A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO DISCOVER WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A COMPETENT AND SUCCESSFUL TEACHER IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to discover the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed to be a competent and successful classroom teacher in the 21st century, in an effort to provide curriculum content to students as well as inspire them to be the best possible version of themselves. At this stage of the research, a 21st century teacher will generally be defined as those educators that have successfully integrated all of the most valuable and essential aspects of the modern era into their pedagogical practices, including both their domain content as well as its practical applications. This report will employ a Phenomenological methodology with a criterion-based purposive sampling of students and teachers currently in the Ontario Education system, and I anticipate that the findings from these interviews will assist in the construction of a composite that will serve as a reasonable method to identify those qualities that are necessary for a teacher to be successful in a modern classroom.

Keywords: 21st Century teacher, 21st century classroom, Phenomenology, Ontario Education

General Summary

The purpose of this study is to discover the necessary qualities needed to be a successful classroom teacher in the modern day, in an effort to assist in both teaching the curriculum content to students as well as inspiring them to be the best possible version of themselves. A successful modern teacher will generally be defined as those that have successfully adapted all of the most valuable aspects of the modern era into their classroom practices, including both the subject matter they are teaching as well as its practical use in the real world. This report will consist of multiple interviews with students and teachers currently in the Ontario Education system, and the hope is that the findings will help in the construction of a list of characteristics that will serve as a reasonable measure as to what qualities are necessary for a teacher to be successful in the modern day.

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I would also like to thank my wife and two children for always supporting and encouraging me to stay the course and finish what I started. I do all of this for you.

Lastly, to every teacher that once inspired me to do better in my own academic career, I stand on your shoulders with great humility and am honoured to do so.

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Introduction

There is a persistent problem built into the profession of education, and it is an issue that is closely connected to the relentless certainty of progress. Education is a discipline that is constantly in flux with the culture that surrounds it, ebbing and flowing with shifting ideologies and evolving understandings (Naar, 2021), and while this dynamic process is important for posterity in all its capacities, it is also a very difficult phenomenon to keep up with and reconcile. This means, among other things, that it is incumbent upon educators to reevaluate the profession from time to time in an attempt to make sure students are still being taught in ways that best serve their individual and collective needs. This is one of those times - perhaps more than ever, the world is moving on and evolving at an exponential rate that has never been seen before in recorded history (Siegel, 2019). The profession of education must always be willing to reflect and reassess itself if the goal is to continue to be effective, applicable, and functionally relevant.

The first time I became aware of this discrepancy between the changes in the modern era and classroom practice was when a Teacher Candidate entered my class and was shocked at what she saw. She was enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Ontario that is still unfortunately stuck in the past, teaching antiquated pedagogy from a bygone era. The desks in my classroom are always set up side-by-side in a U-shape facing the centre, to which her professor vehemently spoke out against in favour of the traditional rows or groups of specifically four. I made it a point to introduce this Teacher Candidate to different departments in the school and then had her incorporate certain concepts from these disciplines into her lessons, which was considered a futile enterprise when she wrote about this disciplinary overlap in her reflections. But the most

egregious practice of mine that her professors derided was the consistent and ubiquitous use of technology in my classroom, especially the use of personal electronic devices - I make it standard practice to utilise this medium in almost every lesson, including discussions on responsible social media use as well as the proper validation of online sources.

It is a curious thing to be criticised for keeping up with the advancements of culture and technology, especially if the end goal is for students to become competent adults in all the ways that their community and greater society needs them to be. Unfortunately, it is clear that many Teacher Education Programs, provincial board policies and private educational associations in Ontario are privy to these same pedagogical limitations, as this was not the last time a Teacher Candidate spoke to me about these and other discrepancies between academic theory and classroom practice. The problem then, it seems, is that certain components within the profession of education have not proactively evolved in some significant and measurable way since the Industrial Revolution and Bobbit's *machine-theory* that was meant to turn complicit students into obedient workers (Flinders and Thornton, 2022). Schools are still built to resemble factories, classes still begin and end with shift-bells, and perhaps most important of all, much of the criteria used to discern what makes lessons and evaluations successful are still stuck in the Standardization-era of the 1800s (Davis et al, 2022).

The purpose of this study is to discover the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed to be a competent and successful classroom teacher in the 21st century, in an effort to provide curriculum content to students as well as inspire them to be the best possible version of themselves. At this stage of the research, a 21st century teacher will generally be defined as those

educators that have successfully integrated all of the most valuable and functionally essential aspects of the modern era into their practices, including both domain content as well as its practical applications.

There is a significant need for this report and others with a similar topic of study, largely due to the fact that the 21st century has seen much change in terms of social and cultural advancements and the education system by nature is trying to constantly keep up (Meckler, 2022). It is worth looking at what it means to be a competent teacher throughout the span of the modern educational movement, as history is a fantastic teacher and there is a deep utility - either directly or indirectly - in paying attention to the evolving features of the profession to identify those characteristics and qualities worth pursuing, altering or otherwise omitting. A variety of documents and artifacts will be reviewed and considered, including past pedagogical practices, substantive research studies, existing Teacher Education Programs, school board policies as well as independent educational associations. All of the sources will have North American origins, as this is the geographical foundation of this study, the site location as well as its sample of participants.

This Phenomenological study will be conducted at Holy Cross Catholic Academy in Woodbridge, Ontario, and will adopt a purposive sampling of students and teachers currently in Ontario Education. I have chosen the Phenomenological tradition because of its ability to provide a thorough and appropriate explanation of the social and psychological phenomena in question (Creswell, 2017), and I have selected purposive sampling because of my tacit knowledge of the

participants (Creswell, 2018) in an effort to select those that I recognize will have a greater probability of openly and honestly advancing the discussion of modern teacher competency.

There are three major questions that will guide this research and the interviews in the field, and they are as follows: what lesson and assessment strategies do students and teachers believe are required to be a successful modern teacher and how do these perceptions align? What classroom teaching practices do students and teachers perceive as the most effective in a modern classroom, and how do these perceptions align? And lastly, how do students and teachers perceive the role of technology in creating effective classrooms in the modern era, and in what ways do these perceptions align?

Literature Review

If the purpose of this study is to discover the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed to be a successful classroom teacher in the 21st century, then the purpose of this literature review is to explore all the various perspectives and methodologies that have been previously used to answer such an important question. The relevance of this topic of research cannot be overstated - there is a considerable need for this study and those like it that continually ask the same relevant questions about the development of the educational profession, particularly because technology, culture, and human connections are evolving at a formidable rate and the education system needs to evolve with it in an effort to further student success. We also see the significance of this topic of study when connected to the creation of future policy, as there are certainly many evolving truths that policymakers need to recognize about the profession they oversee to best serve their constituency. While there are indeed some recurrent traits that have been passed down from the Standardised education of Bobbitt and the revisions a few decades later by Dewey (Flinders & Thornton, 2022), it is clear that the world has moved on far beyond what those men and their contemporaries could have ever conceived. The breadth of this literature review will encompass some of the relevant sources over the past thirty years in educational academia that have sought to identify and understand successful modern teaching pedagogy, as it was in the last decade of the last century that academics truly began to understand the need for a shift in thinking when considering the measures used to describe a competent teacher. This literature review will be thematically broken up into the three major components of the profession - we will discuss those sources that promote student success, those that foster

teacher development, and those that are focused on making modern day connections to the real world.

Student success should be at the forefront of all educational practice, and it is worth our time to review some of the most prevalent recent literature that has focused on what it takes to cultivate these results in a modern classroom. Gone are the days of Standardised education - Davis et al. (2022) have done a thorough job in explaining the three chronologically subsequent eras public education has gone through since the Industrial Revolution - Authentic Education, Democratic Citizenship Education, and Systemic Sustainability Education. Each of these eras coincide with a variety of civil liberty developments, including the Civil Rights movement and Women's Rights, and as such they uniquely progress in a way that affords more attention to student-centred learning where each student's voice is heard and their experiences outside the classroom become more pronounced focal points in curriculum and classroom practices (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2022). The last era, Systemic Sustainability, is of particular interest because of its inherent focus on the growing complexity of our world and the symbiotic nature between what happens in the classroom and what transpires outside of it. This is in line with the work of George Siemens, who constructed the learning theory of *Connectivism* with much of the same goals in mind, though his focus is primarily on how technology plays a part in the overall growing relationships between the vast communities within the varied human cultures (Siemens, 2005). It is clear that both Davis et al. and Siemens see the same trend happening - that of a smaller global community in need of social cohesion - but while both of these sources provide some thoughts on the pedagogical implications, they lack any real

explanation of how their ideas can transfer into practical strategies that can be applied in a modern classroom. Some academics have made productive strides in this regard, including the study by Corbett and Spinello (2020) that cultivates and expands on Siemen's work. It is also worth looking at modern interpretations of Lev Vygotsky's work, for even though he did his best work in the middle of the last century it is without question that he was far ahead of his time. Palincsar (1998) does a good job of articulating Vygotsky's *sociocultural theory of development*, which is a theory that was tragically underused and not even considered during the prevailing lens of Standardised Education when Vygotsky was working (Davis et al, 2022). His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is also a practice that can be successfully implemented into the modern classroom for continued student success, affording meaningful education and dynamic, relevant assessment strategies that fill in the gaps between what the students can do with help from a teacher and what they can do on their own (Palincsar, 1998). Steiner and Mahn (1996) also attempt to highlight the importance of Vygotsky's educational pedagogy by leaning into his importance of the *dialectic method* for student success, which is a significant shift from the antiquated teacher-centred classroom dynamic that many educators still continuously fall back on. Turning to Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory* (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) and the various motivational theories articulated by Eccles and Wigfield (2002), it is clear that for educators to best serve their modern audiences they need to understand what motivates their students, where students place their values and interests, and how both self-worth and self efficacy play a part in their continued success. Wittrock (1990; 1991) offers a very applicable approach to help modern students learn in the classroom - his *generative learning theory* is one

that stresses the importance of giving students a venue to take knowledge learned outside of

school and construct meaningful connections to the knowledge learned within. All of these

sources have the same important goals in mind - whether they address how students learn or

what their motivating principles are - but these papers are mostly theoretical in scope and require

a bit more explanation in terms of both the practical aspects of their theory as well as modern

student perspectives. John Hattie has done exceptional work to fill this gap between theory and

practise with his Visible Learning initiative (Hattie, 2024), which includes a comprehensive

meta-analysis from over a thousand studies of all the factors that affect student achievement in

the new millennium. What started out with 138 factors eventually grew to a list of 256, and

comprises five categories of phenomena that are directly related to student achievement - the

students themselves, their homelife, the schools they attend, the curricula being taught, the

teachers in front of them as well as the pedagogies they use in their classrooms. Hattie's list

seems to identify every aspect of a student's life that affects their achievement in school - which

is an invaluable tool to be able to access - but this report seeks to narrow down that search and is

strictly interested and focused on the teacher-related influences on student success, including

factors from Hattie's list such as teacher efficacy, teacher clarity, teacher credibility, as well as

the variety of pedagogical practices that he identifies as all having either a positive or negative

effect on student achievement. For Hattie, teacher efficacy refers to the net positive effects on

student achievement, teacher clarity alludes to the lucidity to which all instructions and

expectations are articulated, teacher credibility considers the levels of trust, competence,

dynamism and immediacy that students perceive in their educators, and some of the most

prevalent pedagogical practices in his list are Piagetian programs filled with play, self-efficacy based on personal academic worth, as well as the incorporation of prior abilities and existing funds of knowledge into the classroom (Hattie, 2024). Similarly, Willms has made some great strides in the domain of student engagement (Willms, 2003), and his research has shown not only the importance of this phenomena but the global differences in what engages students, focusing on a sense of belonging and overall participation in school activities, both academic and non-academic. This research will consider the crucial role of engagement as well, specifically a teacher's role in both fostering and deterring such an important sentiment.

The second theme that the literature can be grouped into are those sources that foster teacher development, and in this domain there are many individuals as well as private and public institutions that reveal the necessary gains in reviewing literature centred around what makes a competent teacher in the modern day. Michael Fullan has done some important work when it comes to asking and understanding what it means to be a modern teacher, and his work with the global Deep Learning initiatives (Fullan et al., 2017) brought together a variety of vested parties from around the world to ask what it means to promote success in modern students. Their answer is what they have identified as the *6 C's of learning* - character, citizenship, communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking - and it is these qualities, including the pedagogical use of real world scenarios, that attempt to prepare students for the world that awaits them. Another excellent model that concerns successful teaching pedagogy is the Danielson Framework (The Danielson Group, 2024)**,** headed by Charlotte Danielson and encompassing four core principles of the teaching profession: Planning and Preparation, Classroom

environments, Professional Responsibilities and Instructions. Each core principle has 5-7 specific

components that are required of a successful teacher and is a very detailed aggregate of what

proper teaching practices are, which is a very similar result that this report seeks to accomplish,

but with two notable exceptions. Primarily, the Danielson Framework lists practices outside of

the classroom in its evaluation of the teaching profession, while this report is only concerned

with those practices within the class that the students experience and as such has a much

narrower breadth and scope. Which leads to the second difference - the Danielson Framework

was built through the research of academic sources as well as collaboration with teachers (James,

2024), while this report seeks not only teacher perspectives but is primarily concerned with

student viewpoints and the rich explanations of their experiences through the Phenomenological

tradition. Harvard (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003), Grand Canyon University

(Gilpatrick, 2021) and South New Hampshire University (Gagnon, 2019) also focus on and

highlight relevant qualities of 21st century teachers - qualities that they unanimously agree

should encompass good communication, fair and balanced discipline, as well as engaging and

informative practices that incorporate a variety of real world connections. Unfortunately, the

limitations of these sources are threefold - the first is that there is no mention of any modern

student perspectives on the efficacy of these pedagogical practices, the second is that beyond

listing the qualities of a great teacher and a short explanation it is far too generic in scope, and

the third is that these are American institutions and as such there are many substantive

differences between them and their Canadian counterparts. The Ontario College of Teachers is

the governing body of educations for the province, and they too provide a list of the standards

and practices they value in teachers, including the commitment to student learning and safe classroom environments, appropriate pedagogy that follows provincial requirements, and the necessity of being a lifelong learner (OCT, 2022). This is a short policy written in tandem with the provincial government for one of their many Ministries, and is a solid but cursory understanding of what actual "standards and practices" are. The National Association of Elementary School Principals also outline their criteria as to what makes a competent teacher in the modern day, and focus primarily on the use of technology as a means to professionally develop educators (Darling-Hammond & Edgerton, 2021), though its sole focus on technology limits its interpretation and is only a partial part of the overall understanding of the modern classroom experience. The biggest disadvantage with the aforementioned sources, above all else, is that they are normative by design, which means that while they may be informative in their ability to reveal different perspectives they lack the substantive academic attention that is needed (Avram & Budui, 2013). There has been some informative substantive literature on the topic of modern teacher development, including the study conducted by Faulkner and Latham (2016), which is foundationally very much in line with this study in that it seeks to explore teacher competency in the 21st century. The predominant drawback with this article is that it is a narrative inquiry approach taken entirely from the teachers' perspectives, and as such is an interpretation that lacks student input on what they believe are the best qualities a modern teacher should possess. The same can be said for the Jan study (2017), which is a Phenomenological study out of India that attempts to discern what makes a competent 21st century teacher, but is limited by its sole reliance on published sources as its primary data

collection and offers only short blurbs of information with little depth and detail to further elucidate the topic. Within the literature mentioned above there are some outstanding qualities that have been identified as necessary to foster teacher competence, and the Phenomenological tradition of finding the essence of an experience that will be conducted in this report will hopefully work well in discerning which if these factors prove to be the most important to the sample of participants chosen.

The final theme that the sources of this literature review can be grouped into are those that are interested in making modern day connections outside of the classroom. If school is meant to prepare students for the world that awaits them, then it stands to reason that one of the most significant components of the modern world that needs to be addressed is the proper use of modern technology. Fullan and Donnelly (2013) asserted over a decade ago that the entire system needs to change for students to have universal access to technology in the classroom, and this was at a time when the very definition of technology was vastly different and not nearly as ubiquitous as it is in the modern day. In response to this inevitable progression towards a universality of technology, Luke (2018) speaks of the necessity of a 'Digital Ethic' that all students must learn to engage in civilised online discourse as well as the need to teach how this new form of human interaction can promote diversity and reciprocal respect. He also touches on the proliferation of false information and biassed journalism, and insists quite rightly that if the students of today are to become the adults of tomorrow, then they need to be taught how to traverse the many pitfalls and plunders the online world has to offer. A 21st century teacher cannot shy away from such discussions. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) offer sound advice on this

topic as well, especially in their explanation of the desire for "spectacle" in the modern world and how to avoid indulging such an enticing feeling. Both of the above sources offer essential ideas on this topic but are incomplete by design, as they lack in the examination of the practical implementation of strategies in the classroom, something Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) attempt to do with their study on the resources of digital literacy that can be integrated into the curriculum. The networking website Linkedin has also proposed their own measures as to what qualities make a competent and successful modern teacher, specifically the mastery of subject matter content as well as a focus on communication technology (Hargreaves, 2003, as cited in Hilkemeijer, 2016). Linkedin has over 830 million members in over 200 countries (Linkedin, 2022), and has become an important institution in connecting professionals worldwide, but their criteria as to what makes a competent teacher in the 21st century offers nothing new beyond that which this literature review has already mentioned and most Teacher Education programs have already counted as curriculum for decades.

Through the examination of sources that promote student success, those that foster teacher development (from both private and public institutions), as well as those that are interested in making modern day connections (including the use of technology and application in the real world), it is clear through the review of the literature that much has been done in the modern day to understand what factors directly relate to overall student achievement through a variety of different traditions, perspectives and frameworks. So many studies have been done in this domain, and for good reason - the world is always moving on and the education system must make an effort to always move with it to stay current, relevant and useful. Because of this

inevitable and continual progression of society and the world at large, asking what makes a competent teacher is never an outdated question, especially when the ultimate goal is to try to stay relevant by escaping two centuries worth of a status quo that many feel must change (Fullan, 2023). There are always new angles and inventive ways that educators and academics must take to ultimately understand this complex and important issue, and this report will specifically look at the teacher's role in overall student achievement, relying on the Phenomenological inquiry process to attain this goal. Current student and teacher perspectives will be considered and analysed in an effort to glean what the participants feel best answers the question as to what necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes are needed to be a competent 21st century educator, after which it will be constructive and worthwhile to then compare the answers found in the data with the ideas seen in this Literature Review to determine where the results land in the overall conversation.

Methodology

Overview

If the purpose of this study is to discover the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed to be a successful classroom teacher in the modern day, then the objective of this section is to give a detailed outline as to how exactly that goal will be achieved. The Qualitative tradition of research will be employed to conduct this study, as the very foundational nature of this particular method is centred on the experiences of participants by inductively analysing the meanings of their thoughts and words, as well as being field focused with an attention to specifics not lost in abstraction (Eisner, 2017). For this study to be successful at discovering traits of competency as understood by the participants, collecting and aggregating these specific experiences are crucial in attaining this objective. Qualitative research is exploratory and descriptive by design, with an emphasis on data collection in its natural setting as well as a focus on the researcher-as-instrument (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This study will be conducted within the Phenomenological genre of Qualitative research, which Creswell (2017) describes as one that is focussed on a given phenomena and the meanings it has on the people that experience it; this is precisely what needs to be done if we are to discover what it means to be a competent teacher in a modern classroom. The rationale for using the Phenomenological tradition is that this specific genre of research is designed to search for meaning and the aggregated themes within these meanings, it uses interviews as its primary data collection strategy, and it permits the construction of composites to better explain the essence of an experience, divergent perspectives, as well as multiple frames of reference to build a rich understanding of the

phenomena in question (Moustakas, 1994). All of these components are needed to discover what it means to be a successful and competent modern teacher, as this is an emerging phenomenon with an ever-evolving essence that needs to be better understood. This methodology section will discuss all the relevant information concerning the site, sample selection and data collection methods that will be employed, the data analysis strategies that will be conducted, as well as a discussion on certain methodological issues that must be addressed.

Site and Sample Selection

The site selected to conduct this research is Holy Cross Catholic Academy in Woodbridge, Ontario, which is a high school set within the York Catholic District School Board. This site was picked because I have been a part of this community for two decades and in that time have networked many positive relationships that will be beneficial for both site access as well as participant knowledge. I will be using criterion-based purposive sampling - specifically ideal-typical sampling - as my primary sample selection method of participants, as this method is employed when a selection must be based on what is considered the most efficient and most effective qualities needed to successfully align with the overall purpose (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In this case, this method of sampling is appropriate not only because I want a typical sample from the population, but I also need those participants that will ideally be both open and honest in their explanations of their experiences and avoid pandering to the questions in a way that would otherwise skew the data. I will be purposively selecting those participants that I know will speak openly and candidly about what it takes to be a competent teacher in a modern

classroom, with a collective desired outcome to better the institution of education for themselves as well as future generations. While there is certainly a risk when employing criterion-based purposive sampling that the participants selected can either directly or indirectly echo the researcher's own sentiments or claims, this limitation will be considered - I will specifically select teachers that I know have a wide variety of pedagogical foundations and classroom practices, and I will also select students that have always assertively articulated their authentic truth even if it meant going against the status quo or the various educational power dynamics. This means that I will be selecting a variety of students that I have personally taught at some point in my career, all with a wide range of aptitudes and academic preferences. The teachers I will be selecting have worked alongside me for years, and will be from different discipline backgrounds and academic departments. In the selection process of these educators I will also take into consideration the numerous positive anecdotal student opinions of their classroom practices; while this subjective student bias is certainly problematic in defining what an effective modern teacher is, these personal anecdotes will assist in the overall selection of the best participants for the study, particularly in confirming my own positive assertions of each teacher. In total I will be sampling and interviewing 16 participants for this study, which is both typical and adequate for most Qualitative traditions (Creswell, 2017) - this will specifically consist of ten students and six teachers that are all currently within the Ontario education system. The students will consist of three males and seven females all between the ages of 15 - 18, and the teachers will consist of three males and three females all with more than fifteen years of full time teaching experience.

Data Collection Methods

    The data collection method I will be using will be standardised open-ended interviews (Patton, 1990, as cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), which will ask the same determined set of questions to each set of participants. In keeping with the Qualitative tradition, my interview questions must serve a variety of important functions: they must probe for an explanation of the constructs that organise the world (Spradley, 1979, as cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) as well as speculate on the alternatives that may have meaning and applicability (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, as cited in LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), which means that the questions must be written in a concerted effort to understand the value each participant has on their experiences (Patton, 1990, as cited in LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). This report has very clear boundaries - the focus here will be on the participants' explanations of their experiences within the classroom, and will not seek to discover the knowledge, skills and aptitudes that a successful teacher requires when they are not in the classroom. This report is only interested in the best and worst in-class teacher practices and pedagogy, which means the Research Questions guiding this paper as well as the interview questions that follow are focussed on lessons, assignments and classroom teaching practices, with a specific consideration of how technology has a part to play in this experience. The questions asked will be open-ended and framed in ways that require the sharing of personal anecdotes and experiences that vividly articulate each participant's perception of a modern classroom, and I will record the data using the Voice Recorder and Audio Editor app on an iPhone 11 (TapMedia Ltd, 2022). This is an exceptional program that offers a wide range of applicable features like bookmarking important points, recording in multiple audio formats,

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splicing and trimming, and perhaps most important of all it offers the ability to transcribe all recordings into text. These features will make the process much more efficient and effective for both myself as well as the participants I will be interviewing.

Data Analysis Strategies

The next important components of the study that need to be addressed are the data analysis strategies that will be conducted. The Phenomenological tradition seeks to understand the essence of an experience, which means there needs to be a solid and foundational analytic plan in place to discover meanings and themes held within the data collected. Moustakas (1994) offers a quality six-step outline that suggests the appropriate analytical strategies contained within this genre of research: I will begin this section with a *description* of my own experiences teaching in a 21st century classroom, drawing on two decades of professional experiences and analysing both student and teacher roles in this overall dynamic. From there I will move to the *horizontalization of the data* by searching the collected interviews for descriptions of experiences that will eventually yield a list of statements that may or may not overlap. Looking for a *textured description* of the data will come next, where the list of overlapping statements in the horizontalization phase can then be turned into meaning units that will be used to construct thematic descriptions of the experiences. The data analysis will then move to *seek imaginative variations* by going back to my initial description of the phenomenon as well as the Literature Review sources and reflect upon the different perspectives gathered. Not only will this allow for a much richer description and far more pronounced idea of what it means to be a competent 21st

century teacher from a variety of perspectives, but it will also assist in the next important step in the Phenomenological tradition which is to build an accurate description of the overall *essence of the experience*. It is with this knowledge that the final step in the data analysis phase can be achieved, which is the *construction of a composite* to clearly and unambiguously elucidate what it means to be a successful teacher in a modern classroom. This composite sketch will be the ultimate goal of this entire research endeavour - if the purpose of this study is to discover what it means to be a competent teacher in the modern day, then it only makes sense that what we are searching for is a way to measure what specific pedagogies and classroom practices are good, better and best. This means that the composite sketch is going to be a rubric of sorts, with accompanying metrics that will seek to afford an accurate measure of competency based upon the data collected from participants currently within the Ontario educational system in varying capacities. It is this final composite that will hold much utility to the future of education, such as assisting in the update of Teacher Performance Appraisals, crafting relevant and topical Professional Development days, as well as restructuring Teacher Education Programs to better train and equip educators for the future.

Methodological Issues

The final elements that need to be considered when conducting this study are the various methodological issues presented within this specific tradition of research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider *trustworthiness* to be a substantial issue when conducting research within all genres of the Qualitative tradition, and offer four criteria that all studies adopting this approach

need to measure up against if they are to be taken seriously. The first measure is credibility, and

looks to the internal validity of the research study. Clearly defined boundaries need to be drawn,

which means this study will only propose to inquire about the experiences of a phenomenon

within said boundaries, in this case one secondary school within the York Catholic District

School Board in Ontario, Canada. Transferability is the second criteria, which addresses the

external validity of the data and determines whether or not the results can be transferred to other

settings; clear sampling strategies and a connection to existing theoretical concepts will assist in

this aspect, as will a triangulation of multiple forms of data, member-checking and multiple

interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2017). The third measure is dependability, and

focuses on the capacity for the results to be replicated in different settings; providing a detailed

account of all data collection and analysis strategies will assist with this, as will the insistence of

Scott & Usher (1996) that it is prudent to be honest about all a priori knowledge and conceptual

biases so as to better test against varying opinions. The last of Lincoln and Guba's criteria is

confirmability, which concerns researcher subjectivity as well as the potential for different

studies under comparable conditions to amass similar results. While the Qualitative tradition

makes no promises of complete objectivity or generalizability, the Phenomenological tradition

typically permits researchers to set aside their prior judgments and rely on the data to give them

an accurate account of any given phenomenon (Creswell, 2017).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) consider *interpersonal issues* an important methodological

issue for the overall trustworthiness and reliability of a study, particularly the importance of

sincerity in the interview process. They also assert the need for patience, empathy, reciprocity,

and the need to consider various strategies that successfully shed academic armour that may otherwise be unpleasant or off-putting to the participants. These traits are among those that I place great value in and try to cultivate each and every day in front of my students already, so it stands to reason that these same traits are transferable to the interview setting with the same net positive results. Marshall and Rossman (2006) also speak to the importance of the *ethical standards* within the research process, specifically the need for informed consent as well as the protected anonymity of the participants. Letters of consent will be given to each participant prior to their interviews in an effort to obtain parental permission as well as outline the purpose of the study, activities involved, and strategies that will be used to protect their identities. The *technical issues* will be minor at best - negotiating entry will not be an issue due to my position in the school and the positive relationships that I have fostered with fellow colleagues, and I have always advocated for the importance of symmetry (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) between my own considerations and the expectations of both my students and colleagues.

The last of the methodological limitations that this study will be privy to concerns the *demographics* of the participants that will be sampled. The data will be collected from students ranging between 15 - 18 years old as well as OCT certified teachers from Holy Cross Catholic Academy (2023), which is a site that has seen a current uptick in population in recent years largely due to the new additions of the High Performer Athlete and International Baccalaureate Programs. Compared to the provincial averages, the demographics of this school's population are generally higher on almost every social metric, including economic stability of their households, access to in-school special education technology, as well as the representation of students that

declare English as their first language (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). This means, among other things, that some of these demographic characteristics must be considered when it comes to generalising the data to a wider population, including those of low income households or schools set within predominantly first-generation immigrant communities. While Qualitative research typically cannot be generalised in such a way - especially considering the methodological strategy of criterion sampling - this study is both credible and dependable based on the principles of the Phenomenological paradigm (Creswell, 2017). As mentioned before, the students and teachers that will be a part of the sample selection are all from the same school, and as such will have the same demographic limitations to consider - all of them have been brought up and are employed by a Western-style education system organised and governed by the existing provincial policymakers at the Ontario Ministry of Education. This means that each and every participant will have a predominantly Western conception of what it means to be a competent teacher in a 21st century classroom, and while this study makes no claims to a broad generalisation beyond those boundaries, it will indeed hold true for sites and locations with similar demographics as well as a functionally comparable outlook of what is expected from the institution of education.

Summary

As it is seen in the description of site, sample selection and data collection methods, as well as the explanation of data analysis strategies and attention to certain methodological issues, the Phenomenological tradition employed in this study will best serve the purpose of discovering

what it means to be a competent and successful teacher in the modern day. The world is changing

and the education system needs to change with it, and this study will hopefully do its part to

further understand this emerging and ever-evolving phenomenon.

Discussion

Description

    In the two decades I have taught Canadian teenagers one thing has become quite clear - to succeed in the classroom means part of the job requires all teachers to become amateur anthropologists.

    Quite simply, we are in the business of studying people and their patterns over time.

    To be fortunate enough to have a long career requires all teachers to look out into various audiences and attempt to understand their students' positions, preferences and opinions not just individually but in the increasingly diverse group dynamics to which they all belong. And, much like the study of anthropology, it is through the observation of these changing audiences over time that certain patterns and trends start to appear for those willing to look. My undergraduate degree was in Classics, which is a field of historical inquiry rooted in the notion that many of the answers we seek about human nature are locked in the stories we tell one another, the myths that have survived throughout the ages, and the archetypal patterns within these narratives worth extrapolating and understanding.

    I immediately put these ideas to use in my profession.

    This meant that I needed to listen to my audience if I wanted to get to know them, and it was always worth my time to listen to my colleagues to understand their own professional positions. For this reason I have chosen to interview ten students and six teachers, all currently enrolled and employed in the Ontario education system. When selecting the students, I purposely selected those with a wide variety of aptitudes, preferences, and interests, as well as a diverse

background of ethnicities to account for Canada's ever growing multiculturalism. Their names are Drake (male, Mediterranean European, 15), Samantha (female, African, 18), Jordan (male, Central Asian, 18), Leticia (female, South American, 16), Maria (female, Mediterranean European, 18), Maurice (male, Northern European, 18), Tamara (female, African, 15), Johanna (female, Eastern European, 18), Marlana (female, Mediterranean European, 17) and Aqila (female, Middle Eastern, 17). All student participants belong to middle to upper-middle class families. The teachers I have chosen were selected from a variety of different departments around Holy Cross Catholic Academy, and were chosen not only because they are serious professionals but because they all have a true and genuine desire to make the world a better place through their vocation. Their names are Assunta (female, Social Studies), Thierry (male, Canadian and World Studies), Doug (male, Technology), Tasha (female, English), Flynn (male, Science) and Betty (female, French).[1]

The hope is that through the explanations of their experiences I will be able to identify and analyse the trends and patterns in their answers and then extrapolate what will hopefully be a composite sketch that will serve as a reasonable explanation of what it takes to be a successful and competent modern teacher.

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[1] All names of the participants have been changed to protect their identities.

Horizontalization of the Data

For organisational purposes, I have separated the answers into two categories, the first concerning the students and the second focusing on the teachers. I have also organised the aggregated answers of each section in a top-down model, the most prevalent answers revealed first and then progressively less so.

STUDENTS

Best lessons:

Every student interviewed mentioned *student involvement* to one degree or another as a defining factor of a successful lesson, the most frequent example of this manifested through continuous group discussions. Drake, Maurice and Tamara said that it made them feel included in the greater conversation and part of the class in a manner which they all similarly described as more than just a passive audience member. Both Leticia and Drake said it was advantageous to listen to other people's opinions and ideas because it makes one think beyond their own boundaries of thought, and Drake asserted that constant debates - either formal or informal - are the best methods of achieving this. Leticia said quite plainly that "it makes you think when your peers have good answers about the material - this offers a sense of connection you would otherwise not know about them and maybe take outside of the classroom and incorporate into your relationship." Aqila, Tamara and Jordan all used the word "interactive" when explaining positive student involvement in lessons, and each one had a practical example: Aqila's were

interactive handouts of exercises during a lesson, Tamara's was a slideshow that all students were able to access in real time, and Jordan's was a history lesson on the Rape of Nanking where students looked at external sources and then as a class rebuilt that horrifying event together. Aqila said that she feels involved when she is allowed to ask questions mid-lecture, and Maria made it clear that "no matter how good a talker you are, people will become disinterested after a certain period of time. You need to break it up."

The second major characteristic that every single student identified as necessary in a successful lesson is *real world relevance*. Eight students said it was very important if not the most important thing, with only Drake and Maurice believing it was somewhat important but not *the* most important. Aqila said relevant connections to the real world is what keeps her interested and engaged, and Jordan remarked that it is his most prevalent source of motivation if a subject matter needs to be learned and remembered. It is definitely subject matter specific, as well: Leticia, Samantha, Maurice, Aqila, Johanna and Jordan all felt that they did not really expect it from math and science classes - Aqila understood that "some stuff in lessons are not applicable in the real world, but is a prerequisite to what is applicable," and Maurice understood both math and science as "a tool to train your brain to think in different ways." Jordan said math class stopped being applicable to him in grade three because he was never going into a math-related field, and Samantha had a similar sentiment - both students admitted that at this point in their academic careers their only motivation to learn math in high school was to get good grades as opposed to understanding the content. In contrast to the math and science courses, Maurice, Leticia, and Maria all believed that real world relevance was absolutely necessary in the

Humanities and English courses to foster successful learning, engagement and understanding of a lesson. Maria said of history class, "who cares for learning just the events? But if you make it relevant it sticks, like the similarities in Hitler's methods of taking over Czechoslovakia compared to Putin's taking over Crimea. These parallels make it relevant because it's happening again." Similarly, Maurice's history teacher framed many of his lessons by "looking at the past to teach different ways of thinking and different human perspectives," which he felt was very useful. There was also some similar discussions about school-to-home connections specifically, including Marlana's science teacher that taught her experiments she could take home and do herself, Maurice's desire to listen to lessons that are layered with skills needed to succeed in the workforce, as well as Johanna's assertion that it is incumbent upon all teachers to be updated and not outdated in their knowledge of modern family dynamics.

Entertaining public speaking skills was another quality that all of the students identified as necessary in delivering a successful lesson. Every single one of them asserted that a teacher needs to understand that it is a point of being entertained - that is, if they want any learning to happen at all, lessons need to start becoming entertaining at their foundational core. As Maurice put it, "when you aren't entertained you feel like Han Solo stuck in carbonite. Time flies when you're having fun." Being entertained makes the transfer of knowledge much easier according to Jordan, Leticia, Tamara and Maria, and it was also true for Drake, Jordan, Johanna, Marlana, Samantha, Maurice and Maria that oratory skills kept them attentive in class; as Jordan put it, "when you are entertained you are more inclined to watch. Just like Broadway." Here it is necessary for us to now define what successful oration is according to the students interviewed,

and what qualities they consider to be entertaining and genuinely worth listening to. Samantha, Jordan, Aqila, Johanna, Leticia and Maria all thought that expressions and appropriate gestures were foundational competencies for teachers to possess - when Johanna was asked what communication skills are needed for a successful teacher, she assertively and without pause said "all of them." Specifically, Samantha said "they imprint in my mind - alliteration, voice inflection, hand gestures," and Tamara said that "gestures and movement are important. If a teacher stands there and doesn't move, it feels like a robot is teaching you." Jordan was quite specific and had much to say here, including the need for a competent teacher to have a dynamic voice with different tones, continuously circulate the room, have a steady speech that is neither too fast nor too slow, and "arm movement is good, but too much is all over the place; it has to match the rhythm and tone of the speaker." Aqila encapsulated most of the sentiments of the students interviewed when she said that this type of expression keeps her on track in a lesson, and both Maria and Leticia said that it is hard to stay invested in a monotone, expressionless voice. These entertaining presentation skills are a fundamental source of motivation for Johanna, Samantha, Maurice, Leticia, Drake and Maria, all of them telling me that it is what makes them come to class and pay attention; as Samantha said, "you don't want to come if it is boring. It doesn't have to be." Aqila, Samantha, Drake, Maria and Tamara spoke of the need for teachers to learn how to speak to different audiences for this level of engagement, and as Tamara put it, "if your job is to give knowledge, you need to know how to articulate your ideas in the most simplistic and understandable way for the audience in front of you." Tamara said she wants to learn "in a way that is catered to her," and to Maria this includes adapting by "knowing your

audience…grade 2 to 12 is very different. Our history teacher was easy to listen to because he talked like we talked to get his point across." Connected to this was the need for a teacher to be able to frame and conduct each lecture as if a natural discussion, a characteristic that Maria, Marlana, Johanna, Maurice and Aqila all understood to be one of the most important aspects of a successful and engaging lesson.

Another popular consensus amongst the students as to what makes a successful lesson is that it needs to be delivered by what they perceive as *genuine and credible teachers*. Marlana said that "the best lessons are when the teacher is invested and interested and you know it," and referenced one of her science teachers that was so excited over the content being taught that it made his students equally as interested. Drake asserted that "a teacher must look like they want to be there and not just going through the motions," and Leticia said that a good lesson is one that is taught by a teacher that can continuously keep attention peaked, especially if that means being able to point an inquisitive student in the right place to find an unknown answer. This clear content knowledge was seen by both Maurice, Jordan and Johanna as manifesting itself in a teacher's ability to go "freestyle" and riff throughout a lesson in ways that show a much larger well of knowledge than simply the required curriculum content, a quality that the students all agreed added to overall teacher credibility. Aqila, Johanna and Maurice all echoed this need for clear and comprehensible teacher content knowledge, with Maurice asserting that "as a student I can't know as much or more than you [the teacher]. How are you going to teach me and make assessments when you don't even know what you're teaching?"

Worst Lessons:

All of the students interviewed had something to say about the *improper use of Powerpoint presentations*, and all agreed that some of the worst lessons they have ever experienced were the ones that had consistently bad applications of this technological tool. Specifically, Marlana, Maurice, Maria, Tamara, Aqila, Samantha, Jordan and Leticia cited reading off slides during lessons as one of the most incompetent and disengaging practises a teacher can partake in. Samantha said that "if slides are just there to copy text down then why is the teacher reading to me? I clearly don't need to be in class to learn", and Maria echoed these sentiments when she asked "why read off a slideshow and then post it online? I can read it myself and there is no point in listening because I can do my notes my own way." Jordan said that when a teacher reads off slides it "makes you want to fall asleep because monotone voices and lots of words on the slides are boring and like a lullaby," and Aqila asserted that it is not a good look when a teacher reads off a screen the entire time, saying that it makes her want to skip the class entirely. Reading off of the slides for an entire lesson was also connected to the credibility of the teacher for Samantha, Maria, Maurice and Jordan, who all believe that if a copious amount of reading is done off of a screen it makes them question a teacher's competency. The practice of putting massive blocks of writing on a screen like this is a habit that Maurice, Aqila, Maria, Samantha and Jordan all vehemently opposed. Maurice and Aqila both used the word "essay" when negatively describing these big blocks of writing, and Johanna and Maurice believe that a disorganised slideshow - that is, skipping through slides too quickly or

containing no organisational consistency - also contributes to their negative feelings about a lesson.

Another quality that half of the students believed contributed to a bad lesson was *poor public speaking skills*, which indeed makes sense considering their identification of the importance of oration skills in the Best Lessons section above. When discussed here, though, it was less about the technical aspects of public speaking and more specifically about the necessity for a teacher to understand the students in front of them, including for both Johanna and Drake the consideration of audience aptitude. Johanna believes that assuming students have a prior knowledge they have not yet acquired is a serious misstep in the teaching process, and cited a math teacher she once had that gave lectures that "sounded like she was working it out in her head as she spoke," which was almost impossible to follow and did not feel the same as "teaching" because of the lack of explanation. Drake does not like it when "the teacher is too smart and does not understand how people learn because they already know it and can't understand how someone cannot understand." Johanna called this "revelling in their own expertise." Maria hates when a teacher just stands still at the front and "talks *at* you and not *to* you," and Jordan echoed this idea when he said that if a teacher has no sense of movement it makes a lesson lack engagement.

The next common characteristic of the worst lessons experienced was the *injection of teacher opinion* in the transmission of knowledge. Samantha felt it was a huge deterrent in the engagement of the audience, particularly because she felt it not only hinders student expression and opinion but makes it feel like all that is expected of her as a student is to be "uniform." She

also feels that this makes her cater to her teacher's opinions in assessments to get a good mark, and admits that her work suffers as a result. Marlana told me a story of a teacher she had that endorsed the Green Party of Canada and disparaged rival political figures in her lessons, framing these biases as fact. "She said it in a way to try and influence. They shouldn't do that." Aqila said that a common and altogether aggravating quality of these opinionated teachers is the constant interruption when attempting to answer questions in a manner not in line with their own perspectives, which deters her from wanting to ever answer any more questions at all.

The next most common quality identified in the worst lessons experienced was a *teacher's lack of knowledge in the subject matter*. Leticia said that "bad lessons are done when teachers clearly do not know what they're talking about or are confused while trying to teach." Marlana said she had a teacher "once say to the class that Italy is still fascist today, and it was hard to take her seriously after that." Aqila agreed with this reasoning and understood that while it is not realistic to know everything, "we cannot be on the same level - why are you there in the front when it sounds like we are on the same level on this topic?" Maria also remarked that this lack of content knowledge is connected to a clear lack in teacher investment, which leads to a lack of interest for everyone else in the room.

The last common characteristic of the worst lessons experienced was the *monotonous repetition in the lessons*, or, as Drake put it, "repetition of the same thing every day just sucks." He clarified this monotony when he said it is the "classic sit down, do the slides, do homework, then repeat." Leticia had a similar explanation when she said "the worst lessons are when the teacher posts work, says to read through it, you do it, hand it in, and do it all again tomorrow."

Maria agreed with this point and said that this style made her bored quickly, which lessens her overall engagement in whatever the teacher is saying.

Best Assignments:

The most prevalent quality almost all the students spoke about as being necessary for an engaging assignment was the implementation of some form of *freedom of choice*. Drake, Samantha, Jordan, Leticia, Maria, Maurice, Tamara, Johanna and Marlana all felt very strongly that this ability to choose some element of the assignment was intrinsic to engage them and keep them motivated to stay interested. Jordan summed up the collective sentiments when he stated that the "freedom to choose equals the freedom of possibility." Drake felt that "choice in roads to travel is important because it isn't always the same thing and it actually makes you want to do something because it is something students will enjoy because they picked the road." Marlana preferred less restrictions and not a foundational amount of requirements, and Tamara believed that the best assignments were those that gave "the freedom to do what you want in terms of playing with different ideas and not just the ones chosen by the teacher." There were numerous examples given in the interviews that exhibit this characteristic of choice, some of which are as follows: both Maurice and Johanna had the same WWII website assignment that put the students into groups and required them to pick a battle and create a soldier to place in this battle, with a choice of format including short story, journal, movie script or stage play. Maurice enjoyed taking the perspective of a soldier as he felt it gave him "a lot of room to choose where to go with the story," and Johanna appreciated the format choice and selected the journal because she

felt it was the most interesting to her. Maria read a novel in English class and then had to relate it to a movie of her choice in terms of theme, a task she felt generated a better understanding of the narrative being studied. Leticia was tasked to do a presentation on a fictional character where she had to pick a character that would best fit her personality type, and Samantha did her grade 8 speech about braids that was sparked by a conversation about appreciation vs appropriation. "The teacher never told me the topic," she said. "It was me seeing something I was interested in, interpreting it and then applying it." Marlana spoke of an authoritarian podcast assignment in a history class that she enjoyed because of the choice afforded to her in terms of which dictators to focus on, and Tamara did a Chinese Uyghur assignment in a geography class that allowed her the freedom to choose her own argumentative road to travel about the issue.

The second most prevalent characteristic that almost all of the students believed helped produce a quality assignment was that it needed to include an avenue to apply their skills in some form of *creative* way. While they used different vocabulary to describe this idea - Aqila used the word "apply," Johanna, Samantha, Marlana, Tamara and Drake used some derivation of the word "create," and Maurice and Jordan used the word "build" - all meant the same thing and were precisely referencing the need to generate something uniquely their own. Samantha and Johanna prefer English assignments for this, including the creation of short stories, and Johanna asserted that she does not like when teachers "put students in a box" and do not allow them to explore and express themselves with the freedom that is needed for their best work. Aqila felt that assignments needed to be more than just memorization and regurgitation of a lesson, and Drake enjoyed his auto mechanics class for exactly this reason, as the assignments in these types of

classes - mostly project-based by nature - made it far easier to learn something than simply memorising it from a book. He cited the experience of taking an engine apart and rebuilding it as very practical and instructive, as well as creating a mini-roadster out of a small block of wood to race with his fellow students at the end of the semester. Similarly, Maurice discussed a grade 12 science project where he built a chemical compound out of styrofoam and wooden sticks, and it was enjoyable not only because he was able to choose which one he wanted to do, but by building it with his hands and making it 3-D it made the whole experience that much more tangible and real. Tamara said she appreciates when assignments require a lot of creativity because it makes her feel like it is not just about being right or wrong, but rather about succeeding. She cited an entrepreneur activity in a geography class where she was required to build her own business that she felt would be successful, and she chose a delivery cannabis truck. She acknowledged the perception and controversy surrounding such a topic, but because her teacher allowed her the freedom to choose this business to create, it motivated her to take this assignment far more seriously in the long run.

Another important trait of a successful assignment is the *personal connection* the students have to the content. Jordan said he needs to enjoy the subject matter personally if there is to be motivation to follow through at all, and Leticia likes when assignments ask her to tap into personal experiences and interest because it "teaches me to look at myself in a different, comparative way." Aqila wants an assignment that "pulls from the far reaches of my brain and uses skills from other places that I don't normally use," and Maria stressed the importance for teachers to understand that they need to create assignments in a way that their students relate to

them specifically to allow for better understanding and adaptability. Maurice gave an example of when he did an in-class essay for Elie Wiesel's *Night* - the subject matter was personally engaging and interesting to him in such a way that it did not feel like work and indeed made him want to do his best on it.

Another popular quality of a successful assignment that was discussed was the *connection to the outside world*. Marlana felt that this connection to the real world is where she gets her best work done because it makes her want to continue with the research, and Jordan said he believes the same thing and asserted that "real world connections are important in assignments because students are more inclined to be motivated to push through and not get as frustrated with the work or want to quit." Maria felt that this connection to the outside world needs to be manifested in a skill or content idea learned in class that will be useful when applied outside of it, and Samantha said that the best assignments are the ones that say, "this is the topic, now go out in the real world and figure it out."

When it came to the question of which types of assignments are optimal for student success, Marlana, Jordan and Aqila favoured presentations, Drake and Jordan liked group projects, and Aqila, Maurice and Johanna preferred doing writing assignments. Tamara felt very strongly about this topic and stressed the importance of diversity in assessments because "people do not learn the same way. Whatever I am asked to do I'll do it, but I'm not the only person on this earth, of course. Other people that are good at essays may not be good at presentations." Samantha spoke to this point as well, saying that, "I like presentations and speaking assignments so I would be fine if all assignments were like this, but at the same time recognize that other

people have different things they're good at, and the teacher should try to hit all different strengths." She also felt that diversity in types of assignments was good to build a well-rounded student, and Drake agreed with this point because he saw the importance of "teaching students different ways on how to do stuff." Johanna, Jordan and Maurice enjoy new experiences when it comes to types of assignments, or, as Jordan put it, the "sense of mystery as to what I am going to do next." Both Maria and Leticia agreed that this diversity has its limits, though. As Maria put it, "there shouldn't be too much diversity that every assignment is different, because then you will not have a chance to build upon skills learned through feedback." A hypothetical example she cited was "say a teacher gives feedback and advice on a presentation, but if they never assign a presentation again, why give feedback? If you give a presentation at the beginning of the year, then in the middle, and then at the end, people will have a chance to get better at that skill of presenting."

Worst Assignments:

The most spoken about quality of some of the worst assignments the students could remember being given were those that have *unrealistic expectations.* Some of the specific unrealistic expectations remembered were as follows: Leticia did not appreciate when assignments ask for a lot of components in a little amount of time, as well as overloading and piling on of assignments before previous ones have yet to be handed in. Drake echoed this last point when he brought up teachers that make assignments too hard, because "if half the class fails, it is obviously a bad assignment because the kids didn't get it." Johanna had a grade 10

careers class assignment that was built upon the premise that "the students had to pick a prospective future career at 15 years old in an eight-week half semester, and claiming 'I don't know' wasn't an option." She also mentioned a grade 12 religion assignment that required her to pick two articles and summarise. "That's it? Just summarise? In grade 12? Way to keep me engaged. How can you make interesting things so dull? Weirdly easy for grade 12." Maurice remembered an online biology assignment that attempted to be interactive but was very dry and boring with way too much information to intake in one sitting, and if that was not enough, "you had to teach yourself, which made it worse." Aqila discussed at length the need for clear boundaries and specific expectations, and mentioned a teacher that assigned projects by explaining all the things they could not do but was never actually clear on what they could do - "Don't tell me I have creative freedom and then give me so many unclear restrictions."

The next most spoken about characteristic of many of the worst assignments experienced was that they focused far too much on *rote memorization and regurgitation*. Aqila felt that asking someone what they learned is not an adequate way of testing their knowledge, and Drake asserted that memorization is easy but admits he learns very little in the process. Johanna recollected about a "great person essay" in a history class, and not only did she not get to choose the subject matter but she had no room to voice her own opinion, as it was less of an essay and more of a paraphrasing and blending of facts from different sources. Jordan encapsulated the student sentiment on this topic when he said that "forcing me to memorise things for no reason, just to memorise, does no good."

Exams and tests were unanimously derided by the students as some of the worst types of assessments that can be administered. Tamara, Jordan, Drake and Marlana all spoke about the antiquated process that goes into testing knowledge in this manner, as Marlana sees no value in standardised testing and both Jordan and Drake admitted that after a test they forget almost all of the information by the next day. A fruitless process, Jordan felt, as "you spend a long time studying the material, and then do the test and then it's all gone." Tamara identified the discrepancy between the push to be inclusive to all learning styles and the fact that final exams are still written on paper: "We learn something over the course of a semester and then do a basic pen and paper exam. It doesn't make sense because exams should follow KICA [the provincial marking expectations] as well and not be just writing based. Why not do a presentation for an English exam?"

Another quality that bad assignments have is when students are put into groups with *low-value group members*. Leticia specifically said that she does not like the practice of being in a group she cannot pick. Sometimes, she admits, it can be beneficial because "good teachers will partner the right people for you to work well with, but way too many times the teacher puts you together with people that don't work or you have past issues with that the teacher doesn't know about." Maria and Maurice had a similar opinion on being in groups they did not choose, and Maurice told me about a "stages of life" assignment in a religion class where he and his six-person group had to create a very detailed story about a person's life that they had to make up. He said that "I was the general of the group with another guy, but four people did absolutely nothing and I had to do all the work in the last two days." Drake similarly hated being in groups

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that have members that do very little, and "it's especially worse when you tell the teacher and they do nothing about it."

Lack of personal value in an assignment was also an important factor to a few students, Marlana noting the need for justification of an assessment as an absolute necessity for her to have any value in it at all. She cited a religion assignment that made her create an original Hindu god, and considering this religion has millions of existing gods already, it personally felt like parody to her and she did not like the experience at all. Jordan, Johanna and Samantha all thought that the lack of choice in assignments lessened their own personal value in it, especially to Samantha when it is clear that the assessment is meant "to stroke the teacher's ego by feeding their own opinions on the topic." Maria took issue particularly when it is clear that the teacher has absolutely no interest or engagement in the assignment at all, which makes her personal feelings in it almost nonexistent.

Another common component of some of the worst assignments experienced is the *lack of a real world connection*, or, as Jordan put it, assignments that need "a grander scheme connected to the wider world." Aqila believes that "assignments need to emulate real life and reflect real world scenarios in some broad way if you really want to prepare us," and Maria had much to say about these types of assignments, which she felt were cookie-cutter assessments that are clearly decades old - for her, bristol board projects are striking examples of this.

Repetition of assignment type was also an indicator of some of the worst assessments the interviewed students ever had to complete. Drake believes that variety in assignments is welcome because "less of the same is good," Marlana feels that this pedagogy keeps things fresh

in the classroom, and Jordan believes that when types of assignments repeat it builds a lack of motivation to do the same thing ad nauseam. Tamara offered a reason why this is and cited the many differences in student preferences, asserting that "people do not learn the same way…and if they have to do the same thing over and over and they can't do it because it just isn't in them, then it may hinder them reaching their potential because they have to do something over and over and they're just not naturally good at it at all."

Classroom Teaching Practices:

When it came to the best and worst experiences in classroom teaching practices, the students had much to say and there were some definitive patterns that formed when listening to the responses.

The most prevalent characteristic that seven students spoke about was *promoting a sense of fairness and equality in the classroom*. This manifested itself in two ways - bias towards others and equal opportunity for all. As Samantha assertively put it, "favouritism has got to go." Both Aqila and Marlana agreed with this idea, Aqila believing teachers should never pick on people or have visible favourites and Marlana expressing contempt about the moment a teacher's relationship with another student can be construed as favouritism, especially when it comes to assessments. Johanna understands that teachers may have their own biases - "they are human after all," she attested, "but they should give their attention equally to everyone as much as it is in their power," and cited more than a few teachers that "clearly wanted to be accepted by a certain clique of students and in doing so kind of rejected the rest of us." She said that teachers

"have a responsibility to be the unbiased figure in the class, and have a responsibility to every single person in their class." Leticia said that there are some teachers that even disregard rude or disrespectful behaviour just to move on, sometimes even making allowances for such behaviour; her example here was "he's just a guy, he doesn't know any better." Maurice maintained the notion that for this feeling of bias and favouritism to be remedied, a competent teacher "must instil the rules on the first day and tell students that everyone is equal no matter what." Maria felt that this conversation came down to "equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome," with the former being far more fair and necessary in the classroom than the latter. "Everyone," she said, "needs to be marked on the same level and have the same goal." She went on to say that "we [the students] aren't stupid. When we see other students going to the teacher and cry about marks and always getting them changed, it builds hostility towards that teacher and that student." She went on to say "that a teacher needs to give a student whatever they need to get the best mark possible, which means creating assignments in ways that promote personal strengths and help people in their own way." Samantha and Aqila also said those specific words - "equality of opportunity" - and agreed that this fosters a sense of fairness in the classroom, which to Aqila meant sometimes giving certain students more time and care than others based on strengths and limitations. Maurice said there has to be an "equal look" to all assignments - when I pressed him on what this meant, he also described equality of opportunity, and gave an example: as much as possible, teachers should not look at names on assignments when grading them.

The next most talked about quality of successful classroom teaching practices is that teachers *cannot lose control* in a confrontation with students. Marlana said that "teachers cannot

get angry because when you get angry you make mistakes and lose self control. This shows that

if you cannot control yourself you cannot control the class, and it also shows that students have

dominance." Jordan also believes that teachers should not get angry over everything, and Tamara

insisted that "teens never respond well to authority, so using it excessively in class never runs

well. By yelling or threatening, they lose control in the process." On the topic of yelling,

Samantha, Marlana and Maria also felt that it simply does not work as an effective form of

classroom management, especially during confrontations. Maria recounted a story of a grade 5

teacher that had a lot of discipline issues and just could not deal with it "so she would just yell,

which made it so much worse because it added fuel to the fire and those students would thrive on

the chaos." Tamara also believes that shouting at a student only makes it worse for the teacher,

and Samantha argued that at the high school level yelling can even make a teacher the butt of a

joke and open to ridicule. Both Marlana and Jordan did acknowledge that yelling can be effective

when it is not overused; Jordan felt that if you normalise it people will ignore it, but if a teacher

that never yells starts to yell it has more power and gives more credibility to the discipline. To

this end, use of specific tones of voice is a far better tactic than yelling to Marlana, Jordan and

Maria. To Marlana, "tone is more important than volume when disciplining students, and a

deadpan 'I'll wait' with an intense stare always works well in quieting a class down." Jordan said

that by putting your voice into a lower pitch, it models a feeling of disappointment, and even

cited the very parent-like "I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed" as a far more effective tool than

anger. He felt that if "a teacher that is constantly proud and happy with your work says this, the

disappointment hurts so much more."

Knowing your audience is also an important classroom teaching practice that Leticia, Johanna, Drake, Aqila and Tamara believe all competent teachers need to possess. Drake insisted that "talking and having conversations with your students shows you can be open in the class and don't have to lie to the teacher and always watch what you say." He claimed that this shows students that the teacher cares about something beyond the subject matter. Johanna said that teachers need to distinguish when someone is purposely acting out and not purposely acting out, and the best way to do this is to get to know the students and their behaviours. Leticia told me of a time when "a teacher didn't know the proper pronunciation of my name the entire semester. How can you take someone seriously and listen to them if they keep doing this over and over?" Aqila argued that "a teacher needs to have different expectations for each student, depending on their strengths," and she feels that it is important for teachers to know where student aptitudes are and where everyone needs help. Tamara strongly believed that "teachers should conference with every student to see where they're at and get to know them so they don't generalise to thirty students." As an example, she said "don't assume that no questions equals no need for help. Some students are too shy and not comfortable enough to go up and ask." Both Aqila and Tamara said that knowing your audience can only happen when teachers remember what it was like to be a teenager - Aqila believes teachers need to remember that they too messed up when they were kids, which Tamara said could help to "relate and reason with a student instead of being an authoritarian."

Respect was the next most prevalent quality of successful classroom teaching practice, with Maurice, Marlana, Samantha, Aqila and Drake discussing the need for this quality to

produce a successful learning environment. Aqila asserted that a teacher needs to be respected by their students for any work to be done, and both Marlana and Drake asserted that this respect needs to go both ways. Marlana said that "teacher-student reciprocity is necessary" in this regard, and Drake felt that a mutual understanding, respect and appreciation for each other's positions makes for a good classroom dynamic. As an example, he felt that "teachers need to understand that students have three other classes, so don't make their life more difficult than it needs to be." Both Samantha and Maurice feel that this lack of respect is most evident in the various rude behaviours of some students, all of which need to be eliminated immediately. Maurice's example of this is when the teacher is talking he believes the students should be quiet, and if someone talks they get one warning and if they still talk they should get kicked out. Samantha's examples were also talking when others were talking, as well as saying incessantly rude things and being a snob in class. Both students believed that such behaviour needs to have consistent consequences or the lack of respect may grow in the class.

The next six characteristics of successful classroom teaching practices were spoken of by two students each during the interviews:

Samantha and Jordan identified the *engagement of the audience* as a necessity for successful classroom teaching. Samantha asserted that "we are social beings, and when you suppress that in the class it can come out in an atrocious and aggressive way. When teachers cater to the social part of being human, and give a venue to talk and be heard, this unruly behaviour is not necessary anymore, because the social aspect is satisfied." Similarly, Jordan also felt that engagement of the audience would certainly cut down on discipline issues, citing this

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example: "I am more disciplined in my history class because the teacher is straight up and tells me to get back to task if I am zoning out, which holds me accountable. But in science class I am way more goofing around because the teacher doesn't engage us during lessons."

Tamara and Drake claimed that *trust* was an important facet necessary in controlling a class of students. Drake believes that "trust is very important. People are less disciplined when they know the teacher doesn't trust them…when I know a teacher trusts me it makes me not want to break that trust with the teacher because I don't want to let them down and disappoint them. The teacher believed in me, and if I break that trust I deserve what I get." For Tamara, trust was needed because "students will tell you what's going on in their lives if they trust you and have open dialogue with you."

Marlana and Aqila said that it is necessary for a teacher to be *genuine and sincere*. Aqila said that a teacher needs to feel natural in front of an audience, and Marlana said that "sincerity is important in being fair and accepted, especially when teachers need to say sorry for something."

Jordan and Aqila both felt that a teacher needs to *pick their battles* in the classroom. Jordan said that if you fight students on everything it just continues the contentious behaviour, and Aqila's exact words were "Don't focus on the small stuff that isn't worth it."

Maria and Tamara spoke about the negative impact of *immediately sending students to the office* in a disciplinary altercation. Tamara felt it showed that a teacher is not willing to reach out to the student, and Maria said that "if you send the kids to the office right away it does

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nothing and sends the wrong message, and the principal will just give a blanket punishment that does nothing to fix the problem."

Maurice and Aqila both believe that *boundaries* need to be set up between teacher and student for successful classroom teaching. Maurice asserted that "proper discipline is being able to connect with the students on a real level in conversation, but at the same time have the ability to get serious when the time calls for it." Aqila echoed these sentiments when she said that "a boundary is to understand when it is time to work and when it's time to be friendly. Be consistent in the way you present yourself."

When discussing classroom setup, conversations generally lead to two major areas of interest - *desk placement* and *wall decorations*. Desk placement was an important topic of interest for all students, especially their shared animosity for solo rows of desks in single-file lines - or, as Drake put it, "the typical exam setup." Eight students spoke very negatively about this type of desk placement, with Maurice, Marlana, Tamara, Drake and Maria specifically saying that such a setup makes them feel "alone" even in a class full of people. Maurice said it makes him feel "horrible" and "isolated," Marlana said it makes her feel "annoyingly on my own," Maria said it makes her feel like she is on her own island, Tamara noted its similarity to a "military setting," Drake felt like this setup "makes students think the teacher doesn't want them to collaborate," and Johanna remarked that it made her "feel like I'm still in Covid." The alternative, it seems, manifested itself in two ways. The first is sitting in groups, and was mentioned positively by Johanna, Maurice, Tamara, Jordan, Samantha, Aqila and Drake. Tamara said that sitting in groups "promotes collaboration and you may even learn something from

fellow people in the group," and Drake said it "makes you feel connected to others" - both of these opinions were the agreed-upon sentiment of the other students that also preferred this setup. Jordan, Samantha, and Drake said groups of three work best, while Johanna and Aqila specified groups of four are most ideal. The second most preferred setup was the "U-shape" set up with the opening facing the front of the class, and was mentioned positively by Johanna, Tamara, Jordan, Maria, Maurice and Aqila. Maurice remarked that this setup was best "because open concept is good for discussion," Jordan felt that it gave students a sense of connection to the rest of the class, and Maria asserted that it was a conducive set up for a teacher because "everyone can see you [the teacher] and you can talk to all students, and it doesn't look like you're hiding behind a desk." As for assigned seating arrangements, Leticia, Tamara and Drake all spoke negatively about it, Drake saying that it is a way to tell students right away that "I don't trust you" and Leticia articulated her distaste for being put into groups "with people that make you feel miserable for an entire semester and you're stuck." Regardless of the structure, Maria, Marlana, Jordan, Drake, and Tamara all agreed that whatever desk setup the teacher chooses, it must promote active discussion between all students.

Wall decorations were also an important facet of the classroom set up. Both Marlana and Samantha used the same "wrapping paper on a present" analogy to describe the positive impact of wall decorations, and Johanna, Aqila, Samantha, and Jordan all used the word "prison" to articulate the atmosphere in a classroom when there is nothing on the walls, with Samantha visualising it best by saying that "grey walls and grey floors look like solitary confinement." Maurice believes that stuff on walls gives comfort, and Jordan feels that it brings a sense of

liveliness to the room. But, while there was generally a positive response to wall decorations, it was clear that *student assignments on walls* specifically works best to foster an inviting atmosphere. Drake said it shows students that "your work matters and you feel validated" and Johanna said that seeing other students' work on walls was nice because it "shows other people survived the class." Maria felt that seeing student work on walls gives "more personal importance in an assignment because people are going to see what I did," and Aqila agreed with this and felt that all student work needs to go on walls to promote a sense of fairness and belonging. Samantha, Aqila and Jordan all used the same word to describe seeing student work on the walls - they said it gave the room a "homey" feel to it, and Samantha best explained it by saying that "it feels like going into a house and seeing kids' drawings on fridges. It does not look like dead space where creativity goes to die, but a second home with the same decorative needs." Jordan, Johanna, and Maria believe that there is a limit to what should go on walls, speaking particularly negatively when it comes to "teacher motivational posters" according to Jordan, "useless school board posters" to Johanna, and "inspirational teacher quotes that nobody cares about" to Maria.

Technology:

Smartphones were a big topic of discussion, with seven students discussing this technology at length during the interviews. Johanna, Drake, Marlana, Tamara, and Jordan all agreed that smartphones are negatively distracting to the overall learning process in a modern classroom. Johanna admitted to the need to have her phone in her hand at all times, and reflected

on this preference, saying "I get the need for phones, because personally I have anxiety that something bad is going to happen and I need to be beside my phone to get the text. I keep it close, and if someone texts I quickly look at it and then turn it back over, and it doesn't disrupt my learning. But most people I know just use it as a distraction." Drake talked about his own personal battle with becoming distracted easily on the phone, and also acknowledged that if he were a teacher it would be a serious problem getting students' attention. Marlana said that TikTok is a generational problem in this regard, and Jordan agreed when he stated that clips and videos are the largest distraction for him and his friends. Tamara feels that even though students are easily and clearly distracted by this technology, it does not mean there is no value in it; in her words, "anything can be bad." Jordan also believes that it is tough to take phones entirely out of the classroom because some people actually need them to keep calm, using them as what he referred to as "a sense of comfort - I see people with their phones by their side, just swiping up, down, left, right. All the time." Samantha asserted that phones are bad for learning in the classroom for exactly this reason, and for her it only makes sense that during lessons they should be off and away. She went on to say that "I personally hate when people have their phones out when they are having a conversation, and believe the same thing about what happens in class." Marlana agreed with this sentiment when she said that it is a technology that "devalues life and adds to the degradation of society." In the discussion of how to remedy this behaviour in the classroom, most students felt there is little to do at this point, expressing very little in terms of a proactive policy moving forward. Aqila, Marlana and Drake felt it was a matter of trust, all believing that teachers should allow phones until they see the students misusing them, with Aqila

specifically mentioning that she does not like it when teacher pedagogy is "phones away and if I see it once I'm taking it away." Marlana also hates the "phone bin" concept of taking phones away and putting them in a box at the front of the room, and Johanna similarly expressed her dislike of teachers confiscating her personal property and said that taking the phones does nothing but build more animosity between teachers and students. Marlana believes that teachers have an obligation to address this massive issue and suggested that it needs to be discussed at length in the classroom, not just in an informal setting but possibly embedded into the curriculum. Tamara agreed with this and said that "if you want to have more participation in class, you need to get comfortable with incorporating phones into a class. Use it to their advantage and make it a more progressive space to learn."

Computers were the second piece of technology discussed by students, and in stark contrast to smartphones it was discussed much more favourably and is seen as far more beneficial to the overall learning process. Aqila stated that using computers for taking notes helps immensely, and Maria, Maurice and Samantha said that understanding how to create engaging slideshows on the computer is an important skill set for both teachers and students, Maria going so far as to claim that this is absolutely foundational for proper learning in the modern day. This focus on teacher competency in computer use was by far the biggest issue amongst the students pertaining to this particular technology, as more than half the students stressed the need for the teacher to know what they are doing in this domain. Aqila, Jordan and Johanna believe that the proper use of slideshow technology is to have little writing and lots of pictures. Jordan feels that "when teachers use PowerPoint properly it brightens the lectures", and

when I pressed him as to what he meant by "properly" he said that he wanted a clean layout with less writing and the use of some transitions but not too many, or it runs the risk of being distracting. Maria said that the use of videos as a supplementary resource in a slideshow could be beneficial, but "if you are watching YouTube videos every class it is a waste of time because I can watch the same thing at home." Maria also believes that teachers need to be taught how to use technology first before they can ever teach their students, and cited a teacher she once had that introduced a computer programming app just because the school board wanted to implement this new software into the classrooms. Because there was no real purpose and the teacher did not know how to use it, the students were not interested in it at all. Both Aqila and Maurice believe that this is due to teachers not evolving with the times - Maurice spoke of the necessity to "keep it fresh" in the classroom, and Aqila remarked that "we are an evolving society, and classes need to keep up."

The Internet was the next most talked about technology by the students, and both Jordan and Samantha discussed at length how useful it is to access information with such ease and speed in a modern classroom. Jordan recounted an example when he had to do a culminating project in a history class and the abundance of valid sources he found online made his life so much easier. Leticia and Maurice both appreciated the convenience of being able to do homework anywhere now, but Maurice spoke at great length about how the internet has fostered numerous bad habits in recent years for both teachers and students. "I had a grade 12 religion class," he said, "and it was a good teacher that speaks well, but you can just tell the content has been done over and over again. It [the internet] has made teachers lazy." For students he had a more scathing critique,

saying that "if kids have a chance to cheat, they're gonna cheat, and 95-98% of the students in this school do not have the integrity not to cheat if given the situation, and technology [hear speaking of the ability to access information on the internet] allows for lots of situations where you can cheat." He goes on to say that "technology, especially the internet, actually lessens the integrity of students."

It is interesting to note that the last type of technology discussed was only spoken about by one student, Drake, but he made quite a compelling case for the use of video games in the classroom. "Video games would be good to use in the classroom and can teach you important stuff. Think of Call of Duty, students could be tested on the accuracy of the narrative…it would have to be done properly with the right amount of time allotted for it. Like, play a mission, pause it in certain places to teach, then go back to the game to progress."

It is also interesting to note that there were four students who felt it necessary to take a step back from technology to some degree in the classroom. Both Aqila and Johanna suggested that there is still a need to learn note taking skills, especially in the elementary panel, with Johanna saying even in high school students in grades nine and ten should still use pen and paper. Both Leticia and Maurice admitted that they learn far better when they write something and then read off of it to study, instead of going to a posted slideshow (which Maurice said he never does) or reading someone else's words (which Leticia said never helps).

Miscellaneous Connections:

After all of the specific questions asked on lessons, assignments, classroom teaching practices and technology, I then asked every student what other qualities not yet mentioned did they feel a competent and successful teacher had. These were their answers:

Maria, Drake, Jordan, Samantha, Johanna, Maurice and Tamara all said that it is very important for a successful teacher to be able to *relate to their students* in some positive way. Samantha does not like it when teachers act like a boss and treat her like she is an employee. She called this a "robotic feel", and said that it does not land well with students and makes her question a teacher's competency if they have to continually bark orders to get their message across. Maria believes that relating to students makes them inclined to listen to the teacher more, which means that as a teacher "you need to understand the generation in front of you. For example, to teach Gen-Z you need to know TikTok and you need to know what video games they're playing to be relatable when you need to be." It is important to both Jordan and Drake that a teacher is willing to share something about their lives, and both students believe this helps with their overall relatability. Drake said that "one of the worst things a teacher can do when asked about their life is to shut it down because it is shutting down a meaningful connection beyond the classroom that would help students understand the teacher's position better." To both Maurice and Tamara this relatability is best attained when teachers remember when they themselves were students - Tamara was very passionate about the necessity for teachers to "walk in each student's shoes," and Maurice used another metaphor when he said that the students "need to know we are all part of the same race and teachers are just a bit ahead." For Johanna,

this means that the teachers need to have empathy above anything else, and said that "high school is very important. Between the ages of fourteen to seventeen is a crazy time in life and lots of things happen in those years, and there are some students dealing with things that happened in the past that are now resurfacing as they're maturing and becoming adults. Teachers need to be more understanding of this."

Drake, Aqila, Tamara, Marlana, and Maurice all agreed that a successful classroom teacher must be *open to all discussions*. Drake said that doing so "makes the student more open and not shy, and you are more willing to go up to the teacher and ask questions more comfortably." Maurice understood that dealing with certain situations can be hard, but teachers need to be open to discussion and not turn students away just because it may be uncomfortable - to him, this means being objective and having no judgement. Some positive practices to achieve this were discussed as well - Aqila suggested not getting defensive in class or if a student questions a grade, Marlana appreciates teachers that listen to student opinions and contemplate and challenge them instead of just shooting them down and moving on, and Tamara thinks that students should be part of the discussion when it comes to the curriculum, as having more of a say in their learning would make students want to come to class more frequently.

It was also important for Tamara, Maurice, Johanna, Marlana and Samantha that teachers *embrace the role as a parent/guardian* and understand this position of power. Samantha referred to this as an "academic parent," and she recounted the story of "an elementary teacher that was a second mother that I never wanted to disappoint, and when the teacher was disappointed it lit a fire that made me never want to disappoint her again. This fear of disappointment motivates

because it hits a special part of the human ego and it's because of my actions that this person I respect feels this way….it's not imposed guilt but more like self guilt that I feel when I disappoint her. That's stronger." Johanna felt that teachers have this powerful unofficial "parental" obligation to care for their students, and Tamara would prefer if all teachers were willing to adapt to this guardian role and understand that what they do and what they say can profoundly affect their students. For Marlana, this means a competent and successful teacher should not only understand the value they have to their students, but they should care about the success of their students as well, and the worst thing they can say is " I don't care if you fail."

Tamara, Samantha and Aqila felt a successful teacher also *makes students want to learn*. Tamara believes that "a good teacher makes you want to come to class," and Aqila asserted that "we want to come to school to learn, and if you tell students why they should care what you are teaching them, that importance will make us come back." Samantha agreed and said that "you have to make your students care about what we are learning and or they won't listen to you and won't care to disappoint you."

Both Aqila and Marlana believe that a successful classroom teacher was one that was *likeable*. For both students this means that all teachers need to be authentic and genuine and not act like someone else, and it is important that they are generally just a nice person and not condescending.

Proper attire was important to both Jordan and Marlana, or as Jordan put it, "the way they dress is very important." He went on to say that "teachers need to have a sense of style that

matches their personality, and this gives a sense of maturity and professionalism. It's hard to take someone seriously if they dress sloppy and lazy looking."

Lastly, both Aqila and Drake felt that a successful teacher is one that *fosters healthy competition* in the classroom. Aqila believes that this experience is good in class because it "emulates the real world and fosters doing better." Drake claimed that "competition is always good because no one likes to lose, and it forces students to learn more and not lose next time the game is played. We all like to win, it's like a driving force to learn."

TEACHERS

Best Lessons:

The most prevalent characteristic of the best lessons for all teachers interviewed was *public speaking skills*. Flynn quite assertively said that "audience engagement needs to be 100% at all times," and both Assunta and Tasha said it matters to the overall success of the lesson whether or not the audience is engaged and has a positive response to the things a teacher says. Doug believes a teacher must do all they can to not be boring, and both Thierry and Betty feel that appropriate jokes at the right time always helps, especially "self-deprecating ones that show your humanity" according to Betty. All six teachers also told me that they change the way they speak depending on the audience in front of them, and these changes were identified by both Doug and Flynn as "tone, pitch, and expression." Betty, Assunta, and Tasha said that one criteria to alter their style of speaking was age, specifically the differentiation between juniors and seniors. Tasha said that there should be a "more mature vocabulary for older grades," Betty said that "seniors get more informal rhetoric and rapport from me because they have earned that level of maturity," and Thierry said that teaching grade 12s should be closer to "adult to adult, much like the old OAC [the provincial grade 13 that students born before 1984 attended], and with the grade 9s you need to be a bit more strict because they need it." Thierry also believes that a teacher needs to change their oration based on the aptitude streams in front of them, particularly the differences between academic, applied and locally developed courses. Tasha also spoke of changing vocabulary based on the sensitivity of the audience in front of them, telling me that

teachers need to be "attuned to their audience because some students you can joke with and others you cannot." Both Thierry and Betty admitted that these competencies get better with experience, and Betty, Doug and Assunta all believe that successful rhetoric and oration includes more informal elocution to better engage the audience. When I asked each teacher whether or not it was important to entertain their audience, the answers were somewhat divisive. Doug, Flynn and Betty all said yes, Flynn asserting that "teaching is 90% theatre" and Doug even going so far to say that "as a teacher you are an entertainer and work the room and talk to the audience in the same way." Thierry said that being entertaining was "sometimes in the job description but not always," and both Assunta and Tasha said that if students are entertained in a lesson then so be it, but that is not the primary purpose, to which both agreed should be to learn and inform.

Student involvement was mentioned by four teachers during the interviews as a major driving force as to what makes a successful lesson. Flynn felt fostering entire-class participation was very important, and stated an example when he turned a science class into an escape room as a culminating performance task where the students need to work together to succeed. Assunta agreed with this sentiment and explained a WWI unit task that always lands well with the students: in teaching the methods of the Schlieffen Plan that precipitated Germany's involvement in World War I, she puts students into groups of three or four and "we pretend that they are Germany in 1914 and asked to come up with a plan of attack given the technology and resources they had at the time." She would give them a map, chart paper and markers, with zero access to both computers or smartphones. She said that one of the best qualities learned in this lesson is having to talk to other people and deal with other people's perspectives, however dissenting they

may be. Both Flynn and Thierry agreed with her, as well - Thierry told me of his many student-led law debates that force students to defend their points of view in real time, and Flynn asserted that "the best lessons are ones that students gain something more than when they came in, whether it's the content or a new outlook or perspective not held before." Tasha also feels that class discussions are important, and said that her most successful lessons are student-driven in ways that "force you to go off your plan because they are so engaged." She said that spontaneity in the moment always does well because it focuses on student interest, which further drives engagement in the content.

Assunta, Flynn, Doug, and Thierry all assert that some of their best lessons are those that are primarily *skills-based*. Thierry strongly believes that "content is important, but transferable skills are more important." He referred back to his law debates here and highlighted the importance of being able "to think on your feet and accept criticism as well as defend your position, all skills needed to help them in the future as adults." Assunta also agreed that public speaking is a vital skill to learn, to which she referred to numerous examples of presentations she assigns to cultivate this quality in her students. In Doug's auto mechanics classes, hands-on skills are the best lessons that the students enjoy most, and noted that part of his job is always finding new cars to work on because, as he put it, "students want to work on live cars. Dead cars they won't even touch." Flynn feels that all successful lessons must be ones that promote and encourage self-advocacy, "because in the end that one skill will improve every part of that student's life in and out of the classroom."

Another important quality of a successful lesson was *real world relevance*, with Doug, Thierry, Assunta, and Betty using the words "very important" to describe its overall contribution to the quality of a lesson. Doug asserted that "teachers need to know about the outside world, and too many of them just know the textbook and lack any outside experience." Thierry suggested the same thing and said that "when you teach students how to interact and how to solve problems they can then transfer that understanding to the workforce with a boss and colleague, which means that teachers need to know what's going on in the workforce." Betty agreed with this and believes that "a teacher must be in the know to extract anything from the real world and put it into a lesson at any moment." Doug and Betty both spoke at length about the importance of a lesson relating to the students' lives and how the content affects them personally. Doug said that the best lessons were those "that relate to their lives in some way, like when I have real tradespeople come in and talk to my class about their pathways in the job market." In a grade 9 French class Betty has students lean into their hobbies, fears, likes and dislikes to teach proper conjugation of words they may actually use if given the opportunity. Assunta said that this personal connection should also extend to teachers as well, and cited the Parenting class she teaches where "the grade 11s know about my life and my kids because I have to teach by example for it to be a good class." Thierry felt that a broader connection to the world made for a successful lesson as well, and explained that "in social studies we can bring in lots of different current stuff in the news about what's going on around the world and with all the different governments of the world, especially in the history and law and civics classes." Flynn made the point that "we need to change education to match society, and it is not done as much as I know

everyone would like," and Doug agreed with this sentiment and explained to me a time he saw

this in action when he found out that his students in auto mechanics class were learning the same

mathematical skills at the same time in their actual math class, but there was no connection

between the two departments. Tasha and Flynn were the only teachers that said that while real

world relevance is indeed important, it depends on the situation. Flynn feels that in a science

class it depends on the concepts being taught, as some things are just too abstract for the

audience to connect to their own lives, and Tasha stated that it depends on the narrative study in

her English classes, saying that "sometimes there needs to be a bit of hyperbole and fantasy

fiction that doesn't work when connected to realism."

The last characteristic of a successful lesson that was discussed was that it had to be

provided by a teacher that was *passionate about the subject matter*. Assunta claimed that it is a

must for teachers to have a genuine interest in that which they teach about every day, and Tasha

said quite plainly that "I have to like the subject matter so the audience feeds off my excitement.

If you are not excited, why should they be?" She cited *Macbeth*, *Frankenstein*, and *1984* as her

favourite novel studies to teach, and said that "even if students don't like these books or plays, at

least my energy about the content makes it tolerable for them." For Flynn this was a matter of

personal interest, which he said will help teachers begin every class with what he feels is an

interesting hook to get students engaged in the topic of the lesson, and as a science teacher he

named a few instances of "explosive events to get the students questioning things right off the

bat."

Worst lessons:

The most popular aggregate quality of the worst lessons experienced are ones that are too *content-heavy*. As Flynn put it, "introductory lessons are like this, necessary, but they can be laborious. Teaching basic knowledge can be unengaging but a necessary evil that has to be done, and as long as there's a promise of a greater knowledge or a smile later on, the fundamentals have to be taught first and admittedly can be quite dry." Betty agreed and felt that a teacher "needs to get through some things so they [the students] are prepared for what comes next, but too much of this bogs it down and curriculum-heavy lessons can become redundant and boring." Doug called these "black-and-white" lessons, and Assunta spoke negatively of lessons where she said the "teacher just dishes out all the information."

Both Thierry and Doug believe that the worst lessons were the typical *traditional lessons*, or as Thierry put it, "come in, sit down, and now I'm going to talk for 80 minutes." He believes this "old school" structure of lesson does not take the audience into consideration and does not adapt to the proclivities of modern students, resulting in delivery that is, in his word, "stagnant." Doug also believes that these types of lessons are among the worst because "reading and answering questions mean nothing if you don't show them [the students] how to critique when they read."

Betty and Assunta asserted that some of the worst lessons students can experience are those with *no connection to the outside world.* Assunta felt that the connection between a student's life and the content cannot be overstated, and Betty went a step further and said that this connection between a student's life and the content held "some of the greatest importance in

making a successful lesson." She went on to say that "this is a generation of more aware kids, and they are inclined to question everything and its relevance to them. And they should get an answer to that."

Lastly, both Doug and Tasha think that the worst lessons are the ones that are *not the teacher's creation*, such as a board-mandated presentation or ones found on the internet. Tasha said the reason for this is because it is "not my voice."

Best Assignments:

By far the most popular types of assignments are the ones that offer *freedom of choice*, with Betty, Assunta, Tasha, and Doug all believing that this was a necessary quality to have in all assessments. Tasha called it "liberty and agency" and Betty believes that it is important for all students to make a decision and stick to it. An example of this for Assunta is the culminating assessment in her grade 12 Family Issues class. The project is an ethnographic observation that deals with relationships people have with society, and it is important to her that the students come up with their own topic and hypothesis. For Doug, this is manifested in his grade 9 auto mechanics class where he has his students build small wooden model cars that are raced at the end of the year. "There are lots of ways to get to the end result, so I show them the base block of wood and then a possible end result, and how they get there is up to them and that's where the learning comes in."

Betty, Thierry and Doug all believe that successful assignments are those that access *existing funds of knowledge* from the students. Betty said that these assignments are "well

received and never boring" because of the interest in tapping into these a priori ideas, and cited a novel study seminar where she "required the students to pick a song that parallels the thesis they are trying to prove about the novel they read." Thierry told me about a well-received assignment he does in his grade 11 law class where the students take their favourite cartoon character and draw up a wanted poster for their crimes if they lived in the real world. Doug does a mock-Dragon's Den assignment with his grade 12 auto mechanics class where they build a company that they would be interested in creating if given the opportunity.

A *connection to the outside world* was also a common quality of the best assignments to both Assunta and Doug. Assunta referred back to her Family Studies ethnography assessment again, and reiterated the fact that the assignment was to be formatted as a professional report required in most post-secondary institutions. Doug explained a successful assignment he has in his grade 11 auto mechanics class where he asks students to go through the process of buying a car, and makes them research what type of job is needed to afford their choice as well as making decisions about budgeting and whether or not they are going to buy or lease.

Both Tasha and Flynn maintained that the best assignments were those that gave the students a venue to *build something of their own*. Tasha discussed a culminating assessment in her English class that is a play on Vogue magazine's "73 questions with celebrities" with a literary character in the spotlight, and the students need to apply their knowledge and build a coherent and accurate article that also emulates the original medium. Flynn gave an example where he makes the students create a superhero with a superpower connected to chemistry, and

asserted that "I have never had a student get lower than a B mark on this assignment because they are always intrinsically involved with the creation of their own content."

Both Thierry and Assunta affirmed that successful assignments need to make the students *consider different perspectives*. Assunta gave an example of a trench warfare letter when talking about World War I, and said that "the students enjoy it because it is interesting for them to put themselves in someone else's shoes and feel what they felt." In his law class, Thierry says that a good assignment is one that makes students "see a different perspective and look at something with a new critical eye."

Tasha and Flynn said that at their core the best assignments are those that students feel are *fun*, with Flynn mentioning his 3-D chemical compound model project that is always memorable and enjoyable in his grade 12 chemistry class.

Betty advocated for more *presentation-based assessments* as well as bringing *media technology* into assignments, highlighting the necessity for both oral communication skills as well as fostering technological expertise.

Tasha believes the best assignments are also those that "*cannot be googled* or copied from anywhere else on the Internet," and because of this she expressed the need for much more specific boundaries on assessments wherever possible.

When discussing diversity in assignments, Assunta, Betty, Flynn and Doug all agreed that it was "very important" for the overall engagement. Thierry, Assunta and Doug all felt that changing assessments as the units progress is fundamental in *tapping into different strengths* - Thierry gave an example in one of his classes where "in unit one everyone gives me a written

piece, while the unit two summative activity is an art piece," and Assunta said that if "a style of assignment is done in one unit, I do not do it in any other part of the semester." Doug agreed and said "you need diversity of assignments for all kids. Some kids are computer-based, some are better with their hands. Both are good and shouldn't be punished for their preferences." Assunta and Thierry both referenced "art" in assessments as a necessary quality to tap into - Assunta said that "a bit of art, especially for those that it doesn't come natural, is a good thing," and Thierry said that "when kids say 'I don't like art' I tell them that this is why they're in school, to do things they are both strong and weak in to find out about themselves." Tasha agreed with this sentiment and said that there "definitely needs to be room for choice, but an overabundance of choice is not good because sometimes you need to do something you don't want to do but is a necessary skill." When asked to explain further, she asserted that "choice is good for medium format, but the process instruction should be the same for everyone. They need to grow and be comfortable with new things."

Worst Assignments:

By far the most popular answer when it came to the worst types of assignments were the ones that were *redundant by design*, with four teachers commenting on the problem with repetitive assessments. Betty felt that repetition of assignment styles is never well received, and Assunta agreed and gave an example of using two "letter" assignments in her history class one semester, the first as a soldier and the second as a flapper or a speakeasy bartender, to which the students vocally opposed. Flynn felt that this redundancy in assignment format breeds

complacency for both the teacher and the students, and Thierry said that it is a misstep when many of the assignments are structured all the same throughout the course.

The rest of the responses were all mentioned by just one teacher each. Betty believed that "kids need to see value in an assignment or they will not buy into it," Thierry felt that "terrible assignments are the ones that offer no choice," Doug spoke negatively about "cookie cutter assignments that I didn't make but have to do," and Tasha said that some of the worst assignments are the ones that do not give clear directions.

Classroom Teaching Practices:

There was much to say about proper and appropriate classroom teaching practices. All teachers spoke at great lengths about this topic, and when it came to their answers it was the only portion of the entire interview process that fostered the most variance in answers given.

The most common answer across the teacher participants was that successful classroom teaching required *clear expectations* set by the teacher and received by the students. Tasha said that there are two ways she successfully transmits clear expectations in class: the first is her assertion that "teachers have to lead by example and practise what they preach," a quality Thierry agreed with when he said that he has to follow the same rules as a student and never asks a student to do something he would not do. The second, Tasha claimed, is that competent teachers are the ones that set clear boundaries between them and the students. "Can we have a friendly rapport? Sure. But there's still a line I cannot cross." Betty agreed and said that "teachers need to be transparent about what they want and define the relationships and rules in the

classrooms and what is to be expected of them." Doug spoke about the school-wide disciplinary

policy at Holy Cross called "Progressive Discipline," which follows a clearly laid out plan if

inappropriate behaviour continues or escalates. He said that while this is indeed a reasonable

measure, he prefers to set his own clear expectations by taking care of most issues in the

classroom, and rarely does he call parents or alert the office unless it really gets "out of hand."

Thierry felt that there should be no false promises or threats in class "or kids will call you on it,"

and Assunta said, as an example, that "if there's a clear expectation of a uniform policy in the

school, everyone has to be in uniform with no exceptions."

The next most referenced characteristic that contributes to appropriate classroom teaching

practices is the need for *open discourse*. Flynn believes that proper discipline often requires

courageous discussion on everything, even disciplinary actions, which is why he regularly asks

his kids "do you think this is fair?" when addressing a disciplinary issue with them. Doug has a

similar pedagogy in his classroom as he makes it a point to foster accountability by asking

students how their behaviour affects everyone else, and Assunta similarity said that one of the

best ways to deal with certain issues is to talk to the student and ask them to change their

behaviour for a better classroom experience for everyone. Thierry believes that a teacher has to

be open and available to students as much as they can in an effort "to get to know them and build

those relationships that go a long way."

Thierry, Assunta and Betty all said that *respect* is an important component of successful

classroom management. When I asked what "respect" looked like in this context, the first thing

Assunta said was "respectful kids are following instructions and doing what they need to do."

Thierry and Betty went a bit further and discussed what Betty described as "mutual respect from student to teacher and teacher to student." Thierry said that "a teacher's life becomes easier if they earn respect first, and respect is most certainly earned in this job."

Betty, Flynn and Thierry all said that *teacher investment* is also an important characteristic of successful classroom teaching. Thierry very strongly asserted that "they [the students] need to know you care," and Flynn said almost the exact same thing when he stated that students "need to know teachers have some skin in the game." Betty admitted that "French is an unpopular course, and most do not take it after grade 9. But if the teacher shows that they are all in it together, and if you work with the teacher and learn five new things in class, that's a success."

Thierry, Doug and Assunta all spoke about the need for fairness *and consistency* in the classroom. Both Doug and Thierry discussed the absolute necessity of this quality for a classroom to work productively, and Assunta said that "kids want rules and discipline and routine in the class, and many times complain to me about teachers with no rules or fairness or consistency, and it's always worse."

Thierry, Assunta and Tasha all believe that to foster any type of positive classroom environment it is incumbent upon a teacher to *not create a public spectacle* of a disciplinary issue by doing it in front of the class. Thierry was the one that aptly coined the term "public spectacles" here, and spoke to the necessity of protecting the students dignity by dealing with issues privately. "Never get into a power struggle," Assunta also suggested. "Ask them to step outside. If you get into a power struggle in class it will be worse because they [the students] will

always want to win in front of their peers, and you'll just end up in a yelling match." Tasha also

agreed with this, and said that "unless there's some behaviour that is so outrageous I don't

discipline in class. I may use sarcasm to stop certain behaviour, but if something is serious we go

into the hall to talk about it."

Thierry, Assunta and Doug all discussed the need to *circulate the classroom* to foster

better behaviour from the students. Thierry said that this circulation cultivates a class

environment that feels like a conversation, Assunta asserted that she needs to walk the class

while conducting a lesson to do her job properly, and Doug highlighted the need for proximity to

students, especially belligerent ones, to keep everyone on track.

Both Doug and Betty claimed that *knowing your audience* also helps with classroom

teaching practices, with Betty speaking to the importance of empathy in this regard. Doug said

that not only does this allow teachers to "appropriately pick their battles," but it is important

because teachers "need to be aware of the types of students in front of them, and pick up on

things about them without them even saying a word." He went on to give an example, to which

he said "I can pretty much tell you which students are academic and which could possibly be

troublemakers just by where they sit on the first day of class. All of my academic students sit

near the door to the hallway, and all my troublemakers sit closer to the door to the shop [as in,

the mechanics bay]."

When it came to the discussion of classroom set up it was very similar to the responses of

the student participants, as these answers were generally grouped into two categories - *desk

placement* and *wall decorations*.

The most popular desk setup was in groups, though teachers varied in the number of students they believe are optimal - Betty advocated for two or three, Flynn for three or four, and Tasha for four or five. Interestingly, Assunta said that "groups are good for assignments but not lectures, because some people are not facing the board." She also said that she lets the senior level grades pick their seats because "they need to get used to doing this for university." Assunta, Doug and Tasha all like the U-shape with the opening facing the front - for Doug this allows everyone to be accessible to him, though Tasha said that while it is a good setup it is not universal and far easier to do in the senior levels or when class enrolment is smaller. Whatever the set up, Betty said that the desks need to be situated in a way that makes the classroom "warm and inviting," and Assunta said that desks need to be set up for an ultimate goal of "fostering good discussion."

When discussing wall decorations, student work on walls was the most popular choice. Assunta felt that it "shows off everyone's work and also shows that everyone is equal." Thierry believes that putting student work on walls "celebrates student achievement and shows you take an interest in them [the students]." He also said that it is a necessary thing to do to show students a "window into their future assignments," or, as Doug put it, a "hint of things to come." Assunta said she likes to "put maps on the wall to refer to them in lecture and discussion." Thierry said that "history stuff on the walls is good. My university books I keep on my shelves always generate curiosity." Only one person noted a particular decoration that was not acceptable, and Flynn was very clear that he refuses to put up "stock teacher posters of clichéd ideas," and that wall decorations need to be unique to the teacher and students.

Technology:

When discussing the topic of technology use in the classroom, all conversations generally began with the disclaimer that it is something necessary for modern classrooms but needs to be utilised appropriately, or as Tasha said it, "intentionally and purposefully." Betty uses technology in assignments to keep them relevant, which Doug agreed with when he said that technology can be used in class for "better learning opportunities" and Thierry also concurred with when referring to the ability to access information in real time as an "invaluable tool." Betty, Tasha and Doug went on to tell me that they all believe that teachers *need to embrace this technology* in the classroom because, as Doug put it, "everyone has them and they're not going away." Interestingly, both Tasha and Betty referred to phones with the same analogy, Tasha asserting that "you can't fight this beast anymore" and Betty saying you need to "embrace the beast." To Doug, this means that "when it comes to phones, part of our job is to train students how to use them properly." This means that teachers need to *evolve with the times* according to Assunta, Flynn and Doug, who all felt that this was necessary to stay competent in their profession. Assunta said that it is important for "teachers to be on top of every piece of emerging technology," which admittedly is a difficult thing according to Doug, who believes that it is a very difficult thing to keep up with. "My computers are six years old," he said, "which makes them obsolete. We will need to replace them every 2 to 3 years to stay relevant and that just doesn't happen."

When discussing specific technology use in the classroom, all six teachers had much to say about *smartphone* use, the most predominant sentiment was its *hindrance to learning*. Betty said that "students are not always using it for the proper purposes, unfortunately, and that makes

phones very distracting." Assunta agreed that they are a serious distraction and it is a pervasive issue teaching students "when to use it and when not to use it," and said that she has to keep reminding her students what "undivided attention" means. She went on to say that a classroom "must emulate the real world, and when you're at work in the real world are you going to answer your phone when customers are there? Obviously not or there are consequences." Thierry also believes that phones are a big problem in class, especially in terms of taking a student's attention away from otherwise important information in lessons, particularly because of what he says is the very real "fear of missing out." He went on to say that "I did a social experiment in class once. I did a lecture and made them [the students] put their phones upside down on their desks, and then I asked them to tally up every time they felt the need to reach for them. They were shocked at the results." Flynn spoke about certain scientific studies on the development of the cerebellum in young children, and explained the results that show how smartphones negatively contribute to the cognitive development of things like fine motor skills. He also believes that "relying on technology more than your own intelligence is a serious problem. It fails, or even worse, can be hacked."

The only other specific piece of technology mentioned was ChatGPT, and it was only mentioned by Assunta. "If you would've asked me a year ago about technology used in the classroom," she said, "I would've said it was fine until ChatGPT came out. I now have to do many assignments in class to make sure AI isn't being used. There needs to be a new policy to ward off cheating because it's going to get better and it will be harder to find out who is cheating, especially since you can cite through AI now."

Betty, Thierry, and Tasha said that they have gone somewhat "old school" in recent years and brought back pen and paper in certain cases, both for note-taking as well as certain in-class assessments. All of them said in one way or another that this decision is in an effort to get off screens and learn fundamental skills that are otherwise being lost or forgotten.

Diversity in the classroom:

One line of questioning that I specifically only asked the teachers was how they dealt with the growing diversity within their classrooms.

Flynn, Betty and Doug all think that one of the best ways to accomplish this was to *know the audience*. Doug asserted that if teachers ever want to help guide their students to success "we have to know each of them, including how to read and accommodate their IEPs (the provincial Individual Education Plans)," and Flynn said that he tries to hit on "every type of personality, trait, and learning aptitude so everyone can shine." Betty said that it is vital to know the differentiation in her audience to "try and partner up strong and weak students for better results."

Doug, Assunta and Betty all agreed that one of the best ways to deal with diversity is to try to *tap into each student's strengths*. Doug believes that this will always build their confidence, Betty feels that teachers need to "look at the strengths first, not their weaknesses," and Assunta said that she has "a variety of assignments to touch on everyone's strengths," which she cited as an important part of student success in light of the new de-streamed grade 9 Ontario curriculum.

Tasha and Thierry also spoke at length about the need to *be fair* and treat everyone the same, with zero tolerance for disrespect from anyone. "We need to treat everyone the same," Thierry asserted, "because it goes a long way to show everyone they are equal. I will ask everyone the same question and expect the same answer regardless of race, religion, or anything else. We are all human and should be treated as such, and no one has more value than others or should be involved in group guilt. Especially historical group guilt, which is dangerous and unnecessary."

Both Betty and Assunta said that another way to deal with diversity was to build lessons that *embrace personal experiences*. Assunta spoke of a grade 12 Family Issues assessment where she asks the students to do an assignment based on their own family history "so they can see that not only are there differences between them and that it is okay and a part of life, but that we were all the same in being different."

Despite all of these suggestions, Tasha, Flynn, Doug and Betty all believe that it is next to impossible to be truly equal and accommodate everyone in the classroom. Flynn said that "teachers need to understand that you are not going to be good at accommodating everyone in the classroom even though you want to, because there is so much differentiation that it is impossible to accommodate everyone's differences with the current system set up." When I pressed him on this last point, he cited "lack of resources, infrastructure and political support" in achieving this aim. Tasha believes that true equality "is not achievable in life, so not in the classroom either…the stronger students are always going to be successful no matter what." Doug claimed that one of the biggest adversities in achieving true equality in the classroom is the

existing way they teach how to create lesson plans in the Teacher Education Programs, claiming that "the standard way to deliver a lesson, the teacher-driven lectures, is just not for everyone."

Miscellaneous:

Just like with the student participants, after all the pre-written questions were asked and answered I then inquired if there was anything else they wanted to add when it came to what it means to be a successful teacher in a modern classroom. For the first time in the entire interview process, there were no overlapping connections in their answers. As such, I will deal with each teacher's responses individually.

Doug had the most to say in the section. First, he said that all teachers need to be willing to share about their personal lives - "they want to hear about your life, and if they can relate to you it will engage them more in what you have to say." He also said that he does his best to "emulate and mimic" the private sector, which he admits is a double edge sword because "we set these kids up to be good employees, to be on time, to wear uniforms, but what we need to teach them is to think outside the box." He also said that it is the job of every competent teacher to "challenge student convictions" and to do their best to not "exclude or embarrass kids" either on their own or in front of their classmates.

Tasha asserted that to be successful in a modern classroom requires teachers to collaborate with their colleagues and share ideas on lessons and assignments, and she went on to say that "money needs to be spent to modernise education in the right ways, and bring it into the present day."

Flynn said that "you need to love your job or these modern kids will call you on it," and also claimed that it is a professional misstep that "we do not have a way to identify and eliminate bad teachers in our profession."

To Thierry, a successful modern teacher needs to be "open to new things, try new things and learn new skills every day so they can evolve as the world evolves."

Textured Description

   While analysing the participants' answers, there were many overlapping ideas and statements throughout the interviews, not only between the two groups but across them as well. These statements can now be grouped together into meaning units that will be used to create a textured description of the overall experience. To organise this section, I have used the Research Questions that guided this report as the four principal qualities to measure what it means to be a successful modern teacher.

  1. *Successful lessons*

   There were five meaning units that described what qualities are part of a successful lesson:

The first is *student involvement.*

- Students must feel included in the conversation

- Working with peers is important to gain insight into other people's perspectives

- There needs to be an interactive element:

    - lessons driven by student interests

    - ability to defend their own points of view

- Students must be allowed to ask questions

The second is *real world relevance.*

- It is a source of motivation to listen and remember

- Skills need to be taught in lessons to better prepare students for adulthood

- There needs to be a personal connection to the content

- The content must have a broader connection to the world.

The third is *entertaining oration skills.*

- Lessons must be entertaining:

  - it makes the transfer of knowledge easier

  - it is a source of motivation to listen

  - competent presentation software use is an important component of this

- Change rhetoric and elocution to suit diversity of the audience, which can only be done by knowing your audience

- A more genuine, less scripted discussion-based lecture style is needed for engagement

The fourth is that the lesson needs to be delivered by *a genuinely passionate and credible teacher.*

- Teacher investment in topic keeps attention and interest

- Clear content knowledge competency is required to be credible

The fifth is that as best as a teacher can, they are to avoid what can be identified as *traditional lessons* as much as possible.

- Avoid content heavy transfers of knowledge

- Avoid monotonous repetition of similar lessons

2. Successful assignments

There were six meaning units gleaned from the data concerning the characteristics needed for the creation and administration of successful assignments:

The first is *freedom of choice.*

- Engages and keeps student motivated to work through assignments

- Allows students to explore different perspectives outside of their own

- Makes transfer of knowledge easier

- Fosters agency and interest

The second concerns the most popular types of assessments, and they were those that fostered *generative creation*.

- Creating something uniquely their own encourages personal expression and exploration

- Presentations, creative writing and group projects with high value group members are the most well-received formats for assessments

- No assignments should contain only regurgitation and memorization of content

The third is the need for a *personal connection* in an assessment.

- Fosters self-reflection and adaptability

- Allows for better understanding of self in relation to the content

- Gives personal value to the assignment and the motivation to complete it

The fourth is the need for a *real world connection* in an assessment.

- Gets students ready for adulthood by teaching skills needed in the world

- Motivates students to want to complete assessments

- Allows students to consider different perspectives

The fifth is that all assignments should have *realistic expectations*.

- Clear and consistent instructions are needed right from the beginning

- Do not have a lot of components of an assignment due in a little amount of time

- Do not pile on assignments

- Make sure there is an age and aptitude appropriateness in assignments

The sixth is the *need for diversity in assignment types*.

- Taps into different strengths and aptitudes

- Forces students to do something out of their reach and be comfortable with new things

- New experiences are exciting and keeps engagement to the content

- Some need for repetition of assignment types to build on skills learned

3. Classroom Teaching Practices

There were six meaning units that were aggregated when discussing classroom teaching practices:

The first is the need to *know your audience.*

- A teacher must know what resources each student individually needs so they can achieve the best mark possible

- Allows teacher to distinguish between different motivations of behaviour

- Helps relate to students and remember what it was like to be young

- Allows for better audience engagement and gives a greater motivation to contribute

The second is the necessity to have *fairness and equality* permeate every facet of the classroom.

- Reciprocal respect and trust is mandatory

- Equality of opportunity is mandatory

- Teacher needs to set clear expectations and boundaries

- There needs to be open discourse:
    - with students
    - with colleagues

- No favouritism of students, including disregarding inappropriate behaviour

The third is administering *proper and appropriate discipline.*

- No empty promises or threats

- No public spectacles when disciplining behaviour

- Appropriately pick battles in class

- Teachers cannot lose control

  - disciple with tone, not volume

- Do not immediately send student to office when disruptive behaviour occurs

- Circulate the classroom

The fifth is the necessity for a teacher to appear *sincere and invested*.

- Students need to know teachers care about them

- The teacher needs to enjoy the content being taught

- The teacher needs to be likeable as a person

- Teachers need to accept and embrace the role of parent/guardian to their students:

  - must be willing to share who they are

  - model behaviour they want to see in their students

The fifth concerns *desk placement* in the classroom.

- Groups and U-shape work best

- No solo rows

- Must offer a warm and inviting atmosphere that promotes discussion

The sixth concerns *wall decorations* in the classroom.

- Student assignments on the walls work best, especially because it makes students feel "like home"

4. *Technology*

There were four meaning units when discussing technology use in the classroom:

The first one is the need to *evolve with the times*.

- There needs to be constant teacher training, both formal and informal, on all current technology

The second one is the *use of phones*.

- They are a hindrance to learning in their current form, and continual education is needed for both teachers and students on how to successfully adapt this technology into the classroom

The third is the *use of computers*.

- They are very beneficial to the learning process:
    - videos are an important resource
    - presentation software knowledge is mandatory for teachers

The fourth is the *use of the internet*

- It is very beneficial to the learning process and is a matter of convenience in accessing lessons, assignments, resources and data

Imaginative variations

With the data analysis complete, it is now worth examining the findings to discover both the consistencies as well as the variances in each of the participants' answers. It will also be constructive to compare these findings to the various concepts and theories found within the Literature Review, so as to better situate the data with our existing understanding of what it means to be a successful and competent modern classroom teacher in the 21st century.

The findings of this report can be aggregated into five thematic categories that encapsulate the most prevalent topics of discussion in all of the interviews, and as such can therefore be identified as the principal patterns and trends that the participants felt best explained the essence of their own experiences in a modern classroom. These categories are:

1. Fairness and Equality

2. Curriculum Content Mastery

3. Knowing the Audience

4. Providing an Entertaining Venue

5. Motivation and Engagement

Fairness and Equality

The students all passionately preferred equality of opportunity over equality of outcome, whether they specifically articulated that actual phrase or not. This was manifested for the student participants through bias and favouritism, the unfair allotment of inflated marks, and a

respect that is by no means reciprocal. This desired treatment coincides directly with the work of

Davis et al. (2022) and their descriptions of the eras the education system has gone through in the

last century, all with a progressive march towards a similarly strong inclination for the equal

opportunity to succeed. It was important to all student participants that everyone in class have

equal access to all resources that will ultimately lead to individual gain, and to the best of their

abilities a teacher must assist in this process. It was also essential to the participants that open

dialogue permeated every part of the classroom, workroom, and school grounds in general. The

student participants felt that this assisted with overall fair and equal treatment as did the ability to

not only hear and consider different perspectives but ask important and relevant questions,

particularly pertaining to the teacher's overall perceptions and expectations of them. This last

point is of great importance, it seems, as a teacher's estimate of their students' achievement is the

number one factor on Hattie's list as to what influences success (Hattie, 2024). The data in this

report supports this existing analysis, as all of the student participants felt that judgement of

opinions in one way or another went counter to the ethos of how they felt a positive classroom

should function, and while the opinions of teachers were sometimes valued, most agreed with the

premise that it should not feel like a form of proselytising with little room for dissenting

opinions. Whatever the teacher's own proclivities and opinions towards the subject matter being

taught, the student participants felt that this should have very little place in the classroom at the

risk of the transfer of knowledge being otherwise misconstrued or misinterpreted. Which brings

up an interesting point about the evolution of the profession - it was not long ago that the

dynamic between teacher and student mimicked that of the boss and employee relationship,

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where open discourse was rarely permitted in favour of a more "because I said so" style of classroom pedagogy. This made sense during the Industrialisation period when Standardised Education was meant to turn complicit students into obedient workers (Davis et al., 2022), but clearly and unanimously - particularly with the student participants - this is not an optimal way to move forward in education, further demonstrated by Sleeter and Stillman's assertion that a more student-centred learning environment where each pupil's voice is heard is the best move forward in pursuit of greater educational success (2005, as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2022). When reviewing some of the responses from both groups of participants, there were certainly some antiquated phrases used that echo the Standardised education era, phrases such as "listening to lectures," or the need to go "old school," or even the characterization of the student-teacher dynamic to that of a boss and employee. Such framings and conceptions certainly need to be revisited if education ever wants to be Authentic, Democratic, or Sustainable (Davis et al., 2022).

It was also important that fair and equal treatment manifested itself in terms of clear and realistic expectations for the students, certainly in assignments but especially in reference to the discussion of proper discipline in the classroom, something the Danielson Framework highlights when it speaks to "communicating about purpose and content" as a successful teaching practice (The Danielson Group, 2024). It is also worth noting that "teacher clarity" is positioned at entry twenty-five on Hattie's list (2024), which is in the top 10% of the factors influencing education.

Besides the consensus opinion that equal punishment should be allotted for equal offences, much of what both the student and teacher participants discussed was a form of "golden rule reciprocity" where it is mandatory for the teacher to empathetically self-reflect and

do their best to insert themselves into the shoes of the students being reprimanded or punished. Many students derided the practice of yelling at a student or class, admitting that it rarely does anything but make the situation worse. Both Bandura (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) and Vygotsky (Palincsar, 1998) accurately stressed the importance of positive social interactions as a major component in the learning process, and it was quite apparent after listening to all the participants that a personal understanding of one another is exceptionally important for a positive teacher-student dynamic. It seems that a knowledge of the teacher - however brief - is also needed for an overall connection that will foster the trust needed for a positive working relationship. It was evident though the data analysis that the audience needs to know, at the very least, a rudimentary aspect of the teacher's life to be likeable, interesting, and competent enough to listen to, which seems to fall directly in line with the findings of Hattie when he highlighted the necessity of "teacher credibility" as an important influence on student learning (Hattie, 2024). To some of the student participants, this also means that a teacher must accept the responsibility of their role as the parent/guardian in the room, which is something the Danielson Framework also points to when it suggests that "engaging families and communities" is a crucial principle in the teaching process (The Danielson Group, 2024).

Curriculum Content Mastery

According to all participants, a deep mastery of the curriculum content is a necessary skill to possess to be considered a successful and competent modern classroom teacher. The student participants not only appreciate a mastery of content knowledge, they expect it. It was disconcerting to hear how many times they said that they could tell when a teacher had no clue about their domain of study, and in some instances truly felt that the teacher was neither the smartest person in the room nor the most interested in the subject matter. Teachers need to be constantly learning and evolving their understanding of the subject matter they are teaching, which requires every teacher to continuously update and upgrade their information to understand the most current models of their teaching domain, especially its connection to the wider world. This real world relevance was of particular importance with all of the participants, as both teachers and students believed that successful teaching requires a working knowledge of how the subject matter relates and is relevant in an applicable way. Many sources within the Literature Review also position real world relevance as a defining factor of successful and competent teaching (Davis et al., 2022; Siemens, 2005; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003; Gilpatrick, 2021; Gagnon, 2019; Fullan et al., 2017), and the findings of this report concur with these sentiments - many of the student participants asserted that it is this connection to the world that has always been a defining factor in determining their subsequent value in the subject matter.

Two teacher participants suggested more open and extensive colleague collaboration to further promote curriculum content mastery, which is also a solid and productive way to understand which practices are best for the classroom. Collaboration is something that the Deep

Learning Competencies (Fullan et al., 2017) holds in high esteem for its students, and most certainly by extension this is also how teachers must conduct themselves to continually evolve and better their craft.

When a teacher has this mastery of their curriculum content and a deep understanding of its relevance in the world, the findings show that it will also assist in the construction of successful and meaningful assessments, which, according to the data, appears to primarily manifest in two principal ways. The first is a significant amount of freedom of choice in each assessment, as most student participants felt this practice produces their best work. This quality falls in line with the ongoing student-centred trajectory of modern education (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2022), and by allowing students at least some form of personal choice in assessments it would then become one of those "strategies to integrate with prior knowledge" that Hattie (2024) positions as a top-ten factor that influences student success. The second most popular characteristic of successful assessments was the prevalence of creativity and application, or more precisely what Wittrock (1990; 1991) identified as *generative learning*. Assessments that require the creation of a product were far more popular with all student participants interviewed, as building something uniquely their own by applying a new skill set held great importance to them, which is certainly what the Deep Learning Competencies identified as "meaningful knowledge construction" (Fullan et al., 2017). Interestingly, there were a few teacher participants that suggested that too much choice is not a good thing in certain circumstances, and some boundaries and parameters are always needed to make sure their students get an understanding of what it means to do something that is not immediately

accessible to them that must be both learned and cultivated; or, as Vygotsky put it, filling the Zone of Proximal Development (Palincsar, 1998) with what The Danielson Framework would identify as productive and purposeful "assessment for learning" (The Danielson Group, 2024).

One could argue that the type of person that fits this criteria - that is, someone continually willing to upgrade their knowledge base and generate meaningful assessments based on this knowledge - is a person that must have a genuine passion for their subject matter in the same way one would feel about any beloved hobby. Most of the student participants said that a teacher's natural interest and investment in the domain content directly correlated in one way or another to their own interest and investment in the learning process. The Danielson Framework speaks of the necessity for teachers to "engage in reflective practice" (The Danielson Group, 2024), which is only done when someone truly wants to better themselves and continue to be both competent in their craft and successful in their profession. Every student interviewed mentioned to some degree or another the importance of a teacher being able to riff a conversation on the spot, and one of the only ways this successfully happens is if the domain knowledge is understood in such a way that affords a space for multiple interpretations and variations. As such, it was odd to then see "teacher subject matter knowledge" so low on Hattie's list (2024), which is in direct opposition to the findings of this report. But then again, "teacher credibility" is very high on the same list, which means that curriculum content mastery goes far beyond simple rote memory and regurgitation of the facts - while a teacher does not need to know absolutely everything about their domain of knowledge, a competent teacher certainly must know how to find the right answers.

Knowing the Audience

There were numerous instances where the student participants told me how important it was for their teachers to understand and empathise with them, and it was equally as common for the teacher participants to tell me how important this quality was as well.

The data from the interviews distinctly show that when a teacher does their best to understand how students communicate, this will allow for the selection of much more precise and appropriate terminology that ultimately lands well with each audience member and successfully builds what Hattie identified as successful "strategies to transfer knowledge" (Hattie, 2024). This appropriate terminology not only includes contextual and demographic vocabulary but also relevant and topical analogies and metaphors as well, and it is mandatory for all teachers to take the time to evolve this understanding alongside their changing audiences for continued success. For Vygotsky, this was an intrinsic part of the learning process in his *Sociocultural Theory of Development* (Palincsar, 1998), and it seems that both the teacher and student participants selected for this study would agree with this sentiment.

When a teacher takes the time to know the audience individually it will also be much easier to identify a personal connection to the content by tapping into existing funds of knowledge that can then be used to connect that which is learned in the classroom to a student's personal life. This is the focal point of both the Authentic Education and later the Systemic Sustainability movements (Davis et al., 2022), as both eras insist that the process of successfully engaging students requires very deep and very specific roots in the real world to be considered not only useful but worth learning for future success. This is also the reason that a priori

knowledge and the ability to incorporate such information into the learning process are placed within the top ten of Hattie's list (2024), as knowing what each student finds interesting and important can help in crafting those lessons and assignments that will be well-received by the entire class, which can only be done when the various diversities in the classroom are considered. To do this successfully, a competent teacher must therefore not only know their students on an individual level but also a community level, which means the teacher also has to make a concerted effort to educate themselves on the various different diversities of human nature and how to bring out the fullest potential of each pupil. This is something The Danielson Framework addresses when discussing the need for teachers to respect and value the various individual identities within the classroom (The Danielson Group, 2024), it is certainly what Fullan et al. (2017) meant by focusing on citizenship and understanding a student's place in their various communities, and it is a sentiment that continues society's push towards a more student-centred educational foundation (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, as cited in Flinders and Thornton, 2022).

Knowing the audience also means that a teacher must understand student predispositions and proclivities in a way that will simultaneously cultivate personal strengths while eliminating weaknesses, which will help afford students a venue to confront and overcome tasks that are otherwise out of their domain to better their skill set and knowledge base. This is yet another way that teachers can fill the Zone of Proximal Development (Palincsar, 1998), which will in turn lessen the divide between what a student can do on their own and where they still need help.

It was also apparent during the interview process that knowing the audience requires a competent understanding of the relationship this modern generation has with all forms of existing and emerging technology. Teachers need to continually evolve and update their knowledge base to be privy to all the ways their students use their smartphones, the internet, and especially emerging AI software such as ChatGPT. While it was clear that the teacher participants knew all too well the perniciousness of smartphones and negative effects of social media on modern students, I was surprised that many of the student participants recognized their problematic relationships with technology as well. It was incredibly instructive to hear them talk about it from their own perspective, especially when some of them likened their dependence on this technology to that of an object of comfort much like a security blanket. To be a competent teachers means to embrace the best parts of modern technology by efficiently and proactively integrating online digital literacy into the curriculum (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013), much like a recent example of using video games in the classroom with net positive results (Sanford & Bonsor Kurki, 2014). This is only possible if all students have universal access to the same technology (Fullan & Donnelly, 2013), and when there is a clear Digital Ethic put in place that lays the foundation of healthy online discourse (Luke, 2018).

Interestingly, two teacher participants also said that an important prerequisite of most assignments is that they should be fun, and while some student participants explained their past assessments in a similar way, it seemed to lessen in prevalence the further away from elementary school they progressed. To have fun means to experience joy as if one were at play, and there is

something to say about this, especially considering how high Piagetian pedagogy is on Hattie's list (Hattie, 2024).

Providing an Entertaining Venue

It was this theme that held the most surprises when analysing the data, for two predominant reasons: the first is that it held the most variance between student and teacher participants than in previous segments of the interviews, and the second is the notable absence of some of the findings in the Literature Review sources.

The findings from the data show that the teaching profession must fully embrace the reality that an important part of the job description requires an understanding of how to properly entertain an audience, and that includes considering both personal presentation style as well as the physical space that will be used for learning. It was very interesting to look at the variance in the answers concerning the topic of teacher-as-entertainer - while only half of the teacher participants believed one of their primary responsibilities was to entertain an audience, this was unanimously the case when the same question was posed to the student participants. All of them firmly believed that a presentation of any kind is by definition meant to entertain an audience, and it is therefore incumbent upon the presenter to keep that specific audience entertained.

The best and most effective way to accomplish this, according to the participants, was for a teacher to be highly competent in the tradecraft of oratory and public speaking. Many of the student participants had a nuanced understanding of this subject, as evidenced by the numerous examples they offered concerning specific rhetoric and elocution that was necessary for audience

attention - qualities like alliteration, voice inflection and appropriate use of hand gestures. Considering that teachers are required to speak to a multitude of different audiences with a multitude of different aptitudes and preferences throughout the course of a school year, this means that adapting to each audience is a skill that all modern teachers need to possess for continued success. It is here that another notable discrepancy arose in the data between student and teacher participant answers, concerning the skill of proper slideshow usage in lesson presentations. While I had multiple lengthy discussions with the students about the many positive and negative ways to use this specific technological tool, what struck me as very curious was that there was absolutely no mention of this component from any of the teacher participants. Many students voiced their deep discontent when it came to the improper use of presentation software, the common patterns being too much writing, disorganised formatting and teachers consistently reading off of the slides. I was slightly surprised how pervasive a problem this was in the modern classroom experience, as the student participants offered many examples of teachers that have some manifestation of this issue. And yet, not one of the teachers interviewed mentioned this component of lesson preparation or successful classroom practices at all. This discrepancy brought up the question as to why such an important component with one group did not even register on the radar of the other? This is a concern for many reasons, primarily because I purposefully selected the sample of teachers because of my tacit knowledge of their exemplary aptitudes and competencies in the classroom, not just from my perspective but from multiple students that have offered similar opinions of their abilities. This means that if the most

competent in the profession are not considering their visual presentation methods when creating

their lessons, then most everyone else in the profession may also not be considering it, either.

Despite these findings - which clearly articulate the importance of entertaining oration

and presentation skills in connection to teacher competency - none of the sources found in the

Literature Review specifically identify the phenomena of entertainment as a positive and

productive classroom practice. Hattie's list (2024) makes no mention of the need for entertaining

oratory or any presentation skills for that matter - the closest he comes to it is in the identification

of "teacher clarity" at entry twenty-five. Similarly, the various universities cited (Harvard

Graduate School of Education, 2003; Gilpatrick, 2021; Gagnon, 2019) all agree that "good

communication" is an indicator of teacher competence, but are far too vague in definition to be

useful. Possibly one could argue there is a connection between "communicating about purpose

and content" from The Danielson Framework (The Danielson Group, 2024) to that of

entertaining rhetorical skills, but again it feels a bit too tenuous of a leap. This makes me wonder

why such a gap in the literature exists. Is it because the sample of participants is not typical or

representative of the population? That could indeed be the case. Or, is it an emerging phenomena

that requires much more research and development? This could certainly be true as well.

One point of interest that both groups of participants agreed upon and indeed shows up

within the relevant literature is that traditional lessons - primarily characterised by their

content-heavy nature with monotonous repetition and formatting - accounted for some of the

worst lessons ever experienced. All participants felt that a more genuine, less scripted

discussion-based lecture style with audience participation was needed for the successful transfer

of knowledge, which also seems to contribute to the creation of a comfortable space where students feel safe to get involved. Vygotsky was an advocate of this type of Socratic dialectic in the classroom (Steiner and Mahn, 1996), "classroom discussion" is firmly situated in the the top twenty of Hattie's list (Hattie, 2024) and The Danielson Framework (The Danielson Group, 2024) identifies "using questioning and discussion techniques" to foster overall positive learning experiences. Fullan's "Collaboration" and "Communication" competencies also suggest the same practices within a modern classroom, and postulate that it is through discussion with others that we ultimately foster empathy for those with dissenting arguments and opinions as well as learn how to formulate and ask the right questions (Fullan et al., 2017).

If I follow the assertions of the student participants that claim entertainment plays an important role in an overall successful classroom experience, then entertaining an audience requires more than just good oration skills and proper media use - for anyone that has a fondness for attending music concerts, part of the experience also includes the space in which the audience is to be entertained. As such, part of an entertaining venue also includes a discussion on the environment in which the lessons and learning takes place, which means that desk placement and wall decorations must be considered as well. An opinion that almost all of the participants shared was that wall decorations should primarily consist of student assignments, and desks should be set up in either groups or a U-shape with the opening facing the front of the class. The student participants agreed that such practices nurture a warm and communal atmosphere in the classroom, one in which they would not mind attending and participating in on a daily basis. The Ontario College of Teachers lists having a "safe environment" as a compulsory facet of a

modern classroom (OCT, 2022), which is a bit vague in scope but has the right idea in that a venue needs to feel safe for an audience to enjoy themselves. A better encapsulation of this idea is found in the Danielson Framework, more specifically the "Learning Environments" section, that speaks to the relevance of "organising spaces for learning" and "maintaining purposeful environments" (The Danielson Group, 2024), which is exactly what it means to enjoy the space in which learning takes place.

Motivation and Engagement

As I read through the field notes beyond their saturation points, one overarching theme became abundantly clear that was threaded throughout every single student interview and permeated every facet of the data.

Motivation and engagement.

Multiple times while the student participants were explaining their classroom experiences the conversations eventually landed on some version of "why am I learning this" or "why am I doing this?" These are fair questions, and they deserve fair answers. Whether the students specifically said the word "motivation" or not, all students at multiple points during the interview process explained their experiences in the classroom through the lens and context of what motivates them to get involved and then stay engaged. It would be nice for students to have an intrinsic value in the subject matter, but this is rarely ever the case, which means that it is necessary for teachers to answer these questions and show students why the subject matter is worth learning.

It is here that another interesting variance arose between the teacher and student participants. Once again it was the case that one group saturated the interviews with an answer that the other group did not mention once. The teacher participants all spoke of the various and specific pedagogical practices that work well to *engage* their students, but *motivation* and *engagement* are two separate phenomena and not once did any of them discuss the place of motivation within the overall teaching dynamic. Both Bandura (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) and Eccles and Wigfield (2002) demonstrated the importance of motivation within the classroom by highlighting their various theories pertaining to the connection to student interests, values, self-worth and self-efficacy, and Willms' (2003) points to the necessity of proper engagement by fostering a student's sense of belonging in the school community as a whole. To further demonstrate its vital importance in the learning process, motivation shows up in Hattie's list on three different occasions and engagement appears once (Hattie, 2024). All of this begs the question as to why some of the most demonstrably competent teachers I have ever worked with do not readily consider motivation when articulating the essence of their most successful classroom experiences?

The answer, I believe, unlocks the foundational principle of the profession of education and what is required of a teacher in the modern day: the primary responsibility of a modern teacher is to motivate their students, which means that a competent and successful teacher is one that knows how to accomplish this. Teachers must be practical by nature, and as a result it is evident through their responses that the teacher participants primarily concern themselves with the *how*, not the *why*.

It seems that the reason teachers need to be fair and equal, to have a mastery of the curriculum content, to understand the audience and to provide an entertaining venue is precisely because these are the four ways competent and successful teachers motivate modern students to engage in the process of learning.

Essence of the Experience

The foundational skill a teacher needs to possess in a modern classroom is the ability to *motivate their students to engage.* If motivation is the driving force to act, then engagement is the proof of successful motivation. There are four ways that modern teachers successfully motivate students to engage them in a 21st century classroom:

1. *The first is the absolute necessity to be both fair and equal in every element of the classroom environment*, affording all students equal opportunity and necessary resources to succeed. There is to be no bias or favouritism at any point in time, either in lessons, concerning the allotment of marks or in disciplinary actions, and clear and consistent expectations and boundaries must be set and maintained for everyone. Open dialogue with no judgement is mandatory for any student to attempt anything of merit in the classroom, which requires a reciprocal respect and empathy between teacher and student for any positive relationship and progressive engagement moving forward.

2. *The second is the need for the teacher to have a full mastery of the curriculum content.* A teacher must constantly evolve with the times and be up-to-date in their subject matter knowledge to understand its real world relevance and how that information or skill set will ultimately enrich a student's life in the present as well as the future. Having a mastery in the curriculum content will also assist in the creation of successful lessons and assignments centred around student choice and creativity, which can only be done when a

teacher knows a variety of different perspectives and imaginative variations threaded throughout their subject matter. This means that the content must inherently interest the teacher as much as any personal passion, as this will fundamentally help in showing the students that they are about to learn something worth learning and foster their continued engagement.

3. *The third is the need to know the audience,* including their personal proclivities, interests, and contextual understandings of how they see the world. Such a knowledge base will allow a teacher to successfully communicate with their audience in a language they mutually understand, as knowing specific generational interests and terminology will assist in the selection of specific vocabulary, analogies and metaphors to make the transfer of knowledge that much easier. Knowing the audience will also help in the creation of successful lessons and assignments by connecting to their personal lives and existing funds of knowledge. This will promote a personal engagement to the content, which will give a value to the subject matter by showing how the knowledge being learned can be transferred and adapted into skills needed in the world beyond the classroom. Knowing how the audience thinks, behaves and acts - both on an individual as well as a group level - will also give insight on the best ways to cultivate strengths and eliminate weaknesses by understanding how to fill the space between what each student can and cannot do on their own. This includes the evolving technological nature of

communication, which means that it is necessary for a teacher to be up-to-date on the latest technology, especially smartphones, Artificial Intelligence and the internet.

4. *The fourth is the understanding that a major part of the job is to provide an entertaining venue for learning.* Oratory skills must be mastered and need to be easily adjusted to suit a variety of compositions of audiences and aptitudes. Teachers must constantly work on crafting their public speaking skills - including appropriate elocution, gestures and rhetorical devices - in an effort to deliver a more genuine and less scripted discussion-based style of lecturing filled with student involvement. Teachers also need to be well-versed in using technological presentation software, as a proper blend of both words spoken as well as visual and auditory media will have a net positive impact on overall audience engagement and the transfer of knowledge. The physical environment must also be considered when entertaining an audience, and therefore desk set up and wall decorations must be reflected upon as well. The desks need to be set up in a manner that promotes a warm and communal atmosphere of open discussion, and the walls need to be adorned with student work to cultivate that same comfortable atmosphere that feels like home.
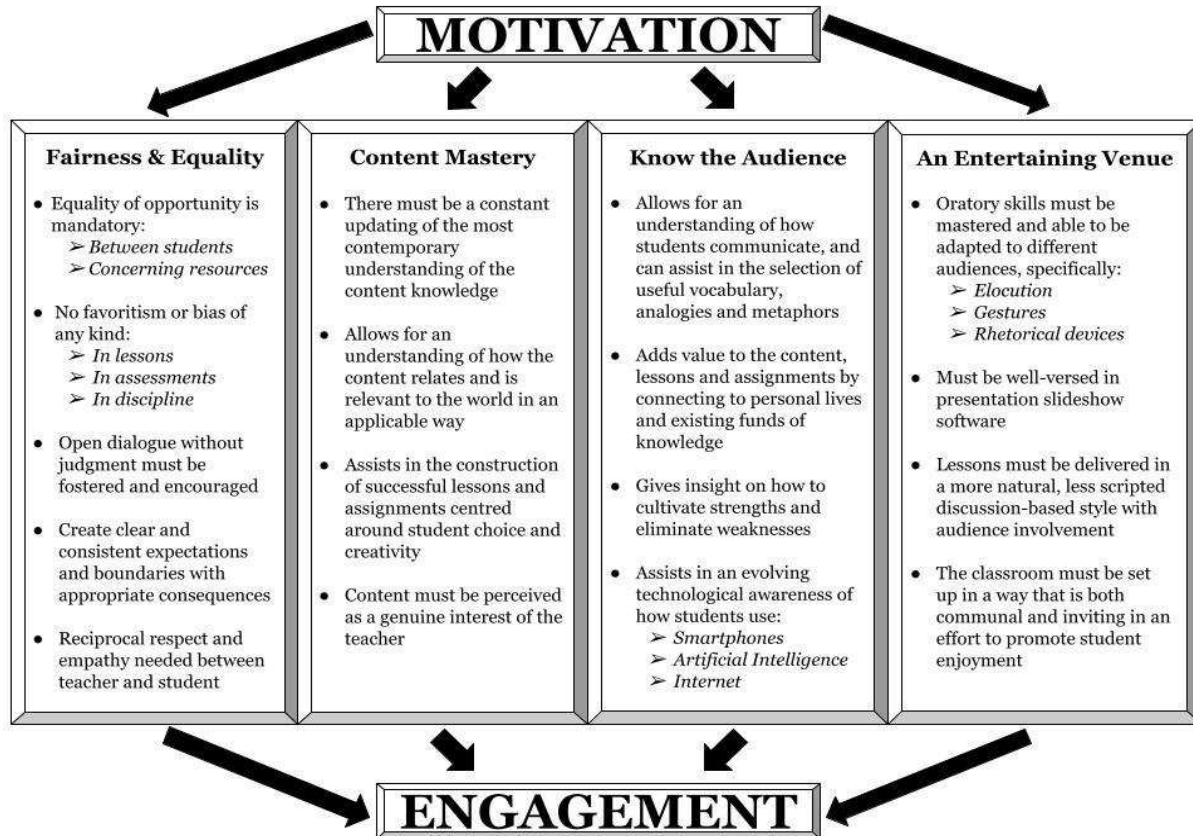
Composite Sketch

The Composite Sketch (see Figure 1) illustrates the Essence of the Experience and common themes shared between the participants.

Figure 1

Composite Sketch of the Essence of the Experience

Note. The foundational skill a teacher needs is to be able to motivate students to engage in class. The four principal ways to accomplish this are as follows: being fair and equal, having a mastery of the curriculum content, knowing the audience, and providing an entertaining venue.

Conclusion

With the findings in this report, the possibilities are significant and far-reaching in regards to further research. The Composite Sketch (see Figure 1) and accompanying explanations represent the essence of each participant's experience in a modern classroom, and I have written it in such a way that is accessible to everyone, whether they are in the profession of education or not. This, I believe, is of the highest value moving forward, as it opens the door to use this information for a variety of instructive purposes.

Teacher Performance Appraisals (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022) are currently the primary methodology used to evaluate teachers and their classroom practices in the province, and the information in this report can certainly assist in developing a more contemporary way to evaluate modern educators. The various competencies found in the Composite Sketch (see Figure 1) can certainly be highlighted and expanded upon to craft useful Professional Development Day activities that are concerned with serious professional development, and can also be of service in updating teacher hiring practices by assisting in the construction of questions that focus on relevant concerns of the profession to better vet prospective candidates. It is also worth turning to the Teacher Education Programs where all student teachers graduate from and one of the original reasons for the inception of this report. In an effort to help Teacher Education Programs across Ontario modernise and evolve with the times, the information in this report can certainly be utilised to reorganise and restructure portions of these programs to properly train teacher candidates with specific skill sets needed to be successful in their future careers.

Beyond the Composite Sketch (see Figure 1) and the information contained within, it would also be worthwhile for researchers to further investigate the place that entertainment has in the overall educational experience. The results from the data analysis combined with the lack of substantive literature on this topic is testament to the importance and overall need of future research in this field.

To ask what it means to be a competent teacher is a necessity for any society interested in its continued survival. Without hyperbole, it can be said that one of the foundational elements that have always helped sustain a society - either past or present - is the degree to which its youth are educated. This means, among other things, that it is incumbent upon all teachers to fully understand what it means to do their job properly, in a concerted effort to not only help their students become the best possible versions of themselves but also become a positive contributor to the society in which they live.

The world moves on, and the education system must always move with it.

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