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Attributes, responsibilities, and identification of a master teacher

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Abstract

What makes a master teacher? What do they do that makes them more effective in the classroom? What allows them to affect their students in a profound way? What qualities, behaviors, and techniques make these teachers special? Some researchers have argued that good teachers are born, others have insisted that nearly anyone can be trained to be a good teacher. Most, however, have agreed that good teaching is a skill not easily measured.

ATTRIBUTES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND IDENTIFICATION
OF A MASTER TEACHER

A Research Paper

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by

Steven J. Buhrow

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What makes a master teacher? What do they do that makes them more effective in the classroom? What allows them to affect their students in a profound way? What qualities, behaviors, and techniques make these teachers special? Some researchers have argued that good teachers are born, others have insisted that nearly anyone can be trained to be a good teacher. Most, however, have agreed that good teaching is a skill not easily measured.

The purpose of this research paper is to effectively describe the behaviors and the attributes of a master teacher, to discuss some of his/her responsibilities and finally to examine what the identification of a master teacher can mean to a school district as a whole, as well as the means by which this identification can be achieved. Research on effective teaching practices was inexhaustable. An attempt to summarize the qualities that intertwine throughout the literature as being "master teacher" qualities, will be explored.

For many years, (Allen, 1986) researchers were not very successful in developing definitions for the effective teacher. Since the 1970's a major shift has taken place. We can now use this influx of literature in identifying and formulating behaviors of a master teacher. For this paper, and as rendered by the AASA (1986), a master teacher was defined as an instructional leader who performs well above average at all levels that have been established as the

criteria for a master teacher. The master teacher has superior knowledge of the subject matter, superior teaching skill, and works effectively with colleagues and students.

Kounin (1970) along with Dunkin and Biddle (1984) pointed out that master teachers tended to be good managers, and brought an organized, efficient, management technique into the classroom. The key management elements, were increasing the time available for learning, preventing disruptions, and keeping the students diligently involved in quality activities. Master teachers demonstrated effective planning skills, using their time and resources wisely. Wragg (1984) indicated that they developed a systematic approach which included everything from room arrangement and housekeeping duties to discipline. These management behaviors were an indirect cause of student learning, but were considered very important by the master teacher. Good and Brophy (1984) discussed the aspect of management behaviors but went beyond that to identify that management also included being able to accept responsibility. Quality instruction was planned and appropriate for the learning experience. Master teachers paid attention to how time was allocated, insuring no area was slighted, noted both Allen (1986) and Colman (1967). Since allocated time was related to achievement, planning smooth transitions helped with maintaining quality instruction time.

Brophy (1979) indicated that master teachers had high

expectations of themselves and ~~that~~ self motivation was important to them. They assumed employee responsibilities willingly, duty assignments were promptly completed and accurate information was conveyed to management when it was requested. Job descriptions were carried out to the best of the teacher's ability.

Instruction development and curriculum studies were led by the master teacher as described by AASA (1986) and Allen (1986).

They had the capability of interacting, sharing, assisting and serving other staff members. The master teacher had the ability to cultivate support systems for teachers and others. They were willing to participate in the development and review of school policies, regulations, and assisted in resolving concerns and problems. The teacher maintained superior attendance, was process oriented, bright, an independent thinker, and was willing to assume extra responsibilities. Bloom (1982) pointed to the fact that they demonstrated a commitment to the pursuit of excellence in activities outside of the classroom. The master teacher was concerned with professional growth activities and encouraged other staff members to participate. The teacher served as a role model by taking advantage of opportunities to learn from others as well as keeping abreast of developments related to teaching. Both Good and Brophy (1984) and Dunkin and Biddle (1984) showed that master teachers stayed aware of what was going on in the classroom, if students were failing to comprehend, the master

teacher looked to themselves to find new teaching approaches. They assigned meaningful homework and became adept to doing more than one thing at a time. Master teachers varied their teaching strategies using a repertoire that included simulations, role playing, direct and individualized instruction, in addition to selected learning content congruent with the prescribed curriculum. They also demonstrated an eagerness to keep curriculum and instructional practices current, with systematic teaching steps that involved review study, practice, and homework followed by evaluation (Good and Brophy 1984).

Brophy (1979) indicated that master teachers have high expectations of their students. They were very good at maintaining students on the learning task. To best utilize time, activities were begun promptly, students actively engaged, and delays were avoided. Setting high expectations resulted in a history of high student achievement. Personal goal setting encouraged in helping to meet those high expectations was the denotation by Barber and Klein (1983). Providing supplementary materials, effective resources and being able to create materials for the instructional setting was important (NASSP 1984). A well organized classroom demonstrated an orderly approach to learning, and building on past lessons was utilized. The master teacher also planned and implemented strategies that encouraged student self discipline, established parameters for classroom behavior,

reinforced positive behavior, and managed disruptive behavior, constructively. NASSP (1984) also noted that techniques were employed to eliminate the causes of undesirable conduct. The master teacher had the ability to handle complex situations arising from behavioral problems.

Personal characteristics were valuable in helping to distinguish a good teacher. Researchers have determined that most master teachers had caring, warm personalities, and carried these features into the classroom. Allen (1986) noted that students seemed to gravitate toward master teachers seeking help in solving problems. These professionals were also democratic in their approach, always dealing fair with students, as well as staff. Master teachers being concerned with perceptual meanings rather than facts and events, reinforced their desire to have students thinking on a higher level.

In the literature, behaviors were intertwined. Some of these behaviors are listed below. First, master teachers showed evidence of superior preparation signified Houlihan (1983) and Wragg (1984). They chose relevant student activities to meet their objectives, attempted to bring the best out in students, and showed a real commitment to the children. Cooper and Ryan (1984) indicated that a master teacher motivated students to achieve performance levels beyond previous attempts. Challenging expectations were communicated, questions and discussions were encouraged, and

activities which stimulated creativity were presented.

It was reported by Colman (1967) and also by AASA (1986), that the master teacher was skillful in verbal and nonverbal communications. Ideas were presented logically and effectively with specific evaluative feedback considered important. At times they needed to be creative in order to handle a complex group of individual student needs. The use of pre and post test, standardized tests, criterion tests, and one on one conferences were vital. Test results were always returned quickly, written comments were given, and feedback was provided.

Wragg (1984) and Allen (1986) noted that another important attribute master teachers possessed was their superior knowledge in a specialized area. Their knowledge was accurate and up-to-date. For this reason, and for the fact that schools used them to assist other teachers in their professional development, additional training usually was necessary. Many states have used a master's degree status as a prerequisite to becoming a master teacher (Allen 1986).

A master teacher went beyond the requirement of meeting his instructional objectives stated Cooper and Ryan (1984). A variety of additional information was added to the required material enriching concepts to the students. This behavior reflected on the teacher's willingness to expand effort and energy beyond the typical school day, also demonstrated here was their originality. It was this

creation, maintenance of enthusiasm and love for learning that made a master teacher special. Wragg (1984) and Griffin (1986) brought forward the master teachers ability to draw out the best in students by paced learning as the students succeed from one level to the next. They designed activities that met the mastery level of their students, and were able to identify their abilities and interests.

Allen (1986) and Griffin (1986) indicated that the master teacher promoted a good working relationship with others by providing active leadership. Relationships with students, staff, parents, and community were promoted. They had the ability to work cooperatively with colleagues and actively shared ideas, materials, and methods with other staff members. They worked cooperatively with support staff and utilized them in a team spirit. The master teacher actively promoted parent and patron involvement in the school by initiating communications when appropriate, a trait noted by Cooper and Ryan (1984). The teacher participated in parent-teacher activities and kept the best interest of the students in mind while communicating with the parent. By promoting positive relationships, the master teacher earned the respect of peers, parents, and the entire community. They found themselves contributing significantly to the quality of life in schools through an active leadership role outside.

AASA (1986) rendered information showing how experience was a necessary part of the master teachers training. There was no

substitute for experience, where master teachers have seen years and years of dealings with staff and students. Being able to call on these different types of experiences made it easier for the master teacher to cope with concerns later on. Experience allowed them to call on their own resources in handling situations. Having proven several techniques through experimentation, master teachers knew what worked best in a given circumstance.

Another area explored in the literature was the various responsibilities that have been carried out by master teachers. Master teachers have effectively helped their principals in instructional leadership. In a study authored by Barber and Klein (1983) a cadre of master teachers were assigned instructional improvement responsibilities beyond their regular teaching duties. In this way the skill and wisdom accumulated by the schools most effective teachers was made available to those with less experience. In support of instructional improvement, master teachers were asked to observe and assist other teachers. Master teachers served as mentors to beginning teachers, teachers who were experiencing difficulty, and student teachers. They have also been asked to train other teachers by demonstration lessons, and by a critique of the teaching of others in the manner of an academic coach. Master teachers were called upon to direct instructional development projects, such as curriculum development and working with the talented and gifted program. Master teachers were called

upon to implement new instructional programs cited AASA (1986). They assisted the principal in the process of teacher evaluation within their specific departments. Other areas mentioned in the research as possibilities for assistance included advice concerning the budget, and development of schedules for their area of expertise. Master teachers were often released from some of their regular instructional duties to perform the above tasks.

Why do we need to identify master teachers? There were several reasons reported in the literature. States were increasingly on the look out for ways to demonstrate excellence in education as stated by Allen (1986) and NASSP (1984). Many movements originated in pusuit of better educators. One of these was the career ladder movement. Parker (1985) testified to the fact that all across the nation, efforts were being made to change the ways teachers were evaluated and rewarded. A shift to a salary schedule that promotes excellence in performance was underway. The career ladder concept provided upward mobility in a series of steps, each of which required a greater degree of competence and responsibility. Master teachers were at the top of most of these ladders. Many areas of concern that were covered as being outstanding in the master teacher, were also important to the movement of a teacher up the advancement scale. These include student results, evaluations, academic standards, and careful planning (Robinson 1984). Career ladders helped in the development

of master teachers, in as much as teachers were more inclined to commit themselves to the profession when they realized that upgrading their skills meant advancement. The most significant problem states faced as they developed career ladder programs, noted Soar, Medley, and Coker (1983) was the evaluation of the teaching performance.

According to Allen (1986) master teacher identification was important with the consideration of new funding that arrived on the scenes in many states. Merit pay was the new word in town and it was directly linked to the identification of master teachers in the school system. Also according to Allen (1986) school districts rewarded superior performance through the use of grants for special projects, or participation in special training opportunities. These appointments were made only after the superior teachers had been identified. Mentor teachers received extra pay and assisted other teachers in improving their skills.

Master teachers needed to be identified for a number of nonmonetary reasons. Robinson (1984) revealed that awards such as teacher of the year have been used by many school district to reward outstanding performance and accomplishments.

The identification of master teachers brought about better district teacher union relations as cited by Houlihan (1983) and Allen (1986). A closer working relationship between staff and administration was easier as more and more tasks of the schools

were shared with the master teachers. School districts chose from a wide variety of incentives, but most involved identification, and maintenance of the master teachers in the system. Identifying master teachers and providing incentives were crucial to a school system, and the ability to retain these people in education had a lasting impact on the future of our children (Robinson 1984). Allen (1986) brought out that master teachers, when identified, can teach more content, teach more skills, obtain better comprehension, and obtain better attitudes. They can teach to more students, to more difficult learners, and in less time. A master teacher can produce more than typical teachers in various combinations of the above factors.

According to Soar, Medley & Coker (1983) and NASSP (1984) evaluation was needed to identify master teachers, and this process alone helped the instructional process and school goals to mesh. Improved teacher competence, morale, and professionalism came out of evaluation. Evaluation and identifying master teachers also brought about increased public confidence in schools. The largest problem faced by school districts however, as shown by Robinson (1984), dealt with evaluation procedures to help find master teachers, and to help determine merit pay.

The writer will, having shown the importance of master teacher identification, briefly deal with three evaluation instruments found in the research and show how they are related to the attributes of

a master teacher. The first approach was the Performance Evaluation Approach rendered by Robinson (1984). This approach was based on process or input and not on results or output measures of student learning. Areas looked at by Robinson (1984) included, knowledge of subject matter, preparation and planning, management, staff and public relations, as well as professional development. These areas were all touched upon as being important attributes of a master teacher. This type of evaluation was clearly used in helping to identify the master teacher.

The second evaluative approach from Robinson (1984) was the Professional Competence Approach. The purpose of this approach was to raise the status, prestige, and salaries of outstanding teachers; also to retain quality professionals. Competence was measured by status, growth, performance contributions, and critical needs, with preparation and experience being most important. Again these items were seen as quite significant in the identification of master teachers.

The third type of approach was the Educational Productivity Approach (Robinson 1984). This approach was based on the premise that student learning was both the goal and product of teaching. This approach relied on output measures of student learning to assess productivity of teachers. This approach looked at attitudes, skills, content mastered, the number of students, and time spent on learning. As seen again, these details were mentioned as characteristics

found in a master teacher.

This brief summary of the three approaches discussed by Robinson (1984) indicated that it was possible to evaluate and identify the master teacher. The characteristics were measurable and a combination of the instruments mentioned above could be utilized in determining our master teachers.

In schools, colleges, and universities there must be many professionals who have the qualities found in this study of master teachers. They are 'national treasures,' remembered by only a small number of students and a few of their colleagues. Hopefully in this time of doubt about education and schooling, ways will be found to identify and reward our master teachers as well as increase our understanding of the vital role they play in the educational process. The administration, the school board, the public, and the teachers themselves must be willing to accept the fact that the position of "master teacher" is a professional position of importance. Clearly, master teaching depends on the knowledge cited by Houlihan (1983), Good and Brophy (1984), Wragg (1984) and Allen (1986), the techniques, cited by Kounin (1970), Dunkin and Biddle (1984) and Wragg (1984), and creativity cited by NASSP (1984), Cooper and Ryan (1984), Wragg (1984) and Griffin (1986), of people who are dedicated to helping students learn. These ideas are only the beginning. Master teachers, applying their talents in schools everywhere, will continue to develop new techniques and will continue to share those techniques with each

other. During the past few years, many researchers have observed the techniques and characteristics of master teachers as has been shown by the writer. The intent of the writer throughout this paper has been to present information helpful to teachers, and to stimulate thinking about significant research finding. The ultimate outcome is that it would promote a greater interest in master teaching, thus leading to more mastery education for students. District master teacher programs address the recommendations of many recent national reports that teacher salaries should be differentiated by the quality of performance. If properly planned, master teacher programs have the potential to reward good teaching, and to retain our "master teachers."

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