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Characteristics of High Quality Teachers: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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May 2019

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Keywords: High Quality Teaching, Teacher Characteristics, Effective Teaching, Instructional Strategies, Teacher Communication, Classroom Management, Teacher Passion

ABSTRACT

Characteristics of High Quality Teachers: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

by

Kelli G. Barnett

A qualitative investigation was conducted to explore the characteristics of high quality teachers. This study used a phenomenological methodology, enabling the researcher to gather information from a purposeful selection of people directly identified as high quality teachers by their principals. This study employed processes of data collection commonly used in observational analysis and included the use of interviews found in qualitative design.

The researcher was able to extract meaning using the coding process and the constant comparative method. Information was sorted into themes that supported and aligned with the research questions leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This was accomplished through thorough analysis of interviews and observations. Teacher participants were asked to participate in an interview prior to the classroom observation, be observed in the classroom, and participate in a post observation interview. Additionally, individual interviews were conducted with the principals of the teacher participants. The quality of data sources led to the triangulation of results giving credibility to the study.

The study findings were conclusive regarding the key characteristics of high quality teaching. There was a clear relationship between high quality teaching and the use of a variety of instructional strategies, the ability to engage students in learning, the use of higher order questioning as a prevalent teaching strategy, the establishment of clear classroom expectations

and the maintenance of those expectations, clear and deliberate communication to facilitate home and school partnerships, and a high level of passion for content and the profession of teaching. Other emerging themes may be utilized to connect high quality teaching to additional characteristics. These characteristics offer suggestions for further research to determine how strong the correlation is between high quality teaching and these themes. The themes included having a caring disposition, high expectations, being self-reflective, having content knowledge, being a team player, and having a strong work ethic.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. Thank you to Aaron, Greer, and Ella Rose for the constant support, love, patience, prayers, and encouragement. You are my motivation for all that I do and my achievements are your achievements. To my parents and in-laws, thank you for everything. Without you this wouldn't be possible. I look forward to spending more time making memories with all of you as well as the rest of our family.

This work is dedicated to my village. I find myself fortunate to have an amazing group of people that support me in all that I do. I have a tremendous group of colleagues that were the inspiration behind my research. Thank you for giving your best to children each day and encouraging me to do the same. I have a group of friends that keep me grounded and happy, especially when we win on trivia nights. Thank you for making time for me even when I couldn't reciprocate. I have a highly educated yet irreverently funny book club that has offered me endless support and encouragement. Thank you for the constant laughs and good times.

This work is dedicated to my favorite teacher of all time, Mrs. Cynthia Moss. I've had many great educators over the years through my life long pursuit of education, yet you have always stood out as my favorite. I have reflected on why that is the case and after completing this dissertation I now see you possess the qualities, skills, and practices that I have concluded define high quality teaching. Your excellent teaching transcends time and changes in education. Thank you for inspiring me both then and now.

This work is also dedicated to the difference makers in education that I've encountered out there. There are so many of you that I've had the privilege to have as teachers, colleagues, and as teachers of my own children. I have had the privilege to work with the best in education during my research for this dissertation. Keep fighting the good fight!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
DEDICATION	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
LIST OF TABLES	10
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	11
Statement of the Problem	11
Research Questions	12
Significance of the Study	12
Definition of Terms	13
Limitations and Delimitations	14
Overview of the Study	15
2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	17
Introduction	17
Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness	18
Student Achievement as a Measure	20
Habits and Dispositions of High Quality Teachers	21
Teacher Passion	24
Teacher Self-Efficacy	25
Teacher Work Ethic	26
Instructional Strategies of High Quality Teachers	26

The Role of Experience and Self-Reflection	29
Teacher Content Knowledge.....	30
Classroom Management and Expectations	31
Communication Skills of High Quality Teachers	33
Advocacy of High Quality Teaching	34
Summary.....	35
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	37
Introduction.....	37
Research Questions.....	37
Qualitative Design	37
Role of the Researcher	38
Ethics.....	39
Setting	40
Population	40
Sampling Strategy.....	41
Data Collection Procedures.....	41
Interviews and Observations.....	42
Data Management	43
Data Analysis	43
Summary.....	44
4. FINDINGS	45
Introduction.....	45
Description of Participants.....	46

Research Questions	53
Research Question 1	53
Interview Findings	54
Observation Findings	58
Research Question 2	63
Interview Findings	63
Observation Findings	64
Research Question 3	64
Interview Findings	64
Observation Findings	65
Research Question 4	65
Interview Findings	66
Observation Findings	67
Emergent Themes	67
Caring Disposition	67
High Expectations	68
Self-Reflection	69
Content Knowledge	69
Team Player	70
Work Ethic	70
Summary	71
5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	72
Introduction.....	72

Statement of Purpose	72
Analysis of Findings	73
Research Question 1	73
Research Question 2	75
Research Question 3	76
Research Question 4	77
Emergent Themes	78
Caring Disposition	78
High Expectations.....	79
Self-Reflection	80
Content Knowledge	80
Team Player	81
Work Ethic	81
Recommendations for Practice	82
Recommendations for Future Research	83
Conclusion	83
REFERENCES	86
APPENDIXES	96
Appendix A: Principal Participant Interview Guide.....	96
Appendix B: Teacher Participant Pre Observation Interview Guide.....	97
Appendix C: Teacher Participant Post Observation Interview Guide	98
Appendix D: Observation Field Notes.....	99
VITA.....	100

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Teacher Participant Grade Breakdown	47
2. Teacher Participant Experience and Education Demographics	48

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every teacher has an impact. Great teachers make a difference. -TODD WHITAKER

There is evidence to suggest that a quality educator is perhaps the most important component for student learning (Liu, Liu, Stronge, & Xu, 2016). Now more than ever, teachers are under scrutiny by students, parents, administration, policy makers, and the public. Accountability is a common term in describing the profession of teaching and attempts to measure teacher effectiveness (Reeves, 2004). In the first part of the 21st century, an emphasis was placed on high stakes achievement testing and both student and teacher successes are being gauged in this one-dimensional format. Reeves (2004) indicated that educators understand the complexity of their profession and resent the measurement of their work using the narrow focus of student performance on a single test. The measurement of high quality teacher should consider the complexity of the profession and the many attributes necessary in order to be a successful teacher that positively impacts student learning outcomes.

While the need for high quality teaching is a priority for many, there is not agreement on how to define high quality teaching or what high quality teaching looks like in action. Teaching is dynamic and complex in nature, which makes defining and assessing high quality teaching difficult (Norman, 2010). This researcher examined a group of extraordinary teachers to find common characteristics and habits among them to better understand the necessary components of high quality teaching.

Statement of the Problem

This research focused on identifying characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment. This study gives depth

to the research surrounding high quality teaching. Studies of the characteristics of high quality teaching are often focused on surveying academia for perceptions on teaching. While much information can be gained from this approach, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to define characteristics of high quality teaching using teacher observations in the context of actual teaching in the classroom environment, interviews with high quality teachers, and principal interviews. Raising cognitive awareness of the core qualities of high quality teaching and promoting self-reflection in relation to these qualities could result in more educators making use of the qualities they have within themselves to carry out exceptional teaching in an intentional way (Korthagen, 2004). By setting the standard for excellent teaching using teacher observations in the context of actual teaching in the classroom environment, exceptional teaching can be defined in an exemplary, yet concrete way.

Research Questions

1. What are the instructional strategies used by high quality teachers?
2. How do high quality teachers establish and maintain expectations for students?
3. What strategies do high quality teachers use to communicate student achievement and behavior with parents and students?
4. How does passion for teaching and subject matter affect teaching quality?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it lends to the body of knowledge surrounding teacher effectiveness. It is also significant in that it is transferable to a greater population of teachers in kindergarten through sixth grade and therefore may have implications for understanding and

improving teacher effectiveness in the greater education population. Improving teaching has the potential to significantly impact student learning outcomes in a positive way.

Further analysis of high quality teaching is of importance in guiding decision making and growth in the teaching profession. Teachers themselves must assume the responsibility for helping characterize exceptional teaching. Those outside of education have attempted to define the profession and have publicly ridiculed the success of the profession. As an education community our definition of a high quality teacher is vague, and the result is our critics are stepping in and defining it for us (Breault, 2013). As a result, there is an over-focus on accountability as a measure of student test scores. It is now up to educators to redefine high quality teaching, share the successes of exceptional teaching, and educate the critics of the profession. Effectively and conclusively defining high quality teaching can allow educators to control the trajectory of future educational decisions. Teaching behaviors can best be analyzed in the context of teaching situations. Through the lens of exceptional teaching in practice we can shape the definition of effective teaching. By doing so, teacher preparation and teacher development in-service programs may be positively influenced. Teachers can be guided to find the characteristics within themselves and support can be offered where needed. This research also has implications that could impact hiring decisions based on solid criteria which will lead to better teaching and student success (Liu et al., 2016).

Definitions of Terms

In order to clarify meaning for the purpose of this study the listed terms are defined as follows unless otherwise stated within the text. These terms are used circumstantially for this study in the field of education.

- *Accountability*: Defined as the recognition of responsibility for schools to provide a thorough and efficient education of all students (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002).
- *Classroom Environment*: Various components of the physical space of a classroom including the physical arrangement of the classroom, student groupings, and learning materials as well as the strategic use of these components (Evanshen & Faulk, 2011).
- *Self-Efficacy*: A person's judgment regarding his or her capability to successfully execute a task (Bandura, 1997).
- *Learning*: Hoy & Miskel (2013) defined student learning as a complex cognitive process of change that happens in a person's knowledge or behavior.
- *Passion in Teaching*: Enthusiasm for the profession and the content. A teacher "in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day" (Fried, 2001, p.1).
- *Work Ethic*: Important characteristics including reliability, confidentiality, continued desire to gain knowledge, cooperation, and effort put into work (Miller, 2001).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses outside of the control of the researcher. One limitation of the research in this study may include external variables on the days of the interviews. Observations on a different day or at a different time may have yielded different results. Other potential limitations of this study include the small sample size and the selection of participants based on recommendations from school principals with final participation being optional. These limitations may have not provided an adequate representation from which to study.

This study was delimited to teachers in the Northeast region of Tennessee within one school system. The participants selected for this study may not represent the overall teaching characteristics of high quality teachers nationally or internationally. Participants took part in a pre-observation interview, an announced classroom observation of teaching, and a post interview. Their school principals were also interviewed as part of this research study. The self-reported data used as part of this study could be a potential delimitation. The limitations and delimitations of this study indicate that the replication of this study may result in varied outcomes.

Overview of the Study

This research focused on identifying characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment. These observations allowed characteristics and habits among exceptional teachers to emerge so that the researcher could draw conclusions regarding the characteristics of high quality teaching.

This phenomenological qualitative study includes five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, definition of relevant terms, limitations and delimitations of the study, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 is a review of literature that includes scholarly research on characteristics of high quality teaching broken down into themes of research and a summary of the literature. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology and design of this study including research questions, qualitative design, role of the researcher, ethics, setting, population, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, interview and observation procedures, data management procedures, data analysis procedures, and a summary of the methodology. Chapter 4 includes research findings including the description of participants, interview findings and observation findings related to the research

questions, emergent themes, and the study findings summary. Chapter 5 includes a statement of purpose, analysis of findings broken down by research question, emergent themes, recommendations for practice, recommendations for further research, and the conclusions of the research study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Much can be learned from examining the literature surrounding the practices and characteristics of high quality teachers. The essential purpose of identifying the characteristics of excellent teachers is to build the base of knowledge for educational professionals who want to improve teaching in themselves, peers, preservice teachers, and within the school community (Keeley, Ismail, & Buskist, 2016). When teaching is improved opportunities for student learning will also improve. Norman (2010) concurred that the true purpose of measuring high quality teaching is not to identify poor teaching, but rather to highlight excellent teaching so that we can help all teachers improve. Shifting the focus away from the negative and pervasive dialogue of what teachers are doing wrong in education today and examining closely what excellent teachers are doing is a positive direction for making strides in educational outcomes. Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) affirmed:

Although various educational policy initiatives may offer the promise of improving education, nothing is more fundamentally important to improving our schools than improving the teaching that occurs every day in every classroom. To make a difference in the quality of education, we must be able to provide ready and well-founded answers to the question, what do good teachers do that enhances student learning (p. 351).

A variety of complex components that are integral to high quality teaching emerged in the literature on this topic. However, a theme that recurred is not only what attributes and characteristics a teacher possesses, but also what is practiced in the classroom (Kennedy, 2010). It is not only necessary to have the characteristics and dispositions of high quality teaching, but it

is also integral to have the content knowledge, work ethic, and resourceful reflection to put into action effective practices in the classroom to meet the needs of diverse learners. Stronge (2018) reasoned that more is known about the profession of teaching than ever before, but due to the complex nature of education there is still important work to do in understanding the characteristics of effective teaching and what the implications are for teacher development. He went on to assert that teachers bring a complexity of characteristics to the profession of teaching. These characteristics included their beliefs and value systems, their aspirations for themselves and their students, their attitude and motivation for student success, and their content knowledge and teaching aptitude skills. He postulated that these characteristics are all rolled together to form a complete package necessary to be successful in the profession. Stronge also argued that it is integral to the field of education to continue to refine the description of what encompasses high quality teaching and to further investigate what specific things teachers can do to increase student success. As the characteristics of high quality teaching are investigated the understanding of these characteristics grows deeper and richer. The implications for student success deepen as the body of research deepens. Stronge reasoned that teaching is complex in that it is one of few professions that can be classified as both an art and a science. Enriching the understanding of high quality teaching allows educators to grow in strengthening and balancing both the art of teaching and the science of teaching. Specific themes investigated within this review of literature emerged as integral to high quality teaching.

Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness

In the current politically charged climate many people have different perceptions on the quality of teaching that is happening in American schools. It is a wildly debated topic with much dissent. While many parents and students report that the teachers they are in direct contact with

are doing a good job in the classroom, a sharply opposing narrative is often expressed about public education (Fernandez & Lutz, 2015). Media Matters found that of the guests invited to cable news networks to discuss education only 9% were actual educators (Power, Tone, & Torres, 2014). Goldstein (2015) affirmed that rarely do those with a depth of experience in teaching and learning get the opportunity to speak about education publicly or be included in educational policy decision making. This undermines the experience, professional judgement, and expertise of teachers. Goldstein reasoned that instead the public voice and decision making is often afforded to politicians who lack experience in education, corporate philanthropists who want to mold education into a business model, or economists who value the science of teaching rather than understanding the art of teaching.

Educators who step up to take over the narrative as experts in the field of education can transform both the perception of education and the implications of excellent teaching. Educators can begin by continually researching and analyzing the practices of high quality teaching and the impact they have on student achievement (Reeves, 2004). Reeves posited that if teachers lead the way in redefining and improving educational accountability, the result will be a more child-centered accountability system that is more accurate, constructive, and motivating to educators. To have a child-centered accountability system there must be a shift in focus to teacher development rather than over utilizing teacher measurement and evaluation (Tomlinson, 2015). Thornton (2010) argued that school communities should be calling on highly effective teachers to research school needs and cultivate the movement of improvement on teaching practice. The true experts in the field of education, highly effective teachers themselves, are those putting research into action and refining the craft of teaching all while keeping focused on the best interests of students. These are the experts who should be leading the growth and development

of the profession. Breault (2013) concurred that if educators do not take over defining effective teaching and assuming accountability to characterize it then a definition will be created for the profession. Breault stated that, “our profession no longer has the luxury of claiming that good teaching is too ephemeral to define and measure. Our critics seem to have no difficulty in doing so” (2013, p. 10).

Student Achievement as a Measure

The current norm in education when identifying high quality teaching is to narrow the focus to student test data to measure teacher value for accountability purposes. Excellent teaching has been proven to be of benefit to student outcomes and student testing data sources are a potentially valuable piece of information for measuring teacher performance (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011). However, student achievement on standardized testing is only a small piece of information among a wealth of other possible sources of knowledge. Goldstein (2015) reported that testing is a valuable part of quality education; however in recent years it has been misused as the single driving force behind both school improvement decisions as well as teacher evaluation systems. True exceptional teaching is much more complex and has a much broader impact than student test scores. Breault (2013) noted that available research calls on the profession of education to continue to dig into concrete examples of exceptional teaching so that educators can build awareness and cultivate those characteristics in the profession. Reeves (2004) argued that while excellent teaching certainly impacts student achievement, it is not the only variable. Many other things impact student achievement as measured on standardized testing including, but not limited to, school attendance, the involvement level of parents, intrinsic motivation of learners, and the leadership of the school. Reeves reasoned that solely analyzing testing data to determine teacher effectiveness would be a convenient and clean method, yet an

incomplete analysis. He stated that this is one piece of what should be a more holistic approach to teacher accountability, which he posited will lead to a better recognition of successful classroom practices and continuous improvements in education. Whitaker (2013) stated that if highly effective teaching is to be understood, it must first be recognized that standardized tests are only a part of the work that should be happening in schools. Whitaker acknowledged that great teachers keep testing in perspective and focus on behaviors that lead to student learning. When used correctly, standardized testing data can be analyzed and used as a tool to allow teachers and schools to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning to better develop student understanding.

Habits and Dispositions of High Quality Teachers

Specific habits and dispositions typically found in highly effective teachers have been researched by a variety of educational professionals. Many such lists have overlapping similarities among them that allow us to reflect upon and further analyze the habits and dispositions that researchers have concluded as integral components of high quality teaching that leads to student success. These integral habits are less about what teachers know and more about the things high quality teachers do in the classroom (Whitaker, 2013).

Colker (2008) interviewed 43 early childhood practitioners to formulate a list of characteristics of effective early childhood teachers. Twelve characteristics emerged that make early childhood teachers effective. Items on the list included passion for what you do, perseverance or dedication in fighting for one's beliefs, a willingness to take risks to achieve academic goals for students, pragmatism or the ability to compromise, patience, flexibility, respect for children and families, creativity, authenticity or self-efficacy, a love of learning, a high level of energy, and a sense of humor. Colker reasoned that excellent teaching is a

combination of these personal characteristics, knowledge of subject matter with a focus on best practices in education, and skills gained through formal education.

Synrnk (2012) confirmed the importance of nurturing teachers especially regarding students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. Students who are nurtured feel more confident to take learning risks in the classroom. Nurturing teachers allow students to see mistakes as opportunities to grow without fear. Synrnk concluded that teachers who are nurturing facilitate learning opportunities as well as structure an environment that empowers students to believe in their own abilities. She indicated this to be of extreme importance to enable students to maximize their learning potential. Synrnk asserted this to be a key component of high quality teaching.

Whitaker (2013) determined that there is no one magic formula for what makes a great teacher, but there are certain characteristics that great teachers have in common. Whitaker proposed that one key component that great teachers have in common is excellent classroom management skills. He stated that this includes the establishment of clear and consistent expectations, routines, and procedures that are consistently maintained over time. Whitaker also asserted that setting high expectations for behavior, effort, and learning outcomes as well as keeping student learning as the central focus of the classroom is an integral component of high quality teaching. He went on to state that high quality teachers put students first, are respectful and positive, and have empathy and genuinely care for their students. Whitaker expressed the importance to seek to improve the overall child both socially and academically, and to look for the most comfortable and least comfortable with each decision. Whitaker also articulated that high quality teachers are constantly refining their teaching, have a plan and purpose for what they do, seek advice from others, and reflect on their practice. Whitaker concluded that these

characteristics are inherent components of high quality teaching and when they all are present this combination of attributes sets high quality teachers apart from other teachers.

Sivret (2014) gathered student perceptions of excellent teachers in the quest to paint a picture of excellent teaching from the perspective of students. She determined that strong rapport with students, encouragement of risk taking, utilization of a variety of approaches, helping students see relevant connections, a safe and comfortable classroom, effective routines and procedures, strong knowledge of subject, kindness and positivity, and a passion for teaching are all key indicators of excellent teaching from a student perspective. Sivret concluded that the student perspective of high quality teaching is an important viewpoint to consider.

Stegemann and Roberts (2016) worked to identify the diverse characteristics that combine to form the ideal highly effective teacher. They found the following to be key to highly effective teaching: the ability to manage stressful situations and crisis situations, warmth, treating others with respect, supporting others in reaching goals, and mastery of subject content. The characteristics that Stegemann and Roberts identified support the argument that the actions of high quality teachers are paramount to their success.

Stronge (2018) created a framework for the qualities of effective teaching including domains of professional knowledge, instructional planning, instructional delivery, assessment, learning environment, and professionalism. He proposed that these key domains are present in the classroom of all highly effective teachers. Stronge also argued that high quality teachers share an unwavering commitment to impacting the world through education by continuously striving to achieve.

These lists of common characteristics of high quality teachers can seem simultaneously simple and yet difficult to achieve. What separates great teachers is their openness to measure

themselves against these characteristics and evaluate their shortcomings to move towards change. In an interview John Hattie described the mindset of exceptional teaching as one that is open to self-evaluation and accepting where individuals fall short so that we they can grow (Boyd, 2009). The complexity that has emerged as researchers have defined highly effective teaching highlights the need for constant evaluation and reflection on the profession of teaching.

Teacher Passion

At the top of most disposition lists of high quality teachers is passion for teaching which is sometimes defined as passion for teaching. An attempt to understand the use of passion as an intentional teaching tool was researched by Palmer (2017). He discovered that passionate teaching is a valuable factor in the success of students. He concluded that principals and teachers should be more intentional in being passionate about teaching content and about the concern for student success to become more effective educators. Palmer supported this argument for passion as a leading factor for high quality teaching that can be evidenced through simple dialogue with the general public about their experiences in school. The teachers that stand out to most are those that had a great deal of passion for both their content and their students.

Keeley et al. (2016) concluded that passion is the highest indicator of excellent teaching based on surveying teachers. However, this cannot be the only determining factor. Keely et al. reported that teachers identified as being excellent themselves rated rapport with students and overall preparedness as high indicators of teaching excellence. Although there is clear evidence to suggest passion as a leading characteristic of high quality teachers, research also suggests that simply being passionate about teaching is not enough. Educators must be willing to put in a high level of effort and have other key skills to be highly effective in the classroom.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

The power of student belief in their own achievement capability has long been considered vital for student success. However teacher self-efficacy is of perhaps greater value and can be defined as what a teacher believes they can do to get students to achieve high goals (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2001). Astuti (2016) studied motivational strategies of successful teachers and determined one of the important components of student success is the motivational strategies used by teachers. One such motivational strategy was the success of teachers who protect the self-esteem of the learner. Student self-esteem is better protected when a teacher has a strong self-efficacy. A direct and positive impact on instructional practices that lead to learner success can be correlated with teachers that have strong beliefs in the capability of themselves as teachers and in the capability of learners (Rubie-Davies et al., 2001). According to Sivret (2014), it is of high importance for teachers to help students develop a strong self-efficacy. High quality teachers are successful at getting students to buy into the deliberate, clear, and consistent message that they are capable of learning and that they will reach their academic goals with perseverance. To make an effective argument the teachers themselves must believe they can do what it takes to teach each student. An integral teacher trait for student success is a caring disposition that truly invests in the belief of the success of each individual student (Helm, 2007). Jung, Brown, and Karp (2011) argued that both school-wide and teacher self-efficacy impact student learning outcomes. Thus, school culture has far reaching impact on teacher self-efficacy and ultimately on student outcomes (Jung et al., 2011). It is vital to student learning to promote the belief in positive outcomes for all students and encourage and support teachers towards that effort to self-actualize student success.

Teacher Work Ethic

A misconception about the profession of teaching is related to teacher work ethic. Because the profession is not respected to the extent it should be by many and because of the time frame of the school day teachers are often not viewed as having a strong work ethic (Goldstein, 2015). However, those who work in the profession know that is not the case. This is supported in research through findings that support a long list of characteristics of successful teachers. Stronge (2018) posited that successful teachers have demonstrated a strong work ethic based on high expectations for students and the planning necessary to facilitate the growth of students. He expounded that highly effective teachers understand the importance of strong work ethic and are willing and eager to put in the effort to developing key questions in planning and organization, focusing on the instruction when planning and organizing student learning, creating a plan to optimize instruction time, taking the time to set learning objectives for student success, and spending quality time using student learning data to inform instruction. The amount of time spent in planning and organization is often misunderstood by those outside of the profession. This misconception may also be applied to the level of work ethic required to properly facilitate student growth. Highly effective teachers know this and are willing to put in whatever time necessary for the best possible outcomes for students.

Instructional Strategies of High Quality Teachers

Effective and engaging instructional strategies employed within the classroom are important to high quality teachers. Marzano (2003) reasoned that the most effective teachers are well versed in and utilize more varied instructional strategies than ineffective teachers. He suggested that schools should provide teachers with research-based frameworks for teaching units of study that include understanding and communicating clear goals to learners, carefully

monitoring progress towards goals, balancing a variety of student groupings and strategies, assessing progress, and celebrating successes.

Bain and Zimmerman (2014) have been investigating teaching through focusing on strategies that great teachers utilize. They found that great teachers develop critical thinking by connecting students with problems that cause them to shift their paradigms. These problems should be connected to previous thinking, be fascinating to the students, and be of importance. However, this is not the way many teachers teach. This method can also be viewed as a contrast to the expectation of teaching to very specific standards for standardized testing success. Great teachers link the content they are attempting to teach with the interests of their students which results in a deeper level of learning and an enjoyment of learning. Bain and Zimmerman (2014) concluded that great teachers do this through the power of questioning.

Tomlinson (2001) argued that teaching to specific academic standards does not have to be in opposition to artful teaching. Tomlinson expounded that standards can be viewed positively if they are reframed as guidance for possibilities for learners. She stated that this could be accomplished by carefully reflecting on the purpose of the standards, carefully planning to address all areas of learning, planning to allow for students to make sense of standards, and organizing curriculum into manageable pieces. She went on to articulate the importance in creating instruction that is invitational to the learner and that focuses on the actions of the learner as essential components to motivate students. Tomlinson also argued that importance of meeting the needs of all learners through accounting for varying student abilities and building a safe and respectful learning environment. Tomlinson posited that high quality teachers teach for the success of all students using these artful techniques.

One teaching strategy emphasized by Raison (2012) was the importance of student engagement in the learning environment. Raison pointed to engagement strategies as key to maintaining the focus and interest of a learner. Many other characteristics of excellent teaching are negated if students are not engaged in the learning process. Rollins (2017) reasoned the key to student engagement is for teachers to create lessons that have a larger portion of class time with students actively working rather than teacher presentation. He stated this work time should allow for students to engage in the learning process, collaborate with peers, and construct knowledge through creating or demonstrating their learning. An active approach for teaching that keeps the focus on the active engagement of students in the learning process blocks the ability of learners to disengage from the learning taking place. Zenawi, Beishuizen, and Os (2012) concluded that student engagement should be emphasized more than the teacher's actual instruction when analyzing quality of teaching. Classrooms with high engagement contain students who are active rather than passive participants in their learning and development. This strategy connects the learner to content in a meaningful way that leads to student success.

Another common strategy of highly effective teachers is that of meaningful and engaging group work. Tomlinson (2017) advocated for a Complex Instruction Model that allows diverse learners to gain experience with meaningful group work by challenging advanced learners while simultaneously developing all levels of student abilities. The Complex Instruction Model builds the collaboration skills of students around rich problem-solving experiences and focuses on balancing responsibility among group members as well as strengthening classroom community.

Stronge (2018) developed a framework for instructional delivery that is conducive to valuing teaching as an art form. His framework includes using a variety of instructional strategies, differentiating instruction, communicating high expectations, promoting complex and

higher-order thinking, using high quality questioning, and supporting student engagement in learning. The use of a variety of strategies emerged as key to highly effective instruction as well as the constant review and refinement of instructional strategies over time. High quality teachers are willing to take risks with instructional strategies and incorporate variety into the practice of teaching. High quality teachers are also continuously reflecting and refining instructional strategies based on student success in the classroom.

The Role of Experience and Self-Reflection

One factor that potentially improves student achievement identified by researchers Huang and Moon (2009) was years of teaching experience at a specific grade level. Stronge (2018) asserted that while experience is relative to the inherent traits that educators possess at the beginning of their career, it is important that teachers refine their practice through reflection. A seasoned teacher may not be more adept in direct comparison to a novice, but a seasoned teacher who regularly practices reflection and refinement will be better in direct comparison to themselves when they were a novice teacher. Stronge attributed this to the fact that with experience comes an increased understanding of content, planning and instructional strategies, decision making, and classroom management. This deeper understanding that develops over time strengthens the rationale to identify and retain highly effective practitioners (Huang & Moon, 2009). Huang and Moon concluded that there is a need for establishing high quality teacher mentorship and fostering teacher leadership within a school community. The retention of highly effective teachers is important to the profession and to student outcomes. Darling-Hammond (2010) concluded the best way to develop future teachers during preservice residency programs is by engaging them in meaningful real-life teaching in settings where excellent teaching is happening and where advances in knowledge and teaching practices are the focus.

The partnership between schools and preservice programs is integral to the continued development of high quality teaching. Quality experience has a significant impact on teacher effectiveness (Hang & Moon, 2009).

Developing the potential within an individual into a highly exceptional teacher “would require schools that value and evaluate serious intellectual performances, support responsive teaching, and allow teachers to build strong, long-term relationships with students and their parents” (Darling-Hammond, 2016, p. 85). For this growth to take place support must be offered to teachers in the endeavor to refine teaching practices and encouragement to the continued development of characteristics of excellent teaching. It is important for the growth of the profession of teaching for scholarly practices to be fostered through a positive and supportive school climate. Teachers who are actively engaged in gaining knowledge on best practices in education improve the student learning experience (Kustra, Martin, Borin, Savage & Vajoczki, 2011). Teachers with strong self-knowledge are consistently strengthening their teaching practices using research in best practices and are consistently asking themselves what kind of teachers they want to become which leads to growth towards becoming exceptional teachers (Fairbanks et al., 2010). Teaching is an ever-evolving profession and a commonality among highly effective teaching is the continued search for growth and improvement. Teachers who take on the role of being a professional learner have improved teaching that results in student learning (Chen, Brown, Hattie, & Millward, 2012).

Teacher Content Knowledge

At the root of an effective teacher is a deep understanding and knowledge of subject matter. Stronge (2018) proposed this to be a basic prerequisite to effective teaching. He argued that high quality teachers must have a strong foundation in the concepts, principles,

methodology, and generalizations within their subject matter. He also stated that high quality teachers are continuously striving to stay current on their subject matter and are deepening their understanding in order to determine pedagogical thinking and decision making. While excellent teaching is much more complex than simply having strong content knowledge, a teacher cannot be excellent without this foundational piece. A lack of content knowledge is a common factor in a teacher's lack of confidence and often leads to misconceptions of students. This is detrimental to student success.

Gay (2012) asserted that when teachers have a deep understanding of the content they are teaching they essentially become the curriculum rather than relying on the curriculum. He went on to conclude that high quality teachers look for ways to develop their content knowledge intentionally. When teachers deepen this foundational knowledge, they become experts in how students conceptualize the content and this allows teachers to identify and correct misconceptions. Gay went on to argue that this process equips teachers with the knowledge needed in order to differentiate instruction for a variety of student needs leading to student success.

Schlechty (2011) asserted that educators who prioritize student learning must also prioritize their own knowledge as an educator in order to be successful. He concluded that high quality teaching includes continuous commitment to intellectual growth. Teachers who are rich in content knowledge have a key element needed to inspire and engage students.

Classroom Management and Expectations

Another key indicator of highly effective teaching that emerged from a review of literature is the importance of quality classroom management and the classroom environment (Evanshen & Faulk, 2011). Evanshen and Faulk concluded that high quality teachers have

established a classroom environment that is used as a tool to facilitate learning. Highly successful teachers show consistency in routines, procedures, and expectations (Sutton, 2014). Sutton explained that highly successful teachers protect the loss of instructional time by fine tuning classroom management and proper planning. Sutton went on to explain that consistency in routine and clear classroom expectations help to establish a learning environment where students may take learning risks. Sutton observed that limited disruptions with behavioral issues occurred in classrooms of highly effective teachers because skilled teachers prevent disruptions on the front end with classroom routines, procedures, engaging lessons, and in-depth planning. Wong, Wong, Rogers, and Brooks (2012) also concluded that teachers with high student success rates do not need to discipline a class because they effectively manage proactively through organization and structure of the environment and procedures. This greatly reduces discipline needs and leads to productive and motivated students. Wong and Wong (2015) explained that teachers can be classified as either proactive or reactive and that reactive teachers create environments that encourage behavior problems and adversely affect student success. Successful classrooms are led by teachers who preplan and focus energy towards procedures, instructional strategies, and expectations. Wong and Wong reported these to be the heart of effective teaching because time is a valuable commodity in schools. The school day is often limited on time and has many potential disruptions. They went to articulate that when teachers maximize and value time then students rise to this expectation. Time in any educational setting is often the most difficult to obtain commodity. It is a great challenge for teachers to meet curriculum objectives, reach all diverse learners, and manage the administrative duties of a typical school day with the limited time available. Teachers who effectively maximize instructional time have a distinct advantage regarding guiding students to successful outcomes (Stronge, 2018). Marzano (2003)

argued the importance of relationships in facilitating student confidence in a teacher's classroom management plan because it is the keystone foundation that allows other components of classroom management to be successful. A teacher can have key dispositions and habits of effective teaching, the content knowledge and effective instructional strategies, the work ethic and self-efficacy of effective teaching, but if they do not have classroom management skills the combination of the other skills and efforts may not result in high levels of student achievement.

Communication Skills of High Quality Teachers

Parent and community involvement is an essential element of high quality teaching. The extent of involvement of parents and the community is directly linked to excellent communication between school and home (Marzano, 2003). Farrell and Collier (2010) reasoned that there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and student learning. They concluded that high quality teaching includes a variety of home school communications regarding student academic performance feedback as well as student behavioral issues. When connections are made between home and school on a frequent basis then a partnership grows that benefits student learning.

Stronge (2018) argued that teacher communication skills should not be limited to home school communications. He emphasized the importance of communication and quality feedback to the learner as a crucial component for high quality teaching. Stronge postulated that effective teacher communication skills assist in the development of critical thinking skills, collaboration skills, and higher order thinking skills in students. High quality teachers build these skills in students through consistent, positive, reinforcing, and specific feedback.

Advocacy of High Quality Teaching

Identifying the key components of high quality teaching has lasting implications on the focus of teacher professional development, teacher evaluation, and teacher education programs. Excellence in teaching should be considered the foundation for these components to reach the ultimate goal of improving student learning (Chen et al., 2012). Teachers who are better prepared regarding how and what to teach have a positive impact on student outcomes and that preparedness also influences the retention of high quality teachers (Strong, 2018). Stronge argued that excellent teaching that continuously leads to successful learning outcomes for students are never fully perfected. Teacher effectiveness is a continuous, reflective, deliberate process. He went on to assert that high quality teachers are immersed in a lifelong pursuit of successful teaching.

Sazedj (2017) reasoned that identifying the qualities of excellent teaching gives school leaders more information to utilize in recruiting and hiring practices to attain teachers who have the desired traits and tenacity for growth and development that is pervasive in excellence within the profession. Pekarsky (2009) argued that it is not enough simply to identify the qualities associated with highly effective teachers, but that it is the responsibility of the community to cultivate these qualities, draw these people into the profession, and encourage teachers to continue to develop and refine these qualities. It is vital for teacher training and development to focus on attributes that have been proven to be part of exceptional teaching because such attributes are an important piece for building knowledge that leads to student success (Hong, Greene, & Hartzell, 2011). The foundation of lifelong learning and development first begins with teacher education programs and is fostered throughout an educator's career (Burns, Yendol-Hoppey, & Jacobs, 2015). This continued growth and reflection is important to the development

of high quality teaching. Burns et al. (2015) argued that if teacher quality is desired there must be a commitment to sustaining resources for teacher development. The implications for student growth is heavily impacted by the advocacy for high quality teaching practices in our schools

Summary

High quality teaching is difficult to define because to teach well means to layer many skills sets seamlessly into a variety of situations while serving diverse learners. Teaching is a complex profession that requires synthesizing, integrating, and applying knowledge in ways that allow learners to connect to prior knowledge, construct upon that knowledge, and acquire new knowledge (Hollins, 2011). Ozmon (2012) explained that education is complex and rich in deep philosophical study, but even then, the perfect approach to teaching has yet to be discovered. He reasoned that educators are “left with the necessity to think about what they do and to attempt to reason out and justify their actions so that they are coherent, meaningful, workable, and directed toward desirable educational ends” (p. 4).

A pervasive element in educational research on the characteristics of high quality educators is that excellent teaching transcends subject matter and the age of the learners. Johnson-Farmer and Frenn (2009) found that high quality teaching requires teachers to be constantly learning themselves, current in their knowledge, able to utilize relevant resources, willing to utilize a variety of instructional strategies to reach a variety of learners, be excellent communicators, willing to put students first, mindful of an environment that promotes active learning and discovery, and able to connect with all students within and outside of the learning process. Stronge (2018) argued that effective teaching can be broken down into four overlapping components that must all be present to a high degree of effectiveness. When a teacher possesses a high degree of all four components then they can be classified as a highly effective teacher.

The first component is a deeply caring teacher that takes the extra steps to connect with students. The second component is the ability to recognize and address the complexity of the profession and handle the many facets of the job while still moving towards the goal of student success. The third component is the ability to communicate clearly and facilitate students' discoveries. The fourth component is serving conscientiously by giving an exceptional amount of time and energy to the profession.

Despite many differences of opinion on the state of education and the strengths and weaknesses of the current educational system in the United States most can agree that the impact of highly effective teachers on student learning is significant (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argued that these systems do not focus on one aspect of high quality teaching, but rather the most success results from systems who see all components complementary of one another and work to build this through policy, practices, and investment into the profession of teaching. Contributing to the body of research that facilitates this growth is the intent of this researcher.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment. In addition, interviews with the highly effective teachers as well as interviews with their principals added depth to the study. Findings from this study may be utilized to identify instructional, management, and communication strategies of high quality teachers. By exploring teacher self-efficacy, preparation, reflection, and content knowledge, and by observing teachers in their environments a better understanding of the characteristics of a highly effective teacher were developed. The findings from this research study may be used to establish standards for excellent teaching and define exceptional teaching in an exemplary and concrete way.

Research Questions

1. What are the instructional strategies used by high quality teachers?
2. How do high quality teachers establish and maintain expectations for students?
3. What strategies do high quality teachers use to communicate about achievement and behavior with parents and students?
4. How does passion for teaching and subject matter impact teaching quality?

Qualitative Design

A phenomenological qualitative approach was applied as a way to add meaningful depth to the body of knowledge existing on this topic. Phenomenological studies gather information from people who experience the phenomenon of interest directly (Patton, 2015). This study

employed processes of data collection commonly used in observational analysis and included the use of interviews found in qualitative design.

The qualitative design method was chosen in order to investigate the instructional strategies, expectations, communication strategies, and teacher passion of the participants in the teaching environment. The focus of this research was on identifying characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment.

Patton (2015) gave seven examples of contributions of qualitative inquiry that included “illuminating meanings, studying how things work, capturing stories to understand people’s perspectives and experiences, elucidating how systems function and consequences for people’s lives, understanding context, identifying unanticipated consequences, and making comparisons to discover important patterns and themes across cases” (p.13). Evidence of many of these examples of contributions of qualitative inquiry can be identified in this research.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2014) identified qualitative research as interpretive in nature and typically involving thorough and sustained experiences with participants. In this study the researcher was an interviewer, observer, collector of information, recorder of data, and analyzer of data related to the participants.

McMilan and Schumacher (2014) emphasized the importance of an effective researcher to use reflexivity in qualitative research. As a veteran elementary classroom teacher in a public laboratory school, the researcher established ideas of what a high quality teacher looked like based on reflective practice and refinement. Patton (2015) recommended that the researcher must acknowledge potential bias and take precautions to attenuate the impact with rigorous procedures. To fully acknowledge any potential bias, the researcher confirms personal interest in

this research study to grow in the profession of teaching as well as facilitate this growth in others as a school leader. As information was gathered regarding best practices of high quality teaching, the researcher focused on the research questions and meticulously documented the findings.

Ethics

The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) prior to beginning research. The purpose of the IRB is to review research involving human subjects. The researcher received IRB approval to investigate the phenomenon of high quality teaching.

Although students were in attendance during the observation the researcher focused on the actions, behaviors, and environment of the participants and did not identify students that happened to be part of the environment of the teacher participant. This study was granted a waiver of the requirement to obtain child consent by the ETSU IRB as the children present during the observations were not determined to be direct participants of the study.

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the research study. The researcher communicated to participants that participation was optional and confidential. Proper steps were taken to protect confidentiality and privacy in the collection and interpretation of data. Participants were informed of the components of the research study, what their participation would entail, and given the option to participate prior to the research study. Consent to participate forms were signed by principal participants and teacher participants prior to the collection of data for the study. The research participants were made fully aware of intellectual property and contact information for additional information regarding their privacy and the ethics of the study was given in advance to the participants. The principals of the teacher participants

participated in an interview (See Appendix A). Teacher participants answered pre-observation interview questions as well as completed a post observation interview with open ended questions that allowed for clarification and further follow up (See Appendices B and C). After the interviews were complete and transcribed teacher and principal participants were given an opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. Observations of classroom teaching were also documented on an open ended observation form that allowed the researcher to record teacher actions and instructional strategies (See Appendix D). Participants interviewed and observed were not connected professionally with the researcher and none of the information gained during the study was connected to the participant before, during, or after the completion of the research. Participant identifying information was kept in a secure location and observation and interview documentation were filed under non-identifiable pseudonyms.

Setting

Qualitative research should occur in the natural setting in order to understand abstract cognition phenomena (Creswell, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the natural setting was determined to be the school environment where the participants work. Pre and post interviews with the teacher participants were conducted on site at participant schools. Interviews with the principal of each study site were also conducted. Observations of the participant teachers were conducted during regular class time at the participant schools. The interviews and observations occurred during designated times at the convenience of the interviewee. All data were collected during the fall of 2018.

Population

Each of the 12 teacher participants of this research study were employed in the same school system in East Tennessee. The participants were involved in the study during the fall of

2018. The participants came from various backgrounds, grade level assignments, and educational experience. The sample for this study included teachers that have been identified as high quality by their school principals. The study also included these four principals in the sample. Interviews were conducted with the four principals who recommended the teacher participants for the sample population. This method of sampling created a sample of participants who have exemplified the phenomenon of this research study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Sampling Strategy

The participants for this study were teachers identified as high quality teachers by their principals. Purposeful sampling was utilized as a way to gain insight into the specific phenomenon of exceptional teaching by utilizing a sampling strategy that matches the purpose of the study (Patton, 2015). The identification of the common defining characteristics enabled the researcher to identify and study the target population in a purposeful way (Creswell, 2015).

Area principals were contacted by the primary researcher to identify potential teacher participants in the study. Teacher participants were chosen based on the criterion of being recognized as highly effective by their principal. No specific limit was given on the number of teachers that the principals could refer. The parameters that principals considered to select teachers included teachers who have been teaching for more than four years, have been actively engaged in the life of the school, currently hold above a 3 level of effectiveness teacher rating using the Tennessee Teacher Evaluation System, and who embody exemplary teaching practice. Using this criterion, teacher participants were invited to participate in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Twelve teachers who were willing to participate in the study took part in an interview prior to the observation. During this interview teacher participants were given a description of

the purpose of the research. The participants were then observed in the classroom environment while teaching and interacting with students as they would on an ordinary school day. A post observation interview took place after the observation. The combination of interviewing and observing teacher participants allowed for depth and inferences that would not be possible with a singular data collection (Patton, 2015). Additionally, individual interviews were conducted with principals of the teacher participants to provide triangulation of data to strengthen credibility of the study. All participants received information regarding the purpose of the study and how the data were to be stored and protected (Patton, 2015). Prior to beginning data collection with participants, a pilot interview and observation were conducted. The pilot allowed the researcher to identify flaws or problems with the research interview method, questions, observation method, and coding prior to conducting research on actual study participants. The purpose of the piloting the interview and observation was to allow the researcher to improve the design of the research and data gathering methods prior to beginning research with actual participants selected for this study (McLeod, 2007).

Interviews and Observations

Data were collected through pre-observation interviews, classroom observations, and post observation interviews. Each teacher interview occurred using an open-ended interview guide to ensure consistency as recommended by Patton (2015). When needed, further probing, clarifying, or follow-up questions were included and varied by participant. The researcher conducted interviews in participant classrooms. All interviews were conducted at times that were convenient for the teachers. In addition, teachers were observed while teaching a lesson of their choice. Information was collected from teaching observations using an observation guide.

The researcher also interviewed the principal of each participant who recommended the participant as a highly effective teacher for the study. This interview included a specific interview guide with variance when needed. The researcher conducted the interviews in locations selected by the principal participants at times that were convenient for the principals.

Data Management

Participants, schools, and school systems associated with this study were assigned pseudonyms for the purpose of assuring anonymity. All data collected during this study, including transcripts, observation notes, and data analysis documents were stored electronically on the researcher's password protected, personal computer. All paper documents including participant consent forms were locked in a file at the home of the researcher. All data were secured separately from pseudonyms in order to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data collected included transcripts and notes of interviews and observations. The teacher participant data included transcripts and notes of pre-observation interviews, classroom observations of teacher participants, and post observation interviews with teacher participants. The principal participant data included transcripts and notes of interviews with the principals of teacher participants. This information was analyzed by coding the data, identifying patterns in the data, sorting the patterns into themes, and then developing a system for categorizing the data (Patton, 2015). The constant comparative method was used to analyze and compare the data then sort them into categories. These categories were used to establish themes and themes were utilized in support of research questions. Direct quotes and interview descriptions were used in the findings report to add depth and clarity to the research findings. Summaries of research findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Summary

This chapter outlined the rationale for a phenomenological qualitative approach to a research topic due to the focus of understanding characteristic of exceptional teaching. The research methods, research questions, researcher's role, ethics pertaining to the study, setting of the study, population, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, interview and observation information, data management approach, and data analysis method were all outlined within this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This research focused on identifying characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment. The study also included interviews with the high quality teachers and interviews with the principals of these high quality teachers. This qualitative study used the phenomenological approach to gather information from people who have been directly identified as high quality teachers. The sample of participants was purposefully selected based on being identified as high quality teachers by educational administrators.

The 12 teachers who participated in this study answered pre-observation interview questions and post interview questions using a semi structured interview protocol with open-ended questions. (See Appendix B and Appendix C). In responding to the semi structured interview questions, participants described their education, teaching experience, their passion for their perceived strengths as an educator, the strengths of the lesson observed by the researcher, and reflected on what they would change in the observed lesson. They also discussed instructional strategies used in the classroom, classroom routines and procedures, the establishment and maintenance of classroom expectations, communication with families, the role of passion in teaching, the important components of high quality teaching, and why they felt their principal identified them as a high quality teacher. The four principal participants participated in an interview and were given an opportunity for clarifying and follow up questions (See Appendix A). In responding to the semi structured interview questions study principal

participants discussed the components of high quality teaching and why they identified the teachers they recommended for participation in the study as high quality teachers.

Observations of the 12 teacher participants occurred while the participants were teaching a lesson to their class on a day and at a time of their choosing. The observations were documented using an open-ended observation form that allowed the researcher to record teacher actions and instructional strategies (See Appendix D). Teacher participants were asked to teach a lesson they would normally teach on a typical day. Classroom conditions included interruptions by administrators, parents, special area teachers, school nurses, other classroom teachers, intercom announcements, bathroom breaks, and students arriving to school late or leaving early.

The research findings and analyses of the data collected are presented in Chapter 4. The study gains credibility via the triangulation of teacher interview responses, principal interview responses, and classroom observations. The interviews and observations conducted were coded according to emerging themes and characteristics of high quality teaching.

Interviews and observations conducted during the fall of 2018 produced the data used in analyses of the characteristics of high quality teaching for this research study. Participants were given an opportunity to review their interview transcripts for approval. This member checking process gives credibility to the study. The study participants were assigned non identifiable codes in order to organize, store, and report research findings and are identified as P1, P2, P3, P4, A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, B3, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2, and D3.

Description of Participants

The researcher contacted two school systems for participation in the research study. One of two school systems contacted for participation in this study responded to the researcher. The

responding school system granted permission for the research study to be conducted within the system. After school system approval six principals were contacted for research study participation. Four of six principals contacted within the school system responded to the principal researcher. Of those four principals all four elected to participate in the research study. The four principal participants that participated referred the teachers they felt best represented high quality teaching within their school. No specific limit was given on the number of teachers they could refer. The parameters that principals considered to select teachers included teachers who have been teaching for more than four years, have been actively engaged in the life of the school, currently hold above a 3 level of effectiveness teacher rating using the Tennessee Teacher Evaluation System, and who embody exemplary teaching practice. Sixteen teachers were referred to the principal researcher and 12 of those teachers elected to participate in the research study. Three teachers elected to participate from school A, three teachers from school B, three from school C, and three from school D. Each participant was assigned a non-identifiable pseudonym code to ensure confidentiality. All teacher participants of this study currently teach in grades K-6. Table 1 is a summary of the grades currently being taught by the teacher research participants in this research study.

Table 1

Teacher Participant Grade Breakdown

Grade Currently Being Taught	Number of Teacher Research Participants Currently Teaching this Grade Level
Kindergarten	1
First Grade	1
Second Grade	2
Third Grade	2
Fourth Grade	3
Fifth Grade	2
Sixth Grade	1

Table 2 is a summary of the years of teaching experience and the highest degree earned by the study teacher participants.

Table 2

Teacher Participant Experience and Education Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Years of Teaching Experience	Highest Degree Earned
A1	21	Ed.S.
A2	7	M.A.T.
A3	23	M.Ed.,
B1	30	M.A.T.
B2	21	M.S.
B3	27	M.S.
C1	5	B.S.
C2	14	B.S.
C3	11	B.A.
D1	16	Ph.D.
D2	18	M.A.T.
D3	11	B.S.

The principal study participants were asked why they selected the teachers referred for participation in this research study. The teacher participants were asked to self-reflect on why they believed their principals referred them to the researcher as a high quality teacher. The results offer clarification on the intent behind the purposeful sample selection.

P1 indicated that A1 was selected because A1 is the “ultimate professional who works hard to stay current.” P1 went on to describe A1 as a leader in the school and the district who is willing to take on initiatives. P1 also described A1 as a teacher who loves students and simultaneously holds students to a high level of accountability. A1 reflected that “I believe in students and know what it takes and what I’ve got to do” for students to be successful as the

reason behind being selected. A1 stated that this is not uncommon within the school and that the school is full of high quality teachers.

P1 expressed the reason for referring A2 was very similar to the reasons behind referring A1. A2 was described as a hard worker with very strong research based content knowledge. P1 also described A2 as a teacher who causes kids to look forward to class. A2 was described as having relationships with both adults and children as a central focus. A2 was identified as being highly respected by parents. P1 stated that creativity in the classroom, student engagement, excellent student achievement on standardized testing, and teaching awards received were all reasons for selection. A2 described self-reflection and refinement of instructional strategies based on student outcome as important skills implemented in the classroom. A2 also spoke of all the high quality teachers within the school and demonstrated a high level of pride in students, colleagues and the school as a whole.

A3 was also referred by P1. P1 described A3 as being excellent at, “seeing the big picture of where kids need to end up and then breaking it down into small and manageable steps.” P1 described A3 as a teacher who uses small groups frequently and differentiation in instruction. P1 also described A3 as someone who holds students accountable and gives them no other option than success. A3 was identified to be a leader in the school system and well respected by parents. A3 deflected the question when asked about the reason behind P1’s choice. A3 stated:

I feel like P1 is very perceptive and tuned into the faculty. I have a lot of trust in P1’s judgement and am honored P1 chose me. I must say I think any person in this building would be an excellent choice for this study comparatively.

P2 referred B1 to the research study for going “above and beyond to develop strong relationships with students and their families.” P2 went on to explain that B1 attends ballgames, recitals, and many other events for students. P2 attributed the trust that B1 builds with both students and families as what allows P2 “to effectively teach at a high level because parents see the commitment that B1 makes to children on a holistic level. The parents seem to be more inclined to provide extra support at home.” B1 was noted as having the ability to differentiate based on the knowledge of where students are academically. B1 was also described as a leader in the school and community and as a, “tremendous resource for other teachers.” B1 stated that P2 hopefully, “recognizes that for 30 years I have always tried my best to be the best educator to my students” as the probable reason for selection for this research study.

P2 also selected B2 as a high quality teacher for this research study. P2 was chosen for having, “extremely high expectations for all students” and differentiating to make sure high achieving students are continuing to be pushed and struggling students are not left behind. B2 was also noted as being strong in the ability to question students and digging deep to have students explain their thinking. P2 described B2 as being content focused and as having the ability to break down learning into clear, distinct steps that facilitate student learning. B2 believes the reason behind selection for the research study to be, “P2 knows I will do whatever it takes to get the kids across the finish line. P2 knows I am not going to give up on it.”

P2 selected B3 for participation in this research study because of “effectiveness that stems from the ability to plan lessons that are content focused and to carry out the instruction of the plan in an excellent way.” B3 was commended for having high expectations for students and requiring them to give their best all the time. P2 also listed communication that is honest and effective as well as being extremely hard working as strengths. P2 went on to describe B3 as

having “an impressive diagnostic approach when working with students.” B3 indicated that following school rules, being a team player, having high student achievement test scores, and having students who make good gains are the reasons believed for selection for the research study.

P3 referred C1, C2, and C3 for participation in this research study. P3 indicated all three teachers are high quality teachers who, “care for students and want them to be successful.” P3 also indicated all are great at delivering instructional content.

C1 was chosen because of the ability to make learning fun. An evident strength is the ability to build a great classroom community each year. C1 believed that P3 “identified me as a high quality teacher because I create a climate in my classroom that is constantly demanding more and pushes students to succeed.” C1 also believed caring about students, believing in student success, and classroom management skills to be contributing factors.

C2 was chosen by P3 for the willingness to, “work hard to help every student reach their potential” and for creating a community for students and families. C2 stated that:

I believe P3 sees the passion I have for teaching each child in the classroom as an individual. P3 knows that I not only see them as students who need to learn, but as unique individuals with various talents who have numerous possibilities to have an impact on the world around them.

P3 chose C3 for having, “a quiet personality, but makes learning fun for students.” C3 also is known for doing an amazing job incorporating technology into lessons and helping other teachers do the same. C3 indicated that consistent results from students, good relationships with students and parents, and content knowledge are all reasons for inclusion in this research study.

C3 also acknowledged the ability to relate the content to, “students at their level” as a key to being considered a high quality teacher.

P4 included D1 in the referral of high quality teaching because D1 has a high energy level and the ability accomplish anything. D1 has found “technology to be one of the most engaging tools to motivate and move early childhood students.” D1 believes the basis for being selected to participate in this research study was a combination of strong content knowledge, strong classroom management skills, strong parent-teacher communication skills, relationships with students, involvement in the community, and having a focus on continued growth as a teacher.

P4 identified D2 as a high quality teacher because obtaining a PhD in reading resulted in a strong content base that allows D2 to serve the school as a writing expert. This strength allows D2 to impact not only the classroom, but the entire school. D2 meets with grade level teams and assists in perfecting writing instruction in the entire school. D2 identified strengths of strong student relationships, high expectations, and deep thinking related to content as reasons for selection in this research study.

P4 also referred D3 as a high quality teacher. P4 described D3 as being “a life-long learner who will stop at nothing to make improvements to teaching.” D3’s self-described strengths of, knowing how to test prep kids, knowing how to get kids excited about learning, and building strong relationships with children and parents were reasons listed for selection in this research study. D3 also explained, “P4 knows I will give 100% no matter what subject or grade level and I will make sure that they understand what we are learning”.

P4 went on to state that D1, D2, and D3 all possess “great attitudes when asked to try new initiatives and they are all master deliverers of instruction who care for their students and the improvements of the school.”

Research Questions

Four research questions were developed by the researcher to guide this study. The researcher’s goal in question development was to gain a better understanding of what a highly effective teacher looks like in action and to find common themes among the highly effective teachers in the purposeful research participant sample. The research questions that guided the focus of this study were:

1. What are the instructional strategies used by high quality teachers?
2. How do high quality teachers establish and maintain expectations for students?
3. What strategies do high quality teachers use to communicate about achievement and behavior with parents and students?
4. How does passion for teaching and subject matter impact teaching quality?

The teacher participant pre and post interviews, teacher observations, and principal interviews were transcribed and coded using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding in order to categorize information according to the research questions and other emergent themes. The researcher used the constant comparative method to maximize validity and reliability in the coding process (NcNabb, 2010).

Research Question 1

What are the instructional strategies used by high quality teachers?

Interview Findings

All four principals discussed instructional strategies in depth when asked about the components of high quality teaching. P1 included, “good knowledge of best pedagogy and best practices” as an essential component of high quality teaching. P2 stated that the important components of high quality teaching include:

...developing lesson plans that are standards based, being able to link new content to prior knowledge, presentation of instruction that is clear, concise, and sequenced appropriately, opportunities for students to demonstrate their progress/mastery of the lesson’s objectives, and the use of multiple instructional strategies.

P3 described high quality teaching as learning that has students at the center of the teaching strategies. P3 clarified that:

The lesson should be planned based on standards, objectives, and instructional goals. What is it that we want the students to learn? What prior knowledge do they have, or will they need to master the goal(s) of this lesson? How is the lesson going to be presented? What activities are the students going to engage in? Am I meeting the needs of all of my learners? What assessment will the students complete? These are all good questions when considering a lesson that includes high quality teaching.

P4 explained that, “a phenomenal teacher will prepare rigorous activities that are engaging, exciting, suspenseful and even fun” and, “the pacing for delivery should be students doing and teachers assisting and assessing.”

All 12 teacher participants also discussed instructional strategies when asked to explain the components of high quality teaching. A1 explained that being open to student ideas in class discussions and encouraging the sharing of those ideas is an important teaching strategy. A1

stated that a focus of teaching should be, “asking kids for more. More than just the answer to a question, but giving me the explanation, the reason behind their thinking. I feel as if I am pretty good at getting to another depth of understanding.”

A2 indicated flexibility in instructional strategies as well as knowing the content, “well enough to be able to explain it from multiple perspectives for different learning styles” as important components of instructional strategies for high quality teaching.

A3 indicated effective questioning and rigor in instructional strategies as important components. A3 also discussed the importance of designing lessons to help students make the connections between multiple standards. P3 asserted that teachers, “need to bring up the rigor and make sure they’re guiding students to make the connections from one standard to the next,” rather than teaching standards in isolation.

B1 discussed that instructional strategies should offer a lot of variety to the learner. B1 described engaging lessons as the key to effective instructional strategies. B1 also explained that, “I use a lot of modeling and peer tutoring,” within lessons in order to scaffold learning.

B2 indicated rigor and high expectations were important components of high quality instructional strategies. B2 communicated that within lesson planning it is important to build in opportunities for students to, “share ideas and not be afraid to tell when they got something wrong. Sharing that with other kids can help everyone grow.” B2 discussed the importance of allowing time within lessons for multiple strategies and sharing different strategies among learners so that, “kids can know there’s more than one way to get a correct answer.”

B3 discussed the importance of organization of content presentation as well as the willingness to try different techniques and strategies when teaching. B3 focused on moving kids back and forth among, “large group instruction, small group instruction, and individual

instruction as needed” based on a deep knowledge of students and student needs. B3 also discussed the use of technology as an important instructional strategy that, “is incorporated daily.”

C1 discussed the importance of high quality instructional techniques that hook and motivate students. C1 attested that the organization of the content so that it is, “personally meaningful and relevant to the students” is key to motivating students. C1 also stated that establishing the purpose of a lesson and modeling thinking aloud were key components for students to connect the relevance of a lesson. C1 stated, “Some of the instructional strategies I use are creating learning stations, cooperative learning, differentiation, and using technology in the classroom.” C1 explained that, “I provide different types of content by setting up learning stations. Each station is a concept related to what they are learning.” C1 also stated the importance of encouraging mixed ability groupings so that students have an opportunity to learn from one another.

C2 discussed the importance of incorporating things to grab students’ interest as a key component of instructional strategies that should be utilized by high quality teachers. C2 explained that instructional strategies such as, “content in song and body movements, exaggerated gestures, technology to solidify learning, visuals, student to student interaction, and time for student reflection” are key components in the classroom. C2 also discussed the importance of reading aloud daily and modeling thinking aloud as important. C2 alleged that it is extremely important that, “students are provided with multiple opportunities to generate ideas and analyze problems from varying viewpoints.”

C3 indicated that “teaching for depth and probing for more” is a core teaching strategy used by high quality teachers. C3 specified the importance of taking the time to ask students,

“why,” or, “explain your thinking” and then following up with deeper questioning as integral to student success. C3 explained that a wide variety of instructional strategies are important and went on to specify, “I use a number of strategies such as rewards for motivation, models to show the math, silly voices, loud voices, games, technology, but I find math talk is an important component of student learning.” C3 also affirmed that, “I ask a lot of questions every day to gauge student engagement and understanding.” C3 spoke about the focus on making learning relevant to students by stressing, “The importance of learning varies types of math and tying it to real world ideas like salaries, STEM skills, and everyday life.”

D1 discussed the importance of hooking students into a lesson as well as continuing to keep them interested and motivated throughout as an integral teaching strategy. D1 stated that, “incorporating prior knowledge, blending many reading and writing standards, technology, interactive read-alouds, guided reading groups, differentiation, partner talk, learning stations, and a variety of grouping strategies” are key to student engagement and success. D1 affirmed the importance of higher order questioning as an effective teaching strategy.

D2 discussed modeling as a key component of high quality instructional strategies. D2 noted the importance of higher order questioning as well as, “integrating deep thinking and pulling apart ideas” daily as important for building depth of understanding in students.

D3 discussed the importance of scaffolding learning as a teaching strategy. D3 indicated constant assessment of student understanding is a key teaching strategy so that the lesson can be adjusted if needed. D3 also stated that the, “use of a lot of questioning and accountable talk where students are explaining their understanding,” is key to effective teaching. D3 explained an importance of incorporating technology frequently in lessons but forewarned, “Using technology makes a lot of students more interested, but it can also be distracting.” D3 further explained the

importance of thoughtful use of technology in planning to ensure the purpose is meaningful in relation to the learning goal.

Observation Findings

A wide variety of instructional strategies were observed during the classroom observations. All 12 teachers implemented multiple instructional strategies within the one lesson being observed for this research study.

A1 demonstrated being open to student ideas in class discussions and encouraging the sharing of those ideas during the classroom observation. This was evidenced in the teaching observation as the most prevalent teaching strategy in the lesson. During the lesson A1 put a math problem on the board and highlighted several parts of the problem. A1 then asked students, “I have something important highlighted. Can you tell why I have highlighted these parts of the problem?” A1 frequently asked students to, “Turn and talk to your partners. Explain your thinking.” A1 followed this up with having students share out to the whole group the thinking of partners. A large portion of the whole group lesson involved teacher questioning and peer and small group discussion. Students were checking work from a previous assignment and discussing a variety of possible strategies. A1 frequently asked students things such as, “tell me why you agree, tell me your thinking, do you know what the mistake is, how can we learn from that mistake, explain your strategy, and who has a different strategy?” throughout the lesson.

A2’s classroom observation involved a science experiment designed to allow students to test how evidence of an object’s motion could be used to predict future patterns of motion. Students created pendulums to conduct the experiment. They used data from the previous day’s experiment to make predictions on what would occur during the lesson. Students were deeply engaged in the lesson and were able to connect to the previous day’s lesson in order to predict an

outcome of modified pendulums. During the classroom observation of A2, teaching flexibility was evident in the discussion that occurred when an experiment resulted in skewed data for one group. A2 led a discussion that included high level student thinking on why this could have occurred. A2 also demonstrated the fostering of explanation of multiple perspectives as students drew diagrams of their experiment, graphed the class results, and discussed their graphs and results. A2 asked higher order questions such as, “Yesterday we identified a phenomenon that happened a lot- what can you connect from that phenomenon to today’s essential question?” A2 also showed an ability to have students make connections across content with the integration of math through the graphing of results of the experiment.

A3 demonstrated effective questioning and rigor as evidenced through the repeated use of high level questioning and student discussion during the teaching observation. The teacher asked students things such as, “defend the statement in the definition using our academic vocabulary, can you recall an example of what we read yesterday that showed validity, what is a reason to support the point you are making, explain the central idea and justify your thinking with text evidence, and use your inferring skills to see if you can determine the author’s point.” A3 connected to the previous lesson and shared the learning objectives with the class to begin the lesson. A3 spent a few minutes in whole group before breaking students into learning stations with rigorous tasks. Stations were centered around main idea and including graphic organizer tasks, writing tasks, technology, creating a poster, and highlighting text. The teacher circulated throughout the learning station rotations and assisted groups who needed extra support and asked higher order questions to all groups.

B1’s lesson offered variety to the learner. This was evidenced throughout the lesson. The observation began with a shared reading that was connected to the previous day’s read

aloud. B1 stopped throughout the read aloud to ask a variety of higher order questions. B1 shared a personal connection to a favorite author as students realized the read aloud was from one of their favorite authors. B1 further connected the content by selecting a seasonal text that was relevant and meaningful to the learner. The teacher finished up the whole group discussion with a partner graphic organizer and then moved into purposefully selected small group work where students completed character, setting, problem, and main idea comparison charts. The teacher circulated throughout the small group time. At the end of the lesson the teacher regathered the group for a song related to the story. The young students were actively involved throughout the lesson.

B2 showed evidence of rigor and high expectations through the use of high level of questioning and discussion in the classroom as well as the differentiated research projects offered to students as they completed the required tasks. B2 used chants and songs to help students retain key information during the lesson. B2 linked the idea of decomposing numbers in math to the science academic vocabulary word decomposers. Students were encouraged to share thinking and the teacher emphasized the sharing of mistakes for others to learn from throughout the lesson.

During the teaching observation B3 incorporated a variety of strategies including chants, mnemonic devices, acronyms, anchor charts, and sentence starter tools for struggling writers. B3's students were preparing for an informative writing assignment and B3 was preparing them in advance with tools that would allow them to be successful writers. Many of these strategies scaffolded learning in an organized format to lead to the production of high level writing independently.

C1 demonstrated high quality instructional techniques that hook and motivate students. During the teaching observation this strategy was evident using crackers to build an edible model of area. C1 led the class in a high level discussion of the concept of area. C1 then allowed students to experiment with area and perimeter using crackers. After students completed the task, graphed their results, and wrote explanations of their thinking they were allowed to eat the crackers before moving to the technology portion of the lesson.

C2 incorporated things to grab students' interest such as technology, songs, movement, games, and differentiation of tasks assigned to students. Students were actively engaged because of the variety within the lesson. C2 provided students with multiple opportunities to generate ideas and analyze problems from varying viewpoints during the lesson.

During C3's classroom observation a discussion on multiple mathematics strategies resulted in digging deep into both student understandings and student misconceptions. Students were openly encouraged to share mistakes and the new understanding of where the mistake occurred so that students could learn from one another. C3 used digital manipulatives to model thinking as a whole group, had students work independently to show understanding, and then moved students into group work to reinforce and enrich student understanding. C3 encouraged students to share mistakes asking, "Who got this problem wrong? Can you explain to us your mistake? What can we do differently so we don't make this mistake?"

D1 demonstrated hooking students into a lesson as well as continuing to keep them interested and motivated throughout the lesson observation. D1 began by discussing the lesson's essential question and referenced it throughout the lesson. D1 linked the lesson to prior knowledge about books the class had previously read. D1 then read aloud and included voice inflections, songs, movement, and partner talk to maintain student interest. After the read aloud

the class made a string character map together. Students were then assigned a character and asked to design a puppet for an upcoming play the students would perform about the book. After creating the character students were asked to use technology individually to record a video that shared the essential question of the lesson, the title of the book that was read, a summary, the main characters, share information about the play, and share about their character in the play. Students were instructed to send the video to their families using an app the teacher had previously taught the students to use. All of these strategies hooked students and kept them motivated on the learning throughout the lesson.

D2 demonstrated modeling and questioning key components in the lesson observation. This was evidenced in the classroom observation through teacher writing demonstrations and pausing to think aloud. D2 referred to the modeling as students worked independently later in the lesson. Students wrote in their writer's notebooks as D2 circulated and asked questions such as, "Tell me about your writing. What will you write next? What do you need to look up later? Why don't you start a new page for research questions that will support your writing when answered? I'm looking for more evidence to support your claim in your writing." The teacher also instructed students to, "Turn to your neighbor and share your writing. What advice can you give them to strengthen their writing?"

D3 demonstrated evidence of scaffolding in the observed lesson by using the previous day's lesson on fractions as a benchmark for the current lesson on comparing fractions. This resulted in a relevant and meaningful connection to the previous day's lesson. The teacher asked a variety of higher order thinking questions including, "Tell me how you know. What is your strategy? Why did you choose this strategy? Is there another strategy?"

Varieties of instructional strategies were observed during the teaching observations of the 12 teacher participants. Of those strategies higher order questioning was the most pervasive strategy that was documented during classroom observations. This strategy was documented as occurring 49 separate times during the 12 classroom observations. When this strategy was implemented the result was a high level of discussion and student engagement. The use of technology, group work, differentiated strategies for diverse learners, and attention grabbing strategies were also prevalent throughout the classroom teaching observations.

Research Question 2

How do high quality teachers establish and maintain expectations for students?

Interview Findings

None of the principals specifically mentioned establishing and maintaining expectations for students when asked about the key components of high quality teaching and only four of the 12 teachers referenced this when asked about the components of high quality teaching in an open-ended question.

Both C1 and D1 listed classroom management as key components of high quality teaching. C3 discussed the importance of, “not wasting any more time than necessary” when transitioning and working on partner and independent work. C3 went on to explain that, “I follow the clock to the minute to keep a schedule, and a I hate wasting time because I know I only have 180 school days and wasted minutes add up quickly into real time.” D2 discussed the importance of students, “knowing you love them and expect the best from them” so that when you need to have a conversation about behavior or effort they know it is coming from a place of care and concern.

Although the topic of classroom management did not emerge on open-ended questioning all 12 teachers did describe the school rules, classroom rules, establishment of classroom rules, classroom routines, and classroom procedures in depth when asked specifically about classroom management. All 12 teachers had clear rules and routines along with classroom rules posted within their classroom. All 12 teachers discussed the introduction, modeling, and practicing of routines and procedures happening at the beginning of the year and revisited as needed throughout the school year.

Observation Findings

Classroom management strategies were observed 105 times during the 12 classroom observations. All 105 classroom management strategies were fluid and non-disruptive. These observations included redirection of off task students, transition procedures, students performing classroom jobs, teacher attention signals, group or task rotation signals, and material distribution procedures. No major classroom disruptions due to student behavior, mismanagement of materials, or ineffective transitions were observed during the classroom observations. All 12 teachers observed in this study used these strategies seamlessly within the lesson without allowing them to distract from the focus of the lesson.

Research Question 3

What strategies do high quality teachers use to communicate about achievement and behavior with parents and students?

Interview Findings

When asked about the components of high quality teaching none of the principals and only one of the teachers mentioned communication as a key component to high quality teaching.

D1 listed parent-teacher communication as an integral piece of a high quality teacher. Despite this lack of inclusion on the initial list of key pieces of a high quality teacher, all 12 teachers gave detailed descriptions of the ways in which they communicate with parents and students about both achievement and behavior. Various means of communication included weekly newsletters, weekly folders home, phone calls, emails, handwritten notes, parent conferences, and communication apps that parents subscribe to for free such as Dojo, Remind, and Seesaw. Nine of the 12 teachers interviewed discussed intentionally sending positive communications home or making positive phone calls so that when negative communications occur the relationship has already been established. Seven of the 12 teachers use a communication app as their primary means of parent communication. All 12 teachers indicated building relationships with families in order to help students be successful as a key reason for strong parent teacher communication.

Observation Findings

Communication strategies were demonstrated six times throughout the 12 classroom observations. These six examples included a teacher writing a positive note to send home with a student, a teacher having students record videos sharing their lesson with their families, a teacher passing out a newsletter for the weekly folder to send to their families, and three instances of parents stopping by the classroom to talk to the teacher in person.

Research Question 4

How does passion for teaching and subject matter impact teaching quality?

Interview Findings

Teacher passion for both subject matter and for teaching was a prevalent theme in this study's research findings. Principal participant P4 explained this phenomenon further:

When I hire a teacher, I first look for energy- not that it's the most important component, but it is what is noticeable immediately. Children must be engaged and without an enthusiastic and engaging teacher, some students lose their focus and willingness to try. Teachers must be driven- driven to do whatever is necessary to help each individual achieve.

When questioned on the components of high quality teaching A2 responded that, "First, the teacher has to have a passion for teaching."

Teacher participants were each asked specifically about the role of *passion* for teaching and subject matter in their interviews and all 12 emphasized the importance of *passion* within the framework of this question. The topic of *passion* emerged an additional 31 times other than those times specifically asked. A3 concluded the interview with, "Well, honestly I can't see myself doing anything else." A3 further stated, "I just feel like I have a passion driving me to teach. I feel very fortunate that I get to get up and go to a job that I love that has purpose for me." B1 also expressed this sentiment by stating, "Enthusiasm is the spark that keeps the love of teaching alive. I think being a teacher is a calling and not a choice." B3 stated that, "Enthusiasm plays a huge role in my approach to teaching. It allows me to do my best and share the love of learning with my students."

Observation Findings

Teacher passion for both content and teaching was demonstrated throughout all 12 teaching observations. B2 and C5 both demonstrated this through frequently inserting humor into the lesson modeling enjoyment of teaching. A1 stated the love for math multiple times throughout the lesson observed. A2 demonstrated passion for the science experimentation and celebrated with students as they celebrated their own success. All 12 teaches exhibited a high level of energy throughout the lesson through their presentation of instructional content and their interactions with students.

Emergent Themes

Based on the coding of participant interviews and observations, the following themes emerged in addition to those directly related to the research questions: 1) caring disposition, 2) high expectations, 3) self-reflection, 4) content knowledge, 5) team player, and 6) work ethic.

Caring Disposition

Teachers that demonstrate genuine caring about students and work to foster relationships built on positive interactions and trust emerged as a key theme of high quality teaching based on the data collected in this study. This theme emerged 40 times during principal and teacher interviews and was directly observed in interactions 10 times during the 12 teacher observations. P1 spoke of the importance of, “building relationships with students,” so that, “students know the teacher cares.” P2 stated that, “High quality teaching goes beyond the instructional piece in my opinion. The ability to develop relationships with students and to understand what motivates them, what interests them, and how they learn best are also extremely important.” When asked the essential components of high quality teaching B1 included, “loving your students,” C2 included, “the love of children, patience, and kindness,” and D1 included, “student

relationships.” A3 summarized, “I love that I get the opportunity to make a difference in a child's life, and hopefully all of them, but even if I just make an impact for one on one day then I have had success. I do take them all very seriously, I love them all as my own.” A2 reiterated the concept of caring for students on this level by stating, “I always think of relationships with students. I think how would I want my daughter to be taught? How would I want her to be behaving? How would I want her to be inspired? How would I want her to be cared about?” A1 spoke of the importance of making it clear that, “this is a safe place where somebody loves them and cares about them. They come in every day and I want them to know that they matter to me. I think they understand that.”

High Expectations

According to the data gathered in this study another prevalent theme that emerged was high expectations that teachers have for both themselves and their students. This theme presented itself in the self-efficacy teachers have for themselves to help students achieve and in the confidence they have that all their students can achieve great things. A3 stated this simply by saying high quality teachers, “expect much, give much.” A3 elaborated by saying, “I believe in them and I want them to believe in themselves.” C1 stated that, “I create a climate in my classroom that is constantly demanding more.” C1 also communicated that, “My students constantly surprise me every day. I love to see when one of my students learns a skill that they have been struggling to learn. I love that I have the ability to help my students achieve their best.” B2 stated that the most important characteristic of high quality teaching is, “high expectations, number one. I don't care where you teach you should have very high expectations. Even for students in bad circumstances because how else are they going to get out of the circumstances?”

Self-Reflection

The concept of self-reflection and continued improvement in the profession of teaching was a common theme throughout the data collected. The concept emerged 27 times during interviews with teacher and principal participants. P1 listed a, “growth mindset” as an integral component of a high quality teacher defining this as a, “teacher always willing to challenge themselves to get better.” P2 reiterated that a high quality teacher will, “continue to hone their craft and learn more about how to be more effective.” P4 indicated that, “phenomenal teachers” must be lifelong learners and in order to achieve this, “a teacher must be constantly researching best practices and bettering himself/herself in all expected areas of teaching whether it be an advanced degree, workshops, conferences, research, or professional development. Phenomenal teachers get recharged from their own learning.” A3 stated that because of the constant reflection and refinement of teaching, “This job has been a blessing. I've learned so much and I feel like that I keep growing more as a teacher every day.”

Content Knowledge

The importance of solid content knowledge to facilitate high quality teaching emerged 23 times during teacher and principal interviews. In addition, all 12 teachers observed demonstrated exceptional content knowledge during the observed lesson. One principal and six teachers listed it as a key component of high quality teaching. D3 spoke candidly of moving up in grade level this school year and the challenge the experience has brought to, “see and understand what the misconceptions are.” D3 stated that:

I think excellence in teaching high-quality means you know how to teach it on a deep enough level so that you can predict what those misconceptions will be and address them

ahead of time or when you hear a child that's misunderstanding you are able to recognize that and help move them through it more effectively.

P4 echoed this thought by stating, "A teacher must know and understand the grade-level standards being delivered and make certain the rigorous activities match the expected standard." A2 stated the importance of thoroughly knowing the standards for the grade being taught in addition to content for the, "prior grade and what the student needs to be successful in the following grade" as well as to know the content well enough to be able to, "explain it from multiple perspectives for different learning styles."

Team Player

The theme of being a team player who not only is focused on helping students in their classroom, but also focused on the greater good of the school emerged in the data 20 times, making it a significant theme. Many of the teachers selected by their principals for this study were identified as being teachers who contribute to the growth of the school community. P1 indicated it to be one of the most important components of a high quality teacher. P3 asserted the importance of teachers who are willing to serve the school community and to have a positive, "attitude towards new initiatives," B1 indicated a high quality teacher is a teacher who improves their team of teachers and is someone who others want to teach with. D1 indicated this trait extends into, "school wide and community involvement."

Work Ethic

The concept that high quality teachers are hardworking emerged in the data 11 times. This occurred four times when principals were explaining the reason for referring teachers for this research study. It occurred six times when teachers were explaining why they felt their principal chose them to refer for this research study. It also was included on the list of important

qualities of high quality teaching by P4. P3 stated that teachers must be, “driven to do whatever is necessary to help each individual achieve.”

Summary

This qualitative study used the phenomenological approach to gather data about the common characteristics of high quality teachers. The sample of participants was purposefully selected based on being identified as excellent high quality teachers by the principals of the teacher participants. Twelve teachers and four principals participated in the research study. The 12 teachers participated in a pre-observation interview, classroom observation, and a post interview. The four principals participated in an interview. The interviews were transcribed and coded using strategies to identify patterns. Observation logs of teacher observations were also coded using strategies to identify repetitive themes. The constant comparative method was used to sort the data into categories. These categories were further analyzed to answer the research questions and present emerging themes. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings presented in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of study findings, conclusions of the study results, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research for this qualitative phenomenological research study. This study employed processes of data collection commonly used in observational analysis and included the use of interviews found in qualitative design. Findings of observations and interviews are reported in Chapter 4. The coding process and constant comparative method were used to sort information into themes needed to give the data meaning. Chapter 1 presented the researcher's introduction of topic. Chapter 2 presented a review of literature related to the topic, and Chapter 3 presented the research methodology.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was identifying characteristics of excellent teaching using observations of highly effective teachers in the classroom environment. The study also included interviews with the high quality teachers and interviews with the principals of these high quality teachers. Unlike research studies that focused solely on participant interviews, this research focused on the triangulation of data from interviews of teacher participants, interviews of principal participants, and observations of teacher participants. Patton (2015) indicated the importance of gathering information from people who experience the phenomenon of interest directly in their environment. Creswell (2014) also argued the importance of understanding abstract phenomena by the gathering of data in the natural setting. Results from this study could

have lasting implications on the focus of teacher professional development, teacher evaluation, teacher hiring decisions, teacher education programs, and student learning outcomes.

Analysis of Findings

Research Question 1

What are the instructional strategies used by high quality teachers?

Whitaker (2013) posited that high quality teaching is more about what teachers do within the classroom and less about what teachers know. Whitaker (2013) argued that high quality teachers have a clear plan and purpose for what they do in the classroom and they keep student learning as a central focus. There is strong evidence to support this within the research findings.

A wide variety of instructional strategies were pervasive in the research findings. All 12 teacher participants discussed a variety of instructional strategies. All four principal participants also focused heavily on instructional strategies. The topic of instructional strategies was the most prevalent theme that emerged in the analysis of data from interviews.

This finding from interview data was supported in the wide variety of instructional strategies that were observed during classroom observations. All 12 teachers implemented multiple instructional strategies within the one lesson being observed for this research study.

Throughout the observations a wide variety of instructional strategies were present. The use of higher order questioning, rich literature, writing connections, technology, group work, partner work, differentiated strategies for diverse learners, learning stations, and attention grabbing strategies such as songs, games, poems, chants, and visual aides were prevalent throughout the classroom teaching observations. This was also indicated when teachers were asked to describe their instructional strategies in the interviews. Sivret (2014) supported this

when he indicated that high quality teachers implement a wide variety of approaches to teaching. Strong (2018) argued that high quality teachers put a great deal of effort into using student data to inform instruction that optimizes instructional time.

The importance of varied yet effective and engaging instructional strategies within the classroom was evident in the data collected. The researcher concluded that high quality teachers use a variety of strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners with diverse learning styles. The researcher also concluded that a wide variety of instructional strategies leads to sustained attention to the lesson and student engagement. The type of strategies used varied greatly from classroom to classroom, yet the concept of variance was constant. Marzano (2003) reasoned that the most effective teachers are well versed in varied instructional strategies that are balanced to meet the needs of all learners. The researcher concluded that a wide variety of strategies that are carefully chosen based on student needs, student learning styles, and student abilities are key to high quality teaching.

Of all the instructional strategies discussed higher order questioning was the most pervasive teaching strategy that was documented during classroom observations. This strategy was documented 49 separate times during the 12 classroom observations with each code representing a series of questions. Every time this strategy was implemented the result was a high level of discussion and student engagement. Bain and Zimmerman (2014) asserted that high quality teaching includes the development of critical thinking through meaningful connections that comes to fruition through the power of questioning. Strong (2018) also proposed that high quality teachers promote complex and higher order thinking using high quality questioning to engage students in learning.

Throughout classroom observations a high level of student engagement in learning activities was prevalent. Rollins (2017) reasoned that students actively working should be a much larger portion than a teacher presenting instructional material in a high quality classroom with a high level of student engagement. Zennawi, Beishuizen, and Os (2002) hypothesized that student engagement in learning is the measure of success in teaching because active participation rather than passive participation leads to student learning. The researcher observed this phenomenon in all 12 teacher observations and concluded that a variety of instructional strategies with a prevalence of higher order questioning leads to a deep level of student engagement.

Research Question 2

How do high quality teachers establish and maintain expectations for students?

All 12 teachers described the school rules, classroom rules, establishment of rules, routines, and classroom procedures in depth when asked specifically about classroom management. All 12 teachers had clear rules and routines that were posted within their classroom. Wong and Wong (2015) explained that high quality teachers are proactive in pre planning and focusing time and energy into classroom procedures and student expectations in the beginning of the school year in order to establish a positive classroom community. Evanshen and Faullk (2011) concluded that high quality teachers establish an organized classroom environment as a tool for student growth and that learners are taught to interact within the classroom. All 12 teachers had organized classrooms that allowed for independence for learners. The researcher observed learners using materials, resources, and spaces within all 12 classrooms in positive and respectful ways. All 12 teachers also discussed the introduction, modeling, and practicing of routines and procedures happening at the beginning of the year and revisited as

needed throughout the school year. Brooks (2012) posited that high quality teachers are proactive in the beginning through organization and structure of the environment and the procedures of the class which reduces disruptive behavior and leads to higher student productivity.

Classroom management strategies were observed during the 12 classroom observations 105 times. All 105 classroom management strategies were fluid and nondisruptive. These observations included firm and kind redirection of off task students, transition procedures, students performing classroom jobs, teacher attention signals, group or task rotation signals, and material distribution procedures. Limited disruptions of significance occur in well-managed classrooms (Sutton, 2014). No major classroom disruptions due to student behavior, mismanagement of materials, or ineffective transitions were observed during the 12 classroom observations. All 12 teachers observed in this study used these strategies seamlessly within the lesson without allowing them to distract from the focus of the lesson. All 12 teachers also facilitated transitions with limited instructional time lost. Wong and Wong (2015) reported this results in high quality teaching because time is a, “valuable commodity” in classroom environments.

The researcher concluded that clear classroom rules, routines, and procedures as well as organized classrooms that students used as a learning tool are key components of high quality teaching. All the teachers observed in this research study had high expectations for student behavior as well as active participation in student learning as evidenced by student engagement in learning and classroom behaviors.

Research Question 3

What strategies do high quality teachers use to communicate about achievement and behavior with parents and students?

All 12 teachers discussed the importance of communication with parents and students. All 12 gave detailed descriptions of the ways in which they communicate with parents and students about both achievement and behavior. Various means of communication included weekly newsletters, weekly folders home, phone calls, emails, handwritten notes, parent conferences, and communication apps. Communication strategies were also evidenced in classroom observations.

All 12 teachers indicated building relationships with families in order to help students be successful as a key reason for strong parent teacher communication. Marzano (2003) supported this by linking the communication between school and home to parental involvement in their child's education. Farrell and Collier (2010) concluded that parental involvement correlates directly to student learning.

The researcher concluded that strong communication skills linked schools and homes into partnerships that likely improved relationships and learning outcomes. High quality teachers demonstrated a mindfulness of the importance of communication with families regarding not only the sharing of needed information and communications about behavior, but also in the sharing of quality feedback regarding student learning outcomes.

Research Question 4

How does passion for teaching and subject matter impact teaching quality?

Teacher passion for both subject matter and for teaching was a prevalent theme in this study's research findings. All 12 teachers interviewed emphasized the importance of passion in high quality teaching. Teacher passion for both content and teaching were demonstrated throughout all 12 teaching observations. All 12 teachers exhibited a high level of energy throughout during lesson observations. Kelley et al. (2016) concluded that passion is the highest

indicator of high quality teaching. Palmer (2017) explained that passionate teaching is a key contributing factor to high quality teacher. Stronge (2018) argued that a high level of passion towards the commitment to impacting the world through education was prevalent in high quality teaching.

The researcher concluded that passion for both content and the profession of teaching was evident in the research data. The high level of energy observed in the classroom observations led the researcher to conclude that this is an important component that directly impacts student engagement and therefore is integral for high quality teaching.

Emergent Themes

The analysis of data after coding participant interviews and observations indicated an emergence of the following themes in addition to those directly related to the research questions: having a caring disposition, setting high expectations, being self-reflective, having content knowledge, being a team player, and having a strong work ethic.

Caring Disposition

Teachers who demonstrate genuine caring about students and work to build relationships built on positive interactions and trust emerged as a key theme of high quality teaching based on the data collected in this study. This theme was noted 40 times during principal and teacher interviews and was directly observed in interactions 10 times during the 12 teacher observations. Synrk (2012) confirmed the importance of nurturing teachers in enabling learners to take learning risks in the classroom. A strong rapport with students that stems from kind and positive teachers has been identified as a key component of high quality teaching (Sivret, 2014). Stegemann and Roberts (2016) identified warmth, treating students with respect, and supporting

students in reaching goals as part of the key characteristics that combine to form a high quality teacher.

The researcher concluded that teachers who demonstrated empathetic and caring behavior tended to foster safe classroom environments where students were willing to take learning risks. This was evidenced in the high level of discussions observed centered around students sharing mistakes in order to benefit the learning of the whole group. Teachers who built classroom environments centered on trust allowed learners to work hard to meet learning goals and have deep conversations about their learning without fear.

High Expectations

Another prevalent theme of this study was high expectations that teachers have for both themselves and their students. This theme presented itself in the self-efficacy teachers have for themselves to help students achieve and in the confidence they have that all their students can achieve great things. Rubie-Davies et al. (2001) discussed the importance of teacher self-efficacy to student success. Teachers who have strong beliefs in their capability and in the capability of learners have a positive impact on student success (Rubie-Davies et al., 2001). Sivret (2014) argued the importance of teachers in convincing students to believe that they are capable to learn and will learn. Stronge (2018) included high expectations as part of his framework for instructional delivery that is used by high quality teachers.

The researcher concluded that teachers who expected much of students generally received much from students. Students rose to high and rigorous expectations throughout the classroom observations in this research study.

Self-Reflection

The concept of self-reflection and continued improvement in the profession of teaching was a common theme throughout the data collected. The concept was noted 27 times during interviews with teacher and principal participants. Fairbanks et al. (2010) posited that teachers with a strong sense of self-awareness who practice intentional self-reflection are consistently asking themselves what kind of teachers they want to become which leads to growth towards becoming exceptional teachers. Student learning is impacted positively by teachers who take on the role of being a professional learner (Chen et al., 2012). The researcher concluded that self-reflection is an important component to all teacher and principal participants in the research study indicating it is a key factor in high quality teaching.

Content Knowledge

The importance of solid content knowledge to facilitate high quality teaching was identified 23 times during teacher and principal interviews. In addition, all 12 teachers observed demonstrated exceptional content knowledge during the observed lesson. One principal and six teachers listed content knowledge as a key component of high quality teaching. Schletchy (2011) asserted that teachers must prioritize their own knowledge as an educator in order to be successful. He concluded that high quality teachers are committed to intellectual growth and that rich content knowledge is a key element.

The researcher concluded that deep content knowledge allowed the teachers in this study to ask higher order questions and lead discussions that led to deep understanding. Strong (2018) posited that a deep understanding of subject matter is a prerequisite to high quality teaching. The researcher concluded that this is a foundational piece from which high quality teaching builds.

Team Player

The theme of being a team player, focused on helping students in their classroom, but also focused on the greater good of the school was noted in the data 20 times, making it a significant theme. Many of the teachers selected by their principals for this study were identified as being teachers who contribute to the growth of the school community. Stronge (2018) concluded that one of the four most important components of high quality teaching is a willingness to serve conscientiously by giving an exceptional amount of time and energy to the profession.

The researcher concluded that the highest level of high quality teaching is actualized when teachers who have developed into excellent teachers, aide in the development of high quality teaching in peers to better the school community and the educational system as a whole. The teachers who were identified by their principals as high quality teachers were all noted by their principals as being leaders within their schools that were willing to help all teachers and students find success within the school community.

Work Ethic

The concept that high quality teachers are hardworking was noted in the data 11 times. This occurred with all four principals as they were explaining the reason for referring teachers for this research study. It occurred six times when teachers were explaining their perception of why their principal chose them to refer for this research study. The work ethic involved in planning and organization in the profession of teaching is often not recognized by the outside community (Goldstein, 2015). The researcher concluded that the importance of a strong work ethic is an invaluable component of high quality teaching as evidenced by the long list of characteristics of successful teachers that the researcher identified in this research study.

Recommendations for Practice

After a review of the extant literature and an analysis of the data collected, the researcher makes the following recommendations for practice.

- Teachers should increase cognitive awareness of the common characteristics of high quality teaching so that self-reflection in relation to these qualities leads to refinement of high quality teaching. Korthagen (2004) asserted that this awareness and self-reflection could result in more educators developing these qualities within themselves to carry out high quality teaching in an exceptional way. Stronge et al. (2011) argued that improving teaching is the most fundamentally important component to school improvement.
- Leaders in education should examine these findings to determine what high quality teachers are doing in order to facilitate teacher professional development opportunities as well as pre service teacher education program development that is centered on the characteristics of high quality teaching. Stronge (2018) concluded that investigating the components of high quality teaching has an important implication on teacher development. Tomlinson (2015) advocated for a child-centered accountability system that must shift our focus to teacher development rather than over utilizing teacher measurement and evaluation.
- Administration should use the characteristics of high quality teaching identified in this research to make sound hiring decisions. Huang and Moon (2009) proposed a focus on identifying and retaining high quality teachers.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings and conclusions of this research have enabled the researcher to identify the following recommendations for future research.

- A quantitative study could be conducted to further investigate the relationship between high quality teachers and their impact on student achievement in relation to GPA and scores on state standardized tests.
- A qualitative study could be conducted to determine strategies for facilitating the development and growth of the identified characteristics of high quality teaching in order to improve teaching quality.
- A qualitative study could be conducted to further investigate the relationship between student engagement and higher order questioning as an instructional strategy.
- A qualitative study could be conducted to further investigate the cognitive decision making in instructional strategies.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological research study was guided by four research questions. Despite the limitations, after the review and ensuing analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes the researcher was able to gain insight into the phenomenon of characteristics of high quality teaching. Below the conclusions of the research findings are provided.

The researcher concluded that high quality teachers use a variety of strategies that are carefully chosen based on student needs, student learning styles, and student abilities to meet the needs of diverse learners. Higher order questioning was identified as a prevalent teaching strategy used in the classrooms of high quality teachers which resulted in a high level of

classroom discussion. A high level of student engagement was also prevalent in the classrooms of high quality teachers. Further, the researcher posited that clear classroom rules, routines, and procedures as well as organized classrooms that students used as a learning tool are integral pieces of the classrooms of high quality teachers. The researcher noted that high expectations for student behavior as well as active participation by students in their learning were paramount features of high quality classrooms. Strong communication skills using a wide variety of strategies meeting the needs of many diverse family needs are of great importance and include positive communications. These communication skills link schools and homes into partnerships that likely improved relationships and learning outcomes. The researcher found that high quality teachers demonstrated a mindfulness of the importance of communication regarding school information, student behavior, and student learning outcomes. Passion for both content and the profession of teaching was evident in high quality teaching and was found to be an important component that directly impacted student engagement.

In addition, other common characteristics emerged in the data leading the researcher to conclude that these characteristics are also important components of high quality teaching. The researcher explained that teachers who demonstrated empathy and caring behavior tended to foster safe classroom environments where students were willing to take learning risks. Teachers who expected much from students generally received much from students. Self-reflection and a willingness to grow and develop as a teacher were key components of high quality teaching. The researcher concluded that deep content knowledge is a foundational piece from which high quality teaching builds. High quality teaching is actualized when teachers assist the development of peers in order to better the school community and the educational system as a whole. Finally, the researcher conceived the importance of a strong work ethic as an invaluable component of

high quality teaching so that teachers can work to develop the many facets of high quality teaching within themselves.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: PRINCIPAL PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Principal Interview Questions:

1. What do you believe are the most important components of high quality teaching?
2. Why did you identify this teacher as a high quality teacher?

APPENDIX B: TEACHER PARTICIPANT PRE OBSERVATION INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant Pre Observation Interview Questions

Purpose: Establish the purpose of the study, gain permission, set observation date/time, set post interview date/time, and answer participant questions, in addition the pre interview will be brief and include the following questions:

1. Tell me about your education.
2. Tell me about your teaching experience.
3. What do you love about teaching?
4. What do you perceive to be your strengths as an educator?

APPENDIX C: TEACHER PARTICIPANT POST OBSERVATION INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant Post Observation Interview Questions

1. What do you believe the strengths of the lesson I observed were?
2. Is there anything you would do differently next time you teach this concept?
3. What are some of the instructional strategies you use in the classroom?
4. Tell me about your classroom routines and procedures.
5. How do you establish expectations in your classroom at the beginning of the school year?
6. How do you maintain those expectations throughout the year?
7. How do you communicate with parents?
8. What types of things do you communicate with parents?
9. What is the role passion for content plays in your teaching and planning?
10. What is the role passion for teaching plays in your approach to teaching?
11. What do you believe are the most important components of high quality teaching?
12. Why do you believe your administrator identified you as a high quality teacher?

APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES

Participant: _____ Observer: _____

Date/Time of Observation: _____

Subject: _____ Number of Students Present: _____

Classroom observation notes (open ended observation notes focusing on teacher behavior, actions, instructional strategies, passion, classroom management, interactions with students, etc.):

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