



Piecing Together the Personality Puzzle

The chicken-and-egg dilemma has its parallel in education. It is the question of whether good teachers are born or if they may be made. There are countless examples of naturally intuitive teachers who were almost legends when they first walked into the classroom—seemingly able to inspire and instruct, but in the same breath—no true greatness is possible unless one is willing to learn, to improve. Are legends in teaching born or made? Our conclusion is that such a question is probably moot. More important, we believe it's better for everyone involved if we were to assume that greatness could be cultivated. This book is predicated on the belief that there are traits, even personality traits, that anyone can improve upon to enhance his or her effectiveness as a teacher—his or her efforts to become a classroom legend.

A Collective Scenario: The Legend Defined

Act I: Reality Rears Its Ugly Head

The classroom clock must be broken. Its hands refuse to move. Beads of sweat form on the young teacher's increasingly furrowed brow. Shortness of breath attends the questions, "What am I doing here!? What

made me think I ever wanted to be a teacher?" As he looks at the pile of papers he will have to tackle at home this evening, after he's attended the open house, after he's helped his wife with the dishes, after he's wrestled though his own children's homework, he begins to understand why his all-knowing parents responded with a quizzical "teacher?" when he announced the career path he had chosen for himself.

Just about the time a midday career change becomes a real possibility, the bell rings, sending all the children, but especially the two most aggravating fourth graders in the world, to lunch, thus avoiding what could only be a mutually destructive confrontation wherein he would seriously advocate some gene pool skimming. These are devil spawn the kind Will Rogers never met. They would have driven Mother Theresa beyond her vows. But with the bell, they're gone, and now, at least, he has lunch—a 30-minute "duty-free" time, his only respite from the inexorable conflict of wills others call teaching.

Act II: The Shock Heard "Round the World"

As he enters the cafeteria, overwhelmed by a sea of children either screaming at one another or pushing one another or giggling at one another (and for the overachievers—all three simultaneously), the weariness of the classroom is transformed into general despair. Despite the deafening noise, he accelerates his pace so he can get quickly through the cafeteria line, gulp down his Tylenol-laced lunch in the teachers' lunchroom and still have a moment's peace before the bells beckons him to the next level of hell.

As he battles his way into the lunch line, he is taken aback by the sight of the two renegades from his last class standing patiently in line, engaging in polite conversation with another fourth-grade teacher—and no—she's not armed—yet still the two balls of nonstop motion and brashness are standing quietly talking. Amazingly, their hands hang innocently at their sides. Their lips rest quietly unfurled from their perpetual snide whorl.

He pauses to take in this image with all its theological implications and is aware that his feelings fluctuate from

wonder—"How does she do that?"

to awe—"Look, they're actually listening!"

to anger—"He said 'Please'—that little son of a gun said 'Please.'"

and finally to suspicion—"Who is that lady and how does she do that?"

Act III: Epiphany—of Sorts

As the conversation continues, despite his resentment, our teacher can't help but be aware of the positive interaction that is occurring, and unwillingly (and perhaps even unconsciously) he begins to wonder how any teacher could ever have a constructive relationship with those two yahoos. Turning away from the dialogue, he enters the lunch line, gets his food, and heads toward the faculty lounge with a pair of queries riddling his mind:

1. What kind of meat is this really?
2. What special powers does that teacher have that makes her able to tame feral fourth-grade beasts?

The answer is probably not a better pedagogy.

The answer is probably not a more interesting curriculum.

The answer is probably not more and more modern technology.

And the answer is not that the teacher with whom they were so politely interacting is a pushover who lets children run rampant. He knows her to be a demanding teacher with high standards. Instead, the answer (and this is not necessarily a terrible thing for him to come to grips with) is that the teacher for whom he was filled with wonder has a very different personality from his own.

Personality is generally defined as the set of an individual's distinguishing character traits, attitudes, and habits. Personality, simply put, is the single most significant feature that distinguishes one individual from another, or, in the setting of a school, one teacher from another. There are certainly as many types of personalities as there are teachers in any given school, and just as obviously there is no single, specific type of personality, no single personality trait that may be deemed preferable in all situations, for all students, all the time.

One may be tempted to assume we're describing a charismatic, outgoing, attractive young teacher, but the fact of the matter is that legends are rarely all of those and may be none of those. The legend may be retiring, may be soft-spoken, may be popular among his or her peers, or may work as a loner. The legend may be a veteran of extracurricular activities or a first-year teacher whose contact with students is limited to the classroom. It may be that the legend is a home-grown alumnus or someone new to America, still finding his or her own path of assimilation. The legend may share ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic with the students, or the legend may appear to have

very little in common with the students. The legend may be a product of the local community college and nearest state university or come from hallowed ivy halls. Regardless, every school seems to have at least one, often more—the instructors who somehow have the personality that builds relationships and trust, those most able to make a difference in the lives of children daily.

For our discussion we have chosen to break down this larger, perplexing concept of personality into four areas of discussion:

1. A necessary disclaimer
2. Desirable character traits
3. Strong attitudes
4. Developing good habits

A Necessary Disclaimer

Admittedly, this is not a very impressive way to start a book on education, but as we coaxed this chapter from our brains onto the page, the previous scenario troubled us because the first few drafts sounded as though they promised a panacea to education:

Clarification 1: We don't believe in panaceas to any complex problems.

Clarification 2: We do believe in education.

What especially bothered us as we considered personality was the adage that opposites attract. If that's true, and there are a bazillion personality types (which is, incidentally, about as close to a mathematical analysis as we get in this work), then the sad truth is that no one teacher's personality could ever appeal to every type of student. Follow this logic:

- It must be assumed that each student brings to class a very different personality of his or her own and a very distinct set of needs.
- It also must be assumed that every teacher can fill those needs to some degree.
- It is, however, impossible for any single teacher to present a personality that will be attractive at all times to all students.

While admitting that no individual teacher can have a personality that is attractive to all students all the time, one must recognize that every teacher can make certain that his or her personality avoids any traits that would preclude learning for any students. Although it's safe to assume that no teacher may be embraced by every student as the "Next Coming," we may hope that no teacher is feared as the "Principality of Darkness" either.

Acknowledging that, there is an important administrative directive implicit here. The school as a whole is best served when administration seeks to bring in a wide range of personalities and not a single type. Certain personalities do not serve certain types of students, and if an administration goes out of its way to hire one type of personality, then it may be assumed that one sector of the student population will not be well served. The faculty, like any individual, is far healthier when it is well rounded.

This is why, then, we chose to open our discussion of legendary personalities with an examination of personality. It is our contention that the teacher's personality is the single most significant trait in promoting educational success, in motivating students. The teacher, we think, is far more important to the education of his or students than any prescribed pedagogy, technology, curriculum, facilities, or textbooks. We believe teachers matter most.

How does one's personality become the key to opening the door of motivating students, of touching lives? We return to the belief that it is in the best interest of education to operate under the assumption that legendary teachers may be developed, that it is possible for every teacher to nurture personality traits that will help him or her establish an environment more conducive to the learning of all his or her students. This, then, is our next task—an examination of the various aspects of a teacher's personality that are most conducive to student success.

Desirable Character Traits

Almost every adult in America can identify a favorite teacher who had a tremendously positive effect on his or her life. We may not have a favorite plumber, a favorite lawyer, or even a favorite proctologist, but most of us have a favorite teacher. Each of us can look back to that one teacher who, more than anyone else, motivated us, cared for us, taught us, and helped us grow. If we were lucky, we had two or three favorite teachers—legends in our minds.

When asked to identify a word or phrase that best describes their favorite teacher, most adults' lists include the following:

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| ✓ informed | ✓ exciting |
| ✓ creative | ✓ positive |
| ✓ compassionate | ✓ challenging |
| ✓ understanding | ✓ dedicated |
| ✓ interesting | ✓ encouraging |
| ✓ patient | ✓ funny |
| ✓ honest | ✓ fair |
| ✓ even tempered | ✓ friendly |
| ✓ happy | ✓ nonthreatening |
| ✓ inspired | ✓ caring |
| ✓ original | ✓ organized |
| ✓ intense | ✓ respectful |

We all know that the teacher who can exhibit even half of these traits any time after the middle of September can walk on water—but for the rest of us, the list of descriptors can be broken down into four major areas of concern students really have about those who supervise their education:

Concern 1

Surveys appear to suggest that students are attracted to classrooms where the instruction is informed, yet entertaining (e.g., “creative,” “funny,” “friendly,” “interesting,” “happy,” and “original”).

Students are not always looking for the easy way out. (That’s a concept they don’t master until somewhere in the middle of their junior year in college—remember?) By and large, they wish to learn and tend to respect the teacher who makes learning enjoyable. The legend’s classroom is exciting. Students are challenged to do well, in the expectation that they will. The coordination of instruction, practice, and remediation prior to measurement is such that interested students can and do succeed. As a result, the legend’s classroom often looks and feels different from other classrooms around the school.

When one enters this room, he or she knows that what follows is categorically unique from the other experiences of the day. It is a fun

and exciting place where learning occurs. In this classroom, humor is as prevalent as content. The fun or excitement is what makes learning easy and sometimes almost accidental. The legend may present material with a comedic sense, or with a dramatic flair, or cloaked in mystery. The presentation does not dissolve into stand-up comedy, but there is a great deal of appropriate laughter intermingled with a wide variety of learning. How clearly can we say it? Learning is fun and exciting here.

In addition, legendary teachers often appear to be great storytellers as well. They weave magical stories in their classrooms with personal anecdotes, true bits of historical information, or wonderfully delightful stories, especially for younger children. Such narratives are not time wasters, but strong devices for making points, for teaching morals, for helping students see connections, framing the story in the eyes or knowledge base of the students.

- Humor can be used in a mnemonic fashion: “When he saw I had trouble spelling ‘recommend,’ my father reminded me that one ‘sea’ is enough for anyone, but we all love M & M’s. It works to this day.”
- Drama may be used to appeal to students’ conspiratorial nature: “Roanoke, as we studied, is the lost colony in American history. If you were an investigator there, what clues would lead you to come up with a theory on what happened?”
- Storytelling is a wonderful approach at the elementary level as the teacher communicates the need for faithful reporting as she tells the story of the boy who cried wolf to an audience that never heard it before and will be caught up in the excitement of the story and readily see its lesson.
- Mystery can be presented in the form of a challenge: “We know that the Constitution requires people who run for the presidency to be natural-born citizens of the United States, but of course, while George Washington was born in America, he was not born in the United States. Who was the last person to run for the presidency not to have been born in what was the United States?”

(By the bye—to prove this is a successful technique, we’ll satisfy your curiosity—the answer is Barry Goldwater, who ran for president in 1964. He was born in Arizona in 1909, and Arizona did not become a state until 1912.)



Make no mistake, the legend does not rely on gimmicks: there is no list of clever activities that can be memorized, no definitive source of entertainment, but the successful teacher does seek to make the learning process enjoyable, interactive, hands-on, and original, ensuring that no child is ever allowed to fall behind or slip between the cracks. The teacher's personality makes this possible. There is a very definitive attitude about the classroom climate and exact knowledge about the very nature of learning. The more boring the class, the less learning that occurs. This concept is well exemplified in the following anecdote.

One of our student teachers was not having a great deal of success once she took over the class. The students begged the supervising teacher to come back because, they claimed, they weren't learning anything. They could not, they maintained, force themselves to pay attention. They liked the student teacher—she was nice and all, but she was just soooooo boring.

The supervising teacher was empathetic to their feelings and wanted to address their concerns with the student teacher but was not prepared to tell her that she was, well—boring. As an experienced professional, the supervising teacher had been prepared to make suggestions about lesson plans, about pacing, about discipline, about reaching closure, about individualizing instruction—but not how to be less boring.

Matters grew steadily worse, as they often do when not confronted; the student teacher started experiencing behavior problems. One day, after school, the supervising teacher told the student teacher, "We need to talk." They sat down at a table, the silence awkward as the supervising teacher sought the right way to say what needed to be said. Finally, the supervisor simply asked, "So, how do you think it's going?"

The student teacher paused for a moment and then reflected, "I didn't know a teacher had to put a show on every day for these kids, and honestly, I don't think I have my act together . . . yet."

Despite the student teacher's previous shortcomings, it was at that moment that the supervising teacher knew she'd be all right.

LESSON:

Every day is a fun-filled, exciting adventure in the legend's class.

Concern 2

Students look for a learning environment that holds challenges for them to learn but is safe from ridicule and failure (e.g., "informed," "patient," "nonthreatening," "motivated" "challenging," "encouraging," and "positive").

All students seem to share two commonalities: all love to succeed and all love to learn, but when the learning experience is laced with repeated failure, shame, discouragement, and accusation, learning is an experience to be dreaded. For the sake of one's own self-esteem, one's self-image, the embarrassed student often distances himself or herself from the system in which he or she fails. Thus instead of resiliency, the teacher is met with apathy, and instead of perseverance, the teacher may eventually encounter hostility.

If students are challenged with significant learning tasks consisting of skills relevant to their lives, however, and enter them assured that their sincere effort will not result in failure or humiliation, then they are far more likely to pursue the task earnestly. No student minds being challenged to think, but every student (every person for that matter) very much minds feeling doomed to failure. To be a legend, a teacher must practice those traits praised by students. It means being patient, nonthreatening, and encouraging. This can easily be achieved when the teacher shows that he or she is willing to share the responsibility for disappointing results: "We could have prepared better for this, maybe with more examples or better review."

As much as possible, the successful teacher encourages and rewards effort as well as success. For example, many middle and high schools operate on a 90% (A), 80% (B), 70% (C), 60% (D) grade scale. That leaves a 59-point range of failure. When a student's work is unacceptable (e.g., it's wrong, off topic, etc.) but is a very legitimate effort, then even if the teacher cannot pass the student and must assign an "F," he or she can still give the lion's share of the 59 points. Lower scores should be reserved for half-hearted efforts.

At the elementary level, efforts should always constitute a portion of the grade, and it is in our humble opinion that no legitimate effort should meet with failure. We are not advocating social promotion, and we're not totally denigrating the philosophy behind the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, but we know that effort counts, and when students abandon effort, all is lost.

Additionally, in the legend's classroom, it's okay to be wrong, because everyone realizes that the search for the correct response is far more valued than the response itself. In the legend's classroom, making an honest effort and volunteering answers—thinking—are more highly valued than embarrassment of being wrong is to be feared. We repeat—thinking skills are more highly valued than embarrassment is feared. If you can make that a truth in your classroom, you are on your way to being a classroom legend. In the legend's classroom, effort is what matters, what is rewarded, what results in success.

In the legend's classroom, the observer will likely find the following behaviors:

- Questions are validated before being answered: "That is a very insightful question!"
- Wrong answers are validated before being corrected: "That answer took some good thinking; you've made a mistake, but you did some good thinking."
- Effort is highly recognized as success: "This is a superb effort, very well thought-out."
- Simply following rules is recognized: "Thank you for raising your hand before talking."

The legend knows that for all children to learn, his or her first job is to make the classroom an ESZ—Emotionally Safe Zone. The further a classroom is from being an ESZ, the less likely learning will occur, especially for struggling students.

LESSON:

Your children must believe this: "To ask a question is, perhaps, to be a fool for a moment. Not to is to be a fool for life."—Chinese Proverb

Concern 3

Students wish to view their instructors as Professionals, models from whom they may learn (e.g., "motivated," "intense," "wise," and "dedicated").

The most successful teachers love their fields. Students might make fun of their dedication—"Old Man Freeman loves, eats, and breathes physics"—but deep inside, they admire their passion; they envy such commitment. Science teachers seem more like scientists than teachers inside the classroom. Vocational people are professionals in their field, working outside the classroom as well. Language Arts teachers are readers and writers, and physical education department staff enjoy good health and recreation. Elementary teachers appear to love long division and make a point of doing problems by hand in front of children, not with a calculator.

Legends are not shams. They love their areas of expertise and communicate that love to their students daily. The legend's real reward isn't on payday; it is every day when the teacher's passion proves contagious to the students. That is the only big-time return on

anyone's investment. Here is an example of this legendary teacher's contagious passion that was passed on to one of his students:

A gruff, older teacher of 25 years was in his room working when a young substitute teacher came up to him after school, absolutely beaming. "Remember me?" she asked.

Politely, he admitted that he didn't. She told him that she was a former student of his, but that didn't jog his memory. He still did not remember her and kindly told her that.

Unperturbed, she told him her name, as though revealing a secret, but he still had to say he did not remember her from class.

Like a trooper, she was not deterred by his memory lapse and admitted that she had given her married name, and then gave her maiden name. But that didn't help either, and the older teacher could only look sorrowfully at her.

She graciously allowed him his poor memory, admitting that it was many years ago that she had been his student. As she named several of her classmates, the older teacher had to confess he remembered them well, along with others she hadn't mentioned.

Her face darkened, and somewhere between tears and anger she said, "I took all your classes. You're the reason I became an English teacher."

And yet, both of us have heard teachers tell students that they didn't like something they were about to study. We've heard them tell their students, "we have to get through this stuff before we can do something fun." We've heard them tell their students that they only have to know something for an upcoming test or, worse, for some nationally normed test to be taken in the spring. Unfortunately, passion and love of learning are not the only contagious attributes. A teacher can just as easily undermine any chance of motivating students toward real success.

When teachers approach every day with passion and commitment, they not only instruct more effectively, they also, however unintentionally, inspire.

LESSON:

When teachers approach every day with passion and commitment, they not only instruct more effectively, which is to say motivate more effectively, but they also, however unintentionally, inspire.

Concern 4

Students seem to desire teachers who are sensitive to their needs and the exigencies of the existence within which they must operate (e.g., “compassionate,” “honest,” understanding,” “even tempered,” “fair,” and “caring).

Over the years we have had the opportunity to work with a number of student teachers. In virtually every case, there comes a time when the student teacher comes up to his or her supervising teacher and presents the same dilemma: “On the one hand, I want to be sensitive to the kids’ needs, but on the other, I don’t want them to think I’m an easy mark for believing every story they concoct.”

The quandary is simply this: do you wish to be popular or respected? The response to this question is not an easy one, and it presents a situation that most educators face at one time or another in their careers, but that doesn’t make finding a response any easier. Perhaps the best strategy for arriving at a response goes something like this: if we can admit that we cannot be perfect—ever—then our course of action is more evident. Given the choice, how do we choose to err?

- Would we rather be the teachers who are never fooled because we never buy any story and never give any student a break?
or
- Would we rather be the teachers who occasionally have the wool pulled over our eyes because we prefer to trust students and deal with them from the premise that they are inherently truthful?

The best people are honest, compassionate, and understanding. The best teachers are, too. Admittedly, neither choice is really desirable, and the thought of students pulling a fast one and laughing about it (and us) later is not attractive, but having to choose, the legend would rather be viewed as a sucker than a cynic.

When dealing with students who are in trouble for breaking a rule or for failing to turn in an assignment, we would be wise to remember what it last felt like when we were pulled over for speeding by an officer of the law.

At that moment, we did not desire justice or moral righteousness; what we craved was mercy and a second chance. When that officer finally let us go with only a warning, we were forever grateful—or at least grateful for a week or 200 miles—whichever came first.

We do not suggest that legends may be characterized by their naiveté, but wouldn't it be nice to be viewed more often with gratitude by students? Repeat offenders are, of course, dealt with sternly and quickly, but the legend understands that students make errors in judgment and are willing to give them a second chance, accept the dubious excuse, and be human. At least once—maybe twice.

The elementary teacher even has a learning moment when a young child offers a lame excuse. Often, at the grade school level a false pretext is readily transparent. At this point, the legend has the opportunity to do some important moral instruction, hopefully in a kind manner and not a belittling one. Here, of course, is one of the failings of NCLB—it ignores the tremendous contribution of educators to the affective and moral domains. More so than the high school teacher, the elementary teacher, by displaying the ability to listen and show great patience, can use a situation such as this to help students grow. We do, after all, make people.

No one is perfect; the world can't function in only black and white. One must be flexible enough in one's exercise of authority so as not to appear brutal and uncaring. The fact that a child has made up an excuse, no matter how implausible, is indicative of his or her desire to appear to have done the right thing. This then is a commonality between teacher and student, a starting point from which to go forth.

LESSON:

The legend never forgets that justice is not only blind, it is compassionate. The human condition never precludes the need for mercy.

When weighed together, these four areas of concern clearly present students' expectations for the environment in which they most readily learn. Caring teachers are the ones who are willing to massage their own personalities in those directions, and that, not coincidentally, is a neat segue to a discussion of attitudes.

Strong Attitudes



One need not travel far into any profession before he or she hears someone say in one breath, "What potential!" and in the next breath, "But he's going nowhere with that attitude." Such an opinion does

nothing more than echo the old saw, "Attitude is everything." What kind of attitude should a teacher carry into a classroom every day? It would appear that most legends share a number of attitudinal commonalities.

Looking for the Best

Effective teachers are always looking for the best in everyone. They are not confused with reports of past success or failure as determinants of future achievement. They do not confuse an older sibling's abilities with those of a younger brother or sister. They do not bring prejudices into the class based on socioeconomics, race, gender, ethnicity, or any other demographic trait. Every child is approached as a unique and special individual, and every individual begins every day with a clean slate. In short, every child in the legend's classroom receives tender loving care.

Legends begin the morning and end the evening believing in the efficacy of what they do. More so than any other teacher, legends believe that attitude, more often than not, determines success. The question of attitude is of such preeminence in education that we are willing to offer this: teachers "burn out" when, and only when, they have resigned themselves to being burned out. It is a conscious choice—but so is attitude.

Taking Risks

Effective teachers are competitive risk takers. The very best teachers share one important quality. They want to be the best—not at the expense of others, not by denigrating their peers, not by playing the flatterer to administration, but in the positive pride in their own success. Legends do not fear outside audits of their work; they welcome them as an opportunity to shine. Legends do not dread classroom observations; they relish them as a time to "strut their stuff." Legends seek meaningful feedback about their performance. Legends are not afraid to seek feedback from the entire learning community, especially delighting in the chance to interact with parents at conferences or open houses.

As a result, legends are risk takers. They willingly pioneer new pedagogies and approaches, not afraid to temporarily stumble, knowing that they can recover quickly. They do not use the same tests year after year in the same old units. Legends are as much into their own growth as they are into the students' growth. At the heart of this

behavior is a very simple conviction, one that often looks like ego or pride to others, and that is the certainty that they can teach anyone anything, and are, consequently, unafraid of failing. This confidence is contagious and students leave the room believing in the same. A mark of such legends are that children often come to these teachers for help in classes other than the ones they have with the legends—they too believe in the legend's ability to teach.

Being Fair

Effective teachers are doggedly fair. There are no favorites in the classroom, and it becomes immediately clear to all students that all rules apply with the same consequences to all students, all the time. Most students, kindergarten through senior year of high school, operate within a very simple value system, one that demands fairness. Children express grave moral outrage when they simply utter the words, "That's not fair." Children expect teachers to be impartial, although they fear that some have pets. They expect that punishment is appropriate to the crime. Although they will argue for no punishment, at some level they understand a fair one. They expect that teachers' interaction with them will not come from any prejudices.

The ramifications of these expectations are numerous albeit singular in nature: neither students' academic success in the class; nor their excellent or less-than-excellent behavior; nor their involvement in extracurricular activities; nor their parents' last names; nor their race, ethnicity, or gender; nor any other outside circumstance will earn them preferential treatment from the teacher. No teacher can overcome the student (or parent) perception that he or she exercises biases in the classroom.

In relation to our earlier discussion, this overwhelming sense of impartiality on behalf of the teacher is a key component in creating ESZs. A very effective practice that any teacher can use to create this sense of impartiality is a simple one. Whenever a teacher finds it necessary to verbally discipline a student in front of others, it is very important that the teacher comes back to that student without much time having passed with something positive. The teacher may have just been forced, in a stern voice, to remind a student, "Jill, I just told you to stay at your desk until dismissed. Now please sit down." Jill has two choices: acquiescence or rebellion. It is important that in the next few interactions, the teacher comes back to Jill as though nothing had happened, to show Jill that there are no hard feelings: "So, the pioneers come to a river too deep to wade and with no boats. What

do they do? Jill, you always seem to solve tough problems, what would you have them do?" Jill may be surprised you came back to her as though you weren't mad, or she may still be pouting, but the important thing is that by coming back to her with a smile on your face, you've shown your impartiality. You are, it is obvious to all, fair.

To demonstrate how important this sense of fairness is, and how important it is for teachers to maintain it, let's look at another example. We have already suggested that the classroom teacher has much to learn from sponsors of extracurricular activities. But such sponsors and coaches face the additional challenge of not seeming to be partial toward their team members. We know of one high school legend who was also a debate coach. As the semester drew to a close, several students with high "Bs" in the class stayed after school one day to talk to her, to see what they could do to raise their grades to an "A" before the final exam. She listened attentively and made some suggestions on how they could study better for the final and how, if they did really well on the final, she might be able to give them "As" for the semester since they had all shown so much growth lately. Before they could leave, with their hopes raised ever so slightly, she said to one boy—"But Brian, not for you. You'll have to earn the "A."

Brian was the captain of her debate squad, and the teacher had explained early in the debate season to her entire squad that if they were in her class, she could never do anything that could be construed as favoritism. She was right. Knowing she could not be perfect, she lived by our precept—if you can't be perfect, you have to choose in which direction you will err. This legend understood that while she could give a break to any number of students based on effort and improvement and any other number of extenuating circumstance, she should be very hesitant to do the same for students who were on her debate squad. She understood that no teacher could ever overcome rumors of giving preferential treatment.

Appreciating the Pull and Tug of the Class



The most effective teachers do not resent the students that make them be their best. To the contrary, the opposite may be true. The legend knows that any teacher can achieve a degree of success with well-mannered, like-valued, highly-motivated students. These apples of education's eye could be placed in a library and 12 years later emerge well educated, ready for college. Great teachers are not needed to produce high college entrance exam scores for these academic wonders. It is the average achiever and more importantly, the underachiever

who truly *need* the great teacher. It is with a great teacher that these students can most significantly make a difference. Conventional wisdom suggests that greatness is defined by adversity and the way in which it is met. Our heroes don't overcome advantages—they overcome tragedy, challenge, and obstacles.

Legends live this simple truth: actions need not always follow feelings—in fact, they may precede them. The fact that the teacher may not wish to have a particular student in class, that he or she may not wish to teach a given unit or even an entire class, does not mean the teacher has to act on those feelings. Instead, by acting as though he or she appreciates the student, the unit, or class, the teacher may begin actually to develop positive feelings, and in turn, engender them in his or her students. Legends do not resent the difficulties of their profession; instead, they embrace them, and in doing so, overcome them. That attitude is lived daily by any school's most effective teachers. The legend understands that every teacher draws a tough schedule occasionally. Every teacher finds the most challenging student(s) in his or her class at some time. In any given year, a teacher may find that he or she eats lunch at 10:30 and then teaches five classes in a row. In any given year, the teacher who adores third grade may return from summer vacation to find that next year she'll be teaching first grade. Legends are flexible and professional as they roll with the punches; they make gallons of lemonade when handed lemons.

Having said that, we do not expect that all teachers do their undergraduate work at Pollyanna Tech and their graduate work at Mary Poppins U. We can be realists about this. We have to admit that there are disappointments inherent in our profession. Often, it's true that the squeaky wheels do get the oil, and flexible professionals willing to help are exploited by thoughtless administrations, but the fact is that a positive attitude is an integral part of our triangular definition of the most desirable personality for successful educators.

The final, and perhaps most important aspect of the concept of attitude, is that it is the most obvious of the attributes to students. A poor attitude cannot be hidden for long, if at all. A good attitude, on the other hand, cannot be hidden at all. It permeates every aspect of the job—to students, other teachers, administrators, and the entire educational community.

Developing Good Habits

All thus far discussed leads to the final segment of our three-sided definition of a legend's personality: the habits of great teachers. It is

possible for one to have tremendous character traits and a very positive attitude and still fall short of being a legend if the third and final piece of the personality puzzle is absent. The positive attributes of both character and attitude are meaningless unless they find expression in the daily habits of the teacher.

It is only in the behavior of the teacher that the positive attitudes of the legend are manifested. To ensure that these positive attributes are evident to students, the legend goes out of his or her way to display the following habits:

- First, the master teacher makes it apparent that he or she works as hard as, if not harder than, the students to assure their success. The legend works nightly to prepare, just as he or she expects students to do.
- Second, the legend is professional in the manner in which he or she relates to students. Despite the fun students may have or the work they may do, the teacher does not lose focus on the professional-client relationship that must be maintained. The legend may be friendly, but he or she does not work to become a friend of the students. There is a difference.
- Third, the legend is punctual, appropriate in dress, and organized. The legend is professional. The teacher's daily preparedness leaves no doubt about his or her dedication and commitment to the success of all students.

All three of these habits are essential to the legend's success. Without them, a teacher is nothing more than a charlatan and has no right to demand the respect and support of the parents or the hard work of the students. Only when the teacher is prepared, professional, and diligent may he or she ask the students to give the kind of effort necessary to succeed. Only then can the teacher motivate students, and if education is not based on successful motivation, then teachers are superfluous to education, and any of the computer programs developed to replace teachers are just as good.

Likewise, the best teachers don't have good or bad days, at least not many of them. Instead, they have good and better days. Their dealings with students are not a reflection of their personal feelings, their health, or their marital circumstances. Rather they are a reflection of their commitment to their students regardless of personal concerns or problems. They are always polite and never lose sight of their real job—seeing to the education of their charges.

Every day a student walks into the classroom of a legend, that student knows he or she will be treated with respect and concern. The student knows that the teacher has prepared a meaningful educational experience; there are no “free days” in a legend’s class. Students know that they will be held up to appropriately tough standards, and they will have to work hard to succeed, but more important, they know that the teacher will be working just as hard to see that success is realized. This is true from the kindergarten class through the advanced placement (AP) calculus class. This is universal among legends.

Conclusions

The whole, in this case, is greater than the sum of its parts. The legend does more than combine the traits, attitudes, and habits herein described. He or she is more than that total. The master teacher is outgoing; he or she is personable, exciting, and energetic. The legend is dynamic, and the sheer force of his or her will allows the legend to be effective beyond the norm. Other teachers may work as hard, may plan as diligently, but they never put all the pieces together as successfully as the legend.

Are good teachers born or made? We come full circle to admit truthfully, and a bit unwillingly, that the marvelous combination of characteristics of the legend is probably, if not innate, then most certainly nurtured long before the teacher ever applied for a teaching position. Acknowledging this, however, we must return to the contradiction we first proffered and suggest again that it would be best if we acted as though legends could be made. We are better off, as a profession, fostering these characteristics, traits, attitudes, and work habits in all our teachers. Doing so will exert a tremendously positive influence on education in America. It reminds us of something mothers have been telling children for along time. Being the best you can be isn’t a destination, it is a journey. It is an education.