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Parent Preferred Teacher Qualities: The Call for Highly Qualified Teachers

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Department of Education.

By
Taylor Roberson

Under the mentorship of Dr. Michelle Reidel, Dr. Meca Williams-Johnson, and Dr. Lina Bell Soares

ABSTRACT

This study sought to answer the question, “What teacher characteristics do parents value most?” as an initial response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The purpose of this study was to determine what teacher characteristics parents perceive as making teachers highly qualified to be used to improve parent-teacher relations and teacher effectiveness. To answer this question, a survey was used to collect data from the parents of K-5 students. 176 surveys were returned out of the 800 administered and were used to help the researcher conclude that there is not a teacher characteristic that stands alone to make a teacher highly qualified in terms of parent based preference. Of the eight characteristics examined, all but one received a majority ranking of 5 for “very important,” signifying that it is a combination of teacher characteristics that parents value. The remaining characteristic (The teacher supports and encourages me to utilize school community council.) only received a ranking of 5 for 67 of the 176 participants. This information lead the researcher to believe that less than half of parents either a) believe a teacher needs to inform parents of school organizations or b) see participation in such organizations as valuable to themselves.

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Introduction

As the original deadline for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 approached with goal of having all students at or above the proficient level by 2013, schools have been under increased pressure to meet the demands despite changing legislations. NCLB required the accountability for student performance to fall upon the schools. It said that schools must incorporate standard-based assessments to show student learning and that teachers should be “highly” qualified. Highly qualified by definition is problematic due to the variations in interpretation. Much research has been done to determine what the best interpretation of the phrase is; however, some aspects could be looked into further.

The federal government says that teachers who are highly qualified have “obtained full State certification as a teacher...[hold] a minimum of a bachelor’s degree; and [have] demonstrated subject-matter competency in each of the academic subjects in which [they] teach...” (Elementary & Secondary Education Act, Title II, Part A, 2005, p. 2). Under this definition, each state is allowed to determine not only how to certify teachers, but also the way in which teachers are deemed competent in subject matter. To meet ESEA requirements of highly qualified teachers, Barge (2012) says the state of Georgia has set up three main ways to evaluate teachers. The first is Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS), which essentially measures their abilities based on various things such as instructional strategies, professionalism, communication, and differentiated instruction. The second is Student Growth and Academic Achievement, or in other words, student performance. For schools to fall into the category of meeting student needs, the teacher should have 50 % of students exceeding standards, 40 %

meeting them, and 10 % or less not meeting standards (Barge, 2012, p. 32). Lastly, teachers will be evaluated based on student surveys. Depending on how the student feels about certain things, teachers will receive certain ratings that affect their evaluations. Combined, these assessments will help determine whether a teacher is highly qualified.

At a different level, professional accreditation agencies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (the National Board), believe that different things should be used to determine teacher qualifications. Darling-Hammond (1996) found that these types of groups consider highly qualified teachers to possess :

Subject-matter expertise coupled with an understanding of how children learn and develop; skill in using a range of teaching strategies and technologies; sensitivity and effectiveness in working with students from diverse backgrounds; the ability to work well with parents and other teachers; and assessment expertise capable of discerning how well children are doing, what they are learning, and what needs to be done next to move them along (p. 5).

This skill set requires teachers to be “instructional leader[s] who orchestrate learning experiences in response to curriculum goals and student needs and who coaches students to high levels of independent performance” (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 5).

Additionally, pre-service teachers have been asked what characteristics they believe make good, or high quality, teachers. Walker (2008) did a study to determine these characteristics through a fifteen year longitudinal study that had pre-service teachers write essays on teachers who impacted them and were most successful in

teaching them. He discovered twelve reoccurring attributes that outlined the characteristics of teachers who were effective according to the pre-service teachers. These attributes, interestingly enough, were all personality based. He found that they believed teachers should be prepared, positive, have high expectations, be creative, fair, and forgiving. The pre-service teachers also said teachers should be approachable, should make students feel like they belong, be able to admit mistakes, be compassionate, have respect for students, and a sense of humor (p. 64-67). Walter goes on to say that future teachers and current teachers alike should take these things into consideration when deciding on what type of teacher they want to be.

Finally, we will look at some other scientific-based research on teacher effectiveness. In 2002, the U.S Secretary of Education issued an annual report that “essentially argue[d] for the dismantling of teacher education systems and the redefinition of teacher qualifications to include little preparation for teaching...stating that current teacher certification systems... impose ‘burdensome requirements’ for education coursework” (Darling-Hammond & Young, 2002, p. 13). The report suggested that everything that had been done thus far to prepare teachers was a waste of time and there needed to be less focus on anything that was not content. Darling-Hammond and Young looked into these findings and found the research that was overlooked by the U.S. Secretary of Education. They found that:

Teacher preparation— including the student teaching and methods coursework the Secretary’s report deplores—contributes at least as much to outcomes ranging from teacher effectiveness to teacher retention. And although there is evidence that some well-designed ACPs [Alternative Certification Programs] have strong outcomes, there is also

evidence that programs and entry pathways that skirt the core features of teacher preparation produce recruits who consider themselves underprepared, are viewed as less competent by principals, are less effective with students, and have high rates of teacher attrition. Finally, the recent advances states have made in strengthening teacher certification requirements have begun to be evident in stronger academic backgrounds and licensing test scores for college graduates who have prepared to teach (p. 23).

In sum, their findings indicate that in areas where improvement has been proven, things should stay the same and that teacher preparation in skills is just as important as in content.

Some of these findings and pushes for reform were meant to be in place by 2006 and others by 2013; yet, here it is 2014 and we are still debating about what makes a teacher effective. We know how the government and professionals would define highly qualified teachers and how they want that to happen, but what about parents? Teachers spend so much time with students— at least six hours a day (but often more), a minimum of 180 days a year, for thirteen years—directly affecting both their education and their overall development. Since the scope of how a teacher affects a student is not limited to the student’s education and is so extensive, I believe parents should have a say in what makes a “highly qualified” teacher. Parents should feel comfortable and confident in the teacher their child learns from, and it is because of this that I investigated parent-preferred teacher qualities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to determine what teacher characteristics are preferred by parents to create a more complete picture of highly qualified teachers and to gain implications for improved teacher effectiveness. Previous studies on teacher effectiveness and the characteristics of highly qualified teachers have focused on sources such as the government, teacher groups, and the like, but have failed to investigate the position of parents. Despite that parents had not previously been considered, Knopf (2007) and Ferrara (2005) showed that communication between teachers and parents is crucial not only to student success, but also to the parent-teacher relationship, thus proving the need for the voice of parents to be heard on the topic.

Literature Review

Teacher quality and the qualities that define a highly qualified teacher have been the subject of much debate since the passing of No Child Left Behind. Recent research suggests that the best teachers have had a thorough education and opportunities to practice their teaching skills before being placed in a class of their own; however, there is also a strong correlation between the relationship of teachers and parents and student performance.

Characteristics of “Quality Teachers”

Darling-Hammond says, “Many people do not understand what successful teaching requires, and do not see teaching as a difficult job that requires rigorous training” (2007, p. 112). Her findings on the subject, however, reveal quite the opposite of this common belief. Effective teaching practices are varied, and teachers who use them consider the needs of all students in the class. Teachers who utilize practices that foster a

good learning environment know that teaching is not one-dimensional—it takes time and skill to do it well. The question that Darling-Hammond seeks to answer is how to prepare such teachers. In the 2007 article, she discusses that:

Pedagogies of teacher education—student teaching, performance assessments and portfolios, analyses of teaching and learning, case methods, and practitioner inquiry—are intended to...build the vision, knowledge, tools, practices, and dispositions of new teachers to reflect on and analyze their practice. [And that] teacher educators—whether they are university or school-based—must construct integrated learning experiences [for pre-service teachers] (p. 130).

These tools together work to give new teachers the experience they need to find their strengths. It also gives them opportunities to reflect and build on their weaknesses. This suggests that effective, or quality, teachers are not just competent in subject matter, but have had (and should have) the chance to practice and reflect before teaching on their own. However, it is important to note that Darling-Hammond also suggests that these pedagogies are “only as useful as the content they convey,” and that “content for teacher education... [should be] vital, usable, and...requires considering [of] all components of preparation...” and that teachers should also be knowledgeable in subject matter (2007, p. 130).

In 1996, Darling-Hammond released a separate article that supports the claims of her 2007 findings. In “What Matters Most: A Competent Teacher for Every Child,” Darling-Hammond says that teacher education programs should be based off the standards and that they should offer certain types of professional development. The pedagogies listed in the 2007 study are examples of professional development that could

be incorporated. Darling-Hammond says, “The reform of elementary and secondary education depends first and foremost on restructuring its foundation, the teaching profession,” and that it must be done by “increasing teachers’ knowledge to meet the demands they face and toward redesigning schools to support high-quality teaching and learning” (1996, p. 1). Increasing teachers’ knowledge can be done by having teacher education programs focus more on the content and standards to be taught. It can also be achieved by having mentor programs for new teachers, internships in schools post-graduation, and, when using professional development, making sure that it is of high-quality and has financial support (Darling-Hammond 1996). With these ideas about how to increase teacher knowledge to raise the quality of teachers in the field, next is exploring how to make schools more supportive of high-quality teachers.

The 1996 article by Darling-Hammond shows that, in secondary schools, “students have less than a 50% chance of getting a science or mathematics teacher who holds a license and a degree in the field in which he or she teaches.” The article offers up additional statistics of similar oddities like 36% of teachers are unlicensed in their second subject area. These statistics show a lack of true quality teachers in many subject areas, and this comes from teachers who are more highly qualified to teach in these areas moving on to different jobs because they can do better elsewhere. (Note that these statistics have changed since the implementation of NCLB with some improvements to these areas; however, conditions still do not meet the requirements set out by the act.) Darling-Hammond suggests that schools should “encourage and reward knowledge and skill” and also “remove incompetent teachers through peer review programs...and due process” (1996, p. 7). If higher quality teachers were recognized for their abilities through

pay raises or tenure offers, these teachers would be more likely to stay. In addition, not having to work alongside other teachers who were under qualified yet being equally paid/recognized would contribute to high quality teachers being present in schools. Despite strong abilities, these high quality teachers feel underappreciated when someone who is not as capable is set as their equal, and thus move on. Murnane and Steele further this investigation in their study from 2007. Because there is now a great deal of job mobility for women and other minorities who would customarily become teachers, incentives need to be sought out to secure the better teachers. Potential incentives include pay raises and bonuses, but creating better work environments is thought to make a difference as well. Other incentives include “pay-for-performance, and reduced restrictions on who is allowed to teach;” however, despite being in practice in some schools, these practices have not been studied for effectiveness (Murnane & Steele, 2007, p. 15).

This problem of low quality teachers is worse in low income and minority schools, and students in these schools are at an extreme disadvantage. Their disadvantage comes from teachers feeling they do not have the support and the tools to meet student needs. Knowing this, Murnane and Steele suggest that we “make schools supportive and humane places for teachers and the students with whom they work,” and that “paying large financial bonuses to teachers to do impossible jobs will not help the children” (2007). So while pay incentives can help, it is important to know when teachers need more than raises and when the school as a whole needs to improve.

In addition to knowledge, extensive practice, and having a supportive school to work in, Brown (2008) finds that teachers also need to have a balance between public

ideals for teacher quality and teachers' own perspectives and identities. Brown says, "Our challenge as teacher educators is to help these teacher candidates meld the two different identities, the public notion of a knowledgeable professional and the personal notion of a caring professional" (2008, p. 179). Preservice teachers sometimes find difficulty in dealing with who they want to be as a teacher and what they believe is expected of them. No Child Left Behind pushes for strong academics, but does not address teacher character. The study by Brown suggests both are important in making a quality teacher, but that teacher education programs should foster the search for this balance. Brown also concludes by reminding us that despite the need for teacher education programs to help preservice teachers find this balance, that "developing a professional identity is a career long process" (2009, p. 180).

To go along with this idea of development over time, Harris and Sass (2011) found that in the case of elementary and middle grade level teachers, experience seems to prevail over professional development in forming highly qualified teachers as judged by student performance. They discovered that, contrary to popular belief, "professional development is [only] positively associated with [teacher] productivity in middle and high school math and [that] on-the-job training acquired through experience is correlated with enhanced effectiveness in teaching both math and reading in elementary and middle schools" (2011, p. 799). In other words, to improve as a teacher takes time, and professional development is only effective in certain areas. Both teachers and students perform better when the teacher is more seasoned.

Based on the research, it can be said that quality teachers are multidimensional. They take into account student need when deciding how to present their lessons, and are

prepared to present them in various so that all students can learn. In addition to being able to present information in different ways, quality teachers are also skilled in their content areas. These quality teachers have a firm understanding in the subjects they teach.

Quality teachers reflect on their performance and that of their students to better themselves. Certain research suggests that some of the most qualified teachers are those who have more practice. This suggests that new teachers who aim to be quality teachers should seek out those teachers with more experience to learn and reflect further. Lastly, quality teachers seem to be those who, in addition to the other duties, have not ignored the need to be nurturing to their students. They have figured out how to meet the call for professionalism from adults and the need to be cared for from the students themselves. But what about parents? The relationship between parents and teachers and how that affects a teacher's quality is something else that requires exploring.

Parent-Teacher Relationships & “Quality Teaching”

A study by Sheridan et al. (2012) shows that in addition to a teacher's skillset and knowledge, that students are better off when their teachers have a strong relationship with parents. In this study, Sheridan et al. investigate the correlation between parent-teacher relationships and student behavior in kindergarten-third grade classrooms (2012, p. 26). What they found is that using “CBC [Conjoint Behavioral Consultations] in promoting positive behaviors in the primary grades...[that] those receiving CBC demonstrated greater improvements in social skills as reported by both parents and teachers...[and that] significant improvements in adaptive skills were reported by teachers” (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 39-40). By working in these CBC groups, parents and teachers were able to better help students make the adjustments needed to succeed. In addition to this benefit,

both teachers and parents who were in the group felt they had better communication than those who were not a part of these groups. This implies that parents and teachers should collaborate more not only for student performance, but also to increase the trust between parents and teachers. The study does say that “the small-group format did not provide sufficient opportunity for parents to build a strong relationship with their children’s teachers” and this is something that should continue to be explored (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 41). As a whole, this study suggests that quality teachers understand the importance of building relationships with the parents of their students. Because of the benefit for students, a quality teacher should seek to make these relationships.

In 2007, a study done by Knopf and Swick explored this relationship between parents and teachers further. They said, “Too often early childhood professionals assume they understand parent perspective and that they have established meaningful relationships with the parents that they serve. Many parents, however, indicate that they are rarely consulted on important issues regarding their child’s schooling” (p. 291). Rather than making these assumptions, quality teachers should be actively learning about all of their students and communicating with parents. Teachers who make assumptions often have stereotypical perceptions of parents instead of taking the time to learn why parents behave the way they do. Some assumptions are that parents do not care, do not have the time, and do not want to be involved; however, an early study by Swick showed that parents actually want to be involved and want a relationship with teachers (p. 293). The variety of student and parent needs is immense, and quality teachers would do well to not get caught up the assumptions but should rather seek out parents and their wants for their students. Misconceptions happen on both sides because of a lack of

communication, and it is something that can easily be remedied when teachers take the time to reach out to parents.

This idea of parent involvement and communication was investigated in the realm of teacher education by Ferrara and Ferrara in 2005. This study was conducted with elementary and secondary preservice teachers, and therefore involved teachers from this broad spectrum. The preservice teachers spoke with current teachers on the topic of parent involvement in the classroom, and found that parent involvement is key to student learning. One teacher said, “The benefits of parental involvement are so immense that they are impossible to ignore. Parents are an invaluable resources to teachers, providing information about their child’s home life and what works best for that child in terms of learning and discipline,” and that “parents, school staff, teachers, and the community are on the same team...” (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005, p. 81). As mentioned before, students have a wide variety of needs and parents can help open this window of understanding for teachers to better meet these needs. This allowed preservice teachers to see the positive side to parent involvement, and also gave them a better understanding of why parents roles in the classroom are so crucial. Having a strong understanding of the value of parents is a key part of being a quality teacher because of what it can do for students.

Despite knowledge on the importance of parent involvement, there is still a divide on exactly what roles parents and teachers are supposed to play. In 2007, Korkmaz surveyed 148 teachers on the responsibilities of parents, the responsibilities of schools, and the responsibilities of teachers—all in regards to increasing student achievement (p. 391). In sum, teachers in the study believe that parents “should pay enough attention to their children to meet their basic needs such as food, health and shelter.” The teachers

said that teachers should “know, respect, and care for their students, use a variety of instructional strategies, be aware of individual differences, motivate students very well...,” and a variety of other school-based responsibilities (p. 398). As a whole, these teachers essentially believe that parents’ roles are mostly home-based. The exception to these teacher beliefs being that about 61% of the teachers in the study believe parents should maintain communication with teachers and about 48% believe they should “provide a good atmosphere for their children to study at home” (p. 392). In answer to this divide, previous research shows that having a relationship with parents within the school helps quality teachers to know students better, therefore making teachers more prepared to meet student needs.

On the other hand, Tveit (2009) found that parents view these roles quite differently as seen through the analysis of text from the National Parents’ Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education in Norway. Traditionally, parent’s roles are defined and established by schools and are therefore school centric, but a push is being made towards parents being allowed to contribute to this definition (Tveit, 2009, p. 290). The NPC believes that “teachers should ask parents how they want the school to develop, how to define objectives and establish service declarations, and how to be evaluated according to the parents’ levels of satisfaction” (p. 293). The NPC also defines parents as “employers and users with rights,” which is a much more active description of parent involvement (p. 293). However, they find that despite this desired level of involvement, that parents “are expected to maintain a passive role, and the teachers’ role is to be active” as implied by the Korkmaz study (Tveit, p. 297). Instead of working with the teachers, “parents leave the definition [terms] of parental involvement to teachers,” even

though they feel differently (p. 297). Parents actually have more rights to be involved than what they exercise because they often submit to teachers' directives on the topic. Knowing this, quality teachers should reach out to parents and give them the opportunity to be more involved.

Lawson (2003), like Tveit, found that when sifting through the roles of parents and teachers that "teachers and parents have different perceptions of parent involvement" (p. 77). This particular study involved teachers and parents from a low-income, culturally diverse, urban elementary school (p. 77). Parents and teachers were interviewed on the topic of parent involvement, and despite parents giving the textbook definition of what parent involvement was, actually had a deeper and quite different idea of it. Parents expressed that they want to be involved in the schools, but that because of their personal situations had a difficult time getting to the schools. Knowing that they need to be involved, parents felt that they should work with teachers, but that they did not communicate well. They said that they "believe that the origin of poor teacher-parent communication lies within the schools, they believe that the school should initiate collaboration by becoming more responsive to parental voices and concerns" (p. 96). Parents also told interviewers that "school teachers and staff members...[make] assumptions about how children's academic aptitude relates to parental caring" (p. 97). Parents feel as though the teachers do not make the effort to listen to them when their children struggle and that the teachers assume the parents do not care when the students have a hard time. Contrasting these feelings are the teachers' beliefs that "some parents may also need to improve their parenting skills, as well as their communication skills with teachers, to help their kids in school" (p. 109). Teachers also prove to be quick to

judge nonworking parents who are not involved as uncaring. The conflicts found in this study point to the need for more effective communication all the way around between parents and teachers, and that trouble arises when assumptions are made.

To aid in helping teachers understand the parent perspective, Kroeger and Lash (2011) worked with preservice early childhood educators on reaching out to parents through interviews. Despite that the preservice teachers were given preconceived ideas of parents, one preservice teacher said that “a parent (not viewed as cooperative by program personnel) loved her child, regardless of school personnel views, and that the views held were worth reconstructing” (Kroeger & Lash, 2011, p. 273). Another preservice teacher reported that she “did not know that he [the student] talks about school all the time at home” (p. 273). The preservice teachers gave many such testimonies about students and parents alike. These interviews gave preservice teachers an opportunity to see that parents who they might assume, or who they were told, would not be interested in their child’s education were actually very willing. Kroeger and Lash (2011) came to the conclusions that teachers can learn a great deal about students by speaking with parents, and that these types of interviews can help students learn by giving teachers inside information. The preservice teachers also found that the parents were more trusting of them after the interviews, and therefore even more interested in being involved (p. 275). Keeping these findings in mind, quality teachers should make sure to not form opinions on parents or students based on anything but their own experiences. Where one teacher may say that a parent is uncaring, a quality teacher who investigates and interviews may find a parent to be quite obliging.

Some parents, on the other hand, do not wait for the teacher to reach out. Hassrick and Schneider (2009) investigated parents who use “surveillance” as a means of having control over their child’s education. They found that “both positive and negative consequences can emerge when a watchful dynamic is established between parents and teachers who are jointly monitoring the educational progress of children” (p. 199). Positive effects include better collaboration between parents and teachers and parents ability to help teachers better understand student needs. However, these positive effects are biased towards middle and upper-class students whose parents are able to observe teaching practices and have input. Lower-class students are at an unfair disadvantage in this situation because their parents may not always be available to express their wants. Alternatively, parents can also “negatively affect teachers by undermining their professional judgment and practice...by ‘ganging up’ with other parents to complain...” (p. 199). Instead of using this as a means of constructively helping their students and the teachers, some parents use surveillance to try to control teachers and get special treatment for their child. This practice is unjust not only for teachers, but also for students whose parents cannot do this for them. Those who wish to be quality teachers should take the precautionary steps to make sure parents feel they are having their needs addressed before surveillance becomes involved; therefore, making it as fair as possible for all.

Recognizing that there is a push for higher parent involvement, Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) researched how teachers felt about having more involved parents in urban elementary schools. They found that “teachers favored parents’ involvement but also felt vulnerable to the increasing influence of parents who scrutinized their work and encroached on their professional domain” (p. 394). To counter balance this, Addi-Racah

and Arviv-Elyashiv recommend that teachers use a diplomatic approach in addressing parents and forming relationships with them. Teachers should tell parents how they can help in the class, and give them many opportunities. This will allow parents to be involved and allow them a say without giving them free reign. Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv say, “By exhibiting their competence and sharing information, they [teachers] can gain support and foster trust between them and the parents” (2008, p. 410). Gaining this trust gives quality teachers back some of the control they fear losing and gives parents peace of mind.

High quality teachers should work to create a relationship with the parents of their students, even when parents seem inattentive. Part of being a good or “quality” teacher is doing what is necessary to help students achieve. Despite that sometimes having parents involved in the classroom can make teachers uneasy, quality teachers should look past this to work for the overall good of their students.

Summary

The characteristics of “quality teachers” have been defined up until this point as a result of their academic training and student successes (Darling-Hammond, 1996 and 2007), their personal commitments to a professional identity (Brown, 2009), and their overall experience within their given educational field (Harris and Sass, 2011). While these definitions cover a wide range of the teaching practice, they ignore the involvement of parents and their voice in the classroom. Additional research reveals that a strong parent-teacher relationship results in increased student behavior and performance (Sheridan et al., 2012). Tveit’s review of the NPC shows that parents want to be involved and build these relationships, but that they often end up in a passive role with little say

(2009). As a result, creating this positive relationship is up to the teacher as many parents do not feel comfortable reaching out to teachers and are unsure of the class-home boundaries (Lawson, 2003). Despite the control teachers want in their classrooms and their uncomfortableness with parental presence, Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) say that involvement and trust can begin with the simple sharing of information.

In pursuit of the sharing of information between parents and teachers and the often absence of parent opinion in the classroom, I sought to bridge this gap and add to the current research. This study was guided by the follow research question:

- What characteristics of teachers do parents value most?

Methodology

Design

This research examined potential relationships between demographic factors such as parent ethnicity, the number of children per household, and student grade levels as they related to the parent ranking of the given teacher characteristics to determine parent preferred teacher qualities. In order to examine this, a short survey (see Appendix A) was used to collect data from parents of students at one elementary school in the Southeastern region of the U.S. Data was then analyzed via descriptive analysis of answer frequencies compared to the above demographic factors.

Population

This study took place in a large county school district in the Southeastern region of the US. The county has a population of approximately 52,655, the majority of which live in rural areas (City-Data.com, 2012), and is home to eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools with a combined enrollment of roughly 11,016

students (The governor's office, 2007). The current study used teachers in K – 5 at one of the eight elementary schools for collection of survey data. Participants in the study were parents of students in the school and were therefore nonrandom. A total of 800 surveys were sent out and 167 were returned.

Data Instrumentation

A survey was chosen as the most appropriate data collection method for this cross-sectional study because surveys yield a faster response turnaround, accommodate for a larger sample size, and allow for stronger inferences on parent opinion to be drawn. This survey assessed parental opinions on the importance of specific teacher characteristics in the education of their children as well as demographic factors such as ethnicity, children per household, and student grade level. The survey was created by the researchers based on highly qualified teacher characteristics defined in previous research and used on current teacher evaluations. Of the characteristics listed, only eight items were used for parents to respond as characteristics they value most.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was sent home with students in grades K-5 via teachers and asked parents to submit their opinions of highly qualified teacher characteristics on a 5 point Likert scale for each of the eight characteristics. Participation in the study involved completing the survey and returning it to the teachers. Completed surveys were picked up from the school after a period of three weeks to allow time for initial administration, completion, and return of the surveys.

Once the surveys were collected, the data was then pulled and sorted by student information, parent information, and survey question results. The data was then checked

for commonalities across responses, compared by demographic areas, and sorted into graphs to display key information. These areas were then evaluated in a discussion of the data. The discussion addresses the key research question and offers implications for increased parent-teacher relations and teacher effectiveness.

Findings

Out of the eight survey questions (see Appendix A for full survey), question one (The teacher is knowledgeable about content and is able to relay information to students.) received the overall highest ranking for parental value having been scored as “Very Important” by 167 of the 176 participants. However, all other questions with the exception of question seven received the same score a minimum of 83 % of the time (see Figure 1). Question seven (The teacher supports and encourages me to utilize school community council.) received the overall lowest ranking for parental value with 38 % of participants scoring it as “Very important” with about 50 % of participants scoring it as a 4 or 3 (average importance). Question seven was also the only survey item to be marked as “Not at all Important,” and question two (The teacher communicates with me regarding my child’s academic progress and behavior.) was the only other question to be marked as a 2 (not important) with only one participant marking it as such; all other questions received a minimum score of 3.

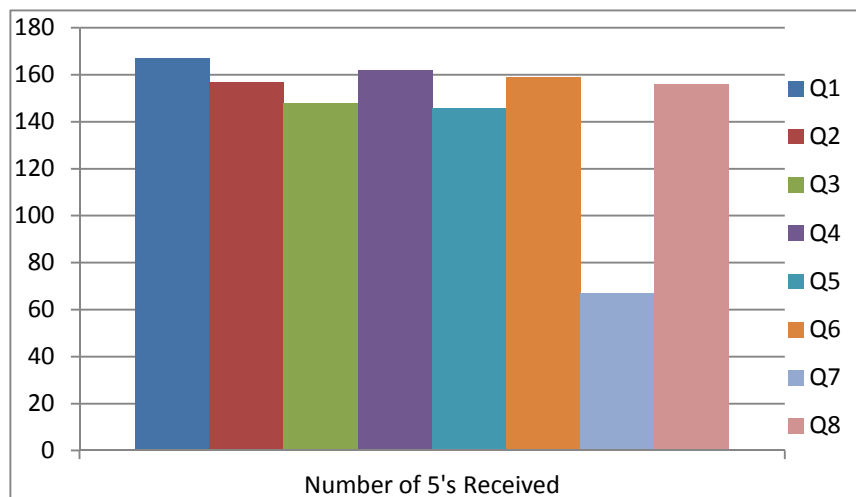


Figure 1

Looking at the participants, 161 were female, 12 were male, and 3 belonged to persons who did not designate gender. Of the 176 parents who returned the survey, 68 had students in multiple grade levels, and 33 had students in 1st grade—the highest in individual grade-level return. There were additionally 24 parents of kindergarten students, with the remaining 119 participants almost evenly representing the remaining four grades (see Figure 2). Of the survey respondents, 74 % of the participants were Caucasian, 11 % were African American, and the remaining 15 % was comprised of Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and other mixed ethnicities (see Figure 3). The students’ ethnicities was the same as that of their parents across the board with few students of an additional ethnicity being represented.

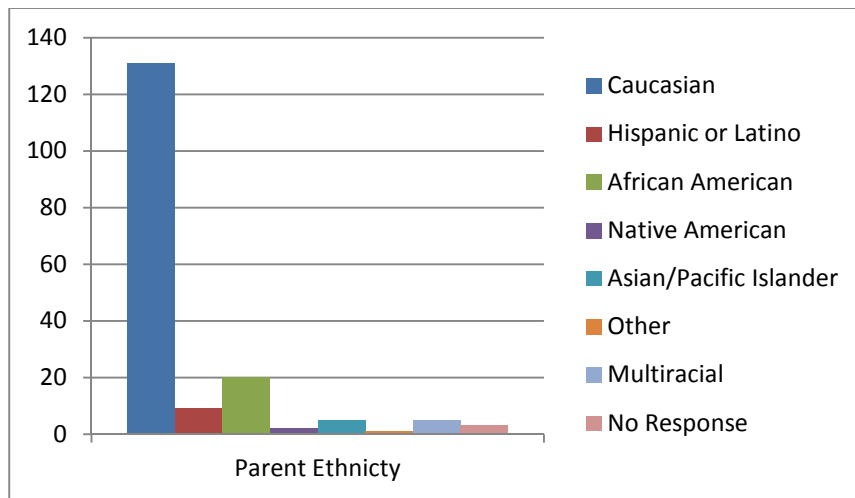


Figure 2

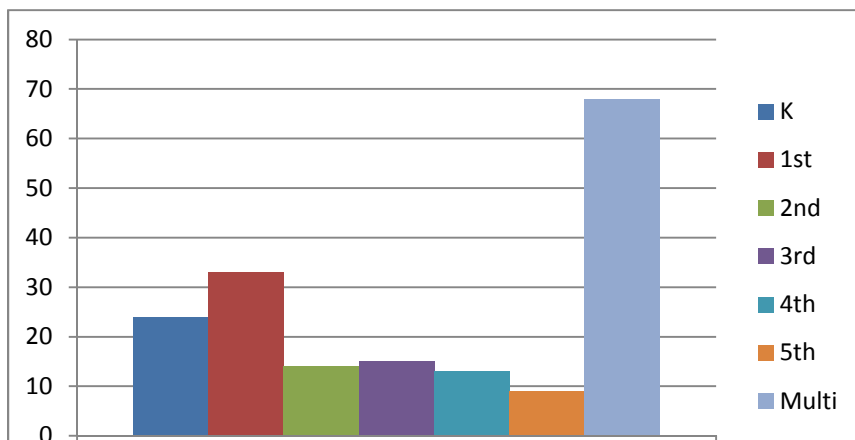


Figure 3

Other varying factors from the participant pool included the number of parents who had children receiving gifted or special education and ESOL services. Nineteen parents reported having children in special needs, 35 reported having them in gifted classes, and seven reported students in ESOL programs. An additional 47 parents said that their students received free and reduced lunch with just over 50 % of participants having students who participate in school activities. No outstanding parallels were found connecting any of the demographic factors and question ranking.

Discussion

My original intentions when conducting this study were to seek out correlations between demographic factors and the importance of specific teacher characteristics to give a voice to parents. Knopf and Swick (2007) said that teachers often assume the opinions of parents without ever consulting them, and I was curious to determine the opinions of the different parent groups—parents of non-traditional students, parents of varying ethnicities, and parents of students in different grade levels. However, like many teachers I was assuming that the parents in this research would want vastly different things and I assumed that a couple of characteristics would stand out while others would fall short. I assumed wrong.

What this data shows is that rather than being divided on the importance of the eight teacher qualities, the majority of parents in this survey were in agreement. Even though being a knowledgeable teacher was ranked the “highest,” it only out-ranked the other six questions by a maximum of 10 % of participants. With the exception of a few outliers, almost all parents designated that the given characteristics (except question seven) were of great value for highly qualified teachers.

Going into this study I did not have any particular characteristic that I thought would be less popular, although I did think there would be more variance between characteristics that were more formal (content knowledge, classroom management, and addressing at risk behaviors) versus more informal characteristics (communication, meeting student needs, creating a safe atmosphere, and encouraging school council). These assumptions were based on my own personal experiences with both schools and parents prior to the start of this study.

When examining the data I found it interesting that the support and encouragement of school councils was so much less important than the other factors. Tveit (2009) found that parents have a desire to be heard in schools and classrooms, and that they want to be more actively involved in making school decisions; despite the fact the school councils would give parents this opportunity, parents still found it to be the least important of the eight characteristics. This information leads me to think that parents either a) do not believe a teacher needs to inform parents of school organizations or b) see participation in such organizations as non-valuable.

Another aspect that I found notable was the popularity of teacher content knowledge as a valuable characteristic to parents. Darling-Hammond and Young (2002) reported that the U.S. Secretary of Education put heavy emphasis on the importance of content knowledge as a priority above other teacher characteristics. However, like the Darling-Hammond and Young (2002) study points out, teacher preparation in skills (like behavior management and creating a positive class atmosphere) were almost equally important in value to parents as the academic knowledge.

Strengths and Limitations

Sheridan et al. (2012) and many others have shown that increased parent-teacher relations improves student success in the classroom across multiple areas, but even with this knowledge, the views of parents on teacher characteristics has been very limited. The results of this study add to the current literature and support studies like those conducted by Sheridan et al. (2012) and Tveit (2009) by making parental opinions known. Knowing what parents value in teachers gives us the opportunity to increase the strength of parent-teacher relationships by examining and incorporating these practices.

The main weakness of this study, despite the benefits and implications, is found in the participant pool. Although it represents a strong sample of the surveyed elementary school, demographically speaking the parent voice heard is quite limited. The majority of parents who responded to the survey were married, white, females. While the other represented groups in the school tended to agree with this majority, it is unknown what results a larger and more varied group of participants would have revealed. Additionally, factors such as socio-economic status, parent age, and parents of students K-12 could impact parent opinion. Hassrick and Schneider's (2009) study investigating parental surveillance of classrooms revealed that middle-and upper-class parents tend to have an advantage in expressing their opinions in that they are more readily available to communicate. Knowing the full demographics of the selected school, it is possible that lower-class parents were unable to complete the survey in the given survey period thus preventing them from participating. Completing the same or a similar survey with participants from a greater number of schools from a variety of districts would also make for stronger overall data.

Implications

With the given unanimity amongst the majority of participants, it is clear that parents value a teacher who is skilled across the various areas thus implying a balanced persona much like that suggested by Brown (2008). A teacher's job is not limited to just teaching students, but extends into a large array of social interactions that range from behavior correction to accepting feedback from parents. The results of this study can be used to inform future pre-service teachers of parent expectations, and can also serve as a reminder to existing teachers that the voice of parents is one that needs to be heard.

The eighth question from this study (The teacher welcomes and responds appropriately to my concerns, inputs, and requests for information.) received high rankings amongst parents and tells us that it is important for us as teachers to take their thoughts into consideration. Knowing this, I intend to try to find the balance asked for by the results of this study in my own teaching career. By knowing what parents value in teachers, I can work towards creating a strong relationship between myself and the parents of my students by meeting the demands of the characteristics.

Conclusion

Completing this study has shown me that there is not a singular teacher characteristic that makes a teacher highly qualified, but rather confirmed my own thoughts that a highly qualified teacher is one who is multifaceted. While content knowledge is important, it takes more than just "book smarts" to be considered successful in the classroom. Teachers are constantly being monitored for effectiveness, and it is our duty to take the opinions of parents into consideration in addition to those of other influential groups.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Directions: Please complete the following survey as accurately as possible. Complete one survey for all children in the home that attend *Blandford Elementary School*. Your information will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you for your participation.

Student Information

Student 1

Gender: Male Female

Grade Level:

Kindergarten 1 2 3 4 5

Ethnicity Origin (or Race):

Caucasian Hispanic or Latino
 African American Native American
 Asian Other

Which of these items apply to your student?

Mark all that apply.

Involved in school activities
 Gifted Special Education
 English Language Learner

Primary Language: _____

Receives free or reduced lunch

Student 3

Gender: Male Female

Grade Level:

Kindergarten 1 2 3 4 5

Ethnicity Origin (or Race):

Caucasian Hispanic or Latino
 African American Native American
 Asian Other

Which of these items apply to your student?

Mark all that apply.

Involved in school activities
 Gifted Special Education
 English Language Learner

Primary Language: _____

Receives free or reduced lunch

Student 2

Gender: Male Female

Grade Level:

Kindergarten 1 2 3 4 5

Ethnicity Origin (or Race):

Caucasian Hispanic or Latino
 African American Native American
 Asian Other

Which of these items apply to your student?

Mark all that apply.

Involved in school activities
 Gifted Special Education
 English Language Learner

Primary Language: _____

Receives free or reduced lunch

Student 4

Gender: Male Female

Grade Level:

Kindergarten 1 2 3 4 5

Ethnicity Origin (or Race):

Caucasian Hispanic or Latino
 African American Native American
 Asian Other

Which of these items apply to your student?

Mark all that apply.

Involved in school activities
 Gifted Special Education
 English Language Learner

Primary Language: _____

Receives free or reduced lunch

Parent Information

Gender: Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female

Children: What is your total number of children? _____

Ethnicity origin (or Race):

- Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latino
- African American
- Native American
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other

Family Structure: Which item best describes your marital status?

- Single Parent
- Married
- Divorced
- Domestic Partnership
- Widowed

Which characteristics of highly qualified teachers do you as a parent value most?

Using the scale below, please indicate how important each statement about teacher is to you as a parent.

	←	Not at all Important				Very Important	→
The teacher is knowledgeable about content and is able to relay information to students.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher communicates with me regarding my child’s academic progress and behavior.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher demonstrates effective classroom management.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher takes steps to ensure that instruction meets the needs of my child.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher appropriately addresses at risk behaviors among all students.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher takes steps to ensure that my child feels safe at school.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher supports and encourages me to utilize school community council.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The teacher welcomes and responds appropriately to my concerns, inputs, and requests for information.		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	