



Good Teaching

Monica Duran

*Field Placement Supervisor and Lecturer
CSU Channel Islands*

A university supervisor shares student teacher perspectives on good teaching.

When I enter an elementary classroom wearing my elementary teacher hat and am in search of good teaching, I'm looking for ideas to teach content in a better or different way. I might also be looking at bulletin boards and classroom arrangement in hopes of finding something that might better suit the needs of my students. I also want to find a teacher who is enthusiastic and positive about his/her students and their learning.

When I enter an elementary classroom wearing the parent hat and hoping my child will be surrounded by good teaching, I'm looking for an educator that is welcoming, willing to listen, attentive to my concerns, and cares about my child. I'm looking for someone who is able to recognize my child's strengths and weaknesses, and is able to create an environment where my child can thrive. I'm hoping to find a climate of acceptance that celebrates diversity and encourages differences so that my child becomes a better human being, regardless of their reading or math skills.

When I enter an elementary classroom wearing a university supervisor hat in search of good mentoring for student teachers, I'm hoping to find a place that is welcoming, cheerful, and kid-friendly. I'm looking for a teacher who understands the importance of good modeling and mentoring, and the patience that those require. I'm hoping to find a teacher who is willing to share their knowledge and their passion with a future colleague because that is how teaching programs work. I'm looking for that special someone who is an expert in their field while at the same time humble enough to know that they still have lots to learn, maybe even from someone just starting out in a credential program.

Suffice it to say, I think I know what good teaching looks like to me and, as a supervisor of student teachers, I've had lots of conversations with my students guiding and directing them toward good teaching. We've worked together to identify strategies and techniques that they have observed that demonstrate good teaching. We've analyzed good lessons and not so good lessons in an attempt to become better teachers. We've attempted to take course content and textbook facts and translate them into applicable skills and knowledge to lead us to better teaching.

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Student teachers are in a unique position – straddling the line between student and teacher. They are at once the student who is learning how to teach and what good teaching is, while at the same time practicing being the teacher and attempting to demonstrate their progress toward good teaching. They are only in this position for a short time – about one school year – and they will never again be in this dual role. I asked the students in my methods course to reflect on criteria they would use to determine good teaching. These multiple subject student teachers were in their final semester of methods courses and student teaching, about 10 weeks from earning their teaching credential, and hoping to land their first teaching position.

The student teachers identified a wide range of characteristics that they felt were indicative of good teaching based on their time as both observers and participants in the student teaching program – preparation, strong classroom management, a sense of humor, connecting curriculum to real life, understanding content – but there were a few characteristics that recurred over and over again among the cohort. The most common characteristic of good teaching as identified by the student teachers was caring.

Caring was identified as the most common characteristic – the fact that good teaching begins with teachers caring deeply about their students. The student teachers commented on a teacher’s ability to build genuine relationships with students: connecting with them, enjoying being around them, and valuing their ideas and opinions. The notion of caring was developed further through understanding the needs of the individual, being mindful of cultural differences and learning styles, building community in the classroom, and teaching students to be caring so that they might become “kind, friendly, compassionate human beings,” as one student teacher reflected. It is important to note that those teachers who demonstrated caring toward their students also demonstrated that same level of caring toward those student teachers that they were mentoring.

Another characteristic that was frequently included was the idea of lessons and activities that were engaging, that engaged the learners. Good teaching is hands-on and collaborative, it addresses multiple learning styles, it focuses on the individual, it is purposeful, and it balances academic and non-academic skills. Engaged students are excited to learn, they are able to build upon their prior knowledge, they learn to make mistakes, and they are constantly learning. As one student teacher stated, good teaching is “empowering students to be problem-solvers and reach their full potential.” I’ve observed on multiple occasions these student teachers being asked by their mentor teachers to share new and different ways to engage students, thereby also including the mentor teachers as engaged learners.

Classroom management and building relationships with parents rounded out the list of most frequently stated indicators of good teaching. Good classroom management included the idea of creating classroom environments that were inclusive, promoted kindness, and were safe. Good classroom management established the teacher as a leader who is firm and professional, but also kind, empathetic and understanding; a leader who has clear and fair expectations that are consistently enforced.

The students commented on the need to view parents as teammates, to maintain relationships with parents, to communicate clearly with them, and to demonstrate empathy by considering their perspective. Knowledge gained from parents in regard to situations away from school can allow teachers to provide needed support during the school day. As one student stated, “having a positive

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relationship with the students' parents, it helps (the teacher) to have a greater insight about the students' needs and home environment."

Good teaching, like so much else in the teaching profession, is, to some degree, determined by what we bring to the table – our own experiences in education help to shape our view of good teaching. There will be aspects of good teaching that vary depending upon the level of schooling being considered. A stronger indicator of good teaching in an AP Physics class may be the teacher's content knowledge and student test scores, not their relationship with parents; whereas, good teaching in a 5th grade classroom may be more clearly identified by the collaborative nature of students learning to work together to solve a problem, and less about their actual test scores.

Good teaching, however, does have some commonalities. Of the characteristics that most people would agree on, as identified by the student teachers, caring is certainly near the top of the list. Perhaps student teachers identify caring so easily because of their unique role as student and teacher, simultaneously. As a student, they are at the receiving end of that caring, demonstrated by a mentor teacher who shares his/her passion, knowledge and experience with someone preparing to enter the profession. At the same time, as a teacher, they are the givers of that care as they learn to share their passion, knowledge and enthusiasm with their students.

I am in complete agreement with the student teachers – good teaching can first, and foremost, be defined by caring. I can still remember my high school math teacher who encouraged me to attend her alma mater and to pursue a teaching career, long before I seriously considered it. As a classroom teacher, I attempted (perhaps not always successfully) to demonstrate caring to both students and families that went beyond the classroom walls and teaching responsibilities. And as a parent, I'm beyond grateful for the many teachers who demonstrated caring by inspiring my children to enjoy reading, to love learning, to find their voice and their true identity – the teachers who were good teachers because they cared. This might explain why, to this day, I remain in contact with some of my own teachers, some former students and their parents, and, most certainly, many of my own children's teachers. Good teaching is caring.

About the Author

Monica Duran is a field placement supervisor and lecturer at CSU Channel Islands, employed at the site since 2001. Prior to that, she was an upper elementary teacher in Moorpark. She earned her undergraduate degree from Pepperdine University, and her graduate degree from CSU Northridge. She is married and has two sons (high school and college), and is a staunch supporter of dual language immersion.