

Furst, S., Gray, S., & Kennedy, S. (2012). From the student's perspective: what makes a great reading teacher? *American Reading Forum Annual Yearbook* [Online], Vol. 32.

From the Student's Perspective: What Makes a Great Reading Teacher?

Sierra Furst
Stephanie Gray
Sarah Kennedy
Bowling Green State University

A plethora of studies have sought to determine the qualities of a successful reading teacher. Many of these studies examined a teacher's practices and compared them to student performance on some assessment (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999; Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Other studies examined new, innovative ideas teachers implemented in their classrooms and measured the outcomes. While these methods of determining the qualities of a successful reading teacher may prove to be successful, there may be a more obvious way of determining what makes a great reading teacher. Perhaps instead of focusing on what educators, administrators, or researchers believe makes an extraordinary teacher, we should instead focus on what students believe, particularly since students are our teachers' target audiences.

Although the idea of asking students what they believe are the qualities of a great reading teacher may not seem very original, there is a definite lack of research about quality reading teachers from a students' perspective. Matthews (2000) reports less than 1% of schools are evaluated on their performance by the students and parents. It seems shocking that our target audience's opinion is seemingly the last group of people whose opinions are considered. Dillion (2010) supports Matthews by stating that, "Few of the nation's 15,000 public school districts systematically question students about their classroom experiences, in contrast to American colleges, many of which collect annual student evaluations to improve instruction." Why the drastic difference from public school districts to American colleges? Do teachers value their opinion any less?

As licensed teachers and full-time graduate students, the researchers in this study believe

that students should be the first group targeted when feedback is needed. These beliefs have shaped this study on what makes a great reading teacher, from the students' perspective. To measure this, a writing prompt was generated that asks students the aspects of their reading teachers' personalities and practices they like as well as the aspects about their reading teachers' personalities and practices that they don't like.

Literature Review

It is important to understand how student perceptions of teachers can affect instruction, as well as teacher attitude, and how these data can be used to inform instructional practices. Dillon (2010) explained:

Teachers whose students described them as skillful at maintaining classroom order, at focusing their instruction and at helping their charges learn from their mistakes are often the same teachers whose students learn the most in the course of the year, as measured by gains on standardized test scores, according to a progress report on the research. (p. 1)

According to Dillon, students are keenly aware of more subtle aspects of teaching, including classroom management, personality traits and effective pedagogy methods. By becoming more aware of student perceptions, teachers may be better able to meet student needs and provide more effective instruction.

From a teacher's personality and demeanor to pedagogy skills, students are actively processing a variety of teacher qualities. Açıkgöz (2005) conducted a study regarding high school students' perceptions of teachers and found students believed personal and pedagogical characteristics were the most valuable traits in a teacher. Students perceive their teachers, the teacher-created learning environments, the lessons and other aspects of teaching and learning in many different ways, causing them to value different traits. Because of this, the collection and analysis of student data concerning perception becomes extremely relevant.

Understanding how students perceive the teachers in their lives affects not only the teachers, but moreover, the students. As teachers come to a better understanding of how students feel, what they see and what they believe about their environment and the teacher themselves, teachers can react responsively. Rimm-Kaufman (2011) explained, "Improving students' relationships with teachers has important, positive and long-lasting implications for students' academic and social development." (p. 1). The author explains that when learning environments and relationships are positive, students are more apt to be successful. By using what teachers know and understand about student-teacher perception, teachers are better able to create more successful learning environments.

When teachers fail to take into account students' perceptions, there can be a critical misunderstanding about the learning environment and the relationships in the classroom. As described by Brekelmans, and Wubbels (2005):

...teachers made a more favorable judgment about the learning environment than the students...it appears that the more the teacher and his or students disagree in the perceptions of the teacher-student relationship, the more the students perceive the teacher as uncertain, dissatisfied and admonishing. (p. 19)

Misconceptions can cause a variety of problems, the most important of which may affect students' learning and achievement within the classroom and even their sense of security. As Smith LaPlante (2003) explained:

In order to alter the way teachers interact with students, teachers need to have accurate information regarding how students perceive their teachers' relationship with them. Rather than wait for problems to surface or escalate, teachers could seek information from their students with respect to the student view of the need or problem. (p. 2)

Being actively receptive to and reflective about student perceptions, teachers have a much better chance of creating successful learning environments.

Methods and Procedures

The purpose of this investigation, then, was to examine students' perceptions of the characteristics of an effective reading teacher. The option to take part in this investigation was proposed to all Fall 2011 student teachers in the early childhood program and middle childhood program at a Midwestern university. Four student teachers who taught a language arts or reading class participated in the study. Data were obtained from a second grade class which contained 17 student responses, two third grade classes totaling 36 student responses, and a seventh grade class with 21 student responses.

To extract the data of interest, a writing prompt was created so that students could feel comfortable talking about their perceptions of a quality reading teacher. After taking into consideration the wide range of targeted grade levels, researchers settled on a very simple, yet direct prompt. There were two prompts; the exact wording for the prompts were, "One thing I like about my reading teacher is..." and "One thing I don't like about my reading teacher is..." The student teachers who participated were given strict instructions regarding the administration of the writing task. Student teachers were told to read the prompt aloud to their students to avoid difficulty for non-proficient readers. Secondly, student teachers were told to allow 10 minutes for their students to respond to the given prompts. Once students had completed the writing prompt, the data were collected by the student teachers and returned to the researchers.

To analyze the data, the researchers first read through all student responses in each grade level and recorded all student responses into two categories: likes and dislikes. Next, subcategories were generated for each grade based on the student responses in each category (likes and dislikes). Each grade level responses were read through a final time to confirm that all responses had been categorized appropriately (likes, dislikes) as well as sorted into appropriate subcategories and tallied accurately. Category percentages (likes and dislikes) were obtained for each grade level. Percentages were calculated for each subcategory by dividing the number of

responses that fit a specific category by the total number of students who participated in the study at that specific grade level. Some student responses involved numerous thoughts regarding their likes or dislikes and their responses may have pertained to more than one subcategory. In this case, the student response was included in the percentages for all applicable categories.

Results

The subcategories created from the student writing prompts were similar in all grade levels pertaining to likes and dislikes of the reading teacher but were not the same (see Table 1). Regarding what second grade students like about the reading teacher, the subcategories reported were engaging activities, reading in class, and personality. The dislike subcategories were work, strictness, reading, and homework. The like subcategories in the third grade level were engaging activities, reading, personality, helpfulness, and rewards. The dislike subcategories were work, strictness, reading, and disappointing the teacher. The seventh grade like subcategories included personality, engaging activities, helpfulness, appearance, and classroom management. The dislike subcategories were too much homework, work, unfairness, and strictness.

Table 1
Categories and Subcategories of Student Responses by Grade Level

	Likes	%	Dislikes	%
Second Grade n = 17	Engaging activities	47	Work	41
	Reading in class	35	Strictness	30
	Personality	29	Reading	19
			Homework	6
Third Grade n = 36	Engaging activities	39	Work	
	Reading	31	Strictness	6
	Personality	22	Reading	6
	Helpfulness	19	Disappointing teacher	3
	Rewards	6		
Seventh Grade n = 21	Personality	59	Too much homework	52
	Engaging activities	33	Work	24
	Helpfulness	29	Unfair	10
	Appearance	5	Strictness	5
	Classroom management	5		

Second Grade Responses

When asked what they liked about their reading teacher, 47% of second graders responded they think their teacher made reading fun with engaging activities. Almost half of the responses involved describing activities such as reading groups, games, activities, and mentioned interacting with the SMART board. These responses were tallied into the engaging activities subcategory because their responses indicated they liked the activities implemented by the teacher. The second highest category was reading; 35% of the students liked their reading

teacher because they enjoyed reading in class. Two students said they liked that the teacher read aloud. More than a quarter (29%) of the respondents explained they like the reading teacher's personality. The personality characteristics deemed to be positive (likes) were nice and/or funny. One student responded, "When some of the kids aren't reading *flowincey* he *preatends* to fall asleep and it's funny." The researchers interpreted this to mean the student enjoys watching the teacher act like he is falling asleep when students do not read fluently.

The largest subcategory of dislikes amongst the second grade responses was dislike of work. Of the responses, 41% of the students described disliking that the teacher gave work that was too difficult. Students also reported disliking specific work tasks such as making sentences with words, computer work, and completing worksheets. Thirty percent of the responses indicated the students disliked the teacher because he was strict and mean because of disciplinary elements involved in the classroom. One student disliked raising his or her hand. Another dislike subcategory amongst the second grade students was reading. These students (18%) disliked that the reading teacher made the students read because they didn't like reading. Only 6% of the students mentioned disliking homework. One student reported, "I do not like reading work sheets. I don't really like reading homework. I do not like reading work sheets because they take a long time. I don't really like reading homework is boring."

Third Grade Responses

The largest like subcategory in the third grade level was the same as the second grade: engaging activities (see Table 1). Thirty-nine percent of third grade respondents liked the engaging activities used by the reading teacher. The students discussed liking the spelling game *Sparkle*, working with vocabulary cards, playing flashcard games, participating in reading groups, and working with partners. The next highest subcategory was reading in general (31%). Similar to the second grade responses, two third grade students described liking when the teacher reads aloud and one student explained he or she likes reading alone. Other students (22%) responded that they liked the reading teacher's personality: adjectives such as nice and funny were used to describe the teacher. Also within the personality category were student responses describing the teacher as fun and generous. A student stated, "I like everything about _____. She is so nice to everyone in the class. She is very fun so when she is around no matter what we are doing is fun for everyone especially when we are reading." Another like subcategory reported was helpfulness; students (19%) said they liked that the teacher was helpful by teaching words well and helping students to pronounce words. Two students, 6%, reported liking that the reading teacher gave rewards.

More than half of the third grade participants reported that one thing they did not like about their reading teacher was the work assigned. The third graders said they disliked work that was too boring or challenging. They elaborated on disliking work that involved long works, long books, or hard questions. The students also did not like reading in groups, completing worksheets, and re-reading text. Another subcategory emerged from the third grade students (6%), which was they generally disliked reading. A third grade student responded, "The thing I don't like about reading is that sometimes I get bored of it." Strictness was also a dislike among several (6%) students. The students explained they did not like it that the teacher made them finish all of their work and the teacher did not allow them to put their heads on their desks. The

final subcategory to emerge involved only one student (3%), who explained that one thing he or she did not like about the reading teacher was “when she gets disappointed at us.”

Seventh Grade Responses

The top like subcategory in the seventh grade was different than the top subcategory in the primary grade responses (see Table 1). Fifty-two percent of seventh grade students described liking the teacher’s personality and discussed the character traits of “nice,” “funny,” and “laid-back.” A total of 33% of the seventh grade students described liking instruction because of engaging activities, such as fun school projects. They said class was fun because it was interesting with a variety of activities. Twenty-nine percent of students liked it that their reading teacher was helpful. The students commented that the teacher was helpful by explaining concepts thoroughly and providing an adequate amount of time for students to complete assignments. One student elaborated, “I like the reading teacher because every time we do projects or essays she explains a lot of things to help us get an A.” One student (5%) reported liking the appearance of the teacher and one student (5%) described liking classroom management aspects implemented by the teacher.

Among the dislike responses in the seventh grade, the top subcategory was too much homework. Fifty-two percent of seventh graders expressed that the reading teacher assigns too much homework. Almost a quarter of the class (24%) responded that they disliked the work involved in instruction such as writing essays and answering comprehension questions. Two students (10%) explained they disliked that the reading teacher was unfair. One student responded, “I could sit in class with my hand raised question after question and she won’t call on me. It was like she had something against me.” Only one student (5%) described disliking how strict the teacher was.

Discussion of Results

Results indicate that although there are a lot of similarities in perceptions of primary and middle school students’ beliefs in important elements and characteristics of effective reading teachers, there are some differences. In regards to what second and third grade students reported they liked best about their reading teacher, the subcategory engaging activities was reported the most. Engaging activities was also shown to be important among seventh grade students but was reported as the second highest subcategory of responses. Students appreciate interactive elements of instruction that involve games, activities, using technology, and the ability to work with peers. Fun instruction that is engaging and includes a variety of activities is valued by students of all ages.

Results demonstrate that older students were more likely to notice and value teacher personality traits. This was the highest subcategory in the likes responses reported by seventh graders, but primary students also described liking their reading teacher because he or she contained certain positive personality traits. The primary and middle school students reported they enjoyed teachers who can be described as nice and funny and the seventh grade students also shared they value teachers who are laid-back. Even though older students may be more likely to notice and value personality characteristics, primary students also deem importance in

teacher ability to make reading class interesting by being fun. Students also value teachers who show they care by being nice.

The second highest subcategory in responses of why primary students liked their reading teacher pertained to an interest in reading. The students either liked their reading teacher simply because they enjoy reading, because the teacher read aloud to them, or because they were able to read in class. It is important to note that seventh grade responses did not contain any mention of an interest in reading in general or in class. Perhaps intrinsic reading motivation is lower among the seventh grade students who participated in the study compared to the primary students. The researchers believe reading teachers of all grade levels need to be sure to strive to identify reading interests of all students and to allow class time for independent reading and read-alouds to promote reading.

Third grade and seventh grade students also described liking teachers who were helpful. When teachers are willing to help students, this is perceived by students as being caring. Students appreciate and recognize that teacher assistance is sometimes necessary for effective learning to take place. The older students identified grades as being significant. They reported the reading teacher as helpful because he or she helped the students to get a good grade.

The two third grade students who reported valuing rewards given by the reading teacher illustrate enjoyment in extrinsic motivation. Liking the appearance of the reading teacher was a unique response given by one seventh grade student. Even though only one seventh grade student's response included a description of classroom management aspects, it is likely that students of all grade levels may be able to perceive when a teacher contains control of a classroom which most likely also results in ability for the other characteristics and elements of a quality reading teacher to take place.

The highest subcategory among dislikes of a reading teacher reported by seventh grade students was too much homework. Primary students are not usually expected to spend a significant amount of time at home on homework. This is most likely why only a small percentage of primary students reported disliking the reading teacher because of assigning too much homework. Second and third grade students expressed they disliked work the most when asked what they did not like about their reading teacher which was the second highest subcategory reported by seventh grade students in dislikes responses. Students explained they disliked when the reading teacher assigned work that was too boring or challenging. This demonstrates that the students may not have understood the reason or significance for completing the activities deemed "boring." Reading teachers should explicitly explain to students the benefits in completing reading activities and why specific skills need to be practiced. In asking for student feedback regarding reading assignments and activities, teachers can analyze whether tasks are actually too difficult for a student's ability level or if the teacher simply needs to work on improving student stamina to complete longer tasks. Student feedback regarding dislikes of certain types of work can also provide the teacher with valuable information in planning instruction. There may be a different method of accomplishing the same student learning objective that would contribute to bringing about variety in instruction, which results from this study demonstrate students value highly. Students are more willing to put forth full effort when they are interested in and motivated to complete schoolwork. For example, perhaps

the seventh grade teacher in this study could use these results to notice that students do not like answering comprehension questions. Perhaps, the teacher could instead implement engaging reader response activities to improve instruction.

The results of all grade levels also contained dislikes responses involving teacher strictness. Students perceive a teacher as strict because of procedures and or rules of the classroom and disciplinary actions. Some second and third grade students explained disliking the reading teacher because of simply not liking to read. A third grade student demonstrated that he or she respects the teacher highly by reporting not liking when the teacher is disappointed in the class. Students are motivated to work hard and want to make the teacher proud when they like and respect him or her. Two seventh grade students' responses included remarks of the teacher being unfair. If students perceive special treatment being given to other students or think they are singled out in not being given fair treatment, they will not like the reading teacher.

Conclusion

The main conclusion derived from this study is that all students, regardless of grade level, value friendly teachers who incorporate engaging activities, those who are explicit in their expectations of students, and those who are willing to help students who struggle with reading or assignments. This conclusion is aligned previous research conducted on positive student-teacher relationships. More specifically, the present investigation is supported by the research of Rim-Kaufmann (2011) who examined characteristics of positive student-teacher relationships. He identified six different aspects of positive student-teacher relationships. Several of his aspects are reflected in the results of this investigation. First, positive student-teacher relationships consist of teachers who show pleasure and enjoyment of students, which is supported by the present investigation. Students at all levels expressed a desire to have a teacher with a friendly personality. Another aspect identified by Rim-Kaufmann was that teachers offer students help in achieving both academic and social goals. This aspect was evident in the present investigation where students indicated they liked teachers who were helpful. A final aspect evidenced in this investigation was that teachers seldom show irritability or aggravation. This aspect was present in students' descriptions regarding teacher personality, but also in their dislikes of teachers they didn't want to disappoint, and teachers who were unfair, or perceived as strict.

Implications

It is important to recognize just how critical these qualities of a reading teacher are to students. Teacher helpfulness and support have been shown to have vital to students' self-esteem. In fact, Reddy, Rhodes, and Mulhall (2003) found, "Students who perceived decreasing levels of support over the course of middle school tended to report declining levels of self-esteem over the same period of time and vice versa" (p. 132). A decline in self-esteem can have long-term effects on a student. Therefore, helpfulness and support are qualities of teachers that are vital to student success and high student self-esteem.

Great qualities in a reading teacher can also positively affect student motivation as well as social and academic behaviors. According to Wentzel (1997), students who perceive their teachers as caring, good models, very democratic, who individualize instruction and attention

and nurturing to students were more motivated in school. The author further concluded that a teacher's positive and encouraging attitude towards a student can result in increased positive social and academic behaviors and outcomes (Wentzel, 1997, 2002). It is apparent that a positive relationship between a teacher and a student can lead to very rewarding outcomes in the academic, motivational and social aspects.

The results of this study suggest that students value a friendly personality, engaging tasks, and helpfulness and support for reading instruction. This information was gleaned through asking students their opinions about their reading teachers through the use of a writing prompt. Although asking for student feedback can sometimes make a teacher feel vulnerable or insecure, it is crucial to go to the targeted audience when desiring constructive feedback. Teachers who ask for their students' feedback may be surprised to see the willingness and constructiveness they display. In fact, the vast majority of the responses that were obtained from this study were constructive. In closing, the authors of this study challenge readers to consider the views and perceptions of their students the next time they are searching for constructive feedback.

References

- Açıkgöz, F. (2005). A study on teacher characteristics and their effects on student attitudes. *The Reading Matrix*. 5(2), 103-115.
- Brekelmans, M. & Wubbels, T. (2005). Two decades of research on teacher–student relationships in class. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43(1-2), 6-24.
- Gambrell, L.B., & Mazzoni, S.A. (1999). Principles of best practice: Finding the common ground. In L.B. Gambrell, L.M. Morrow, S.B. Neuman, & M. Pressley, (Eds.), *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (pp. 11–21). New York: Guilford Press.
- Dillion, S. (2010, December 10). What works in the classroom? Ask the students. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/education/11education.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1322527422-RZK7GFQx7/MaZ1sfQacBUg>
- Guthrie, J.T., & Alvermann, D.E. (Eds.). (1999). *Engaged reading: Processes, practices, and policy implications*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kamil, M.L., Mosenthal, P.B., Pearson, P.D., & Barr, R. (2000). *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Mathews, J. (2000). When parents and students grade staff. *School Administrator*. 57 (9), 6-9
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00- 4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Reddy, R., Rhodes, J. E., & Mulhall, P. (2003). The influence of teacher support on student

adjustment in the middle school years: A latent growth curve study. *Development and Psychopathology*, 15(1), 119-138.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2011). *Improving students' relationships with teachers to provide essential supports for learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx>

Smith LaPlante, S. (2003). Factors influencing grade six students' perceptions of teachers. (Master's thesis, University of Maine), Available from University of Maine Digital Commons. (<http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/15>)

Wentzel, K. (2002). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development*, 73, 287-301.

Wentzel, K. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 411-419.