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FIRST PERSON

## What Makes a Great Teacher: Pedagogy or Personality?



—Getty

By Ariel Sacks

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"She's one of those people who just has a way with kids."

"I think it's his personality that makes students love his class."

You've probably heard comments like these, and I've said versions of them myself. Though they affirm the powerful and unique personalities that many teachers bring to their work, these comments also bug me. They diminish the role of pedagogy and all of the decision-making that informs teaching, and this reinforces a view of teaching as less than the professional work it is.

Of course, a teacher's passion, charisma, warmth, and humor influence the way students experience a class. But teachers aren't really "born" knowing how to connect and inspire children in a classroom setting. Instead, they must grow these capacities by continually developing pedagogical and social-emotional skills.

### The 'It' Factor in Teaching?

The idea that a great personality makes a great teacher is fantasy. Most of us have seen brand-new teachers or guest speakers who come in with what seems like the right energy: They're confident, caring, and creative. But without relevant teaching skills, most aren't effective with students.

The summer before my first year of teaching, I observed a 7th grade summer school classroom in East Harlem. The teacher there taught kindergarten during the year, but she had been assigned to middle school students for the summer. She was from the neighborhood and Puerto Rican, like many of the students in the room. On the first day, she excited them, describing how she was learning to ride a motorcycle and what she loved about it. Then she asked them each to share something they loved doing. Students liked her immediately, and there was a hopeful feeling in the room that this would be a great summer school experience.

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Beyond the first day, however, the teacher began assigning academic work that came from packets the school provided to her. The work was pretty dull, and students started to push back in the ways adolescents are known to when they are bored or having difficulty. The teacher's kindergarten experience wasn't really translating to middle school, and she struggled to address their frustration. Though she had a personality that students were initially drawn to, she didn't have the tools to facilitate their learning in this context. Without relevant curriculum and pedagogy, what we might think of as "personality" will quickly fall short in the classroom.

Likewise, when a teacher is successful, we can't just attribute it to personality. Teaching methods are critical to educational outcomes for students, and not all methods or curricula are equally effective. Even in the above example, what the teacher did well on the first day wasn't simply about her personality. She made some sound pedagogical decisions: to spend time building connections with her students, giving them a structured way to speak about themselves, and listening to them with interest.

So, personality isn't important in teaching at all ... case closed? Not really. Personality *is* important, but the traits that matter most aren't fixed.

A teacher can be soft-spoken, not someone we'd describe as extroverted or funny, but still create an excellent learning environment. What really matters is the ability to demonstrate compassion and emotional constancy, the cultural competency needed to develop trust and understanding with students, and the courage to, as Brené Brown writes, **take risks and be vulnerable**.

These "soft" skills make a strong teaching persona that can support the delivery of a sound method. And when teachers with compelling personalities are successful, let's not forget that they've got some real skills driving those outcomes.

#### Self-Awareness Is Key

In trying to puzzle out the role of personality in teaching, I found the research of Vanessa Rodriguez, **author of *The Teaching Brain: An Evolutionary Trait at the Heart of Education***, illuminating.

A former New York City teacher herself, Rodriguez's Teaching Brain Theory is based on the idea that **teaching is a developmental process**, just like learning is. But teaching is unique because it's dependent on interaction: You can learn on your own, but you need a learner in order to teach. Rodriguez believes that awareness of all that goes into those interactions is at the center of successful teaching.

Rodriguez and her team include **five distinct "awarenesses"** in their framework: Awareness of the self as a teacher, awareness of the teaching process, awareness of the learner, awareness of interaction, and awareness of context. Each is a continuum, and teachers develop them at varying rates.

This way of thinking about teaching makes a lot of sense to me. Great teaching requires an awareness of *all* of the factors at play in a particular moment, to take advantage of opportunities and anticipate and address challenges.

What jumps out at me most, though, is that awareness of self is as important in the framework as the awareness of learner or the awareness of teaching process. Generally in teacher preparation and professional development, the focus is on teaching practices and how we can understand our students as learners. But we are rarely called to **look at our own identities**.

Perhaps the element of personality that most contributes to excellent teaching—as essential as our pedagogy, knowledge of our students, and of course, knowledge and passion for our subjects—really boils down to our ability to develop a strong sense of ourselves in our teaching role. The vibrancy we notice in an excellent teacher may really be a combination of skilled pedagogy, a highly developed awareness of the teacher's presence, emotions, and needs, and the conscientiousness to attend to them as well as we all want to do for our students.

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*Ariel Sacks (@arielsacks) is a middle school language arts teacher and curriculum coach. She is the author of **Whole Novels for the Whole Class: A Student-Centered Approach**.*

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