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## Secondary school students' perspectives on characteristics of good and effective teachers in Meru County, Kenya

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### Abstract

This study sought to establish secondary school students' perspectives on the characteristics of good and effective teachers in Meru County, Kenya. Teachers are the cornerstone of schools, playing a critical role in raising educational standards. There is, therefore, a need to understand the specific attributes that students deem important for effective teaching. This paper aimed to fill this gap by investigating the points of view of secondary school students on the qualities of good and effective teachers. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilising questionnaires and focus group discussions to gather data from 127 form 3 and 4 students in a public secondary school in Meru County. The quantitative analysis involved percentages, while qualitative data was analysed narratively. The study findings revealed a consensus among students regarding the qualities they value in teachers, including knowledge, expertise, enthusiasm, approachability, and the ability to create a supportive learning environment. The study concluded that effective teaching is not solely determined by subject content knowledge but also by a range of interpersonal skills and instructional practices. Teachers who are friendly and approachable are highly rated by their students. Understanding students' perspectives on effective teaching characteristics is crucial for aligning instructional practices with their needs and preferences. The study recommended that teacher professional development programs should focus not only on improving content knowledge and instructional strategies but also on the development of interpersonal skills, classroom management techniques, and strategies for fostering positive teacher-student relationships.

**Key words:** Effective teachers, secondary school, students' perspectives, teacher characteristics.



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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher quality is of paramount importance in determining students' academic achievement in any education system. As the most important resource in schools, teachers are vital to boosting education standards (OECD, 2009). The teacher nurtures children's love of learning and is responsible for providing a suitable environment that allows children to express their feelings, develop their own ideas, take risks, make choices, and, most of all, grow to be strong-thinking individuals (Dowd, 2018). Teachers can thus do untold damage to the lives of children or build and develop them into great citizens capable of serving society in different capacities.

Dowd (2018) argues that becoming a teacher offers endless opportunities to help all students understand and achieve their potential. Teaching is not only a profession that requires rigorous standards but also a calling to serve others. The teacher's task is to bring them into closer contact with students for hours each day during the most formative years of their lives (Education Council of Aotearoa, 2018). Geher (2015) emphasises the pivotal role of kindergarten teachers in shaping young minds and setting the stage for a lifelong pursuit of learning. Conversely, middle school educators face the daunting task of igniting academic interest in adolescents amidst complex developmental and social dynamics. Highlighting the cumulative influence of teachers throughout an individual's life, Geher (2015) underscores the significance of every student receiving high-quality teaching during their schooling.

American Psychological Association (2010) opines that students who received highly quality education in the early school years and experienced supportive school environments exhibited higher academic achievement, were unlikely to require special education services and were more likely to graduate from high school. Further, research has demonstrated that teachers' teaching style and the decisions they make in class have a great influence on the learner's learning outcomes as well as encouraging them (Markley, 2004; Riasati & Bagheri, 2014; Hasan, 2019). Those teachers who are able to empower, inspire, and persuade learners can give valuable experiences to students that will impact their

academic lives emphatically. In contrast, those teachers who are incapable of satisfying such tasks will undoubtedly create a negative experience for the learners and make their learning wasteful (Riasati & Bagheri, 2014).

In many countries and states, school personnel evaluation typically falls under the responsibility of the school principal or immediate supervisor (Reid, 2021; Pawlas & Oliva, 2007), often without input from students. However, students play a crucial role in education, and their perspectives are valuable for informing pedagogical strategies and policies (Hande et al., 2014, as cited in Wing-man, 2018).

According to the Teachers Service Commission (TSC, 2015), the teacher should be evaluated at least once a term, which translates to at least three times a year. The school principal then provides a written summary for each teacher to the County Director of Education (CDE), who in turn submits the same reports to the commission as they may be required. The TSC Code of Conduct and Ethics (2015) outlines some of the conduct and duties for teachers who are also public servants:

- i. Being patient, dignified and courteous to students and colleagues
- ii. Evaluate students honestly and only on the basis of their performance
- iii. Not practice nepotism and favoritism
- iv. Dress appropriately and observe personal hygiene
- v. Conduct their duties efficiently and punctually, meet deadlines, and ensure that their official duties take precedence over their other activities.
- vi. Actively and personally foster a culture within the teaching profession.

Consequently, there arises the need to gather the viewpoints of secondary school students regarding the attributes and characteristics they perceive in good and effective teachers.

Some research that evaluates students' opinions on the characteristics of good and effective teachers has been done (Donahue, 1994; Marsh & Roche, 1997; Ralph, 2003; Delaney, n.d). However, most of these studies are conducted in Asia and American countries and mostly focus on higher education. The

TSC in Kenya is commanded by the Kenyan Constitution 2010, article 237, to, among others, register qualified people as teachers and audit the standards of education and training of people entering the teaching service (The Constitution of Kenya 2010). For one to qualify to teach in a secondary school, he or she should have a minimum of a diploma in education or a bachelor of education degree. This, therefore, means that all secondary school teachers have met the criteria set by the government and, hence, are qualified to teach in their respective secondary schools. The question is whether or not highly qualified teachers, as defined by the TSC, are also effective and good teachers in classroom instruction.

The problem is that the government, school administrators, teachers, parents and students view teacher effectiveness and good teaching differently. Teachers and students often blame and complain about each other in education circles and sometimes experience conflicts as a result of misunderstandings brought about by failed expectations (Qureshi, 2013). Many times, discipline problems among students have arisen in schools, with students accusing their teachers of high hardness, ineffective teaching, and lack of interest in students' well-being. Students have also complained to the school management and rejected certain teachers who, in their judgment, did not meet their academic expectations, and they are worried it would affect their academic achievement if the said teachers continued to teach them. The purpose of this study was to establish 'secondary school students' perception of what they considered to be the most important characteristics of effective and good teachers.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the past has predominantly focused on exploring students' perspectives on quality teaching and effective educators within tertiary education settings and Western cultural contexts (Tormey, 2021; Wing-man, 2018; Basow, 2000). Numerous studies, e.g. (Ansari et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2011), emphasise the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in fostering academic engagement, motivation, and overall well-being among secondary school students. Students often value teachers who

are approachable and supportive and demonstrate genuine care for their academic and personal growth. Belinda and Sexton (2014) observed that teachers' actions, no matter how large or small, have the potential to affect not only children's achievement but also their self-esteem and experience of school in major and ongoing ways. Ralph (2003) performed research on teaching efficacy using how well students learn as the basis for judging competent teachers. The study was conducted in a Canadian university, and students represented four different instructional settings: Physical Education, Sociology, Education, and Business. The students were provided with 32 hypothetical instructor profiles and were asked to score nine selected teaching qualities created by Marsh and Bailey (1993). The study came up with five attributes of effective instructors: Collaboration with others, organisation and management of the environment, desire to improve, knowledge of the material, and commitment to learners. According to Ralph, "exemplary teaching is identifiable, and the quality of its various parts can be assessed" (p.53).

Hattie (2009) and Marzano (2007) highlight the significance of effective instructional practices in enhancing student learning outcomes. Secondary school students tend to appreciate teachers who employ diverse and engaging teaching strategies, provide clear explanations, and offer constructive feedback to support their learning progress. In another study, Qureshi (2013) describes the characteristics of a good teacher as one who is honest, friendly, hardworking and a generous citizen. However, the interpretation of the characteristics of effective and good teachers majorly depends on the perceptions of individuals defining them. The cultural and environmental contexts may also influence students' perceptions of the characteristics of good and effective teachers.

In Kenya, Khavere et al. (2023) carried out a study on Students' Perceptions of Teacher Classroom Effectiveness and Academic Achievement in Hamisi Sub-county. The study employed a survey design, and the findings indicated that students perceived their teachers positively in terms of responsiveness to feedback, effectiveness in accomplishing tasks, preparedness, understanding student needs, eliciting

enthusiasm, approachability, using student-centred teaching approaches, and providing relevant activities. Misigo et al. (2014) carried out a study on the qualities of effective secondary school teachers in Kenya. Participants comprised 90 students drawn from secondary schools in three provinces in the country and employed phenomenological research design. The study found that effective teachers possessed qualities such as a good sense of humour, knowledge of the subject matter, caring and understanding, explaining concepts well, patience and respect for learners; God fearing, self-confidence and focused, emotionally stable; correcting wrong responses politely; providing social and career guidance; fluent and well-spoken in English; fair to all learners; marking assignments promptly; punctuality to class; counselling learners; willingness to help learners; warm and friendly to learners; preparing well for lessons; involving learners in lessons; encouraging questions; honest and admission of errors; commitment to duty; and being organised. A Similar study was necessary to strengthen these findings.

In summary, the existing body of literature on teacher effectiveness spans various educational levels, cultural contexts, and environmental settings. Different research designs have also been employed. However, while these studies have identified a range of teacher attributes associated with effectiveness, there remains a lack of consensus on which specific attributes hold the greatest influence, particularly within the realm of secondary education. This study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a comprehensive examination of teacher attributes and their impact on student perceptions of teaching quality and academic achievement in secondary education settings. The research seeks to contribute to a greater understanding of effective teaching practices and their implications for student learning outcomes in secondary education.

### METHODOLOGY

The results reported in this research are based on a survey conducted among 127 secondary school students, comprising 64 form four students and 63 form three students, enrolled at an extra-county

Secondary School in Meru County. The study was carried out between February and March 2017.

The motivation for this investigation arose from reports emanating from the principal's office, indicating that form four and form three students had expressed dissatisfaction with several teachers, asserting that they were not "good teachers" due to perceived deficiencies in their teaching effectiveness. The researcher, therefore, sought to probe into the students' perceptions of what constitutes a "good teacher" and their understanding of the concept of teaching effectively.

Scarboro (2012) advocated for the use of questionnaires as an effective method for eliciting students' perspectives. To align with this recommendation, the researcher developed an open-ended questionnaire that would help students freely express themselves without being forced to respond to predetermined questionnaire items. The researcher distributed 127 questionnaires to a randomly selected group of students, providing them ample time over the weekend to complete the surveys. Subsequently, all distributed questionnaires were retrieved; however, 11 were deemed incomplete and consequently excluded from the analysis. A total of 106 questionnaires were collected, 57 from form fours and 49 from form 3 group. Quantitative data collected underwent analysis utilising descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies and percentages, supplemented by narrative presentations for a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Additionally, a focus group discussion was convened, comprising 8 class representatives selected through purposive sampling due to their significant roles in managing students' affairs. Purposive selection ensured the representation of individuals knowledgeable about student dynamics and concerns within the educational context.

### RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The students were asked to describe the qualities of a 'good' and 'effective' teacher that they would recommend to their colleagues. Table 1 presents the findings.

**Table 1: Students' Perception of Characteristics of Good and Effective Teachers**

Statement	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Number=N
Jovial/friendly/Approachable/Not gloomy/hostile/ rude	88	83%	106
Knowledgeable /knows the content and ensures students understand the content	85	80.2%	106
Punctuality/commitment to work/does not waste time	83	78.3%	106
Well prepared/organised and has confidence	81	76.4	106
Inspires students/motivates/appreciates/counsels	78	74%	106
Caring/ready to help	77	73%	106
Has a good relationship with students/respects students	68	64.1%	106
Fairness/honesty	64	60.3%	106
Corrects wrongdoing	58	54.7%	106
Gives Assignments/Asks questions, and involves learners in class activities	54	50.9%	106
Self-discipline/smartly dressed	51	48.1	106
Gives clear instructions/Audible	49	46.2	106
God Fearing/Prayerful	46	43.3%	106

Table 1 highlights a predominant viewpoint among students regarding the attributes of good and effective teachers. According to the findings, the foremost quality desired by students is a teacher who is jovial, friendly, and approachable, as opposed to being rude or hostile. The majority of students (83%) express this view. A significant number (80.2%) of students preferred teachers who are knowledgeable in their subjects and able to help them understand the content during instruction, while another 78.3% of students preferred teachers who are committed to their work, are punctual and do not waste students' time. Additionally, 76.4 per cent of students preferred teachers who are well prepared, organised and have confidence in the delivery of instruction, while 74 per cent favoured teachers who inspired them, motivated, counselled, and appreciated students. Seventy-three per cent (73%) of students argued that good and effective teachers care and help their students; have good relationships with students and respect them (64.1%); are fair and honest (60.3%); correct wrongdoing (54.7%); gives assignments or class activities and asks students questions (50.9%). Teachers who are self-disciplined and smartly dressed were rated at (48.1%); give clear instructions, and are audible at (46.2%) and those who are God fearing and prayerful at 43.3 per cent.

Findings from the focus group discussions with class representatives confirmed the findings from the questionnaires, as shown in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1. *Good teachers are jovial. They infuse jokes in their lessons that break the monotony during instruction and relax the classroom environment even when learning difficult subjects.*

*Good teachers are available for consultation at any time. They will listen to you and help you even when the issue at hand is not academic. They are generous.*

Excerpt 2. *Good and effective teachers are knowledgeable. They respond to students' questions with confidence and do not always refer to textbooks when teaching. They do not copy-paste information. This inspires students to be like them. As for bad teachers, they are rude and aggressive; they do not keep time and don't like being asked questions. They seem not to know what they are teaching; some lack content knowledge. Students lose interest in learning because they are not likely to succeed in their examinations.*

Excerpt 3. *“Less effective teachers often detract from valuable lesson time by sharing irrelevant stories in the classroom. They give assignments for topics they are supposed to teach or fail to*



*address essential topics adequately. Additionally, some resort to abusive language and dismiss students' views without consideration. They come to class to read textbooks, which we can read on our own, so why waste our time?*

These findings suggest that students highly value certain qualities in their teachers. A vast majority rate teachers highly based on personal attributes such as being jovial, friendly and approachable. Effective teachers prioritise relevant content delivery and create a respectful learning environment where students' voices are heard and valued. Students do not rate highly teachers who waste learner's time through irrelevant stories in the classroom, which consumes lesson time, or those who are not patient enough to allow students to express themselves.

Further, the findings suggest that students rank highly teachers who possess deep knowledge of their subjects and effectively convey that knowledge during instruction for the benefit of their students. This implies that expertise and proficiency in teaching content are crucial for student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Additionally, students greatly appreciate teachers who are committed to their work, maintain punctuality and respect students' time. This underscores the importance of professionalism and reliability in the teaching profession. Teachers who demonstrate dedication and respect for their students' time are likely to earn their appreciation and respect in return. Secondary school students also value and respect teachers who are well-prepared, organised and confident in delivering instruction. This means that teachers must take time to prepare for classroom instruction and possess presentation skills to enable them to effectively engage their students in a variety of classroom activities and facilitate learning effectively.

Finally, students express a preference for teachers who inspire and motivate them, provide guidance and support, and show appreciation for their efforts. This emphasises the crucial role of teacher-student relationships and the impact of encouragement and mentorship on students' academic success and personal development.

The findings of this study agree with several other studies carried out elsewhere in the past. Pianta (1999) and Roorda et al. (2011) emphasise the impact of excellent teacher-student interactions in fostering academic engagement, motivation, and overall well-being among secondary school students. The authors further argue that students often value teachers who are approachable and supportive and demonstrate genuine care for their academic and personal growth. Ramsden (2003), cited in Qureshi (2013), pointed out some characteristics of effective teaching, such as engaging students' interests in the subject matter by providing clear explanations and showing respect and concern for students and their learning. Additionally, Misigo et al., in their (2014) study on the qualities of secondary school teachers in Kenya, found that effective teachers are caring, encouraging, approachable, enthusiastic, respectful, knowledgeable, empathetic, passionate and have a good sense of humour.

In essence, these findings underscore the holistic nature of effective teaching, highlighting the importance of cultivating a diverse skill set that encompasses not only academic expertise but also interpersonal competence, organisational skills, and the ability to inspire and support students on their educational journey.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusions:** In conclusion, the findings show that effective teaching is not solely determined by subject content knowledge but also by a range of interpersonal skills and instructional practices. Teachers who are friendly, knowledgeable in their subjects and skilled in helping students comprehend content during instruction are highly valued and respected by their students. Learners prioritise teachers who demonstrate commitment, punctuality, and respect for students' time, as well as those who are well-prepared, organised, and confident in their lesson delivery.

**Recommendations:** The study recommends government investment in the development of teachers' diverse skills as an essential element for enhancing educational outcomes and nurturing the holistic development of students. Teacher professional development programs should not only focus on improving content knowledge and

instructional strategies but also on the development of interpersonal skills, classroom management techniques, and strategies for fostering positive teacher-student relationships. This is likely to improve students' attitudes towards learning and, by extension, students' outcomes. Secondary schools should also establish a culture that allows students to evaluate their teachers regularly, similar to practices used in institutions of higher education. This will enable them to communicate freely about their

learning experiences and their perspective towards effective teaching. Such an opportunity may help identify areas for improvement and tailor professional development initiatives to address specific needs and preferences. Teachers should prioritise cultivating jovial, friendly, and approachable interactions with students. Doing so may help minimise instances of blame games and conflicts within schools arising from misunderstandings due to unmet expectations.

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