South Africa:
What makes an effective teacher?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

> " The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. "
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> BARBER & MOURSHED, 2007

Decades of research make it clear: teachers make a difference in student learning. In fact, Stanford University economist Eric Hanushek (1992) has noted that the difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year. Given the strength of these findings, nations around the world recognize that in order to improve educational outcomes and equity they must focus on effectiveness of teachers. A critical step toward achieving that goal is for individual countries to identify the competencies required for effectiveness and use them to inform teaching standards, pre-service teacher preparation, professional development programs, and performance evaluations. To make an impact, those systems and processes will need to be based on a common understanding, within each country, of what it means to be an effective teacher.

Oxfam's international study of teacher competences and standards concludes that in order to build that common understanding, it is "absolutely necessary that the question as to what is considered a quality educator is investigated among stakeholders" (Bourgonje & Tromp, 2011, p. 145). Giving stakeholders a voice not only allows us to understand how they think and feel about a topic; it provides an opportunity to help frame important policy decisions that directly impact their lives. Pearson is therefore surveying students, teachers, principals, education researchers, policymakers, and parents in 23 countries regarding their perceptions of what it takes to be an effective teacher. Pearson is comparing the views expressed by these stakeholders with both current government teaching standards and research on effective teaching.

This report, the first in the series, summarizes the results of the survey conducted in South Africa, where the government has been working to provide a high quality education to all children, yet still faces significant struggles in developing and training teachers to deliver high quality instruction. In the global report, 23 participating countries are compared not only across stakeholder groups, but by country as well.[1]

The Survey

To learn the qualities that education stakeholders in South Africa value most in an effective teacher, we surveyed all nine provinces in South Africa. The stakeholder groups include:

- Students ages 15-19
- Parents of K-12 students
- K-12 teachers
- K-12 administrators
- Education researchers and policymakers

Respondents were asked to list, in their own words, between three and 15 qualities that they feel are most important in making an "effective" teacher and to indicate what type of teacher, by subject(s) and grade level(s), they were thinking about while creating their list. The survey did not define "effective" for respondents, other than that it meant "good," allowing respondents to define what an effective teacher meant for themselves. We developed a coding system to categorize responses, based on prior research about competencies of effective teachers. This coding scheme was reviewed by teachers, principals, education policymakers, and researchers and revised iteratively as additional responses were coded, resulting in a final list of 32 categories.

The Most Important Qualities of Teachers in South Africa

We found remarkable consistency in how the groups of surveyed stakeholders responded when they were asked to list between three and 15 of what they believed to be the most important qualities or competencies of effective teachers. The most common response of four out of the five stakeholder groups was that effective teachers are *Patient, Caring.* It was also the most common response when comparing government and private schools; primary and secondary grade levels; and males and females.

The second and third most common responses across all stakeholder groups were *Dedication* to teaching and *Professionalism.* Dedication was expressed as hard-working and passionate, and refers to the teacher's passion for teaching and commitment to student success. Professionalism was expressed as behaviors such as reliable, responsible and punctual, describing general behaviors of professionals regardless of field.

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[1] There are 23 countries participating in this survey, listed in **Table A1** in the Appendix of this report.

Most Important Qualities of Teachers in South Africa

1 Patient, Caring, Kind Personality

2 Dedication to Teaching

3 Professionalism

4 Ability to Develop Trusting, Productive Relationships

5 Ability to Make Ideas and Content Clear

6 Subject Matter Knowledge

7 Managing the Classroom Learning Environment

8 Knowledge of Learners

9 Intelligence

10 Lesson Planning

When the responses of all stakeholder groups are combined, the other seven categories in the Top 10 qualities or competencies mentioned, were in descending order:

· The ability to form trusting, supportive *Relationships* with students.

· Communicating ideas clearly (*Make Content Clear*)

· *Subject Matter Knowledge*

· *Classroom Management*

· *Knowledge of Learners* and learning

· *Intelligence* and critical thinking

· *Lesson Planning* and organization

Seven of the Top 10 most frequent responses for each group of stakeholders were shared by all groups. Moreover, the responses of stakeholders associated with public and private schools were also remarkably similar: they shared the same nine of the Top 10 response categories, with the same categories in their top 4. For grade levels, results were somewhat more variable but still, the nine of the Top 10 categories of responses were the same. For male and female respondents, nine of the Top 10 categories were shared, and in nearly the same rank order in terms of frequency of responses.

The four categories of qualities mentioned most often across the entire sample reflect how strongly South African education stakeholders value dispositions of character (responsibility, trustworthiness) and care (relatedness, responsiveness) in their teachers. Some of these dispositions are built into the Teaching Standards in South Africa, and there is research that supports the link between these dispositions, effectiveness, and learner outcomes. What was notably missing from the most frequently reported survey responses was *Teaching Skills*—i.e., knowledge and use of a variety of teaching methods, including pedagogical content knowledge. This category of competencies showed up in the Top 10 only in the responses of the research and policy group. Overall, teaching skills was mentioned in less than 2% of all responses. Also all but absent in the responses (less than 1%) was the importance of knowledge and use of *Assessment* to evaluate and track student progress. This is particularly troublesome for educators, education researchers, and policymakers, given the central role of assessment in supporting student learning.

Implications

The greater emphasis placed on teacher "dispositions," such as caring, kindness, passion, effort, and professionalism, rather than on teaching skills may reflect the belief that without these critical dispositions, subject knowledge, and pedagogical skills are insufficient to foster effective learning. While the majority of the qualities of effective teachers identified in this survey are reflected in the government's standards of effective teaching, this research identifies several qualities that are not mentioned: confidence and self-efficacy, intelligence and critical thinking, challenging students and setting high expectations, and believing that all children can learn. Ultimately, the survey results reaffirm the notion that, at its foundation, teaching is about trusting relationships between teachers and learners that foster learner success, as these communities define it.

Using These Results to Improve Teaching Practice in South Africa

We recommend that the results of this survey be used to inform and guide the definition of what it means to be an effective teacher in the teaching and learning culture of South Africa. Moreover, the results can inform discussions about teacher preparation, hiring, training, and evaluation in South Africa, particularly in light of the problems in these areas documented by research.

Teacher training programs could place greater emphasis on dispositions that stakeholders believe are essential for effectiveness, such as patience, passion, and responsibility. The programs could assess these qualities in candidates, counsel candidates on career fit and provide training to improve teaching dispositions in future teachers. Likewise, training programs may want to emphasize the knowledge and skills that were mentioned less frequently but have been shown to be critical to effective teaching, such as classroom management and organization, updated subject knowledge, assessment of learner progress, and reflective practice.

While this research identifies many different qualities and competencies of effective teachers, we caution against using the results to generate a checklist approach under the misguided belief that there is a single winning pattern of competencies to be an effective teacher. Finally, it cannot be overstated that to be effective teachers, the work conditions and environment, first and foremost, must be well managed; school context and community culture have a profound influence on the way different teacher roles and competencies are understood, prioritized, and practiced.

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