Tampa Bay Times

Column: Great teachers born, and also trained

By Brian Dassler and David R. Colburn, special to the Times

Monday, August 19, 2013 1:27pm

One of today's persistent myths about education is that great teaching is innate. In other words, you either have it or you don't. Even some highly talented teachers will tell you that their effectiveness in the classroom resulted from some elusive and unidentifiable set of personal characteristics.

Some teachers do have an advantage over others in the classroom because of their outgoing personality, enthusiasm about life and positive demeanor.

The conclusion, however, that only these people constitute the best teachers is deeply flawed as well as damaging to the profession. It implies that struggling teachers lack some innate talent that they will never be able to attain, no matter how hard they work.

The accumulated evidence, however, suggests that skillful teaching is, in fact, observable, measurable and attainable.

Let's take one specific and very important teaching skill — asking questions. There is nothing innate about knowing how to ask questions in order to elicit student thinking and engagement, but there are few things that take place between teachers and students that are more important.

A skilled teacher learns to pose questions that all students are capable of answering. After asking a question and giving students the time to process it fully, the well-trained teacher does not call on the student who raised the first hand. Nor does the teacher necessarily seek an oral response.

After waiting until more students raise their hands, this teacher might ask the students to turn to their neighbor and discuss their responses with one another. Or the teacher may ask the students to write their answer to the question, after which the teacher might visit the desks of some struggling students to determine if they need additional support or encouragement.

As this single skill illustrates, the work of an effective teacher is nuanced and can often be complex. It takes practice, observation and conversation with one's colleagues and mentor to refine these skills. Very few of us, in other words, will get good on our own.

Earlier this year, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation released a final report from the Measuring Effective Teaching project, which sought to identify the particular skills and talents that are essential to great teaching. The project was a multiyear effort involving 3,000 teachers in seven school districts across the country, including Hillsborough County.

The study confirmed two important points. The first concluded that effective teaching can be measured. "The (MET) data show that we can identify groups of teachers who are more effective in helping students learn."

The second point emphasized that "teaching is too complex for any single measure of performance to capture it accurately. ... The challenge is to combine measures in ways that support effective teaching while avoiding such unintended consequences as too-narrow a focus on one aspect of effective teaching."

Bill Gates elaborated on this point in a *Washington Post* op-ed in April, cautioning states against rushing to use only one measurement in teacher evaluations. He also criticized the promotion of competitive environments for teachers rather than collaborative ones.

The Gates Foundation study embraced student feedback in assessing effective teaching, observing: "We found that a well-designed student perception survey can provide reliable feedback." Questions such as "My teacher knows when the class understands," and "In this class, we learn to correct our mistakes" are highly correlated with positive student achievement outcomes.

This summer Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, commented, "If someone can't teach, after they've been prepared and supported, they shouldn't be in our profession."

While we agree in principle with her statement, we believe that the preparation and support of teachers is critical to their success. Without that preparation and support, even the gifted teacher will struggle and most likely fail.

So as the nation begins another school year, we call on district and school administrators to make greater investments in skilled teaching. And we urge teachers to embrace these efforts and the multiple methods to evaluate them, including student perception surveys. Working together in this fashion will advance the quality of education in our schools and enrich the academic environment for students — of that we are certain.

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