

## Gaining Insight into Teaching: The Lived Experiences of Teachers of the Year

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**Abstract:** What qualities describe outstanding teachers? Many stakeholders in education argue that student achievement indicates teacher quality. Ten Teachers of the Year participated in this qualitative study, showing their lives as outstanding teachers personify four roles and two phenomena. Findings indicate the need to investigate the moral dimension of teaching.

In 2005, Fenstermacher and Richardson asked if “there is any sure way to tease out the characteristics and properties of quality teaching” (p. 186), and the question persists. Given the current educational climate of teacher accountability and performance-based measures, the value-added model to measure the effectiveness of teachers has established itself as the gold standard in measuring teacher performance. It is accepted that the teacher is the most important factor to impact student performance (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004), but the debate over the qualities, skills, and knowledge that characterize and identify good teachers continues (Berry, 2010; Harris & Sass, 2008). Goldhaber and Anthony (2007) explained that education research has failed to reach a consensus over which, if any, readily identifiable teacher characteristics are associated with students’ learning gains.

The common denominator among studies measuring teacher quality (McGee, 2006) is that “effectiveness is a vague concept when considering the complex task of teaching” (p. 30). The focus on linking effective teaching to student scores on standardized tests assumes that effective teaching arises solely from and because of the actions of the teacher. As such, the basis of current educational policy rests upon a causal connection between teacher quality and student learning as measured by students’ test scores. This policy, derived from the “Teaching as Transmission—Process-Product Research” (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005, p. 198) model, defines teacher effectiveness as the use of certain empirically-supported, successful instructional behaviors to transmit knowledge and skills to students. Students’ achievement signals the effective teachers, and in turn, the instructional methods of these teachers are touted as best practices. However, Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) contend that teaching practices, in and of themselves, do not facilitate effective, quality teaching; rather, quality teaching results from a combination of learner engagement, a nurturing learning environment, sufficient learning opportunities, and intentional practices on the part of the teacher.

Furthermore, Polanyi (1962) and Schön (1987) explored the existence of an informal educational practice, whereby the intuition and feelings of the teacher unconsciously influence his or her way of being in the classroom. Palmer (1997) asserted that effective teachers know themselves, their students, and their subjects on a deeper level; the act of teaching materializes from one’s inwardness. Similarly, van Manen (1991) introduced the related construct of “pedagogical tact” (p. 122); where the effective teacher seems to tap into an undefined, internal source of understanding, facilitating spontaneous, appropriate responses or actions to actual situations.

Fundamental Western philosophical thought offers two distinct attitudes that direct meaning for the term “teacher”: (a) the teacher facilitates critical thinking and understanding through a mutually educative and caring relationship between himself and his pupil, and (b) the

teacher delivers a set of prescribed mindsets to his student through directed methodologies (McEwan, 2011). The first speaks of a teacher who fosters a relationship with the students and works in collaborative “life situations in which the meaning of facts, ideas, principles, and problems is vitally brought home” (Dewey as cited in McEwan, 2011, p. 134). This definition embodies a moral obligation and a realization that schooling “serves more expansive ends than scores of academic achievement” (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011, p. 570). Noddings (1991) asserted that nurturing the child’s moral fiber is the primary responsibility of teachers. Burant, Chubbuck and Whipp (2007) discussed the teacher’s practice in terms of ideas and feelings that reflect a “moral sensibility” (p. 405), which connects the selfhood of the teacher with his or her behaviors in the classroom.

The other philosophy describes the teacher engaged in formalized and generalized instructional methods. In this view, the teacher is responsible for the delivery of information via the deployment of an artificial or constructed system; teaching is only the act of “the application of approved techniques and practices” (McEwan, 2011, p. 128). This position asserts that education is for a specific product, rather than to value knowledge and reasoning abilities in and of themselves (Smith, 1996, 2000). This philosophy follows the scientific management and social efficiency theory models that emerged in correlation with the Industrial Revolution in the United States (Bobbitt, 2009).

In the midst of this ongoing struggle to define teacher quality, little research asks those individuals recognized as outstanding teachers about their own teaching experiences in relationship to good teaching. To date, few studies focus on self-defining the phenomenon of what it means to be an effective teacher. Although the literature reviewed included studies of Teachers of the Year (ToYs), these studies failed to illuminate the inner nature of being a ToY (Agne, 1999; Fenderson, 2011; Jensen & Templeton, 1993; McGill, 1999; McNeely, 2004; Puglisi, 1986; Rushton, Knopp, & Smith, 2006; Shanoski & Hranitz, 1992; Skretta, 2009; Van Schaack & Glick, 1982; Verner, 1999; Wallace, 2008). Lacking in these research efforts is the exploration of the ToY’s possible intangible dimensions, such as those represented by van Manen’s concept of tacit knowledge (1991) or Palmer’s concept of inner selfhood (1997, 1998).

Given the gaps in the literature, the researcher used a phenomenological platform for the study. Research conducted under the philosophical theoretic framework of phenomenology describes an experience and reflects on that description to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (van Manen, 1991, p. 41); in other words, to come to know something and know that we know it. Phenomenology, as a philosophical framework of inquiry, is an appropriate foundation for the study of human behavior because it allows the researcher and the subjects of the study “to understand the meaning that people have constructed about their...experiences” (Merriam, 2002, pp. 4-5); in the human science model (Polkinghorne, 1983), knowledge results from new understanding about human phenomena. The phenomenological research questions were: (a) How is teaching experienced by recognized as outstanding Teachers of the Year (ToYs)? and (b) How do the feelings and perceptions of ToYs about being good teachers provide insight, if any, about the relevance to teaching of concepts such as pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991), teacher selfhood (Palmer, 1998) and professional dispositions (Burden & Byrd, 2012)? The phenomenological framework supports the new understandings that surface from the descriptions of lived experiences, bringing a depth and breadth to our knowledge base; they deepen and enrich our perceptions, resulting in more valuable understandings than any formerly held about the world of everyday life.

## Method

The researcher employed the phenomenological method to conduct this study because it offers the researcher and the participants the opportunity to be in the world and of the world simultaneously; derived meanings are subjective because they do not exist outside of one's consciousness (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011). The phenomenological method is intentional in this sense; it is necessary for the researcher and the participants to recognize on a conscious level the relationship that they have to the object under study. This method necessitates bracketing out personal intentionalities – one's customary, taken-for-granted understandings or natural attitude. Emerging from this reductive process is the essence of a phenomenon. Studies conducted using phenomenology do not seek to confirm or negate a preconceived hypothesis, but rather gather, analyze, and synthesize interview data to construct themes inductively and to identify possible issues or factors that may offer an enlightened understanding of effective teachers in their lived experience. In this investigation, the goal was to understand the essential structures of the ToYs within their lived experience as recognized as outstanding teachers.

### Sample

This investigation employed criterion purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), requiring the participants to hold ToY status. Purposeful sampling generated a wide variety of participants (Figure 1), providing diversity in gender, years teaching, grade levels, subject matter expertise, educational background, etc., and in turn, afforded information-rich stories from the ToYs (Patton, 2002). The School Broward of County Florida furnished a list of the past 24 years of finalists and winners of their Teacher of the Year Award (BCTOY) who were still classroom teachers for the district. The researcher contacted and invited the ToYs to participate in the study via email. Using pseudonyms, 10 ToYs (Figure 1), participated in 60-90 minute, in person, audiotaped, semi-structured interviews.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews of the participants. The phenomenological investigation customarily employs this method of inquiry because this research approach originates from the internal perspective of the participant and not from an external point of view (Moustakas, 1994). Although the researcher had a drafted list of possible interview questions, the participant's responses determined probing or follow-up questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Personal essays written as part of the ToY application process provided supplementary data (Jensen & Templeton, 1993; Van Schaack & Glick, 1982; Verner, 1999; Wallace, 2008). It is typical for ToY applicants to respond to a variety of essay prompts that may reflect their philosophical and pragmatic dispositions of teaching as a lived experience (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2011). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that such material could provide "rich descriptions of how the people who produced the materials think about their world" (p. 133).

The researcher maintained a journal during the data collection and analysis process, and interviews were transcribed manually and member-checked; the researcher and an independent peer in qualitative research individually coded the transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The coding process facilitates the identification of themes that describe and define the lived experience of the participants.

Coding is a systematic classification procedure to organize the data collected. The analysis of the coded transcripts followed a manual implementation of the Moustakas (1994) modified version of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. This process

requires the researcher to identify (mark), categorize, classify, and label the primary patterns or themes in the data (Patton, 2002). Analysis proceeds in four steps that drill down from one level to another, each time uncovering another layer of meaning, until the researcher can synthesize the textural and structural description of the data to produce a rich and comprehensive picture of the essence of the phenomenon. A peer's independent coding verified the researcher's identification and analysis of themes. Furthermore, the researcher's journal provided opportunities for reflectivity and an audit trail of information collected.

### Results

In response to the primary research question – How is teaching experienced by recognized as outstanding Teachers of the Year? – the data analysis generated four categories or roles: (a) Lovers, (b) Doers, (c) Shakers, and (d) Believers. The participants live these four roles concurrently. They do not separate their practice of teaching from the rest of their lives; for each ToY in this investigation, teaching is his or her life, his or her way of being in the world: “I mean this is my life, the classroom and everything; this is what I do” (Diane).

As Lovers, the ToYs love children, love teaching, love learning, and love their subject matter. Participants' remarks exemplify the role of Lover: “If you don't love children, find another job” (Juliette); “I fell in love with teaching” (Christopher). Sylvia said, “I love talking about this stuff. I can talk about this all day.” Each in his or her own way, the ToYs exude passion as they talk about themselves as a teacher. The researcher's journal included comments such as, “Rosa sounds like her heart is doing the talking”; and “José is beaming; his smile is glowing.”

In their role as Doers, the ToYs explained that they accept responsibilities, set goals, and employ methods. Taina spoke holistically as a Doer: “Because there's so much to get done... and you have to find the time.” James talked about his responsibility to ensure student comprehension: “How I can help the students step up, in terms of their understanding of the curriculum ...I've done a lot of work toward the Internet to make sure that they have all the extra resources.” Diane discussed her main goal as “just to make them [her students] excited about learning and to push them to do as much as they can.”

The ToYs are Shakers because they described themselves as managing change, and managing authority and autonomy. Marie describes balancing administrative authority over her with her own autonomy: “I don't presume to tell any administrator what should or shouldn't happen...I'm careful about it; I ask, ‘How about if we try to do this?’” As a change-agent, Rosa recalled how she “started AP here with foreign language a long time ago,” and that “I [she] decided, you know, just have Spanish V after IV, because...they [her students] wanted to go on to V, as an honors class.” After 21 years teaching music, Juliette's administrator assigned her half-time to music and half-time to PE. She admitted that she didn't like it, but she managed to find common benchmarks in both content areas, and “I [she] tried to use Musical PE and Physical Music all year long.”

Lastly, the ToYs demonstrate an infinite capacity for hope – hope in their students, in themselves, and in the world. The cavernous scope and depth of their positive belief system echoes each time the ToY believes in a better tomorrow as he or she coaches, nurtures, or presents an optimistic attitude. “Well, I kind of look at myself as the coach...cheer them on, give them skills and things they can utilize” (Tom). As a nurturer, José called his students “my kids,” and his classes “a family.” He repeated the idea that he “prepare[s] them for life.” From Sylvia's ToY essay, her optimism is clear: “My role is to be a catalyst for their growth...to teach them form and a way of being in the world.”

In response to the secondary research question – How do feelings and perceptions of Teachers of the Year (ToYs) about being good teachers provide insight, if any, about the relevance to teaching of concepts such as pedagogical tact, teacher selfhood, and professional dispositions? – the data analysis designated two phenomena: (a) Moments of Knowingness and (b) Inexplicable Power.

Both phenomena are metaphoric expressions to describe those moments when the ToYs know that good teaching is happening in their classrooms. Taina talked about “want[ing] to see children’s eyes light up” and Christopher compared the phenomenon of knowingness to being “like God said, ‘touch you.’”

The metaphor Inexplicable Power relates to a strength or gift of force that the ToYs possess. The ToYs did not acquire or learn this power or control consciously; the ToYs only became aware of having experienced this phenomenon in the aftermath of their effecting a positive outcome in their respective classroom. Diane narrated the concept thusly: “You can turn something that’s ordinary into something extraordinary, just put a twist to it, a little effort, something different.” Sylvia asked the researcher if “being alive in the field of teaching [is] teachable.” In Tom’s discussion about comparing himself to water, he explained: “Water is harmless, but it’s flexible, persistent. It can move mountains.” Christopher may have said it best when he thanked me by expressing that he found renewal as a teacher from the interview experience; he remarked how “even this interview...it energizes you again.”

The findings reveal an intricate combination of factors among the ToYs, indicating that teaching is their lifeblood, the organic fuel that sustains life in them. José declared, “It’s how I am...I feel energy,” and Sylvia exclaimed, “I am alive in the field of teaching!” The four roles and two phenomena of the ToYs that surfaced from their stories suggest defined core attitudes (dispositions) and an unconscious, internal wellspring. The data analysis uncovers that the ToYs have an “an active sensitivity...an insight while relying on feelings” (van Manen, 1991, p. 144), and “if you go deep...you find the hidden wholeness” (Palmer, 1997, para. 71); the ToYs exhibit “values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence teacher behavior” (Burden & Byrd, 2012, p. 4). Thus, the lived experience of the ToYs suggests that they embody intangible aspects reflective of van Manen’s (1991) pedagogical tact, Palmer’s (1997) inner selfhood and spirituality, and Burden and Bryd’s (2012) professional dispositions.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate good teaching happens when the ToYs get through to their students using effective and moral means. The ToYs did not mention students’ test scores as part of their lived experience as a quality teacher.

The essence of the roles and phenomena revealed that the ToYs are effective in getting through to students by being emotionally open; they exhibit deep capacity to feel and trust their feelings; to teach from the heart; to teach *who* he or she is; to teach honestly and openly. Participants are effective in getting through to students by having a sense of the sacred in their knowing, in their teaching, and in their learning. The sense of the sacred is the inner selfhood of the teachers, connecting so strongly and intimately with their subject, their students, and their learning that they can know “the inwardness of the things of the world” (Parker, 1997, para. 45). Furthermore, the ToYs are effective in getting through to their students because they operate from a sense of intentionality: Intentionality means doing things for a reason, or on purpose. Intentional teachers are those who are constantly thinking about the outcomes that they want for their students (Psychology Campus, 2004-2008, para. 5).

The essence of ToYs is the manifestation of their fundamental moral fibers, representing the teacher's value system (*character*), the teacher's ability to understand and apply ethical behaviors (*intellect*), and the teacher's capacity to demonstrate concern and compassion for others (*caring*). These moral fibers surface as dispositions that are identifiable by the teacher's conduct (Sockett, 2006).

### **Implications**

In exploring the phenomenology of the quality teacher based on the lived experiences of teachers of the year (ToYs), this study speaks directly to the need for educator preparation programs to consider, foster, and measure the dispositions necessary for teacher candidates to address the needs of all students. In moving forward with ever-increasing standards and measurable systems of accountability, it is difficult to envision how the emotional or affective nature of good teaching can thrive. In losing sight of values and beliefs that directly inform how human beings feel, then the practice of teaching is in trouble. If the inner selfhood of perspective teachers is not considered, then teacher educators and administrators may be training, recruiting, and hiring individuals without heart and soul. If pre-service and new teachers lack the nurturing and mentoring to develop heightened sensibilities and to trust their inner selfhood, then teacher education programs and schools forfeit the opportunity to grow good teachers. If a teaching soul can be educated, then teacher education programs should embrace a curriculum that assists pre-service teachers to understand themselves and to become aware of their inner selfhood.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the stories of the lived experiences of 10 ToYs are an insufficient basis on which to build a platform for teacher education. However, the study paves the way for subsequent phenomenological explorations of the lived experience of teachers, such as those teachers whose students' test scores show marked improvement from one year to the next, or those teachers having completed different pathways to certification. Teacher preparation programs should test and research curriculum and interventions that are specifically designed to develop heart and soul in pre-service teachers.

The current focus on identifying effective teachers does not include the moral dimension of teaching. Why is that the case? The idea of effectiveness linked to purpose receives credence from research on worker effectiveness in other professional arenas. Harris and Rutledge (2010), in their research on worker effectiveness, conclude that the choice of the effectiveness measure defines the educational outcomes that are important and establishes the purpose of the work. These authors maintain that the underlying purpose, or in their words, "theory of ethics," lies within the realm of philosophy and defines what the work is supposed to accomplish, and the theory of behavior (or theory of action) is rooted in the social and psychological sciences and establishes how people achieve the objectives established by the theory of ethics. In this sense, an interconnection of the two theories exists, and one cannot have a model of effectiveness without the confluence of both theories. It seems logical then that the moral dimension of teaching would be a significant aspect to consider when identifying effective teachers.

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Figure 1  
*Profiles of the Participants*

Name	Ethnicity and Gender	Highest Degree Earned	National Board Certified	ToY Finalist or Winner	Grade Level or Subject Taught	Years Teaching
Marie	White Female	MS	Yes	Winner	Grades 9-12 English/Language Arts	40
Christopher	White Male	MS	No	Winner	Grades 9-12 Biology and Chemistry	32
James	White Male	MS	Yes	Finalist	Grades 9-12 Mathematics	29
Diane	African American Female	BS	No	Finalist	Grades Pre K-5 Kindergarten	28
Rosa	Hispanic Female	MS	Yes	Finalist	Grades 9-12 Spanish and French	27
Taina	Hispanic Female	Ed S	Yes	Winner	Grades 6-8 ESE, ESOL, and Reading	22
Juliette	White Female	MA	Yes	Finalist	Grades K-5 General Music	21
José	Hispanic Male	AA	N/A	Finalist	Grades 9-12 JROTC	15
Tom	Asian American Male	MS	No	Finalist	Grades 9-12 Social Sciences	9
Sylvia	White Female	MA	No	Finalist	Grades 9-12 Drama	6

## APPENDIX A: CODING CATEGORIES USED IN THIS STUDY

### Research Question One

Four major themes emerged from the data in relation to research question one. A color marked each major theme. Sub-themes surfaced within each major theme. Abbreviations marked the identified sub-themes.

<u>Color Code</u>		<u>Abbreviation Code</u>
<b>ToYs as Lovers</b>	(yellow)	
	Lovers of Children	LC
	Lovers of Teaching	LT
	Lovers of Learning	LL
	Lovers of Subject Matter	LSM
<b>ToYs as Doers</b>	(green)	
	Doers accept Responsibilities	DR
	Doers set Goals	DG
	Doers employ Methods, Procedures and Processes	DMPP
<b>ToYs as Shakers</b>	(pink)	
	Shakers manage Change	SC
	Shakers manage Authority and Autonomy	SAA
<b>ToYs as Believers</b>	(blue)	
	Believers as Coaches	BC
	Believers as Nurturers	BN
	Believers as Optimists	BO

### Research Question Two

Two major themes emerged from the data in relation to research question two. A number marked each major theme.

1. Moments of Knowingness (1)
2. Inexplicable Power (2)