

The Supportive Learning Environment

EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

An Eye On Education Book



JAMES H. STRONGE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SERIES

Jennifer L. Hindman
Leslie W. Grant
James H. Stronge

The Supportive Learning Environment

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2010 by Eye On Education

Published 2013 by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hindman, Jennifer L., 1971-

The supportive learning environment : effective teaching practices / Jennifer L. Hindman, Leslie W. Grant, James H. Stronge.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59667-142-3

1. Learning, Psychology of. 2. Effective teaching. 3. Cognitive styles in children. 4. Competency-based educational tests. I. Grant, Leslie W., 1968- II. Stronge, James H. III. Title.

LB1060.H56 2010

371.102—dc22

2009043003

ISBN: 978-1-596-67142-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-317-92339-8 (ebk)

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to

Teachers and administrators who seek to use their gifts for working with children and youth in meaningful ways.

Aunt Gail who, for many years, effectively taught students when their regularly assigned teacher could not be there, and her daughter-in-law Liz Jarvis who is a second year teacher.

JLH

To Haddon and Eleanor, may they learn and grow through positive environments created by classroom teachers.

LWG

My first teacher, my mother, who taught me to read.

JHS

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About the Authors

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- ◆ *Student Achievement Goal Setting: Using Data to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Eye On Education, 2009)
- ◆ *Qualities of Effective Principals* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008)
- ◆ *Qualities of Effective Teaching, 2nd ed.* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007)
- ◆ *Handbook on Educational Specialist Evaluation* (Eye On Education, 2003)
- ◆ *Superintendent Evaluation Handbook* (Scarecrow Press, 2003)
- ◆ *Handbook on Teacher Evaluation* (Eye On Education, 2003)
- ◆ *Handbook on Teacher Portfolios for Evaluation and Professional Development* (Eye On Education, 2000)

His doctorate in the area of educational administration and planning was received from the University of Alabama. He has been a teacher, counselor, and district-level administrator. He can be contacted at: The College of William and Mary, School of Education, PO Box 8795, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795; 757-221-2339; or jhstro@wm.edu.

Acknowledgements

This book and its companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (Eye on Education, 2010) are the result of many workshops, studies, articles, and conversations with many individuals. Throughout the years, we have met many teachers, researchers, and administrators. Our interactions with them helped us to connect research to practice and sometimes inspired by the magic of a professional work from practice to research. Thank you to each of you, too numerous to acknowledge by name, who have impacted on our work.

The nexus of much of this work is coauthor James Stronge. He is like a Roman arch. His work facilitates the transportation of ideas much like the arches supported the aqueducts built centuries ago to carry water into the cities. Those who are privileged to interact with him can walk through the arch or benefit from the support of the arch. Over the years, James has involved us in effective teacher research and writing. As such our research interests in assessment, evaluation, and teacher selection have benefited from the collaboration.

We gratefully acknowledge the subscribers to the *Teacher Quality Digest* (a publication we self-published for three years) who supported our work to delve in deeply to topics related to effective teachers. Their confidence in us, inspired us, pushed us, and motivated us to identify relevant research and topics that represented a mix of the expected and the unexpected.

We would like to thank Mary Vause, a freelance copyeditor and graduate student in The College of William and Mary's School of Education. Mary completed her Master's in Education and is now a teacher. We benefited from her editorial suggestions offered before the book was ever submitted to Eye On Education.

Also, we would like to acknowledge our colleague at The College of William and Mary, Christopher Gareis, Ed.D., as a contributing author for his work on the mentoring section found in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, the efforts of the reviewers, editors, and support staff who carried this manuscript from the down the field achieving first down "milestones" to score a touch-down are commended.

Finally, we deeply appreciate Bob Sickles' commitment to recognizing the potential that a book has to contribute to the profession and his support to bring a book from author's conception to publisher's birth.

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List of Free Downloads

Figure 2.1. Immediacy Interaction Record	page 12
Figure 2.5. Student-Teacher Interactions	page 19
Figure 2.7. Student Information Sheet	page 24
Figure 3.7. Communication Observation Record	page 38
Figure 3.9. Professional Development Plan.....	page 42
Figure 4.4. Routine Memo.....	page 57
Figure 4.5. Student Survey I	page 60
Figure 4.6. Student Survey II	page 61
Figure 4.9. Time Use Form	page 65
Planning for Online Group Meeting	page 82

Contents

About the Authors	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Free Downloads	x
List of Free Downloads	x
Part I: Research and Practice Intertwine	1
1 Introduction	1
What Is Teacher Effectiveness?	2
Why Is Teacher Quality Important?	3
What Is the Relationship Between Teacher Quality and Student Learning?	3
How Is the Book Organized?	5
How Can the Book Be Used to Promote Teacher Quality?	7
Notes	8
2 What Dispositions Support Teaching and Student Learning?	9
Immediacy	10
What Is Immediacy?	10
How Do Good Teachers Convey Immediacy?	10
How Can Teachers Assess Their Immediacy Behaviors?	11
Immediacy Interaction Record	12
The Intervention	13
Teacher Credibility	13
Why Does Teacher Credibility Matter?	13
How Does Teacher Credibility Affect Teacher Effectiveness?	14
Caring	15
Why Does Caring Matter?	15
How Do Students, Teachers, and Researchers View the Impact of Caring?	15
What Does the Research Say About the Connection Between Teacher Caring and Student Achievement?	16
How Can Data Be Collected About the Caring Teacher?	18
Observing Teacher-to-Student Interactions	18
Focusing on Number of Interactions	18
Watching the Teacher	18
Reflecting with the Form	20
Welcoming and Engaging Caregivers	20
Why Engage Caregivers?	20
How Can Caregivers Become Involved at School or at Home in Their Students' Education?	21
School Involvement	21
Home Involvement	21
Potential Challenges	22

How Does the Way Caregiver Involvement is Solicited Affect Whether Caregivers Become Involved?.....	22
How Can I Effectively and Efficiently Solicit Caregivers' Potential Involvement?.....	23
Summary.....	25
Notes.....	26
3 What Knowledge Do Teachers Need to Support Teaching and Learning?.....	29
Knowledge Through Subject-Matter Preparation, Certification, and Experience	30
How Much Does Subject-Matter Knowledge Matter?	30
How Much Does Certification Matter?.....	31
How Much Does Experience Matter?	32
Knowledge of How to Communicate.....	34
Why Does Communication Matter?.....	34
What Does the Research Say About the Relationship Between a Teacher's Verbal Ability and Teacher Effectiveness?.....	35
How Can Communication in the Classroom Be Improved?	35
By Phrasing Commands and Directions Better.....	35
By Avoiding Potential Pitfalls in Communication.....	36
How Can Teachers Reflect Upon Their Communication?	37
Knowledge Gained Through Professional Development.....	39
What Does the Research Say About the Positive Impact of Professional Development and Student Learning?	39
What Constitutes Effective Professional Development for Teachers?.....	41
Sharing Professional Knowledge with Others Through Mentoring.....	43
Why Does Teacher Mentoring Matter?	43
What Does the Research Say are the Effects of Teacher Mentoring?.....	44
What Roles Can Mentors Fulfill in Support of Novice Teachers?.....	44
Relating	44
Assessing	45
Coaching	45
Guiding	46
How Else Can Mentoring Be Done When Face-to-Face Interaction Is Not Feasible on a Regular Basis?	46
Summary.....	46
Notes.....	47
4 What Teacher Skills Are Necessary for a Positive Learning Environment?.....	49
Learning Environment Basics	49
Why Does the Learning Environment Matter?.....	49
What Do Researchers Say About the Learning Environment and Teacher Effectiveness?.....	50
What Does the Learning Environment Convey When Nobody is There?	51
How Does Cultural Responsiveness Relate to a Positive Learning Environment?	53
How Can Rules and Routines Contribute to a Positive Learning Environment?	54
By Developing Rules and Routines	54
By Communicating Rules and Routines	54
By Following Through on Rules and Routines.....	55
What Routines Are Important to Communicate?.....	55
Student Ownership	56

Why Does Student Ownership and Involvement Matter?	56
How Can Student Ownership Be Encouraged?	58
How Can a Teacher Quickly Solicit Student Input?	59
Time Management.....	62
Why Does Time Matter?	62
Why Does Time Management Matter?.....	63
What Is the Value of Teacher Time?	63
How Can a Teacher Determine Time Use?.....	64
Observing with the Time Use Log.....	64
How Long Are the Observations?.....	66
How Is the Time Use Log Used?	66
Reflecting with the Time Use Log.....	66
Summary.....	67
Notes.....	68
5 Conclusion	71
How Can Principals Support Teacher Effectiveness Through School Culture?.....	71
How Can Teachers Support Their Own Quality?.....	72
What is the Role of Reflection in Improving Teacher Performance?	72
What Is the Basis of Teacher Reflection?.....	73
How Do Quality Teachers Reflect to Improve Their Professional Practice?.....	73
How Can Teachers Support Student Success?	74
The Ultimate Test of Teacher Quality: Holding High, Reasonable	
Expectations for Students.....	74
Translating High Expectations into Student Success.....	75
Translating High Expectations into Daily Practice	76
Summary.....	76
Notes.....	77
Part II: Reproducible Resources.....	79
Communication Observation Record.....	80
Immediacy Interaction Record	81
Planning for Online Group Mentoring.....	82
Professional Development Plan Template	83
Routine Memo.....	84
Student Information Sheet	85
Student Survey I	86
Student Survey II.....	87
Student–Teacher Interactions.....	88
Time Use Log.....	89
Part III: Annotated Bibliography and References	91
Matrix	91
References	117

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Part I

Research and Practice Intertwine

1

Introduction

If you needed a dresser for your bedroom, what would you look for? After all, there are millions of dressers in the world. What would be your priorities (e.g., price, style, craftsmanship, availability)? I look for hallmarks of quality in the craftsmanship such as solid wood, dovetail drawers, butterfly joints, hand sanding, and protective finishes that allow the beauty of the wood seen. Of course I want it all and at a good price. However, my funds are limited and so I make choices. There is one dresser in my home that I'd like to tell you about, it was my husband's childhood dresser that his mother picked up at a garage sale. Over the years, I have changed how the dresser looks and functions in response to my household needs. I refinished the top to let the natural wood show, painted the body of the dresser twice, and changed out the drawer pulls a few times. This dresser was mass produced with dovetailed joints, and with my attention, it has become a piece that has functioned well in each setting.

To a degree, teachers are like dressers, there are 3.9 million teachers in the United States a number expected to grow to 4.4 million by 2016.¹ There is a lot of variation in the effectiveness teachers, influenced by personal attributes, acquired knowledge, and learned skills. Decades of research abounds on qualities of effective teachers. There are some teachers who are like finely crafted dressers in that there are numerous hallmarks of quality from how they interact with people to the learning outcomes recorded. On the other end, there are the ineffective teachers whose instruction barely holds together like a flimsy cardboard backed dresser. Many teachers, however, are like my husband's dresser—they are effective, and if not quite effective, can be made so with some targeted efforts. Even better, these teachers can make choices to be even better like I enhanced the fit and usefulness of dresser. In this book, *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*, both elements of finely crafted classrooms are explored and the background attributes of the teachers who created them—in essence, how teachers create environments and relationships that inspire and motivate students. The companion book,

Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices, addresses the planning, instructional, and assessment choices that teachers make to construct learning experiences. Both books provide tools for practitioners to use to hone their craft.

In *Student Achievement Goal Setting: Using Data to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Eye On Education, 2009), we asked the critical question “Why do we have schools?” at the beginning of the book. In answer we offered “...there are only two reasons why schooling exists: (1) teaching and learning, and (2) supporting teaching and learning.”² It is this latter reason—supporting teaching and learning—that is the focus of *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*. In particular, we address the following questions related to how and why we can and should provide proper support mechanisms for teachers and students.

- ◆ What is teacher effectiveness?
- ◆ Why is teacher quality important?
- ◆ What is the relationship between teacher quality and student learning?
- ◆ How is the book organized?
- ◆ How can the book be used to promote teacher quality?

What Is Teacher Effectiveness?^a

Teacher effectiveness is a broad concept³ that can be defined in many ways.⁴ The word “quality” denotes the experience of being with a special teacher, and the term “effectiveness” works well when referring to analytical evidence. We choose to use the terms “quality” and “effectiveness” interchangeably. One clear and undeniable way to define teacher quality is to personally know an effective teacher, or to have benefited from the tutelage and teaching of an extraordinary teacher. Another way to define teacher effectiveness is to analyze—or dissect—it based on the extant research about what makes teachers effective. In this section, we briefly explore both perspectives: *analyzing* a quality teacher and *interacting* with a quality teacher.

Although we may not be able to define teacher quality with precision, we certainly can identify key teacher qualities that form the foundation of any useful definition. Studies examining effective teacher characteristics are profuse and often seem to seek an elusive secret formula for teacher quality. Unfortunately, there is no single magic elixir for quality teaching. However, one thing we know for certain about teacher quality is that it is multi-dimensional and these multiple dimensions interact to form the chemistry of what makes good teachers good.

Figure 1.1 notes some key components of a quality teacher.^b

a This section of the chapter is replicated in Chapter 1 of the Eye On Education companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (2010).

b For a more comprehensive review and discussion of key teacher dispositions, skills, and knowledge, see: Stronge, J. H. (2007). *Qualities of effective teachers* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Figure 1.1. Selected Characteristics of Quality Teachers

- ◆ *Communication skills* including the ability to listen to and value what students have to say;⁵
- ◆ *Teacher preparation* in terms of content knowledge⁶ and certification,⁷ among others;
- ◆ *Personal dispositions* such as enthusiasm, motivation, and reflectivity;⁸
- ◆ *Personal relationships* with students built on fairness, trust, and respectfulness;⁹
- ◆ *Classroom management* that provides a safe, robust, disciplined, and vibrant learning environment;¹⁰
- ◆ *Instructional planning, delivery, and ongoing student assessment* combined in such a way as to constantly monitor and deliver differentiated, effective instruction;¹¹ and
- ◆ Clearly focused goals and high expectations to promote student achievement.¹²

Why Is Teacher Quality Important?

Regardless of how we choose to define quality, building-level administrators and teachers know that the work of good teachers results in improvements for students, including improved instructional opportunities and improved student learning. Although we highlighted a number of key dispositions and practices (i.e., teaching processes) in the section above, let's consider the impact (i.e., results) of a high-quality teacher:

- ◆ Fewer discipline issues;
- ◆ Better relationships with their students; and, most importantly,
- ◆ Higher student achievement results.¹³

Thus, any worthy definition should take into account both the *process* of teaching (e.g., quality instructional delivery skills) and the *results* of teaching (e.g., student achievement gains).

So why does teacher quality matter? Because learning matters. If we hope for our children a better quality education and a brighter tomorrow, we also must hope for—and support in every practical way—quality teachers.

What Is the Relationship Between Teacher Quality and Student Learning?^c

Analyses of data from teacher value-added assessment studies¹⁴ offer compelling evidence regarding the influence of the classroom teacher on student learning.¹⁵ The overarching finding from value-added studies is that effective teachers are, indeed, essential for student success. In fact, it has been estimated that out of all the factors that

c This section of the chapter is replicated in Chapter 1 of the Eye On Education companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (2010).

are within the control of schools, teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement.¹⁶ Consider the following specific findings presented in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Teacher Impact on Student Achievement

Major Findings	Study
◆ The impact of teachers is far greater than that of overall school effects. In other words, “which teacher a student gets within a school matters more than which school the student happens to attend.”	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Beginning in third grade, children placed with highly effective teachers scored on average at the 96th percentile on Tennessee’s mathematics state assessment, whereas children placed with ineffective teachers scored on average at the 42nd percentile.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ Students of less-effective teachers experienced reading achievement gains of one-third standard deviation less than students with effective teachers.	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Students of less-effective teachers experienced mathematics achievement gains of almost one-half standard deviation less than students with effective teachers.	Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004
◆ Lower-achieving students are more likely to be placed with less-effective teachers.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ If a student had a high-performing teacher for just one year, the student likely would remain ahead of peers for at least the next few years of schooling (residual effect).	Mendro, 1998
◆ Third grade students of teachers in the top quartile of effectiveness (based on hierarchical linear modeling predictions) scored approximately 30 to 40 scaled score points higher than expected on the Virginia Standards of Learning state assessment in English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, respectively. Students of teachers in the bottom quartile of effectiveness scored approximately 24 to 32 points below expected scores.	Stronge, Tucker, & Ward, 2003
◆ The teacher has a larger effect on student achievement than any other school-related factor, including class size and ability levels within a class.	Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997
◆ Fifth grade students scored approximately 30 percentile points higher in both reading and mathematics in one year when assigned to top-quartile teachers as compared to those students assigned to bottom-quartile teachers.	Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2008

To summarize the impact of effective teachers on student learning, Wright, Horn, and Sanders surmised that “seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor.”¹⁷ Yes, we do need *highly qualified teachers* as required in the U.S. federal legislation *No Child Left Behind*. However, much more importantly, we need *high-quality teachers*.

How Is the Book Organized?

The following are premises of *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices*:

- ◆ Teachers come to the profession with dispositions nurtured by parents, mentors, teachers, and life experiences (Chapter 2).
- ◆ Teachers seek and acquire knowledge to become effective teachers and then further develop their professional knowledge and skills (Chapter 3).
- ◆ Teachers use these dispositions and knowledge to create a positive, robust classroom environment that nurtures learners (Chapter 4).
- ◆ Teachers take advantage of support mechanisms and integrate those supportive skills into their teaching repertoire in order to become masterful teachers (Chapter 5).

The Venn diagram (Figure 1.3) below depicts how *The Supportive Learning Environment: Effective Teaching Practices* and its companion book, *Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Effective Teaching Practices* (Eye On Education, 2010), address the extant research related to teacher quality.

Figure 1.3. The Relationship Between the Companion Effective Practices Books

