintain order and discipline in the classroom. They must therefore be authoritative and firm while dealing with their students. Although the teacher has to be strict sometimes, a certain balance of authoritativeness must be possessed. One must be steady and consistent in his/her decisions, but he/she must also be patient. This balance would be displayed by answering “yes” to the inquiry “While watching other kids, have you ever sent a child to time-out?” and “no” to the question “Have you ever yelled at a child while watching him/her?” This person would be able to discipline properly without losing his/her temper.

Finally, the creative trait was fairly self-explanatory. One who is creative is imaginative, often thinking of new ways to do things. A creative person is often somewhat artsy and
ingenious. This characteristic, although often rare, is fairly easy to identify. A simple “yes” answer to the question “Is your bedroom very colorful and decorated?” would show that the person likes to personalize his/her belongings and be original. Creativity can be applied to almost all areas of teaching, especially in creating a stimulating and inspiring environment.

Because questions regarding each personality trait were mixed randomly, a key was used to identify the “correct” answer. If a subject had chosen this answer, they signified that they possessed the desired trait. It is from these indications that we were able to draw our conclusions.

RESULTS

The following graph illustrates the average number of times the subject indicated that that he/she possessed the personality traits by “correctly” answering the questions. Passionate, patient, and cooperative characteristics had the highest averages of around 12 each, while the authoritative and creative traits were lower, 9.9 and 10.8 respectively. In general, females scored higher in all the personality traits except for the authoritative characteristic, which was just about equal between the two sexes.
The most notable margin of difference between males and females was with creativity. The average number of indications for creativity for females was 12.1, while it was 23% lower in males at 9.4. Of the thirty-two females polled, eighteen, or 56%, recorded above average scores, while in males only eight subjects out of twenty-eight, or 29%, scored above the average of 10.8. The positive correlation between females and being creative, 0.332, was the strongest of any other correlation associated with this study.

Although correlations between the characteristics and gender were the most notable, there were several others worth mentioning. A positive correlation of 0.230 existed between those who had experience babysitting and those who possessed the passionate trait. As for correlations among the five traits, a positive one of 0.275 was present between those who were authoritative and those who were passionate. Also, there was a negative correlation of -0.271 between the characteristics of patience and authoritativeness.

DISCUSSION

The first results to be analyzed are the traits themselves. Indications showed that the personality traits of passion, patience, and cooperation were possessed most frequently. This implies that these traits are easily possessed and also perhaps more easily expressed. Creativity proved to be more of a unique quality, appearing less than all other traits. Also, creativity is not really a characteristic that can be practiced or worked toward obtaining, like patience, so this
might explain its absence in many people. Some people simply do not have it. Finally, authoritatively is a difficult trait to examine because it often incorporates a variety of circumstances. Often the action taken depends heavily on the situation at hand. For example, question #11 stated “You find it easy to confront people when their behavior is disruptive or offensive.” A person who answered “true” indicated that he/she possessed the power to be authoritative. However, even a subject who could be considered a disciplinarian might have answered “false” because they might be able to tolerate these disruptive actions to a certain degree, and therefore would ignore them rather than address them. This rationalization would also explain the negative correlation between those who are patient and those who are authoritative. Sometimes authoritative people take the initiative to handle situations only because they have no patience to bear them. Therefore, as the authoritative trait increased, a subject’s patience decreased. A study dedicated to discipline alone could delve further into the personality of an authority figure.

The background information regarding the subject’s involvements with youth yielded some interesting but not surprising correlations. Subjects whom had experience coaching children showed a positive correlation to the authoritative trait, implying that structure and discipline are necessary components for effectively teaching new concepts. There was also a strong positive correlation between subjects who had experience babysitting to the passionate characteristic. This was not too startling because people who do not like children and are not enthusiastic about taking care of kids do not make good babysitters. These two correlations are helpful because they show some activities that future teachers can engage in to prepare for their future occupation.

The connection between gender and personality traits was the most provocative. This study showed that females generally possessed the personality traits necessary to become an
effective teacher to a higher degree than males did. This information might encourage the traditional stereotype that teaching is a woman’s profession. However, an article by Allan F. Cooke introduces the problem with having mostly female teachers. He quotes Jarolimek and Foster by stating, “A broader range of role models will need to be presented to young children as a part of their formal education than has been the case in the past. Boys and girls should encounter models of men and women in a variety of occupations.” Even though females scored higher in this personality test, there is still the legitimate argument that male teachers are needed in education.

This study was successful as an introduction to the complex task of finding the “best” teachers. It examined five personality traits that are essential for any teacher. Findings indicated that not quite half of the students polled (48.3%) would be successful elementary school teachers if the possession of those traits were indeed required. Only 29 subjects out of 60 reported at least half the number of possible indications for each trait. This proves that even if all of these students from the respected institution of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill obtained a teaching certificate, only half of them would possess the necessary personality traits to be an effective teacher. The fact that a teacher has to have both the knowledge and certification to be a teacher, along with certain personality characteristics, makes the search for qualified teachers for America’s public schools even more difficult. Perhaps additional studies should be conducted to examine more fully what activities or habits might have caused or produced the personality traits possessed by 48% of the subjects in this study. Then we would be able to pick the most suitable persons to educate the future of our country.
References

