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## **The Top Ten Qualities of an Effective Reading Teacher**

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Many wonder and meditate on the recipe for a student's success. Some assert that intrinsic qualities determine success for an individual. Others postulate that success is a direct result of external factors or environment. However, research continually points to one central determinant of growth and success in a student, the teacher (Hattie, 2003; Wren, 2006). It is true that the teacher plays a central role in the overall success of a student. Whether in the general classroom, or in a reading center, the teacher impacts the educational well being of every student with whom he or she comes into contact. Wren (2006) posits that highly-qualified teachers are not necessarily high-quality reading teachers. He argues that there is a great deal of confusion between highly qualified and high quality teachers. Highly qualified simply refers to the degrees, certifications, or qualifications of the teacher, whereas high quality teachers have talent, knowledge, and skill. With this distinction in mind, it behooves researchers to explore what we know about high quality teachers of reading. Synthesizing the qualities that effective reading teachers employ provides critical insight as to how others may replicate the success these expert teachers have experienced.

### **Methods**

To best collect relevant research regarding high quality reading instruction, a search was initiated to review a wide base of educational research. The process began by reading numerous research journals and texts to compile a working list of important qualities or practices successful reading teachers employ. These resources were accessed in journals and texts, from a variety of authors, over the past 20 years. These resources were accessed from physical as well as electronic databases. As the list developed, traits were singled out that most frequently were identified by authors as key components in an effective teacher of reading. This list was then tweaked and whittled down to present ten of the most frequently cited qualities or practices of an effective reading teacher.

## Results

As the literature base was reviewed, a number of personal qualities were noted. Qualities such as kind, patient, caring, friendly, etc., were frequently cited as necessary for effective teaching, in general, not specific to reading teachers. Therefore, these characteristics were eliminated from our list. Then, we categorized and classified those characteristics that were most specific to high quality reading teachers. These qualities should be viewed as individual brush strokes contributing to an overall portrait of a high quality reading teacher. Rather than competing, these qualities work together to form the best in the teaching profession. In fact, it could be concluded that it is the combination of these qualities that lead to highly effective reading teachers. What follows are ten research-based qualities or practices that effective reading teachers employ. These ten qualities/characteristics/practices are not in any particular order and should not be considered an exhaustive list of the many traits of a high quality reading teacher.

### **1. Provide Direct, Explicit Instruction**

Effective teachers of reading utilize direct, explicit instruction (Denton, n.d). According to Blair, Rupley and Nichols (2007), “Explicit instruction means imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher-student interactions and teacher guidance to student learning” (p. 434). Reading teachers must always assess the needs of their students. In some cases students need clear, direct explanations of how to successfully complete a skill. Furthermore, direct instruction is intended to meet the needs of all students, including those who are experiencing difficulty in learning to read (Tierney & Readence, 2005). Focused on skills, the teacher must have clear observable goals and know exactly how he or she will present the strategy to the students. Blair, et al. state, “Teachers should provide instruction that reflects the students’ level of reading development” (p. 433). Taking this into account, the reading teaching is able to plan instruction to focus directly on the selected strategy to be used. This makes the learning goals clear to the students and allows them to focus on the task at hand. The key to explicit instruction is the active communication and interaction between teacher and student (Blair et al.).

### **2. Exhibit Flexibility**

Flexibility is a key component of an effective reading teacher. How many teachers have developed the “perfect” lesson? Every detail was combed through, not a single variable left to chance, only to realize during the lesson that students just weren’t grasping what was expected. At this point some might panic. Some possibly wouldn’t know how to proceed. However, the effective reading teacher knows that, through careful planning, accommodations can be made to change directions during a lesson to meet students’ needs. With respect to the reading teacher, the International Reading Association (IRA, 2000) asserts, “They know when to organize children in large groups for direct, explicit instruction, when small group or individual instruction is more appropriate, and when children will learn more efficiently on their own” (p. 239). Quality reading teachers aren’t afraid of the unexpected. They realize that flexibility is part of the job. They adapt to classroom variables and help their students overcome

adversity when needed. High quality reading teachers analyze how these variables influence students' reading and make changes when necessary. A good reading program should not be regimented and inflexible; rather, it needs to be flexible to allow the teacher to make necessary changes to make the program succeed (Blair et al., 2007). Elite reading teachers handle unforeseen occurrences with confidence and a knowledge that plans can and should be adapted when needed.

### **3. Model Behaviors**

Modeling is an important task for the quality reading teacher. Modeling includes dramatizing how and when to use the skill or strategy in authentic reading instruction (Blair et al., 2007). Reading teachers work with whole class, small groups or one-on-one, modeling how to use a strategy. This could be modeling effective comprehension practices while using a think aloud during a writing activity, or modeling fluent reading while conducting a class read aloud. Through modeling, teachers also explain why it is important for students to use the strategy or skill (IRA, 2000). Through modeling, students are able to witness authentic examples of how and when to use a specific strategy or skill and then draw from this experience when they have an opportunity to authentically employ its use. When teachers model engaged reading to their students, they place emphasis on the role that reading has for their own lives, as well as the impact it can have on students (Turner, Applegate & Applegate, 2011). As teachers model authentic reading or a specific strategy or skill, they enable a student to concretely visualize how he or she might successfully complete a similar endeavor.

### **4. Scaffold Instruction**

Any high quality teacher is familiar with scaffolding. Falling within the student's zone of proximal development, scaffolding provides the necessary supports students need until they have mastered a task (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the level of difficulty at which a student can complete a task with adult or peer assistance. For reading to be within a child's ZPD, a teacher inserts scaffolds to support the child through the activity. In reviewing the actions of effective teachers, Metsala, Wharton and McDonald (1997) found, "Effective teachers used a great deal of scaffolded instruction" (p. 520). Effective reading teachers know when to insert scaffolds and closely monitor their student's progress.

Effective reading teachers guide students in their use of skills and strategies, gradually diminishing support and assistance and eventually require students to assume greater responsibility as they become more skilled (IRA). Scaffolding instruction can take place in many parts of a reading lesson. Effective reading teachers "provide students with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension to promote independent reading" (Gambrell, Mandel, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007, p. 19).

### **5. Link Reading and Writing**

There is an undeniable link between reading and writing. Many of the skills necessary to succeed in reading are also present in writing. There is reciprocity between the two that expert reading teachers note and actively seek to connect in their daily lessons. If a child struggles with

reading fluency, he or she is likely to also lack the qualities of a fluent writer. If his/her word recognition is weak in reading, it is likely he or she will lack the ability to employ rich vocabulary in writing. Excellent teachers understand how reading and writing development are related and they work to integrate both skills into instruction to take advantage of the student's development in both areas (Denton, n.d.; IRA, 2000; Leu & Kinzer, 2003). These links are continuous, and effective teachers often incorporate both across the curriculum (Metsala, & Wharton-McDonald, 1997). Many teachers are adept in recognizing the reading and writing connection; however, effective teachers not only recognize this connection, they actively connect the two daily in a variety of methods.

## **6. Balance Literacy Instruction**

Debates over phonics instruction, whole language and balanced literacy have long been observed. However, based on current research, one can see that many of the most effective reading teachers are taking a balanced approach to reading instruction. Students need to experience skills-based instruction as well as authentic reading experiences. Students benefit from practice in individual skills such as phonics and phonemic awareness, but must also read authentic texts for real purposes. Students succeed when they are able to master individual reading skills, while then having the opportunity to put those skills to use in an authentic way. In a review of effective teaching practices, Metsala, and Wharton-McDonald observed, “Highly effective teachers reported using both immersion in authentic literacy-related experiences and extensive explicit teaching through modeling, explanation, and mini-lesson re-explanations, especially with respect to decoding and other skills” (1997, p. 519). Reading teachers comprehend that students need to have the explicit skills-based instruction but also time to put those skills to practical use. Blair et al. (2007) assert, “The more time students spend on actual reading in which they can be highly successful, the more they probably will learn” (p. 436). Authentic experiences add value to the students' learning and only foster greater development. Quality reading teachers realize that the balance of instruction shifts across the developmental span and shifts for individual students (IRA, 2000).

## **7. Maintain High Expectations Of Students And Self**

Reading teachers must expect the most out of themselves as well as their students. These teachers believe in themselves and believe that investing substantial effort in their work will result in all students learning. These teachers also maintain the mantra that failure is not an option (Blair et al., 2007). Students will achieve more when they are held to high standards and made aware of what is expected of them. The higher the standards, the greater achievement the students will experience. These expectations, however, need to be realistic. Reading teachers who hold themselves to high standards will create an environment of success while modeling successful cognitive strategies to students. High-quality reading teachers establish clear goals and expectations of which all students are aware. Teachers who articulate specific reading behaviors to be achieved prior to teaching and who teach relevant content, frequently have students who achieve at higher reading levels (Rupley, Wise & Logan, 1986). If students know what is expected of them, they will work to achieve said goals. Students need direction and an idea of where they are headed. This clarity and knowledge that the teacher has great expectations for them allows students to feel a sense of pride, self worth and spurs them to take

control of their scholarly efforts. Additionally, effective reading programs have teachers who believe in themselves and expect their students to succeed in learning (Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate, 2000). Without these expectations teachers as well as students often fail to reach their full potential.

## **8. Employ a Variety Of Assessments**

Assessment should be undertaken to guide instruction. Assessments must be continuous and appropriate for every student. Teachers who continually assess students are able to accurately guide instruction towards the needs of the students (Leu & Kinzer, 2003; Wren, 2006). Reading instruction becomes more student-centered and effective when it is based on assessment results. The ability to differentiate instruction is dependent on accurate assessments of the students' needs. Incorporating both formal and informal assessments in the reading classroom enables the teacher to assess students based on a number of measures for a complete view of their abilities and needs. Effective reading instruction is dependent on assessment that helps teachers and students move toward and attain daily and annual reading goals (Gambrell, Morrow & Pressley, 2007). This calls for a balance between formative and summative assessments. This balance will enable the reading teacher to effectively assess every student by looking at daily needs and overall growth (Gambrell et al.). Additionally, excellent reading teachers are familiar with a wide range of assessment techniques. These techniques range from end-of-the-year standardized tests to daily informal assessments (IRA, 2000). High quality reading teachers are well versed in utilizing a variety of assessments and they use their assessments to guide instruction and impact student learning.

## **9. Motivate Students**

Every teacher must be able to motivate students to succeed. However, this is particularly true with reading teachers. Students who are motivated to learn are often more engaged, experience higher levels of achievement and internalize learning goals (Blair et al.). Students often lack motivation to read and teachers who can provide motivational experiences in the reading classroom provide students with more opportunities for success. Affective bonds can be strengthened for students when their teachers provide assistance during lessons by creating tasks that influence a child's motivation (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2012). When teachers key in on student interest and allow them a chance to engage in affect building activities, their motivation often increases. It has been found that one of the key factors in motivating students to read is a teacher who values reading and is enthusiastic about sharing a love of reading with students (Gambrell, 1996). This enthusiasm and love for reading can compel students to explore and try reading out for themselves. Teachers become explicit reading models when they share their own reading experiences with students and emphasize how reading enhances and enriches their lives (Gambrell). Time and time again research demonstrates that it is the teacher more than any other factor that leads students to success (Hattie, 2003). Without the teacher as a motivator, many students would fail to engage in new or different reading experiences.

## 10. Maintain A Rich Classroom Library

Effective reading teachers immerse students in an environment of reading. When they are surrounded by an abundance of reading materials, students have the ability to select books to cater to their interests, while also exposing them to new genres. High caliber reading teachers allow for students to have access to high quality literature, across many genres (Gambrell, Mandel, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007; Wren, 2006). Excellent reading teachers include a variety of reading materials in their classrooms, and are not limited to books. This can include magazines, comic books or newspapers (IRA, 2000). Students who are able to explore diverse texts are able to experience varied reading opportunities, thus expanding their literary horizons. Students need to have access to reading materials to construct a positive attitude towards reading, and often these attitudes are cultivated in the classroom. Creating a print rich environment is a key component in developing lifelong readers. Students who have this exposure are more likely to pick up a book and read. Accessibility to high quality literature is necessary for every student to become a successful reader. Elite reading teachers understand the importance of a high quality classroom library and provide their students with daily access to all of the titles within their collection.

### Conclusion

It is clear that high quality reading teachers embody numerous characteristics. The preceding list addresses only ten qualities or practices effective reading teachers employ. It is not the authors' intent to view as one of these qualities as more important than another; rather, they are to be viewed as a collaborative collection of beliefs, practices or attributes that contribute to the effectiveness of a reading teacher. There are, indeed, many other traits not represented that deserve equal attention. This list is a mere snapshot, garnered from the most frequent citations in educational research. Going forward we must praise our educators who employ these practices and encourage others to follow suit. No matter where we may differ on our list of traits or reading priorities, let us not forget our one common goal -- that every teacher of reading must have the best interests of his or her students in mind, and strive to create engaged lifelong readers.

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