

The Lasting Impact of Influential Teachers

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Abstract

Influence can be defined as having an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone or something. Teachers influence students in many different areas of students' lives, not only academically but socially as well. This article presents the findings of a study about how teachers influence their students – specifically students who have become teachers themselves. Thus, data was collected from fifteen working teachers who teach in Central Alberta (centered in Red Deer). Data suggested that teacher, influence can be categorized into five main themes: (1) building relationships, (2) a teacher's passion for their work, (3) mentoring students through modeling, (4) having high expectations of students; and, (5) the ways teachers go “above and beyond” in their work. Our research findings suggest the importance of growing and nurturing teacher-student relationships.

Key Words

Teachers, influential, relationships, passion, modeling, mentoring, education

Introduction

This research sought to better understand the influential impact of teachers on the lives of others. To collect data, fifteen working teachers participated in this study, and were asked to write short (between 200 and 400 words) narratives about teachers who were influential in their own lives. When these short narratives were analyzed, several recurring themes surfaced. The most common theme centered upon the importance of personal relationships between teacher and student. Other common themes included: a passion for a subject, enthusiasm for teaching, high expectations for students, mentorship through modeling, and a theme that was titled “going above and beyond.” This last theme included narratives about teachers who go the “extra mile” for a student. This research supports a belief in the power of the positive influence one person can have on another - especially when teachers impact children who might become teachers themselves. The five themes of relationships, passion, high standards, modeling and mentoring, and going above and beyond are discussed in this article.

Literature Review

When judged by the sheer volume of the work, the topic of teacher influence emerges as being highly important. Those who search the research literature seeking insight into “teacher influence” will be overwhelmed by the amount of research. However, when synthesized, this body of literature reveals a number of themes that focus upon teacher influence. These themes included relationships, a passion for teaching, a demand for high standards, the importance of modeling and mentoring, and the number of characteristic actions teachers use to impact the lives of their students.

Winograd & Others (1990) explored what they saw as an “abundance” of data to help explain the many roles teachers have that make them influential in children’s overall development. They believed the early relationships formed between teachers and students foreshadowed adjustment and functioning of students in later school years. Their expanded model encompassed children’s characteristics, social skills, and behaviour problems.

Ismail and Hayes (2005) studied factors that affected classroom motivation. They noted how teacher passion and enthusiasm impacted their work and noted a connection between enthusiasm and motivation.

Kesner (2005) came to believe educators’ perceptions of gifted students exerts a tremendous influence on gifted children's academic and social-emotional development. Of the factors associated with a successful classroom experience for gifted children, Kesner came to believe that a classroom teacher plays a vital role both on the academic and the personal side.

den Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, & Wubbles (2005) synthesized findings from research on teaching and learning, learning environments, and effectiveness to find links between teacher interpersonal behaviour and student attitudes. To analyze teacher interpersonal behaviour, they looked at two dimensions of behaviour - influence and proximity. The study found that all subject-related attitude variables – including pleasure, relevance, confidence, and effort – had positive links to teacher proximity. Three outcome variables – pleasure, relevance and effort – also had positive effects on influence.

Overall, proximity seemed to be of stronger importance than teacher influence. The results significantly link teacher interpersonal behaviour to student motivation.

Influence goes past grades K-12 schools. A study of the highly successful South Central Institute of Technology, where American Indian students graduate five times higher than the national average, convinced Schmidtke (2009) that, although the personal and academic relationships between instructors and students have often been seen as *the* major factor in the success of American Indian college students, the way teachers teach (instructional methods) and organize their instruction (classroom and curriculum design) also influence student retention. Schmidtke suggests that instructors must be sensitive to their students needs when they design and deliver instruction. Smith & Schmidt (2012) examined pre-service physical education teachers' beliefs and values of teachers and teaching by analyzing and interpreting favourite teacher narratives. They collected and analyzed 186 pre-service, physical education teachers' narratives and categorized qualities and characteristics identified into three central themes: (1) Pay it Forward, (2) Caring in Teaching, and (3) Motivated to Learn. The findings suggest that understanding favourite teacher influences on pre-service teachers offers insights about how to impact teacher education programs for physical education teachers.

As well, influence can be housed in school leadership. Cherkowski (2012), for example, found that the compassion one principal exhibited influenced the desire of his school's teachers to commit more fully to their craft. Cherkowski looked at how leaders nourish and sustain such passion. She determined that a leader who is emotionally committed to teachers could foster and sustain more powerful learning communities. Fullerton's (2008) work suggests how the passion a teacher brings to teaching and subject area

content influences student engagement. Fullerton connected factors that affected motivation and passion to focus on how leaders nourished and sustained relationships. His research helped explain teacher roles that make influence so crucial to a child's overall development. Finally, Hudson and Savran-Gencer (2009) believe quality mentoring can help direct pre-service teachers' practices. Their research suggests that professional development programs that target the needs of mentors may further enhance mentoring practices.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to further explore the influence that teachers have on the lives of their students, specifically upon the lives of those students who have become teachers themselves.

Participants

To collect our research data, we asked fifteen participants to describe how a teacher had positively influenced or impacted their lives and their practice: we received responses from thirteen females and two males. Of the fifteen participants, the average years of teaching experience was 13.2 years. The range of teaching experience was from 29 (the longest serving teacher) to 3 years (the youngest serving teacher). Just over half of the participants (56%) were elementary teachers. The remaining teachers were secondary teachers: 22% taught at middle school and 22% taught in high schools. More than half the participants taught in urban areas (54%) and the remaining (46%) taught in rural schools.

Method

To gather data that might address the influence past teachers have had on working teachers, the study used the following instrument to collect data. This instrument, as shown below, was given to a University of Alberta Masters of Education cohort to be completed over a weekend during a summer graduate-level course. As part of a graduate-level course assignment, data was collected from the fifteen participants, who were also graduate students in this course. Specifically, participants were asked to respond to the following questions in two hundred words or less:

“Most (if not all) teachers have been influenced positively by another teacher. Who, as a teacher, has most influenced you? Or, who is the most impactful/effective teacher you know? How has this teacher influenced your own teaching or life?

Write about the teacher who comes to mind who has most/best influenced you as a teacher or student. Review the qualities or characteristics of this teacher. How this person influenced you – generally or specifically? Write no more than 200 words to describe this person or the influence this person has had upon your life?”

Analysis of Data

After data was collected and brought together, it was analyzed by the five researchers who conducted the study. When analyzing the data from these fifteen participants, twenty-five comments focused on relationships; thirteen comments mentioned the passion of teachers as being inspiring; twelve comments noted the importance of

modeling or mentoring behaviour; eight comments suggested that their teacher's high expectations were significant; and six comments mentioned that an influential teacher was especially influential because he or she willingly went "above and beyond" the call of duty on their behalf. Below, we will further outline and comment upon the five themes we pulled from the data.

Theme One: Relationships

The stories written indicated that the ability of a teacher to develop a personal connection with students was highly influential. Teachers described their influential teacher using words such as, unconditional love and forgiveness, extremely supportive, calm, understanding, kind, hard-working, compassionate, sincere, humorous, and intelligent.

Many participants commented about how influential teachers cared about all their students and how they ensured that their students were successful without any judgment or lecturing. One comment, "Wow! I feel so safe and well cared for!" speaks to this sentiment. This idea of feeling cared for was quite important for many participants. There was a common feeling among teachers that those personal relationships were invaluable to student achievement. Students were inspired to work hard to achieve excellence as a direct result of the support from the teacher. For example, the teacher, "made sure we knew how to do math," students said that, "you belonged, you were valued, and you worked hard to please your director." These descriptions further underlined the idea that a teacher's belief in one's ability "made a difference in my life

that speaks of the incredible power that teachers possess to affect children in a positive way.”

Another common element in this theme of relationships was the idea of teachers giving their time to students. A few illustrations included the teacher “always greets her students, every single day, at the door with a smile and a hello;” he/she “always has time for me and my endless questions;” and the teacher “genuinely took the time to listen.” One respondent commented, “We spend so much time with these people and it is our job to keep them safe and have them see their true potential.”

Theme Two: Passion

The passion teachers brought to the classroom was referenced by several participants. Many participants mentioned that their inspirational teacher demonstrated passion for their subject matter or for learning in general. Although some people mentioned that their teacher inspired them with their vast knowledge and expertise in their field, others were impressed that their teacher was not especially gifted in the subject area, but was passionate about their work. The words “excited,” “energetic,” and “enthusiastic” were mentioned many times to describe inspirational teachers’ approach to teaching. In addition, many participants reported a sense of urgency or heightened importance in the teacher to ensure that their lessons were understood. Clearly, the quality of “passion” was important to participants who were inspired by a teacher.

Theme Three: High Expectations

The high expectations of influential teachers were important to the participants were revealed in their stories. Some of these comments mentioned were; “When you gave

100% and got 100% as your grade, there was still something to improve.” or “He gave us difficult music and made us rise to the challenge of playing it.” Teachers who had high expectations taught me to “have a ‘why not?’ attitude and set high standards for my students.” These teachers believed that everyone could achieve excellence or that everyone had the ability to think and that, with hard work, all students could experience success. Teachers of influence were always willing to help a student improve and experience success.

Theme Four: Modeling/mentoring

Teachers who handed down their craft to new teachers were respected and appreciated. These teachers shared their tried and true methods of differentiating the curriculum, collaborating, motivating, and inspiring students. Influenced teachers recall being “taken under their mentor’s wing and sharing everything they knew about teaching little children.” These teachers would take time from their busy schedules to teach the strategies they valued as their ‘best practices.’ They would loan materials to ensure that new teachers had what they needed to begin their careers with the ability to offer students a quality education.

Reflection to improve teaching practices was stressed and advice was given to “stay on top of new curriculum and new ideas.” However, teacher mentors advised that teachers always be sure that they had the “ability to find a healthy balance between home and school.” One reflective teacher recalls, “Because of him, I have a true understanding of the impact that teachers have on their students.” Such teachers truly inspire those entering the profession that we are ‘in a league of our own.’

Theme Five: Above and Beyond

Teacher comments spoke to the after-hours dedication teachers put in. We are speaking not just of the additional academic time put into planning and marking, but of teachers who would take their own time to dedicate to extra-curricular activities like sports, music, and drama. One bandleader made it possible for his troupe to travel nationally and internationally to share their talents, have extraordinary experiences and appreciating those who had the same passions as themselves. Some teachers showed up at soccer games, hockey games, or gymnastics competitions because they, “still remembered how it felt to be cared about.” Another participant spoke of a time when he was in grade nine and his dad had just had a severe surgery and his teacher showed up at the hospital to see if “there was anything he could do to help.”

Participants suggested that many teachers ‘go above and beyond the call of duty’. Participants spoke of a genuine compassion for their well-being. One teacher recalled a time when she was bullied and taunted on a daily basis. School was a place that terrified her. She was told by peers that she was useless but her teacher made her see that she was not. The teacher saw what was happening in her life and made an effort to change her direction. Many participants recognized the need to be included, “No matter who you were, regardless of size, coordination, or ability, (her teacher) gathered you into her dancing troupe, fitted you with a costume and taught you to dance.”

As teachers, who are also researchers, we understand the huge social component in the teaching profession that often goes unnoticed as a significant contributing factor to student success. Influential teachers recognized that school was much more than lessons

and exams. Student learning is influenced by a host of other factors like “peer, family, home environment, school resources, community support, leadership, and social climate that all play a role in how students learn” (Little, Goe, & Bell, 2009).

Discussion

The aim of our research was to better understand the influential impact of teachers on the lives of others. The narratives written about teachers who were influential on participants were analyzed and revealed recurring themes. Our findings echoed much of the literature reviewed prior to collecting our data. Specifically, a common thread between both the research literature and our own research data was that influential teachers have a positive affect on student lives. This influence extends well beyond academic achievement; indeed, such influence impacts a student’s overall well-being. Themes that emerged from our data included relationships, passion, high expectations, modeling and mentoring, and going above and beyond for the student. These themes are the qualities that make teachers of influence.

Considering our findings, we wonder how these qualities might be fostered in teachers currently influencing young people? We hope our findings influence the development of sustainable pedagogy and reinforce the importance of student-teacher connections. We believe influential teachers combine their creativity, passion, and knowledge to establish positive and impactful relationships with their students. All teachers are influential in some way to their students. The connections teachers make with their students are as varied as the individuals themselves. We want to increase teacher capacity to build

authentic student-teacher relationships. In doing this, more students will benefit from personalized educational experience

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