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What makes a great teacher during a pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged many assumptions underlying education, including those related to the qualities that are most essential to being an effective teacher. We interviewed 23 state primary and secondary school teachers about what makes a great teacher during a pandemic. Two themes were identified: *caring for pupil wellbeing*, and *dealing with uncertainty*. Teachers reported that the need to demonstrate these qualities, while always important, has intensified during COVID-19. These findings indicate that teacher education and professional development programmes may benefit from recognising and assisting teachers to develop these qualities.

COVID-19 has shifted the educational landscape. Schools have needed to intermittently open and close in response to policy changes while continuing to teach and look after the welfare of their pupils (Van Lancker and Parolin 2020). The pandemic has also raised the age-old question: *What makes a great teacher*?

Important non-cognitive qualities (aka social and emotional skills) for effective teachers have been identified in the past. For example, a study identified that the most important non-cognitive qualities for effective teaching are: empathy and communication; organisation and planning; and resilience and adaptability (Klassen, et al., 2018). Similar qualities were identified in a meta-analysis on teachers' personality and teacher effectiveness (Kim et al., 2019, in which extraversion showed the strongest association with effectiveness.

In a pandemic, when planning the future is difficult, it is likely that qualities akin to empathy and communication, and resilience and adaptability would be particularly important. Accordingly, the current study examined *what makes a great teacher during a pandemic*?

Method

Participants were 23 state primary and secondary teachers in England (5 male, 18 female) with an average of 14 years of teaching experience (SD = 9.17, range = 1 to 32). They consisted of members of Senior Leadership Teams (SLT; e.g. deputy headteacher, headteacher; Participants 1–9) and classroom teachers (Participants 10–24). They participated in semi-structured interviews via a video-conferencing software in November 2020 as part of a larger longitudinal project (see Kim and Asbury, 2020 for more details).

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Table 1. What makes a great teacher during a pandemic?

Caring for pupil wellbeing	Dealing with uncertainty
Being a good listener; Willingness to maintain relationships; Being positive; Optimism; Being calm and systematic; Empathy; Nurturing*; Caring for the pupils; Kindness; Charisma; Support and care; Likeability and approachability; Building and maintaining relationships; Understanding	Flexibility*; Resilience*; Versatility; Communication*

The participants were asked what quality makes a great teacher during a pandemic, and whether that quality was equally important before the pandemic and would be equally important afterwards.

Responses were collated by identifying keywords that participants used to describe the qualities in answer to the interview question, and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke 2013). Participants' responses to the question about the relative importance of this quality before and after the pandemic were recorded as yes, no or unsure (see Supplementary Information).

Results

Two themes were identified in relation to what makes a great teacher during a pandemic: *caring for pupil wellbeing*, and *dealing with uncertainty* (see Table 1). All qualities were named once except for those marked with asterisks, which were named by two participants.

Caring for pupil wellbeing captured warm interpersonal qualities required when engaging with pupils. For example, the centrality of maintaining relationships with pupils during the pandemic was highlighted by Participant 2, who explained, 'I think the most important thing is whether we're apart or whether we're together, actually, you mean something to me and you're special to me and you're important to me.' The warmth of human relationships that can help reassure pupils was highlighted by Participant 16 who said that: 'Kindness might supersede [resilience] a little bit because I think that they're [pupils are] scared.'

Dealing with uncertainty captures one's ability to adapt to the ever-changing situation. Participant 24 identified the centrality of resilience 'because it's such a high stress job.' Moreover, open communication to deal with uncertainty was identified as important at this time. Participant 11 explained how their headteacher emails weekly to ask staff, 'what's gone positively this week?, what can we improve on?; any key messages? . . . And I just think that way of communicating has just really worked.'

A recurring comment was that their identified quality was important before the pandemic and it would be important after the pandemic, but that its importance had intensified in the current circumstances. For example, Participant 14 said, 'Nurture was always important but I think it's become clearer now that there's more needs arising and we do need to be more understanding of that.'

Discussion

The two umbrella qualities that teachers identified as critical during a pandemic were *caring for pupil wellbeing*, and *dealing with uncertainty*. The former links to the importance of empathy and communication from Klassen, et al., (2018) study and somewhat to extraversion from (Kim, et al., 2019) meta-analysis. There was a sense that teachers felt that these qualities were needed more than ever in the current situation due to pupils' growing welfare needs and the changing situation. *Dealing with uncertainty* relates to resilience and adaptability (Author), which is particularly relevant in a pandemic.

Given the small-scale qualitative nature of this study, one should avoid generalisations. However, given that these two qualities were also identified as important in other studies, our combined findings may have implications for teacher education programmes and professional development programmes. Recognising these qualities as central to the teaching profession may help to ensure that teachers are effective now and in the future.

Disclosure statement

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