

The Supportive Learning Environment

Effective Teaching Practices

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Part I

Research and Practice Intertwine

1

Introduction

If you needed a dresser for your bedroom, what would you look for? After all, there are millions of dressers in the world. What would be your priorities (e.g., price, style, craftsmanship, availability)? I look for hallmarks of quality in the craftsmanship such as solid wood, dovetail drawers, butterfly joints, hand sanding, and protective finishes that allow the beauty of the wood seen. Of course I want it all and at a good price. However, my funds are limited and so I make choices. There is one dresser in my home that I'd like to tell you about, it was my husband's childhood dresser that his mother picked up at a garage sale. Over the years, I have changed how the dresser looks and functions in response to my household needs. I refinished the top to let the natural wood show, painted the body of the dresser twice, and changed out the drawer pulls a few times. This dresser was mass produced with dovetailed joints, and with my attention, it has become a piece that has functioned well in each setting.

To a degree, teachers are like dressers, there are 3.9 million teachers in the United States a number expected to grow to 4.4 million by 2016.¹ There is a lot of variation in the effectiveness teachers, influenced by personal attributes, acquired knowledge, and learned skills. Decades of research abounds on qualities of effective teachers. There are some teachers who are like finely crafted dressers in that there are numerous hallmarks of quality from how they interact with people to the learning outcomes recorded. On the other end, there are the ineffective teachers whose instruction barely holds together like a flimsy cardboard backed dresser. Many teachers, however, are like my husband's dresser—they are effective, and if not quite effective, can be made so with some targeted efforts. Even better, these teachers can make choices to be even better like I enhanced the fit and usefulness of dresser. In this book, *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*, both elements of finely crafted classrooms are explored and the background attributes of the teachers who created them—in essence, how teachers create environments and relationships that inspire and motivate students. The companion book,

Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices, addresses the planning, instructional, and assessment choices that teachers make to construct learning experiences. Both books provide tools for practitioners to use to hone their craft.

In *Student Achievement Goal Setting: Using Data to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Eye On Education, 2009), we asked the critical question “Why do we have schools?” at the beginning of the book. In answer we offered “...there are only two reasons why schooling exists: (1) teaching and learning, and (2) supporting teaching and learning.”² It is this latter reason—supporting teaching and learning—that is the focus of *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*. In particular, we address the following questions related to how and why we can and should provide proper support mechanisms for teachers and students.

- ◆ What is teacher effectiveness?
- ◆ Why is teacher quality important?
- ◆ What is the relationship between teacher quality and student learning?
- ◆ How is the book organized?
- ◆ How can the book be used to promote teacher quality?

What Is Teacher Effectiveness?^a

Teacher effectiveness is a broad concept³ that can be defined in many ways.⁴ The word “quality” denotes the experience of being with a special teacher, and the term “effectiveness” works well when referring to analytical evidence. We choose to use the terms “quality” and “effectiveness” interchangeably. One clear and undeniable way to define teacher quality is to personally know an effective teacher, or to have benefited from the tutelage and teaching of an extraordinary teacher. Another way to define teacher effectiveness is to analyze—or dissect—it based on the extant research about what makes teachers effective. In this section, we briefly explore both perspectives: *analyzing* a quality teacher and *interacting* with a quality teacher.

Although we may not be able to define teacher quality with precision, we certainly can identify key teacher qualities that form the foundation of any useful definition. Studies examining effective teacher characteristics are profuse and often seem to seek an elusive secret formula for teacher quality. Unfortunately, there is no single magic elixir for quality teaching. However, one thing we know for certain about teacher quality is that it is multi-dimensional and these multiple dimensions interact to form the chemistry of what makes good teachers good.

Figure 1.1 notes some key components of a quality teacher.^b

a This section of the chapter is replicated in Chapter 1 of the Eye On Education companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (2010).

b For a more comprehensive review and discussion of key teacher dispositions, skills, and knowledge, see: Stronge, J. H. (2007). *Qualities of effective teachers* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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Figure 1.1. Selected Characteristics of Quality Teachers

- ◆ *Communication skills* including the ability to listen to and value what students have to say;⁵
- ◆ *Teacher preparation* in terms of content knowledge⁶ and certification,⁷ among others;
- ◆ *Personal dispositions* such as enthusiasm, motivation, and reflectivity;⁸
- ◆ *Personal relationships* with students built on fairness, trust, and respectfulness;⁹
- ◆ *Classroom management* that provides a safe, robust, disciplined, and vibrant learning environment;¹⁰
- ◆ *Instructional planning, delivery, and ongoing student assessment* combined in such a way as to constantly monitor and deliver differentiated, effective instruction;¹¹ and
- ◆ Clearly focused goals and high expectations to promote student achievement.¹²

Why Is Teacher Quality Important?

Regardless of how we choose to define quality, building-level administrators and teachers know that the work of good teachers results in improvements for students, including improved instructional opportunities and improved student learning. Although we highlighted a number of key dispositions and practices (i.e., teaching processes) in the section above, let's consider the impact (i.e., results) of a high-quality teacher:

- ◆ Fewer discipline issues;
- ◆ Better relationships with their students; and, most importantly,
- ◆ Higher student achievement results.¹³

Thus, any worthy definition should take into account both the *process* of teaching (e.g., quality instructional delivery skills) and the *results* of teaching (e.g., student achievement gains).

So why does teacher quality matter? Because learning matters. If we hope for our children a better quality education and a brighter tomorrow, we also must hope for—and support in every practical way—quality teachers.

What Is the Relationship Between Teacher Quality and Student Learning?^c

Analyses of data from teacher value-added assessment studies¹⁴ offer compelling evidence regarding the influence of the classroom teacher on student learning.¹⁵ The overarching finding from value-added studies is that effective teachers are, indeed, essential for student success. In fact, it has been estimated that out of all the factors that

^c This section of the chapter is replicated in Chapter 1 of the Eye On Education companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (2010).

are within the control of schools, teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement.¹⁶ Consider the following specific findings presented in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Teacher Impact on Student Achievement

Major Findings	Study
◆ The impact of teachers is far greater than that of overall school effects. In other words, “which teacher a student gets within a school matters more than which school the student happens to attend.”	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Beginning in third grade, children placed with highly effective teachers scored on average at the 96th percentile on Tennessee’s mathematics state assessment, whereas children placed with ineffective teachers scored on average at the 42nd percentile.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ Students of less-effective teachers experienced reading achievement gains of one-third standard deviation less than students with effective teachers.	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Students of less-effective teachers experienced mathematics achievement gains of almost one-half standard deviation less than students with effective teachers.	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Lower-achieving students are more likely to be placed with less-effective teachers.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ If a student had a high-performing teacher for just one year, the student likely would remain ahead of peers for at least the next few years of schooling (residual effect).	Mendro, 1998
◆ Third grade students of teachers in the top quartile of effectiveness (based on hierarchical linear modeling predictions) scored approximately 30 to 40 scaled score points higher than expected on the Virginia Standards of Learning state assessment in English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, respectively. Students of teachers in the bottom quartile of effectiveness scored approximately 24 to 32 points below expected scores.	Stronge, Tucker, & Ward, 2003
◆ The teacher has a larger effect on student achievement than any other school-related factor, including class size and ability levels within a class.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ Fifth grade students scored approximately 30 percentile points higher in both reading and mathematics in one year when assigned to top-quartile teachers as compared to those students assigned to bottom-quartile teachers.	Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2008

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To summarize the impact of effective teachers on student learning, Wright, Horn, and Sanders surmised that “seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor.”¹⁷ Yes, we do need *highly qualified teachers* as required in the U.S. federal legislation *No Child Left Behind*. However, much more importantly, we need *high-quality teachers*.

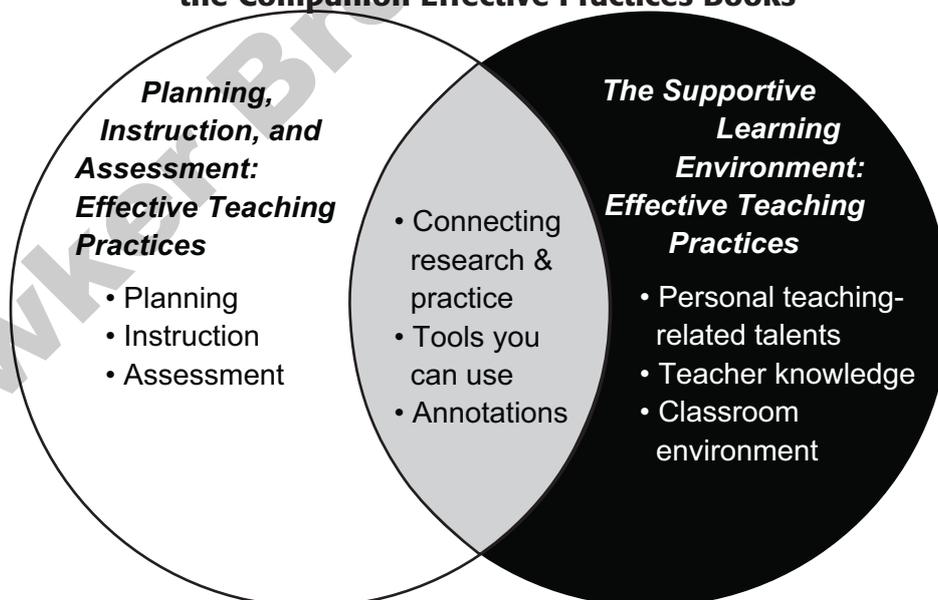
How Is the Book Organized?

The following are premises of *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*:

- ◆ Teachers come to the profession with dispositions nurtured by parents, mentors, teachers, and life experiences (Chapter 2).
- ◆ Teachers seek and acquire knowledge to become effective teachers and then further develop their professional knowledge and skills (Chapter 3).
- ◆ Teachers use these dispositions and knowledge to create a positive, robust classroom environment that nurtures learners (Chapter 4).
- ◆ Teachers take advantage of support mechanisms and integrate those supportive skills into their teaching repertoire in order to become masterful teachers (Chapter 5).

The Venn diagram (Figure 1.3) below depicts how *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices* and its companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (Eye On Education, 2010), address the extant research related to teacher quality.

Figure 1.3. The Relationship Between the Companion Effective Practices Books



The book focuses on research-based practices of teacher quality. Three parts comprise each book, they are:

- ◆ *Part I* focuses on selected key elements that support teaching and learning, namely, teachers' personal dispositions, professional development, and the importance of creating and sustaining a positive learning environment (Chapters 1 to 5).
- ◆ *Part II* offers reproducible resources for use by teachers and those working with teachers.
- ◆ *Part III* includes an annotated bibliography of key publications that are related to supporting teacher quality.

Figure 1.4 summarizes the relationship between the two books as they address essential elements for teacher quality.

Figure 1.4. Overview of Content for the Companion Books

Chapter	<i>Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices</i>	<i>The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices</i>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Teacher effectiveness defined ◆ Impact of teacher effectiveness on student achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Teacher effectiveness defined ◆ Impact of teacher effectiveness on student achievement
2	Instructional planning and teacher quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Focusing on essential knowledge and skills ◆ Differentiating instruction ◆ Using Response-to-Intervention ◆ Integrating technology effectively 	Personal dispositions of quality teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Immediacy ◆ Credibility ◆ Caring ◆ Engaging caregivers
3	Instructional delivery and teacher effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Teaching for conceptual understanding ◆ Using questioning as an instructional strategy ◆ Developing inquiring minds ◆ Increasing student engagement 	Professional knowledge and teacher effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Certification ◆ Experience ◆ Communication ◆ Professional development ◆ Mentoring
4	Student assessment and teacher quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Developing aligned assessments ◆ Creating rubrics that communicate expectations ◆ Providing feedback ◆ Using assessment data 	Teacher management skill, classroom attributes, and teacher effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Learning environment ◆ Rules ◆ Routines ◆ Student ownership ◆ Time management
5	Interrelationships among planning, instruction, and assessment	Supporting teacher quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ School culture ◆ Teacher reflection ◆ High expectations

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How Can the Book Be Used to Promote Teacher Quality?

Effective teachers know how to use resources around them and how to maximize their own time as well as time in the classroom. *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*, along with its companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices*, focus on elements within education that can support effective teaching and can therefore also support student learning.

Our intent is that the book will be a valuable resource for the following audiences:

- ◆ Teachers—including classroom teachers, resource teachers, and educators in other settings—who desire to improve their own performances and the performances of their students through this value-added methodology;
- ◆ Teacher leaders who are in a position to impact teacher practice through their support and expertise;
- ◆ Administrators who supervise and support teachers; and,
- ◆ Staff development specialists who plan and deliver training focused on improving instructional practices.

Regardless of your position in the enterprise of teaching and learning, it is our sincere hope that *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices* benefits your school, your teaching practices, and, most importantly, your students.