

Does personality make a good teacher?

The answer is not that straightforward, but teachers' well-being may be the path to investigate further

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Based on their own experiences as students, most people tend to believe that a teacher's personality has a significant effect on student outcomes, both academic and psychological. Researchers, too, have long hypothesized that teachers' personality traits affect the quality of their instruction.

Psychologists define personality traits as patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviour that remain relatively stable across situations and time and play a significant role in shaping behaviour. In contemporary research, the standard theory of personality identifies five personality traits, often referred to as the *Big Five*:

1. Neuroticism
2. Extraversion
3. Openness to new experiences
4. Agreeableness
5. Conscientiousness

Studies from several countries have described teacher recruitment in terms of negative selection, suggesting that teacher candidates have less favourable cognitive and personality characteristics than students in other subject areas. It appears that this view of a negative selection process into the teaching profession is widely shared by policymakers and the public at large.

However, my current research in Germany has been unable to find empirical support for the negative selection hypothesis. Instead, vocational interests, especially interest in contributing to society, seem to be the most important predictor of enrolment in a teacher education program. Teachers appear to be particularly interested in listening to the problems of others, connecting with people, and caring for others.

It is often assumed that an individual's personal characteristics must be well matched with the occupational environment if that person is to achieve professional success. Across various occupational groups and over extended periods of time, the *Big Five* have been shown to be valid predictors of occupational success. In the case of social professions, conscientiousness and agreeableness play a particularly significant role.

One might therefore assume that the *Big Five* are also predictive of teachers' success, as measured by instructional quality or favourable student outcomes. For example, a more agreeable teacher — who also has the necessary professional knowledge, beliefs, motivation, and self-regulation — might be expected to be better able to create a supportive social environment in which students feel secure and personally valued and thus achieve better learning outcomes.

Personality is only a minor factor in successful teaching

Yet empirical findings show only weak to moderate associations between the *Big Five* personality traits and teachers' occupational success. So why do so many people believe that teachers' personalities are a key factor in student outcomes?

The term "personality" is often (mis)used to refer to such qualities as *enthusiasm*, *motivation*, and *supportiveness*. Researchers, however, would point out that enthusiasm and motivation are not personality traits, but rather aspects of teachers' professional competence, and that supportiveness is a component of instructional behaviour — and these qualities are indeed closely linked to student outcomes.

Although current research shows only weak associations between the *Big Five* personality traits and teachers' instructional quality and student outcomes, two — so far mostly separate — research strands are finding some evidence of an indirect effect of these traits through teachers' well-being.

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The first research strand focusses on the association between the *Big Five* personality traits and subjective well-being. Neuroticism, in particular, has long been known to be associated with subjective well-being. The second and more recent research strand looks at the associations between teachers' subjective well-being and the quality of their instruction and students' outcomes. Researchers have found that teachers' stress and exhaustion are negative predictors of both. However, scholars have yet to combine these two research strands and conduct a longitudinal investigation of the correlations that have been identified.

So does personality make a good teacher? The answer is probably "yes" in terms of what most people consider to be personality traits, but "to a relatively limited extent" when it comes to the *Big Five* personality traits. Given the highly complex nature of associations among teachers' personality traits, teachers' well-being, instructional quality, and student outcomes, however, many questions remain unanswered.

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