

Three Characteristics of Effective Teachers

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Abstract

This article discusses three characteristics that are often associated with successful music educators. The three characteristics discussed include nonverbal communication, teacher self-efficacy, and servant leadership. Although there is no magical combination of characteristics that will produce an effective music teacher, these three attributes have been shown to positively affect the effectiveness of the teacher and may provide current and future music educators some ideas and information that may be applied to their own teaching.

Keywords

characteristics, effective teachers, nonverbal communication, self-efficacy, servant leadership

In 2001 the U.S. House of Representatives passed Public Law 107-110, also known as No Child Left Behind. The intention of this law was to improve the performance of U.S. primary and secondary schools by increasing the standards of accountability. One of the main objectives was to provide a “highly qualified” teacher for every classroom. The law defines a highly qualified teacher as “one who has (1) fulfilled the state’s certification and licensing requirements, (2) obtained at least a bachelor’s degree and (3) demonstrated subject matter expertise” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Most educators would define a “highly qualified” teacher in a different manner. According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (n.d.) Summary Data on Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher Quality, and Teacher Qualifications, “teacher quality—knowledge and effectiveness—is the number one school based factor in student achievement.”

The question of what makes an effective teacher has no clear answer. Each teacher brings with him or her certain natural traits as well as learned behaviors and characteristics. Cruickshank, Jenkins, and Metcalf (2003) defined effective teachers as “caring, supportive, concerned about the welfare of students, knowledgeable about their subject matter, able to get along with others . . . and genuinely excited about the work that they do. . . . Effective teachers are able to help students learn” (p. 329). According to their research, teachers must also have high self-efficacy, good verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and strong leadership ability. All of these characteristics contribute to effective teaching and learning.

The characteristics of effective teachers have been extensively discussed, making the compilation of a comprehensive list of traits very difficult. For every good teacher there is a unique list of personal characteristics; however, there are some that frequently recur. This article discusses three of the characteristics that are important for effective teaching: nonverbal communication, self-efficacy, and servant leadership.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is a key factor in effective teaching for all subject areas. Until the 1970s, educational research focused almost entirely on verbal communication patterns, whereas the importance of nonverbal communication in the classroom had not been systematically studied (Galloway, 1974; Grant & Hennings, 1977; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). Since then, educational researchers have been able to identify relationships between nonverbal teaching behaviors and communication skills of classroom teachers with students’ academic achievement and attitudes toward school (Hughes, 1981). In addition, according to Woolfolk and Brooks (1983), an ongoing, reciprocal process of nonverbal communication regularly occurs between teachers and students during normal classroom activities.

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Nonverbal behavior can be very powerful because almost all nonverbal actions are potentially communicative and create distinct meanings (Rashotte, 2002; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). Nonverbal behaviors generally fall into four categories: proxemics, coverbial behavior, paralanguage, and appearance (Brooks & Wilson, 1978; Hennings, 1977; Lyons, 1977; Rashotte, 2002; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). Proxemics includes space and distance. Coverbial behavior includes elements of physical gestures, facial expression, body movement, and eye contact. Paralanguage include the behaviors accompanying speech such as tone of voice, pitch, volume, rhythm, and speech rate. Appearance includes attractiveness, grooming, and dress. These nonverbal behaviors can reveal a great deal about teachers and how they perceive the students.

The nonverbal behaviors utilized by teachers compose a complex form of communication. They can have very specific purposes and meanings yet may also be influenced by context. Particular nonverbal behaviors can serve a wide range of functions such as demonstrating attitudes about student achievement (Hughes, 1981), teacher friendliness (Lyons, 1977), caring (Brooks & Wilson, 1978), and credibility (Karr & Beatty, 1979; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). To teach effectively, educators “must appreciate the capacity of body and voice to express meanings and must feel free to express themselves completely using arms, eyes, legs, fingers, feet, face, torso, and voice” (Hennings, 1977, p. 184).

Nonverbal communication has been studied for many years as a vital part of human interaction (Hennings, 1977; Love & Roderick, 1971; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). Love and Roderick (1971) wrote that “communication theorists have long believed that words were not the only message sent between people, and that nonverbal cues accompanying verbal statements could reinforce or deny the meaning of the words” (p. 295). Nonverbal communication has also been a common field of study in the areas of advertising and acting, where “what is ‘said’ nonverbally oftentimes communicates with greater impact than what is said with words and that nonverbal language is a fundamental component of the communication process” (Hennings, 1977, p. 183).

Research in nonverbal communication includes supplementing, reinforcing, or regulating verbal exchanges (Ekman & Friesen, 1969), demonstrating emotions (Ekman & Friesen, 1975), indicating liking or disliking of individuals, situations, or ideas (Mehrabian, 1972), being persuasive (Albert & Dabbs, 1970), and influencing the performance of others (Hennings, 1977).

Only in recent years, has there been a widespread realization within the educational community of

the significance of nonverbal language in speaking and listening and realization that nonverbal clues can be used as purposefully to create an impression in everyday conversations as they are in the world of advertising. (Hennings, 1977, p. 183)

It is more difficult to study nonverbal communication than verbal communication because “nonverbal stimuli occur all at once—the face, eyes, hands, movement” (Galloway, 1974, p. 305). Methods of studying nonverbal communication in the classroom have varied substantially. Methodologies have included high- and low-inference methods, laboratory settings, Likert-type scales, classroom interaction analysis, and observation methods (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). Different methods must be used to study nonverbal communication than have been used to study verbal communication. Galloway (1974) stated that if “one wants to determine the effect and weight of nonverbal influence, one has to cut out the talking, otherwise, one has no valid measurement of the nonverbal” (p. 306). Love and Roderick (1971) created an instrument to record teacher nonverbal behavior including 10 categories of nonverbal teacher behavior and the teachers’ associated actions. Once the basic instrument for recording teacher nonverbal behavior had been developed, a unit for developing teachers’ awareness of their own nonverbal behavior was constructed, including a series of activities beginning with reading about nonverbal behavior, observing nonverbal behavior in general and specific ways, live practice, and concluding with using the recording instrument (Love & Roderick, 1971).

In the study conducted by Love and Roderick (1971), they found that by creating an awareness of nonverbal behaviors, “a majority of teachers exhibited a change” (p. 298).

Bringing the nonverbal communication of teachers to the level of conscious awareness could make possible the analysis and understanding of the nonverbal dimension in classroom communication . . . to make valid judgments about the effectiveness of their nonverbal behavior, teachers must be aware of their use of nonverbal behavior and have some idea of the repertoire of possible nonverbal behaviors. (Love & Roderick, 1971, p. 295)

Teachers need to understand nonverbal communication and behaviors as well as the power and influence they can have over others (Hennings, 1977; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). In addition, there is also a need to “raise the level of conscious awareness so they may be able to identify, analyze, and, if necessary, modify their own nonverbal behavior” (Love & Roderick, 1971, p. 299).

Nonverbal skills can be taught and learned (Hennings, 1977; Hughes, 1981; Izard & Izard, 1977; Koch, 1971). Through instruction and practice, skills can be developed in physical expression, vocal expression, and interpretational skills (Hennings, 1977). To refine these skills, a “vocabulary of nonverbal expression” (Hennings, 1977, p. 185) must be developed. This can be accomplished through many activities including photo analysis where individuals study photos to identify nonverbal messages and clues. Firsthand observations are also useful in raising awareness and interpretation of meanings. Some of the most useful means of developing nonverbal skills are through the use of role-playing, story sharing, pantomime, and dramatization (Hennings, 1977; Hughes, 1981; Izard & Izard, 1977; Koch, 1971).

Development of nonverbal communication skills may be especially important for music educators. According to Balzer (1969), 75% of a teacher’s classroom management direction is nonverbal. In any music class, the teacher can effectively and quietly stop unwanted behavior by making eye contact with the offender, a shake of the head, or walking over and standing near the source of the problem. A music teacher can also give positive reinforcement nonverbally by smiling, nodding the head, leaning toward the students, and maintaining eye contact (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985). In every type of music class, from elementary general music to academic courses and to secondary performance ensembles, nonverbal communications including eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and body motion and posture can contribute to environments that are conducive to positive learning experiences and happy students (Battersby, 2009). In addition to classroom control, nonverbal instruction through modeling has been found to be more effective than verbal instruction in instrumental music classes (Dickey, 1991).

Ensemble directors intentionally incorporate nonverbal communication and behaviors into their teaching on a regular basis through conducting. Conductors with advanced nonverbal communication skills have been found to be viewed as more effective and were preferred by student performers (Byo, 1990; Price & Winter, 1991; Yarbrough, 1975). The use of expressive conducting gestures has also been shown to produce positive outcomes in performance as well as positive student opinions of the music and the conductor (Price, 1985; Price & Winter, 1991). Gestures, physical appearance, eye contact, facial expression, and posture have been factors considered in evaluating a conductor’s nonverbal effectiveness (VanWeelden, 2002). Julian (1989) found that the perception of the conductor may be formed based on nonverbal behaviors on and off the podium. Nonverbal communication between a student and teacher is a constant and powerful force in any

classroom but is particularly apparent between a conductor and ensemble.

Nonverbal messages are sent between people constantly. Effective teachers must be aware of the messages they send to the students. The teacher must also be adept at reading the nonverbal communication being received from the students. This requires a greater awareness of self and others for often the nonverbal and verbal messages will conflict. These nonverbal interactions are both an influential and a persuasive form of communication between teachers and students. This type of communication is constant and reciprocal in every human relationship. To be highly effective as an educator, each teacher should work to develop an awareness and useful vocabulary of nonverbal communication. According to Reece and Brandt (2008), “The important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said” (p. 35).

Self-Efficacy

High self-efficacy is another important characteristic for effective music teachers. Self-efficacy is the set of beliefs a person holds regarding his or her own capabilities to produce desired outcomes and influence events that affect his or her life (Bandura, 1986). These beliefs affect how people think and behave, the choices they make, the goals they set, and the courses of action they pursue. Self-efficacy beliefs help to ascertain the influences of self-motivation, expenditure of effort on an activity, and level of perseverance when faced with difficulties or obstacles. Perceived self-efficacy determines levels of confidence and emotional health as well as which factors are attributed to success and failure (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

In addition to individual efficacy, teacher efficacy is also central to effective teaching. Teacher efficacy is the set of beliefs a teacher holds regarding his or her own abilities and competencies to teach and influence student behavior and achievement regardless of outside influences or obstacles. It is the teacher’s perception of his or her own competence as well as the ability of teaching as a professional discipline to shape students’ knowledge, values, and behavior (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). It is a task-specific measure and not a global personality trait and has been identified as a factor that relates most consistently to teaching and learning (Soodak & Podell, 1996; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990).

A teacher’s sense of efficacy can be an influence in many ways. It has been shown to influence many types of student outcomes including academic achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Ross, 1992), motivation (Woolfolk et al., 1990), and the student’s own sense of self-efficacy (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988). In

music research, self-efficacy has been shown to influence music performance (McPherson & McCormick, 2003, 2006), practice skills (Nielsen, 2004), and performance anxiety (Petrovich, 1989).

Teacher efficacy has also been shown to relate to teachers' classroom behaviors such as the effort they put into planning and organization (Allinder, 1994), setting attainable goals (Ross, 1994), levels of aspiration, use of time (Soodak & Podell, 1996), classroom management strategy (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Emmer & Hickman, 1991), willingness to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Guskey, 1988), and questioning techniques (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Woolfolk et al., 1990). Efficacy has been found to influence teachers' persistence when things are difficult and increase resiliency when there are setbacks (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Highly efficacious teachers have been found to be less critical of students when they make mistakes (Ashton & Webb, 1986), to be more willing to work longer with students who are struggling (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and to be less inclined to refer a difficult student to special education (Podell & Soodak, 1993). These teachers have also been found to have a greater commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992) and greater enthusiasm for teaching and are more likely to remain in teaching (Allinder, 1994; Guskey, 1984). The studies in teacher efficacy have revealed much information as to the expanse, influence, and effects of the construct as well as the importance of future study. As Frymier (1987) wrote, "In any attempt to improve education, teachers are central" (p. 9).

To develop high self- or teacher efficacy, one must understand where these beliefs originate. People's beliefs about self-efficacy develop from four primary sources (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). The first and most influential is through mastery experiences, which serve as indicators of capability. Success then builds belief in one's capabilities and raises self-efficacy. To cultivate a strong sense of self-efficacy, individuals must have positive experiences in overcoming obstacles. These experiences teach that success usually requires hard work and perseverance. In music teacher education, it is very important that preservice teachers have opportunities to experience positive teaching experiences through peer teaching, conducting ensembles, and student teaching. As a teacher gains experience, if he or she feels successful, the self-efficacy will continue to increase. Once people believe they can be successful, they will persist in the face of difficulty and quickly recover from obstacles in the classroom or rehearsal.

Vicarious, or observational learning, is the second mode of developing and strengthening self-efficacy. People

assess their abilities in relation to the accomplishments of others (Bandura, 1986). The impact made on an individual's self-efficacy through modeling largely depends on the perceived likeness to the model; the greater the perceived similarity, the greater the influence on efficacy beliefs. Seeing or visualizing similar people successfully perform can raise self-efficacy in the observers, believing that they too possess the abilities to master similar activities (Bandura, Adams, Hardy, & Howells, 1980). Incorporating peer teaching and conducting in teacher education programs as well as opportunities to observe young teachers can contribute to increasing preservice music teachers' self-efficacy. In-service teachers can also benefit from observing peers in the schools and in special situations such as conference presentations, concerts, and so on. Vicarious experiences are generally weaker than mastery experiences; however, "they can produce significant, enduring changes through their effects on performance" (Bandura, 1986, p. 400).

The third means of increasing self-efficacy is through social persuasion, which is a means of increasing people's beliefs that they possess the capabilities to accomplish their goals. "People are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). People can be convinced to try harder to succeed and therefore enable skill attainment and successful performance that results in heightened efficacy beliefs. The positive reinforcement offered by faculty, mentors, supervisors, and peers can contribute to higher teacher efficacy. Self-efficacy expectations created in this manner may be weaker than those created from mastery experiences because they do not originate from actual accomplishments.

Self-efficacy beliefs are also derived from physiological and emotional states. People rely on information conveyed through these states to judge their capabilities. Extreme emotional or physiological reactions can be debilitating and often indicate to people a lack of ability or an indicator of poor performance. Self-efficacy can be raised through reducing both stress reactions and the misinterpretation of physical reactions. It is the interpretation, not the magnitude of the emotional or physiological states, that is important. Coping strategies can be learned to overcome negative perceptions and raise both performance and efficacy levels (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy is a powerful force in many human activities, including teaching music. People tend to be only as successful and effective as they believe they are. As Bandura (n.d.) stated, "People who regard themselves as highly efficacious act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as inefficacious. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it."

Servant Leadership

Leadership is an important skill needed by teachers. Teachers provide leadership in the classroom, the school, and the community (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996; Battisti, 1999; Bowman, 2005; Colwell, 1992; Wis, 2002). Battisti (1999) stated that it is the teacher's responsibility to lead his or her students to achieve their potential and to lead the parents in being active supporters through effective modeling. As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "The art of choosing men is not nearly as difficult as the art of enabling those one has chosen to attain their full worth" (as cited in Koestenbaum, 2002, p. 55).

One form of leadership that has been shown to be very effective in the classroom is servant leadership. The concept of servant leadership has existed for a long time and can be seen in the actions and teachings of many historical leaders. The term *servant leadership* was not utilized until the 1970s, when it was coined by Robert Greenleaf (1977) in an essay titled "The Servant as Leader." He wrote,

A servant leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such, it will be a later choice to serve-after leadership is established. . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant leader to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (pp. 13-14)

A servant leader is one who is focused on others rather than himself or herself and puts the needs of the organization first (Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003; Keith, 1994; Shugart, 1997). Other traits demonstrated by servant leaders include humility, honesty, trust (Bowman, 2005), compassion, understanding, selflessness (Keith, 1994), openness, stewardship (Bennett, 2001), passion, responsibility, and vision (Wis, 2002). Behaviors exhibited by servant leaders include caring, open communication, empathy, autonomy, an appreciation of cultural differences, enhanced self-awareness, equitable decision making, and faithful service (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Herman & Marlowe, 2005). In 1998, Larry Spears, CEO of the nonprofit Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant

Leadership, presented 10 characteristics of servant leadership formulated by the center. They included the ability to listen, heal, persuade, conceptualize, develop, dream, trust and build, communicate, evolve, and promote (Spears, 1998). Although the description of servant leadership characteristics can be extensive, servant leadership is primarily about "focusing on people, principles and the 'big picture'" (Wis, 2002, p. 22).

All of these traits and behaviors demonstrate the usefulness of servant leadership by teachers in the classroom. "Servant leadership in the classroom speaks to the universal human longing to be known, to care, and to be cared for in pursuit of the common good" (Bowman, 2005, p. 257). Teachers as servant leaders create a classroom environment of trust, service, and community (Bowman, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003; Keith, 1994; Pinchot, 1998; Shugart, 1997). These leaders also work to empower the group or team (Brody, 1995) and give time and consideration to students' other interests and ideas (Bowman, 2005). According to Covey (1990), servant leadership is primarily focused on the students. Wis (2002) wrote, "If the teacher always asks 'what is best for the students?' he or she is leading by serving the students before considering personal needs and desires" (p. 20). It is a goal of servant leader teachers to create a "community of caring" (Herman & Marlowe, 2005, p. 175). The teacher as servant leader models desirable attitudes, behaviors, and skills to the students and sets high standards for all (Bowman, 2005; Wis, 2002). They "help others discover latent, unformed interests" and remove "obstacles that thwart students' discovery and development of their talents" (Bowman, 2005, p. 258).

According to Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2003), there are five basic principles for being an effective servant leader in the classroom. The first is that the teachers "run to great purpose" (p. 100) or have a significant purpose in mind. Second, the teacher as servant leader "unleashes the strengths, talents, and passions of those he or she serves" (p. 14). The third principle involves setting high standards of performance and modeling the skills and attitudes they teach. "They function as the very leaders of character that they wish to find in the world" (Bowman, 2005, p. 258). Fourth is "to address your weaknesses, build on your strengths" (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003, p. 102). The final principle is to "put oneself at the bottom of the pyramid so that one can focus on unleashing the energy, excitement, and talents of those being served" (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003, p. 102). This requires that teachers focus on the developmental needs of all the learners as well as examine their own teaching styles (Bowman, 2005, p. 259). Servant leadership has the potential to bring out the best in the teacher and the students. As Keith (1994) wrote, "Servant

leadership is the best kind of leadership for both the leader and the led” (p. 12). This style of leadership can be successfully utilized in any situation that requires strong leadership.

Renowned conductor and music educator Frank Battisti (1999) wrote that “effective teachers must be strong leaders” (p. 40) and that “leadership is a necessary quality for music educators if music education is to thrive” (p. 38). A music classroom is a unique environment in which a teacher’s effective leadership and modeling can incite motivation, excitement, and passion. Leonard Bernstein (1963) wrote,

The conductor must not only make the orchestra play, he must make them want to play. . . . He must exalt them, lift them, start their adrenaline pouring . . . he must make the orchestra love the music as he loves it. It is not so much imposing his will on them like a dictator, it is more like projecting his feelings around him so that they reach the last man in the second violin section. (p. 150)

Traits associated with strong leadership in music education include enthusiasm for leading, ability to motivate others, compassion (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996), passion for music, vision, public relations skills, vitality, commitment, a sense of responsibility, confidence, courage, sense of community, communication skills, positive attitude, self-discipline, desire for excellence, fairness, respect, and ability to delegate (Battisti, 1999). Although these traits describe an effective leader in music education, they also share many commonalities with servant leadership.

Servant leadership may also be an ideal form of leadership for music educators and teacher–conductors. This style of leadership allows for the development of a community atmosphere in the classroom or rehearsal in which everyone is striving for improvement by working together. Wis (2002) wrote,

This kind of conductor rejects the notion that leaders must be autocratic and trusts that all the musical goals will be reached if the focus is on serving, the musicians and the music. Thus, serving involves using ones gifts in ways that add value to others’ gifts. (p. 20)

Although the objective of the music classroom is to teach music, the teacher as servant leader focuses first on the students and their abilities, ideas, and desires. The music educator or teacher–conductor as servant leader displays certain characteristics, including service, vision, responsiveness, trust, the ability to persuade, and strong character (Wis, 2002). According to Covey (1990), servant leaders work to improve “from the inside out”

(p. 34). The music educator as servant leader has a unique power to influence lives through service and music with the hope of inspiring some of the students to do the same. According to Lippmann, “The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on” (quoted in Bartlett, 1980, p. 813).

Effective leadership in the classroom is a necessity for effective teaching. Servant leadership is a style of leadership with great benefits for the students and the teacher. The teacher never stops learning and improving, and the students are the center of attention, with their needs being placed first. Servant leadership is one style of leadership that might be effective in education. As Goodstein (1987) stated, “A more thorough understanding of teacher leadership behavior will help educators improve teacher effectiveness” (p. 13).

Conclusion

Effective schools need effective teachers; however, there is no definite formula for what makes an effective teacher. These individuals display a myriad of characteristics and behaviors. This article has discussed three characteristics often displayed by effective teachers. First, nonverbal communication, including proxemics, coverbal behaviors, and paralanguage, can easily, quietly, and effectively be used for classroom management, relating and giving feedback to students, and music instruction through modeling and conducting. Second, teacher self-efficacy, the beliefs a teacher holds regarding his or her own teaching ability, has a direct impact on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes in the classroom and rehearsal. A music teacher with high teacher self-efficacy will usually put more effort into planning and setting goals, have better classroom management, be more flexible in instructional methods, be less critical of students when they make mistakes, and have greater commitment and enthusiasm for teaching. Third, a music teacher as servant leader is focused on the students and their abilities, ideas, potential, and desires, on building a caring, learning community, on setting high standards, and on displaying great passion and enthusiasm for music teaching. Each of these three characteristics is a valuable tool for music educators and can help teachers to create healthy, excited, motivated, and musical classrooms. Adams (1973) wrote, “A teacher affects eternity: he can never tell where his influence stops” (p. 300). For this reason, effective teachers are a necessity, and the study of the related characteristics needs to be continued.

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