

# The Personalities of Exemplary Teachers

Louis A. Chandler

Rita M. Bean

University of Pittsburgh

*A review of the education literature finds some research interest in the personalities of teachers as they affect specific aspects of the teacher-student relationship. Yet, there has been little effort to identify the personality characteristics that underlie those values that effective teachers bring to their teaching. This study examined the personality characteristics of 48 high school teachers (who have been recognized for their outstanding teaching), by using a standardized assessment instrument, the Personality Research Form. In general, it was found that, when compared with the normative group, exemplary high school teachers were more achievement and intellectually-oriented, with the males more supportive, and females more assertive, than their normative group counterparts.*

A review of the education literature finds some research interest in the personalities of teachers as they affect student learning, yet it has been largely through anecdotal accounts, such as case histories, that we have come to more fully realize the tremendous influence a teacher may have on an individual student. We are struck by that influence when we find, in the biographies of outstanding individuals, reference to exceptional teachers -- those whose impact was profound and lasting.

A number of studies have examined teacher personalities, typically, in terms of their vocational choice, behavior, effectiveness in the classroom, and relations to their students, (Bennett, 1995; Bowman, 1991; Bridgewater, 1984; Brophy, 1986; Campbell, 1984; Chesley, 1984; Clark & Trafford, 1995; Forrester, 1992; Galbraith, 1992; Harris, 1986; Holey, 1992; Itskowitz, 1991; Johnson, 1983; Keene, 1983; Kittoe, 1990; Landrum, 1992; McClain, 1988; Miller, 1993; Monsour, 1987; Murray, Ruston, & Paunonen, 1990; Norwood, 1992; Phillips, 1985; Prince, 1985; Rommel, 1992; Reinhiller, 1995; Sheffy, 1986; Shelton, 1994; Sorminenni, 1984; Sparks, 1987). Nevertheless, little effort has been made to identify the underlying personal characteristics of those teachers who have profoundly influenced their students, motivating them to achieve, and providing them with models the students themselves wish to emulate.

One notable effort to examine psychological characteristics of "ideal" teachers was reported by Wickstrom (1993). Wickstrom asked staff members at an overseas missionary boarding school to use an adjective checklist to describe persons they considered to be ideal administrators, teachers and boarding home parents. He identified certain qualities that might be characteristic of each position, the implication being that selection and training might be

improved for various staff positions if those qualities were taken into account.

Our plan was to study the personalities of exemplary teachers, with the view toward discovering those underlying personality traits that might be associated with the qualities cited by their students. To select teachers, we turned to an ongoing University-Community partnership, the All Star Educators project, that had been established to recognize excellence in teaching. In this project, student achievers were asked to nominate teachers who had inspired and challenged them, and then to submit an essay in which they were to reflect on how the teachers kept students involved, demonstrated a love of their subject, and inspired their students.

## Method

During the 1992-93 school year, nominating essays on 54 teachers were submitted to the project. For this study of the personalities of exemplary teachers those essays were reviewed with particular attention to the adjectives used so that a list of teacher characteristics could be assembled.

The qualities cited in the nominating essays were grouped in terms of three dimensions: personal qualities, attitude towards the subject taught, and attitude towards students. These exemplary teachers differ in their personalities with some described as warm, personable and outgoing, others as more stern and disciplined, but a review of the qualities frequently cited by their students identified certain core qualities they held in common. For example, these exemplary teachers are described as *hard-working and dedicated*. They are thoroughly *knowledgeable* about their discipline, tend to employ *creative* teaching techniques, and

show infectious *enthusiasm* for their subject. They take a *personal interest* in their students. They are *encouraging*, although quite *demanding* in what they expect of their students.

#### *Participants and Procedures*

The pool of potential participants for this phase of the study were all high school teachers who had been nominated by their students for the All Star Educators awards during the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years ( $n = 102$ ). Each potential participant was mailed a letter explaining the project and inviting them to participate. Those who agreed to participate ( $n = 57$ ) were then mailed a packet which contained a cover letter along with a copy of the *Personality Research Form*, answer sheet, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. They were asked to complete the test using the standard test instructions and return it within three weeks.

Of the 57 teachers who agreed to participate, 34 returned completed test answer sheets within the specified three-week period. A reminder letter brought responses from an additional 14 teachers. The total of 48 responses represented 84% of those who originally agreed to participate in the study. The final sample was composed of 24 male, and 24 female high school teachers with an average age of 46.2 years. The teaching experience of the sample ranged from 6 to 40 years ( $M = 22.6$ ;  $SD = 8.5$ ). In terms of the highest degree held: 11 held Bachelors' degrees, 35 Masters' degrees, and two Doctoral degrees.

#### *Measure*

The *Personality Research Form (PRF)* is a carefully constructed general personality inventory which focuses on normal areas of functioning. A self-report measure, the PRF is commercially-available; contains 352 True/False items; and requires about an hour to complete.

The PRF has its theoretical origins in the seminal work of Murray (1938) and his associates. The version used here (PRF-E) yields 22 scales said to represent personality traits most relevant to a wide variety of areas of human functioning, several of which seemed intuitively related to the traits cited in the essays.

In addition to construct validity, established by its grounding in Murray's theoretical work, extensive evidence for concurrent, convergent and discriminant validity is presented in the manual (Jackson, 1989). Data on test-retest and parallel form reliability are also available, as well as estimates of internal consistency found with various samples, all of which suggests good reliability. For example, test-retest reliabilities across the subscales ranged from .80 to .96 with a median of .90.

## Results

All answer sheets were hand-scored following the instructions in the manual, and raw scores were calculated for the 20 personality scales and two validity scales of the PRF Form E. The mean scores for each sex were plotted on profile sheets so that composite profiles could be constructed

for both males and females, thus providing the typical pattern of scores found with this sample of exemplary teachers.

Next, in order to examine how the teachers might differ from the normative group, a series of *t*-tests were performed comparing the means on each of the scaled scores. Multivariate *t*-tests could not be used since some of the subscales used common items, and inclusion of those subscales would have created problems of autocorrelation. On the other hand, performing separate *t*-tests would have violated the a-priori Type I error rate of 0.05, so the Bonferroni inequality adjustment was applied to correct for this problem, and separate *t*-tests were performed.

The analysis found differences on 15 of the 22 subscales. Differences for both male and females were found, when compared to their counterparts in the normative group, on Achievement (Ac), Affiliation (Af), Aggression (Ag), Change (Ch), Play (Pl), Understanding (Un), and Desirability (Dy). Differences between male exemplary teachers and their male counterparts were also found on Exhibition (Ex), Harm avoidance (Ha), Nurturance (Nu), and Infrequency (In). Differences between the female exemplary teachers and their female counterparts were found on Defence (De), Dominance (Do), Impulsivity (Im), and Succorance (Su).

This analysis suggests that, as a group, the teachers are more achievement-oriented and intellectual than the normative group. They are also less affiliative, less aggressive, less changeable, and less care-free.

In addition, an analysis of sex differences indicates that the male teachers are also more cautious, less exhibitionistic, and more supportive than their male counterparts in the normative group. Female teachers tended to be more assertive, less suspicious, less impulsive, and less dependent than their female counterparts in the normative group.

Finally, the validity scales, which may be seen as a measure of social desirability, suggest that both sexes tended to respond in ways which could be seen as presenting a favorable picture.

In sum, exemplary high school teachers are more achievement and intellectually-oriented, with the males more supportive and females more assertive than their normative group counterparts.

## Conclusions

Personality testing of exemplary teacher confirmed the opinions of their students that such teachers tend to be hard-working, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable. They hold their students to high standards, yet they remain encouraging and always show a personal concern for their students. It is the personality of the teacher that brings the human dimension to teaching, introducing what Weisz (1989) has called the "hidden curriculum".

The crucial role teachers play in student learning has been well established (e.g., Gage, 1985). Eisner (1974) has called teaching an art, one guided by educational values, personal needs, and by a variety of beliefs or generaliza-

tions the teacher holds to be true. Therefore, the study of exemplary teachers holds considerable implications for the selection and education of would-be teachers. Such exemplary teachers might also serve as role models to be studied and emulated by student teachers as they prepare to enter the profession.

## References

- Bennett, C. L. (1995, April). *Teacher perspectives as a tool for reflection, partnerships and professional growth*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Ca.
- Bowman, A. M. (1991). The effect of the similarity between teacher personality type and student personality type on students' achievement in a community college setting. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51, 4064.
- Bridgewater, E. F. (1984). An analysis of selected personal factors related to effective teaching in secondary schools. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 44, 3550.
- Brophy, J. (1986). Teacher influences on student achievement. Special Issue: Psychological science and education, *American Psychologist*, 41, 1069-107.
- Campbell, M. A. (1984). Personality characteristics of most effective and least effective college teachers in three church related universities as measured by the Myers-Briggs type indicator. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 45, 1049.
- Chesley, R. (1984). The California Psychological Inventory as a measurement of selected psychological characteristics of full-time Wyoming community college instructors. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 45, 62.
- Clark, A. & Trafford, J. (1995). Boys into modern languages: An investigation of the discrepancy in attitudes and performance between boys and girls in modern languages. *Gender and Education*, 7, 315-325.
- Eisner, E. W. (1974). *The educational imagination*. New York: McMillian.
- Forrester, L. V. (1992). Effective teaching behaviors in award-winning community college teachers in the United States and Canada employing Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership Effectiveness. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, 2381-2382.
- Galbraith, M. (1992). Understanding career choices of men in elementary education. *Journal of Educational Research*, 85, 246-253.
- Gage, N. L. (1985). *The scientific basis of the art of teaching*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Harris, P. W. (1986). Relationship of teachers personality (Personal Orientation Inventory) to their instructional competencies and interest in inservice education. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47, 1246.
- Henjum, A. (1983). Let's select "self-actualizing" teachers. *Education*, 104, 51-55.
- Holley, S. P. (1992). The relationship between personality types of the student-teaching triad and the success of the student-teaching experience. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, 2505.
- Itskowitz, R. (1991). The self-concepts of teachers as related to the types of problems for which they refer students for psychological help. *School Psychology International*, 12, 133-141.
- Johnson, W. A. (1983). Personality correlates of preferences for preprofessional training by special education and regular class trainees. *Education*, 103, 360-368.
- Keene, D. L. (1983). Personality factors related to career choice and job satisfaction among female elementary and secondary teachers education alumni. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 44, 1596.
- Kittoe, F.A. (1990). Ranking of characteristics of teachers of the gifted compared to characteristics of effective K-12 regular classroom teachers. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 50, 2015.
- Landrum, T. J. (1992). Characteristics of general education teachers perceived as effective by their peers: Implications for inclusion of children with learning and behavioral disorders. *Exceptionality*, 3, 147-163.
- McClain, C. R. (1988). The relationship between personality characteristics and teaching effectiveness of secondary vocational agriculture teachers. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 48, 1643-1644.
- Miller, C. L. (1993). Personality characteristics of pre-service and effective teachers as assessed by the California Psychological Inventory. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53, 2746-2747.
- Monsour, D. K. (1987). Student teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction: An analysis of personality and cognitive variables in relation to performance. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 48, 632-633.
- Murray, H. G., Rushton, J. P., & Paunonen, S. V. (1990). Teacher personality traits and student instructional ratings in six types of university courses. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 250-261.
- Norwood, J. E. (1992). Stress and coping among teachers: Functions of personality integration and selected teachers' characteristics. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53, 599.
- Phillips, D. A. (1985). Personality traits and teacher-student behaviors in physical education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 408-416.
- Prince, B. P. (1992). A study of personality types of educators and preferred discipline strategies. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53, 1103.
- Reinhiller, N. (1995, April). *Collaboration between special educators and general educators: The perspective of a researcher turned Teacher-Researcher*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Ca.

Rommel, J. R. (1992). The relationship of teacher personality types to classroom effectiveness with at-risk students in special education residential schools, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53, 1783.

Sheffey, M. A. (1986). Concurrent validity of Holland's theory for college-educated Black men, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 14, 149-156.

Shelton, K. (1994). *Reader response theory in the high school English classroom*. paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Orlando, FL.

Sorminenni, H. B. (1984). The relationships between personality and teaching effectiveness of vocational industrial teachers in selected high schools in Northeast Texas, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 45, 770.

Sparks, R. (1987). The relationship between selected teacher personality factors, student self-concept and student ratings of teachers, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 48, 1118.

Weisz, E. (1989). Teaching as performing: A hidden curriculum for effective college teaching, *College Student Journal*, 23, 155-158.

Wickstrom, D. L. (1993). Personality characteristics of staff members at selected overseas missionary boarding schools. Special Issue: Psychology and missions, *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 21, 74-85.

### Author Note

The authors wish to thank Ms. Peggy Shields for her assistance in data analysis, and to acknowledge our debt to the late Dr. Ernest Dorow, a colleague and friend, who contributed in many ways to this project.

*Louis A. Chandler is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology in the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. His research interests are in childhood stress and the school experience, personality assessment, and school reform.*

*Rita M. Bean is a Professor of Education and Associate Dean in the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. His areas of research interest are: professional development of educators, literacy instruction, and school change.*

Reprints should be requested from the first author.