I have a saying: “Good teaching is good teaching is good teaching.” Essentially, this means that it is rather easy to identify a good teacher from an ineffective one. Effective teachers seamlessly blend together positive personality traits, content knowledge, and pedagogical skillfulness coupled with an in-depth understanding of their students and their learning needs. This entire package is evidenced in the consistent performance of the teachers and the learning achievement of their students. Conversely, ineffective teachers struggle on multiple fronts, typically with glaring deficiencies.

The research on effective teachers is replete with specific identifying qualities. A simple exercise of reversing these identifiers can provide insight into what an ineffective teacher looks like. However, a powerful and authentic voice exists that is often overlooked in education. That voice is the voice of our students. Considering that students have sat hundreds of hours in multiple classrooms with variously effective and not so effective teachers, we can learn a lot by listening to them.

There have been a number of studies incorporating student voices in reference to positive teacher qualities (Brown 2004; Delaney 2009; McCabe 1995; Rudduck and Flutter 2004; Walker 2008; and Young, Whitely, and Helton 1998). Generally speaking, students repeatedly express that they want teachers who are qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable about their content areas, who possess a set of desired relational skills, and who know how to teach and to create and manage a safe and effective learning environment. Counter to this, student voices and educational researchers alike identify less effective teacher behaviors that are worthy of examination.

1. Teacher Qualifications and Expertise
It is not unusual for some Christian schools to employ untrained teachers because they have “subject-area expertise” or to reassign teachers to areas they were not trained for. Although such practices may conveniently fill a need, both can cause a teacher to be or become ineffective.

Although some will take exception to my singling out of individuals not trained as teachers, the use of such persons may very well hinder the academic achievement of a
school’s students. James Stronge emphatically states that “one of the best predictors of low student performance in individual schools is the number of uncertified teachers in the building.” Strong also asserts that the practice of reassigning teachers to fill a need in an area in which they are not trained to teach actually hinders their teacher effectiveness, rendering them “ineffective” (2007, 8).

In my research among students who attended international Christian schools, the participants repeatedly identified a dislike for teachers who were unqualified or who taught outside their areas of expertise. One participant explained it this way: “We had one teacher who taught biology and she had just graduated from a premed program, and I didn’t judge by credentials. I just judged by the quality of teaching … if they are a bad teacher, they’re a bad teacher. There’s no two ways about it … Sometimes learning how to teach well doesn’t mean that you can teach well.” Another participant shared this concerning teachers who filled in for courses they were not trained to teach: “Sometimes if there was a hole, they grabbed a random teacher and it was a disappointment. They’re learning just as much as the students are learning.”

Although it is tempting to use an individual with subject-area expertise but no teacher training, or it is convenient to move an established teacher into a different area than what he or she was trained for, caution should be taken. Both practices can lend to ineffective instruction and teacher and student frustration.

2. Teacher Persona
Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter (2004) interviewed British students and wrote, “What struck us was that the qualities that matter to pupils tend to be as much about how they are treated as how they are taught” (78). This concept of the “teacher as a person” is also supported within the research conducted with student voices as well as from educational experts. In my research findings the number one teacher quality repeatedly referenced and desired involved teachers who were highly relational and invested meaningfully with students on multiple levels—academically, socially, and spiritually. James Stronge also identifies many wonderful qualities of effective teachers within this area, but he also lists a number of red flags associated with ineffective teachers including the following (2007, 117):

- “Believes that teaching is just a job”
- “Arrives late to school and class on a regular basis”
- “Is not sensitive to a student’s culture or heritage”
- “Demeans or ridicules students”
- “Exhibits defensive behavior for no apparent reason”

I too heard similar complaints about teachers who lacked positive “teacher persona” qualities. In fact, students were very expressive about certain types of teachers they did not like. These included harsh and regimented teachers, teachers who did not engage meaningfully with students before and after school, and hypocritical teachers whose personal and spiritual lives did not match up with the school’s ethos and the teachers’ classroom admonitions.

Parker Palmer’s famous thought “You are who you teach” (2007) can insightfully be applied another way: you are how you teach. Ineffective teachers often struggle to bridge the gap between being a teacher-authoritarian or teacher-friend figure to that of becoming a student-centered teacher-authority/adult-mentor/advocate.

3. Pedagogical Skills and Classroom Management
In her study Nancy McCabe found that “students perceived the best teachers as those who came across as very human, yet very professional at the same time. They believed in students and students wanted to learn. They were organized and prepared. They were subject-centered as well as student-centered teachers” (1995, 125). In my research, participants expressed a desire for teachers who not only knew how to present information well but also knew how to maintain an orderly learning environment. Counter to this, Rudduck and Flutter identified student irritation with teachers who wasted time and created boredom in the classroom (2004, 81). Again, weighing in on these areas, Stronge describes a number of red flags of ineffective teaching. Below is a sample of his list (2007, 119–23):

- “Displays inconsistencies in enforcing class, school, and district rules”
- “Gives unclear directions or explanations”

Ineffective teachers struggle on multiple fronts, typically with glaring deficiencies.
• “Allows student disengagement from learning”
• “Makes up rules and consequences or punishment according to the mood; is unpredictable”
• “Uses no (or very few) lesson plans or plans that are poorly written”
• “Selects activities that are unrelated to the learning objective”
• “Teaches content that is inaccurate”
• “Consistently experiences student behavior problems”
• “Is unresponsive to student cues that the delivery of instruction is ineffective”
• “Does not apply current research-based strategies or best practices”
• “Interacts very little with students during instruction”
• “Is unprepared to begin the lesson at the beginning of class or during transitions”

These red flags were also evident in my research. I heard participants tell me about teachers who couldn’t explain information well and who were lax, disorganized, disengaged, and unable to enforce classroom structure. All of these point to an ineffective teacher. Thankfully, the incidences of ineffective teachers in our schools are limited. Instead, we are blessed to have some of the most dedicated, talented, and inspirational classroom teachers. However, Christian schools must be diligent guardians advocating nothing short of teaching excellence. Identifying teacher weaknesses and developing a professional growth plan toward success and effectiveness can be challenging, but the results are positive for both the teacher and students.

References

“Sometimes learning how to teach well doesn’t mean that you can teach well.”

Dale Linton, PhD, is a lifelong educator with 35 years of experience in public schools and international Christian schools. He directs the student teaching program at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. Dr. Linton is a frequent speaker and presenter at ACSI international conferences, and he provides professional services to Christian schools and teachers worldwide.