

Twenty-Five Factors Great Teachers Have in Common

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT

I've never met anyone who couldn't tell me about a great teacher he or she had in school — a teacher who has influenced the course of his or her life in important ways. Few people, of course, ever tell the teacher that he or she has made such a deep and lasting impression. But that's OK. Great teachers don't need encomiums of praise. They are sustained daily by the opportunity to turn on the academic light switch for a student here, console a heartbreak there, redirect a child back on the right path, help a student find the strength to leverage, and maybe even unknowingly save, another's soul. I've had teachers in my life who have done all of those things for me. I still do.

Recently, within a span of one week, I had the good fortune to hear from two of my former students from decades ago. They both sought me out to thank me for spurring their interests in the arts, literature, and film. Both told me that I graded too hard. One brought along a paper she had written in a fifth form (junior year in secondary school) class that she had taken with me in 1979 to remind me of her analysis of Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night." (The analysis was quite brilliant for a 16-year-old, I have to say, and I had graded it an A; some 34 years later, it seemed, she wanted me to up it to an A+). Encounters like these remind me of the impact all teachers have on their students. But the truly great teachers — like many who have taught me and my children and my grandchildren — have the most decisive impact.

In my 42 years in the field of education, I have crossed paths with and seen in action a gazillion teachers from every state and in 34 countries. What I've observed of the best of the best — those who are exceptional in their craft — is that they share most or all of the following traits. Great teachers...

1. Love kids and mentor them.
2. Know how kids think and what motivates them to think.
3. Exude irrepressible enthusiasm for the subjects they teach, but teach students rather than subjects.



4. Advocate for their students, especially when they alone see virtue and talent hidden in a student.

5. Empathize with the most vulnerable students, and provide a safe harbor for any student caught in a personal storm.

6. Demonstrate high academic intelligence (IQ) through their intellectual curiosity and thoroughness; and demonstrate emotional intelligence (EQ) through their empathy, social judgment, and sensitive approach to difficult conversations.

7. Experiment with teaching and the emerging technologies that support it, relishing being the "fast horses" out of the gate in an effort to innovate in ways that improve their teaching and their students' learning.

8. Become "first followers" of other teachers with good ideas.

9. Seek to stay current with the research in the field, especially as it relates to the age group they teach.

10. Adjust to the needs and abilities of kids, rather than expect all kids to squeeze into the same learning mold.

11. Network with other teachers and scholars in their school, local community, and (increasingly) the digital community.

12. Collaborate with and support their colleagues, and demonstrate deep concern for the culture of the school.

13. Assess skills on a flexible and individualized scale more so than content on a fixed scale.

14. Model the skills and values a 21st-century school would seek as student outcomes: character, creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and cosmopolitanism (cross-cultural competency).

15. Create a positive, intentional, achievement-oriented culture in their classroom rooted in an ethos of fairness and nurtured by the belief that every student can succeed.

16. Seek to find and leverage each student's strengths rather than dwell on any student's deficiencies.

17. Support school leadership, including taking initiative in solving problems rather than in creating them.

18. See their students' academic

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failure as partly their own and work to reverse it.

19. Show interest in their students beyond their academics, attending their games and concerts and exhibits.

20. Love life, and show it.

21. Find a way to reveal their souls and the ethical frames by which they think, when appropriate, in the "teachable moments" that present themselves in school settings.

22. Love learning and model the growth mindset they imbue in their students.

23. Embrace diversity and manifest cross-cultural competency, approaching differences with curiosity rather than judgment.

24. Find ways, despite the lack of positional power, to "lead from the middle."

25. Send "a postcard of the destination," as Chip and Dan Heath put it in their book *Switch*, so students are clear about where they are going and how to get there.

It strikes me that, while these characteristics have always been central to good teaching, they are becoming increasingly clear to those of us who work in the field — especially with the new brain research on learning. In this era of steady change, uncertainty, and challenge, these characteristics of quality teaching will no doubt matter more than ever. Therefore, it's essential for those who lead schools to acknowledge and support great teachers at every turn, work to hire teachers who embody many or most of these characteristics, and establish a professional culture of support and learning in schools so that all educators can improve their skills and develop these qualities.

It also wouldn't hurt if all of us reached out to our great teachers and thanked them. As many a wise person said, "Teaching is the profession that makes all other professions possible" — including ours.

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