Cambodian Journal of Educational Research
2026, Vol. 6, No. 2, Online First
https://doi.org/10.62037/cjer.2026.06.02.04

CAMBODIAN EDUCATION FORUM
A forum for education

**Review Article** **Open Access**

# Characteristics of an effective teacher: A personal reflection

**Korngleng Sear** *

Western Training Center, Western University, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

*Received: November 1, 2025* *Revised: March 6, 2026* *Accepted: August 10, 2026*

## Abstract

Teachers play a vital role in developing human resources for society, the nation, and the wider world. By effectively nurturing students' knowledge, skills, and character, teachers help prepare them to become capable employees, responsible parents, effective leaders, and good citizens. Given the importance of teachers in shaping individuals and society, understanding the characteristics of effective teaching is essential. Drawing on secondary sources and the author's own reflection, this article examines 12 characteristics of effective teachers. These include viewing teaching as a calling, having strong subject-matter expertise and a deep understanding of their students, planning lessons thoroughly, creating a joyful learning environment, communicating clearly, measuring their success by their students' achievement, cultivating students' character skills, serving as positive role models, motivating students to work harder, having a high level of emotional intelligence, regularly assessing students' learning, and genuinely desiring the best for their students. The article concludes that every teacher, with the right mindset, sustained commitment, deliberate effort, and support from others, can continue to learn, grow, and develop into a more effective educator.

**Keywords:** Effective teachers; teacher effectiveness; effective teaching; teacher characteristics; personal reflection

* Korngleng Sear ✉ korngleng@gmail.com 🖃 Western Training Center, Western University, No. 66, St. 217, Russey Village, Sangkat Steung Mean Chey, Khan Mean Chey, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

© 2026 The Author(s)
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA) license.

## Introduction

Teaching is one of the most important professions in the world. Teachers play a significant role in developing human resources for society and the wider world. Therefore, effective teachers are essential in the education sector. The effectiveness of teachers is measured by students' learning outcomes in their classes (Khojastehmehr & Takrimi, 2008). It is a fact that different people hold different views of what makes a teacher effective (Ansari & Malik, 2013). It has been suggested that effective teachers have the ability to establish a strong rapport with students, motivate students to perform better (Ansari & Malik, 2013), capture students' attention, possess strong personal skills (Arends, 1986, as cited in Ansari & Malik, 2013), maximize the instruction time, present lessons in a way that meets students' needs, and seek opportunities that allow students to apply newly acquired lessons in the real world (Brophy & Good, 1986; Witcher et al., 2001). In my view, effective teachers are those who manage themselves well, care deeply about their teaching, and genuinely desire the best for their students.

In Cambodia, the number of students passing the national high school examination has increased annually since the introduction of examination reforms in 2014 (Oeun & Heng, 2025). Similarly, the latest results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate improvements in Cambodia's performance across all three assessed subjects: science, reading, and mathematics (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2026). Despite these encouraging developments, there are still weaknesses that require further attention (Oeun & Heng, 2025). Compared with high-performing East Asian countries such as China, Singapore, and Japan, Cambodia continues to lag considerably behind in the PISA results.

According to the 2025 PISA results, China recorded scores of 597 in science, 527 in reading, and 612 in mathematics, while Singapore achieved 560, 535, and 563, respectively (OECD, 2026). Although Cambodia has made significant improvements in its performance, its scores remained substantially lower, at 382 in science, 347 in reading, and 366 in mathematics. The gap is also evident in the overall country rankings: China ranked first and Singapore second, while neighboring Thailand and Vietnam ranked 53rd and 39th, respectively. Cambodia, by contrast, ranked 75th among the 91 participating countries and

economies (OECD, 2026). These results highlight the considerable gap that Cambodia continues to face in educational achievement compared with both high-performing East Asian systems and some neighboring countries.

One potential solution to this issue is to improve the quality of teachers. Effective teachers who provide high-quality instruction can have a strong direct influence on students' reading performance while also indirectly promoting positive learning behaviors, such as regular attendance and timely completion of homework (Tomaszewski et al., 2022).

Against this background, this article aims to discuss the characteristics of effective teachers. Drawing on secondary sources and the author's personal reflection, the article outlines 12 characteristics that teachers should not overlook to be effective teachers. The article concludes that good education and an effective school system are the foundation for producing real human resources for society and the country.

## Characteristics of effective teachers

### *Effective teachers see their work as a calling*

Effective teachers see their jobs as more than just jobs. A story about a tourist who came to visit a construction site could explain this point very well (Ben-Shahar, 2021). As he arrived at the site, he saw many construction workers. As he walked around the site with great excitement, he stopped and asked a builder, "What are you doing?" The builder said, "I'm laying bricks." The tourist walked ten more yards and saw another builder doing the same thing. He still asked, "What are you doing?" The second builder responded, "I'm building a wall." Finally, the tourist walked across to the third builder, who paid painstaking attention to his building. The tourist asked him, "What are you doing?" The builder smiled at him and replied, "I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God." (Ben-Shahar, 2021, p. 29).

Just because people work in the same environment and the same jobs does not mean they approach their tasks the same way. A study by psychologists Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton at the University of Michigan showed that people viewed their work from distinct perspectives: A job, a career, and a calling (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). First, when people view their work as a job, they only do it to get a paycheck. They may not like their work, but they

do it because it is their obligation. Second, people who consider their work a career will try to do their job for the sake of getting additional bonuses. They see the opportunity for promotion, salary raises, and other perks. Third, people who view their work as a calling. External motivations are not the major contributors to their performance. They do it because they love it, enjoy it, and care about it. They are passionate about going beyond the call of duty, and their work turns out to be useful, meaningful, and significant for themselves and others.

There is no doubt that effective teachers view their work as a calling. They get up excited and walk into their classrooms with enthusiasm. They do their job as if it were the last day of their lives. As conventional wisdom states, "Some wake up to an alarm. Some wake up to a calling" (Maxwell, 2018, p. 235). Furthermore, when teachers respect, love, and care about their students, and are in charge of their learning outcomes, there is no doubt that students, in return, will respect and like them as their role models (Kao, 2022). When I introduced the discovery of a job, a career, and a calling to my students, one student raised her hand and asked, "How can I find my calling?" I replied that we can seek our calling by asking these three questions: What can we be the best in the world at? What are we deeply passionate about? What drives our economic engine? (Collins, 2001). I continued telling them that my work as a teacher is my calling because I can teach my students very well. I love, enjoy, and care for my work, and I can also earn a good salary.

### *Effective teachers are specialized in their subject and know their students well*

Effective teachers have extensive knowledge of the subjects they teach. They read widely in their field, pursue improved teaching techniques, and stay engaged with educational research. In addition to subject knowledge, effective teachers know their students well and build close rapport with them both inside and outside the classroom. Hill and Jones (2018) examined several million elementary school students in North Carolina and found that certain fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms experienced notable gains in mathematics and reading. The explanation was not simply that those classrooms had better teachers; rather, many students benefited from learning with the same teacher for two consecutive years (Hill & Jones, 2018).

This implementation is called looping: teachers move up a grade with their students (Hill & Jones, 2018). Looping creates a robust rapport between teachers and students. They get to know one another personally. Teachers deeply grasp their students' personalities, strengths, and challenges. They recognize students' potential and let them know their potential. Finally, it allows teachers to shift their roles from being instructors to coaches and mentors. For example, Finland, which claimed victory in PISA, a standardized test of their math, reading, and science skills, for three consecutive times in 2000, 2003, and 2006, widely implements looping in its schools (Grant, 2023). Finnish elementary schoolers always stay with the same teacher for multiple grades, from two years to six straight years (Colagrossi, 2018).

### *Effective teachers plan their lessons meticulously*

It is important for teachers to plan their lessons thoroughly before they enter the classroom. Associate professor Sophal Kao suggested that planning the lesson well allows teachers to succeed 50% in their teaching (Kao, 2019). The remaining 50% will be achieved by the activities teachers perform in alignment with their lesson plan in the classroom. Likewise, Wiseman and Hunt (2014) also acknowledged that good preparation can inevitably lead to effective teaching for every teacher. Well-planned lessons support teachers in their teaching and prompt teachers to think properly about the theories of effective teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2011).

Automaker Henry Ford once asserted, "Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success" (Maxwell, 2007, p. 93). Many people recognize the power of 5Ps: Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. This concept can apply to various aspects of our profession, such as projects, public speaking, sharing sessions, teaching, and so on. Nevertheless, there is controversy about how different teachers see and plan their lessons distinctively based on their teaching experience, salaries, and institutional culture (Kao, 2019). Most old-timer experienced teachers are likely to plan their lessons in brief, whereas novice teachers organize their lesson plans in detail (Richards & Farrell, 2011; Scrivener, 2011).

Thus, effective teachers do not take their lesson plans for granted. Whenever they sit down to plan their lessons, they thoroughly contemplate these elements in their lesson plans: lesson aim, warm-up or lead-in, presentation, practice, production, plenary, expected problems, relevant materials, methods,

approaches, and techniques (Kao, 2018; Ur, 2012). Furthermore, they deliberately enter the classroom early to ensure that the surroundings, such as lighting, sound system, projector, and the like, work properly.

### *Effective teachers create an enjoyable learning environment*

It is worthwhile to note that effective teachers are always on the lookout for creating an environment conducive to students' learning outcomes. This means that students feel comfortable and secure when they sit in the classroom. As Kao (2022) remarked, "Regarding the classroom environment, I also believe that effective learning takes place when the classroom atmosphere is safe and friendly and when teaching is fun and enjoyable" (p. 104).

How can effective teachers establish such a learning environment? According to Ben-Shahar (2007), there are two models of learning: the drowning model and the lovemaking model. In the drowning model, students are inspired by external motivation. They study because they receive pressure from their parents, teachers, or society. They learn because they have to. They review lessons to avoid failure and negative consequences, and at the end of the term or semester, they feel a sense of relief from their learning. As a result, they become victims of their study. On the other hand, students in the lovemaking model are fond of their learning. They learn because they want to. The time they spend sitting in class, reviewing lessons, reading books inside and outside the classroom, doing homework, researching for their projects, and writing their thesis or dissertations becomes their eureka moments (Ben-Shahar, 2007).

Unquestionably, effective teachers are capable of helping their students change from being students in the drowning model to being students in the lovemaking model by applying the concept of flow. Flow is "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 4). People experience flow when they enjoy doing a task and do it extremely well simultaneously (Ben-Shahar, 2007).

According to Ben-Shahar (2007), people experience flow in many aspects of their lives, such as reading an interesting book, watching an unpredictable movie, playing a musical instrument, or painting a work of art. In a mixed-ability class, effective teachers can sense that some students are anxious or

perplexed when the lesson level exceeds their capacity. Some students, nevertheless, feel bored due to the easiness of the lessons. These two problems appear in the classroom because students learn without experiencing flow.

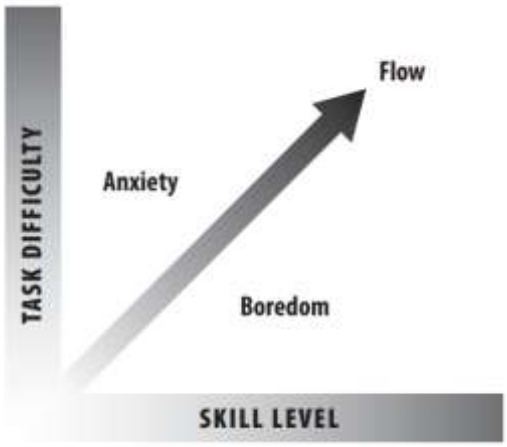



**Figure 1.** The conditions of flow (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p. 87).

As indicated in Figure 1, when students' skill or ability is higher than the difficulty of the lesson, students feel bored. Conversely, when students' skill or ability is lower than the difficulty, they are anxious. To address this common problem, teachers must organize lessons and tasks that are neither easy nor difficult for the students. In short, teachers need to be sensitive to their students' learning. If students get bored or anxious with their studies, teachers must increase the challenge bar or decrease the difficulty to bring them back to experience flow.

### *Effective teachers simplify language for easy understanding*

Effective teachers communicate in ways that are clear, accessible, and student-centered. Their purpose is not to impress students with the breadth of their knowledge, but to make ideas understandable and useful for learners. They are skilled at translating complex concepts into simple, comprehensible language that supports student learning.

I must confess that communication through speaking is one of my weaknesses. I sometimes speak fast without clarity. My students typically request that I slow down my speech and explanation. However, speed and clarity are simply parts of teachers' communication. The extensive knowledge of teachers turned out to be the core issue concerning students' understanding. Figlio et al. (2015) assessed whether students really learned more from the experts than

nonexperts. They compiled data on every freshman at Northwestern University from 2001 to 2008. They wondered if students performed better when more qualified lecturers taught them. What they found was fascinating. Students who initially took classes with experts ended up with poorer grades in the next class.

Experts cannot teach their students as beginners well for this reason: the curse of knowledge. The curse of knowledge occurs when a person knows a lot and then assumes that others know just as much as he or she does (Berger, 2023). For example, by assuming that patients may know as much as he or she does, a doctor may communicate with them using acronyms, shorthand, and other medically technical terms. As a result, the receivers gain little or no understanding from the doctor.

To address these problems, I have followed the advice of author John C. Maxwell who believed that good communicators take something complicated and make it simple (Maxwell, 2023). For years, I have tested and applied a "3S" strategy: "Keep it Simple. Say it Slowly. Have a Smile" (Maxwell, 2010, p. 154). By practicing the 3S strategy, I ultimately found my rhythm in communication.

***Effective teachers measure their success by the achievement of their students***

Effective teachers often care about their students' learning outcomes. They work hard to help their students become successful in their academic journey. Teaching evaluations from students play a vital role in letting teachers know their strengths and shortcomings. It works as a powerful catalyst in pushing teachers to improve their performance in the classroom (Kulik, 2001). However, teaching evaluations from students can turn out to be a curse as well. According to my schooling experience, some academic teams rely solely on teaching evaluations from students to assess teachers' performance. Some teachers, in response to this requirement, try to use any possible ways to please their students so that they receive good comments and ratings from them. More seriously, as teachers continue to indulge their students, it leads them to treat their studies lightly. They feel free to do unimportant tasks and irrelevant activities in the classroom. As a result, students do not try their very best in learning and merely gain little improvement at the end of the term or semester.

### *Effective teachers cultivate students' character skills*

American author Helen Keller once asserted, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experiences of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved" (Grant, 2023, p. 23). It is worthwhile to note that a strong character is built through a series of hardships. Moreover, solid character is a mark for predicting a person's future success. From their research, Chetty et al. (2011) could estimate the salaries of kindergarten students when they grew up into their 20s. As illustrated in Figure 2, kindergarten students who learned with more experienced teachers would end up earning better salaries than their peers.

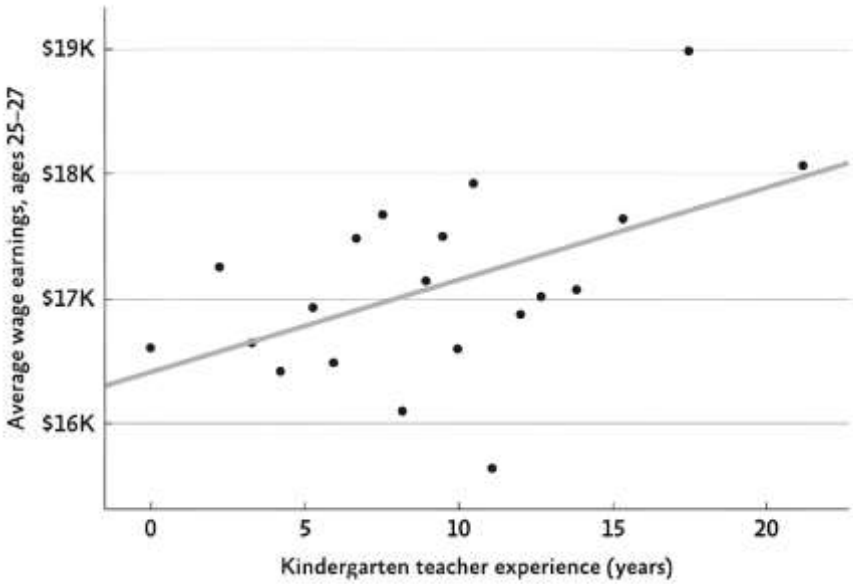



**Figure 2.** Having an experienced kindergarten teacher predicts higher adult income (Chetty et al., 2011)

According to Chetty et al. (2011), experienced kindergarten teachers profoundly impacted their students over a long period because they had cultivated these four character skills for them.

> *Proactive*: Being initiators to ask and answer questions, find information in the books, and request teachers to learn outside the classroom.
> *Prosocial*: Being a good team player with their classmates.
> *Disciplined*: Being able to curb the impulse to disrupt the class and pay attention to teachers.
> *Determined*: Being able to face challenges and persist despite adversities.

In the late 1800s, William James, known as the father of psychology, suggested that people above 30 years old were unable to grow their character (Grant, 2023). William wrote, "By the age of thirty, character has set like plaster and will never soften again" (Grant, 2023, p. 19). However, new evidence revealed that people can learn and excel in their character skills even in their 30s, 40s, and 50s (Campos et al., 2017). Social scientists chose 1,500 entrepreneurs in West Africa. They placed them into three different groups. In Group 1, the entrepreneurs went on to run their businesses as usual. The entrepreneurs in Group 2 were trained in cognitive skills such as finance, accounting, HR, marketing, and pricing. Finally, the entrepreneurs from Group 3 were taught character skills, including proactivity, discipline, and determination. The result, after two years, showed that the entrepreneurs in Group 3 could accumulate their firms' incomes by an average of 30 percent, which was approximately triple the benefit of entrepreneurs in Group 2.

I often alert my students that they can gradually discipline themselves by coming to school frequently, arriving at class early, setting a schedule for self-directed learning and sticking to it, doing homework on time, and, often, reviewing lessons. Furthermore, I tell them that they should learn to become good collaborators when they are assigned to work with their classmates on a project or presentation. I deeply believe that students will bring these behaviors with them when they become employees for an organization, and as a result, they will reach fruition in no difference from the kindergartens in the study.

### *Effective teachers set a good example for their students*

Children are easily influenced by their parents' attitudes (Cialdini, 2021). For example, the venerable humanitarian Mother Teresa grew up in a family full of generosity. Her mother always gave away clothes, housed people, and fed hungry citizens (Cialdini, 2021). Such acts of giving set a good example for Mother Teresa when she became an adult. She founded the Missionaries of Charity and dedicated her entire life to serving the poorest of the poor. What is more? Her life mission to help the poor also generated a ripple effect. A great deal of nuns has kept working on her vision until today. Like parents, teachers play a key role in shaping students' attitudes. In a place like a house, a workplace, or a school, a person's attitude and behavior will be contagious to others like electricity through wires (Maxwell, 2008).

According to Maxwell (2012), bad attitudes, such as an inability to admit wrongdoing, failing to forgive, petty jealousy, and a desire to hog all the credit alone, are caught more easily than good attitudes by students. More importantly, teachers in the classroom are the most powerful people whose roles are to send good or bad attitudes to their students. If teachers often change their emotions, display rudeness, and express no ethics, then it will set a copycat for the students in the classroom. As a proverb states, "Trees die from the top" (Drucker & Maciariello, 2004, p. 3). Alternatively, once teachers are gracious, kind, and fair, these attitudes will be transferred to students in the classroom. Students, in return, will emulate their attitudes and become good citizens of their country in the future.

Effective teachers recognize that they transmit attitudes to their students. Therefore, they model good manners and professionalism in all settings. They are polite, arrive in class on time, and demonstrate professional conduct in their teaching. They treat students with kindness and fairness, avoid holding grudges, and show respect consistently. In short, they do what they can to become credible role models for their students.

### *Effective teachers are their students' chief encouragers*

Motivation is like oxygen to people's souls. I have yet to meet a person who does not need motivation. As long as people are still alive, they truly need another person to tap on their backs. As the founder of Chick-fil-A, Truett Cathy, beautifully observed, "Do you know how I identify someone who needs encouragement? If the person is breathing, they need a pat on their back!" (Maxwell, 2011, p. 110). The following activities can be used to motivate students to learn more effectively (Brown, 1994; Kao, 2010; Killen, 2003; Ur, 2012).

- Be interested in the students' learning.
- Arrive in class on time.
- Plan productive lessons.
- Correct homework and assignments regularly.
- Remember students' names and call them correctly.
- Generate a benign classroom to learn or create a friendly environment in class.
- Make lessons interesting.
- Drill students to express their lives during the lessons.

- Build up a good rapport with students.
- Appreciate and encourage students who bring their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences to the classroom.
- Connect classroom learning activities to students' daily lives.
- Design learning activities that help improve students' critical thinking.
- Create proper learning activities and make instructional materials related to students' level of academic and social development.

However, what motivates one student may not motivate another. Therefore, effective teachers tap into different strokes for different folks (Blanchard, 2018). This means teachers need to use different motivations for different students. Figure 3 shows Maslow's hierarchy of needs developed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 (Ben-Shahar & Ridgway, 2017). In general, most people desire fundamental needs such as air, shelter, water, and food to survive. Once these basic needs are met, people will move on to the middle section of the pyramid to satisfy more complicated social needs such as security, friendships, and family. Finally, esteem and self-actualization, the abstract needs, are the last demands. People desire to have deeply meaningful lives.




**Figure 3.** Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Ben-Shahar & Ridgway, 2017)

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if we teach vulnerable students in a non-government organization, motivations such as books, pens, snacks, clothes, and other external factors may work as powerful forces to push students for better performance. Conversely, motivations such as additional scores, public praise, recognition for their great performance, medals, letters of appreciation, and inviting students to join school competitions should be considered for students hailing from families with independent financial support.

### *Effective teachers have a critical mass of emotional intelligence*

As teachers, their emotions really matter to their students in the classroom. Research has highlighted that emotion can be transmitted from one person to another or a group of people. Friedman and Riggion (1981, as cited in Goleman et al., 2001) conducted an experiment by putting three strangers sitting face to face in silence for a minute or two. The result indicated that the most emotionally expressive of the three sent his or her mood to the other two without speaking a single word. This study is also true in the office, shop floor, or boardroom. There is no doubt that when a teacher is pessimistic, angry, cranky, and ruthless, it will inexorably create a toxic classroom filled with negative students who display similar or the same moods as the teacher. Conversely, if the same teacher is optimistic, joyful, upbeat, and energized, then it will create a warm, comfortable, and secure atmosphere for students who love and enjoy their learning. Understanding this fact propels me to consistently maintain my positive mood every time I walk into the classroom so that it benefits my students.

Back in 2014, when I started my teaching career as a part-time teacher for a private school, I was young and green. I knew nothing about classroom management. I had no idea how to connect with my students. I did not know about lesson plans, teaching methods, or motivation. On my first day as a teacher, I vividly remembered that I got furious with my students because they did not pay attention to my teaching. On the second day, I entered the classroom, locked the door, and spent over 30 minutes complaining about the students' behaviors. On one occasion, as I could not curb my anger, I lashed out at a student and ordered him to leave the classroom. More seriously, I even transferred a student from my class to another class because of the intense conflict between him and me. I am sorry to admit that I did everything in order to win over my students.

A decade later, as I reflected on my teaching career, it was clear that I allowed emotion to govern me. As a result, my outside actions come from my inside emotions. In fact, each emotion can produce different kinds of responses in the body. As Goleman (2020) noted, anger can generate a pulse of energy strong enough for vigorous action, whereas love generates a general state of calm, contentment, and cooperation. This is why many parents sacrifice their lives for their children because of their deep love for them.

As I became older and more mature, I began to know about emotional intelligence. I learned how to apply self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. I learned how to fake my emotions until I made it. As associate professor Sophal Kao advised, "Instead of bringing bad feelings into the classroom, I pretended that nothing happened to me before I entered the classroom and started teaching as usual. This is because I understood that all the students who came to school were ready to receive good education, fun, and happiness from their teachers and friends" (Kao, 2022, p. 104).

The good news is that emotional intelligence is learnable (Goleman, 1996). We can improve and strengthen our emotional capacity. First, as we age, so does our emotional intelligence. For example, a person in his or her 40s is more likely to have higher patience, self-awareness, and perseverance than a person in his or her 20s. Second, emotional intelligence largely stays in the neurotransmitters of the brain's limbic system. This system monitors our feelings, drives, and impulses. Research revealed that we can excel in the limbic system through motivation, practice, and feedback (Goleman, 1996). However, it is important to emphasize that building one's emotional intelligence is not an overnight destination. It is a long process. It results from sincere desire, dogged focus, and concerted effort. As philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." (Goleman, 1996, p. 71).

### *Effective teachers assess their students' learning regularly*

Assessment plays a pivotal role in monitoring students' progress and identifying areas for improvement. It also alerts students when they are at risk of falling behind. For example, when I joined a course at TESOL House, I noticed that the trainer conducted regular assessments and shared weekly reports with trainees. This helped me understand my strengths and areas for improvement. As a result, many trainees improved steadily from the beginning to the end of the course.

In *The Leader in Me*, author Stephen R. Covey warned, "Students work all quarter without knowing where they stand, and then at the end of a quarter, or term, the teacher sends a report home letting parents know their child's scores. Only if parents choose to say something does the student learn how he or she is doing, and often it is only the 'bad' scores that are brought to their attention. No wonder why some students don't like the game of school. No wonder why some quit" (Covey, 2014, pp. 105–106).

Kao (2022) asserted that in-class assessments, such as tests, quizzes, and term papers at the end of the month, term, semester, or year, are not the only way to evaluate students' learning. Sadly, these types of assessments make students feel intimidated, leading to lower scores. Kao wrote from his personal experience as a student, "According to my schooling experience, sitting tests and exams always made me feel nervous, although I did them well. Thus, these assessment methods are not always the good ones for assessing students' learning outcomes" (Kao, 2022, p. 108). Kao's assertion is correct in only one part, but it seems to miss the other part. Students feel nervous or frightened while sitting in the classroom for exams because they are not confident in themselves. They do not review lessons thoroughly. If students take their time to review all the lessons in preparation for their exams, they will get good results in their exams.

Why is that? According to Stanford professor Bob Zajonc's cockroach theory, a person's performance near or before other people leads to two consequences: better or worse performance (Berger, 2016). When the task is easy and very familiar to a person, as he or she has done it hundreds or thousands of times, it will improve his or her performance. However, when it comes to a difficult and complex task unfamiliar to a person, or he or she has only done it a few times, then it will worsen his or her performance.

In the assessment context, if students do not prepare themselves for the exam, they will not be confident in their ability; as a result, they will feel nervous when they sit near many students in the classroom. By contrast, students will be confident enough to do their exams if they prepare themselves in advance. In my professional experience, I help my students do their exams well by spending a great deal of time reviewing almost all the lessons for them.

### *Effective teachers desire the best for their students*

Effective teachers always desire the best for their students. They seek to make a difference in their students' lives. They add value to them, serve them, and help them become better people. This commitment to making a difference in students' lives is well illustrated by the experience of Michelle Kuo, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, who shortly after graduating from Harvard University, took up a volunteer position with Teach For America (Kuo, 2017). She had to teach students in a remote area of Helena in Arkansas. The location was infamous for its domestic violence, gang, drug deals, and constant turmoil. Over there, she met some critically vulnerable students, including Patrick, who was a Grade 8 student. Inspired by Patrick's story, Michelle was dedicated to making a difference in her students' lives. Patrick started to improve under Michelle's mentorship.

Nevertheless, Michelle was convinced by her parents to leave her volunteer job in order to attend law school. She eventually decided to quit her job and move back to continue her education. A few years later, on her law school graduation day, Michelle learned that Patrick was caught and imprisoned for murder. She returned to Helena to find Patrick and keep educating him. Every day for seven months, Michelle went to teach Patrick in prison. They read novels, poems, and history. Day by day, Patrick grew confident and became a reader (Kuo, 2017).

Because of their love of their job and their deep care for their students, effective teachers like Michelle Kuo never give up on their students' lives. They have an underlying assumption that every student has great potential to change, improve, and become a better individual in society. Because they desire the best for their students, they strive to bring out the best in them.

## Conclusion

Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." However, only good or great education is a powerful weapon for changing people's lives, and effective teachers play a vital role in shaping the future of students. This article has shown that effective teachers love their jobs and care for their students. They have extensive knowledge of their subject and build strong, lasting rapport with their students. They plan their lessons well before teaching. They establish a classroom that brings joy, safety, and comfort to students. They present their lessons in simple, easy-to-understand language. They measure their job performance by their

students' success. They also teach their students character skills such as being proactive, prosocial, disciplined, and determined because they understand that these skills are foundational to students' lives and future success. They display a positive attitude and behavior for becoming good role models for their students. They encourage students to continue doing their hard work. They are self-aware of their emotions and regulate their negative feelings in ways that do not affect their students' learning. They also assess their students' learning regularly, provide quick interventions for struggling students, and always strive to do their best for their students.

The 12 characteristics of effective teachers discussed in this article provide important guidance for those aspiring to become effective teachers. By adopting these principles, together with the right mindset, strong commitment, sustained effort, and support from others, teachers can enhance the effectiveness of their teaching and, ultimately, contribute to the development of human capital for the benefit of society as a whole.

## Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

## Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## The author(s)

**Korngleng Sear** has been an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher for 11 years. He has called himself a student of personal growth since 2018. He self-published a book entitled *The 7 Lessons for Life* in 2025. His areas of interest are leadership, education, business, psychology, relationships, and social influence.

Email: korngleng@gmail.com

## References

Ansari, U., & Malik, S. K. (2013). Image of an effective teacher in 21st century classroom. *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World*, *3*(4), 61–68.

Ben-Shahar, T. (2007). *Happier: Learn the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment.* McGraw Hill.

Ben-Shahar, T. (2021). *Happiness studies: An introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ben-Shahar, T., & Ridgway, A. (2017). The *joy of leadership: How positive psychology can maximize your impact (and make you happier) in a challenging world.* Wiley.

Berger, J. (2016). *Invisible influence: The hidden forces that shape behavior*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Berger, J. (2023). *Magic Words: What to say to get your way.* Harper Business.

Blanchard, K. (2018). *The heart of a leader*. Jaico Publishing House.

Brophy, J. E., & Good, T. L. (1986). Teacher behavior and student achievement. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching*. Macmillan.

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Prentice Hall Regents.

Campos, F., Frese, M., Goldstein, M., Iacovone, L., Johnson, C. H., Mckenzie, D., & Mensmann, M. (2017). Teaching personal initiative beats traditional training in boosting small business in West Africa. *Science*, *357*(6357), 1287–1290. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aan5329

Chetty, R., Friedman, N. J., Hilger, N., Saez, E., Schanzenbach, W. D., & Yagan, D. (2011). How does your kindergarten classroom affect your earnings? Evidence from project star. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 126*(4), 1593–1660. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr041

Cialdini, R. B. (2021). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. Harper Business.

Colagrossi, M. (2018, September 10). *10 reasons why Finland's education system is the best in the world*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/10-reasons-why-finlands-education-system-is-the-best-in-the-world/

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't.* Random House Business.

Covey, S. R. (2014). *The leader in me: How schools around the world are inspiring greatness, one child at a time*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2008). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Drucker, P. F., & Maciariello, J. A. (2004). *The daily Drucker: 366 days of insight and motivation for getting the right things done.* Harper Business.

Figlio, D. N., Schapiro, M. O., & Soter, K. B. (2015). Are tenure-track professors better teachers? *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, *97*(4), 715–724. https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00529

Goleman, D. (1996). What makes a leader? In Harvard Business Review (Ed.), *HBR's 10 must reads: The essentials* (pp. 63–83). Harvard Business Review Press.

Goleman, D. (2020). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2001). Primal leadership: The hidden driver of great performance. *Harvard Business Review*, *79*(11), 42–53.

Grant, A. (2023). *Hidden potential: The science of achieving greater things.* WH Allen.

Hill, A. J., & Jones, D. B. (2018). A teacher who knows me: The academic benefits of repeat student–teacher matches. *Economics of Education Review*, *64*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.03.004

Kao, S. (2010). *Introduction to TESOL*. Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia.

Kao, S. (2018). *Self-directed learning approach to developing teaching professionalism* [Doctoral dissertation, Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia]. PUC Repository. http://res.puc.edu.kh/2019/files/faculty-assets/edu/Self-Directed-Learning-Approach-to-Developing-Teaching-Professionalism.pdf

Kao, S. (2019). *Practical methodology in TESOL.* Kao Sophal Publication.

Kao, S. (2022). My personal philosophy of education and its practices. *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, *2*(2), 100–115. https://doi.org/10.62037/cjer.2022.02.02.06

Khojastehmehr, R., & Takrimi, A. (2008). Characteristics of effective teachers: perceptions of the English teachers. *Journal of Education (Journal of Education & Psychology)*, *3*(2), 53–66. https://sid.ir/paper/564083/en

Killen, R. (2003). *Effective teaching strategies*: *Lessons from research and practice* (3rd ed). Social Science Press.

Kulik, J. A. (2001). Student ratings: Validity, utility and controversy, *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *27*(5), 9–25. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.1

Kuo, M. (2017). *Reading with Patrick: A teacher, a student, and a life-changing friendship.* Random House.

Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *Talent is never enough: Discover the choices that will take you beyond your talent.* Thomas Nelson.

Maxwell, J. C. (2008). *Leadership gold: Lessons I've learned from a lifetime of leading.* HarperCollins Leadership.

Maxwell, J. C. (2010). *Everyone communicates, few connect: What the most effective people do differently.* HarperCollins Leadership.

Maxwell, J. C. (2011). *The 5 levels of leadership: Proven steps to maximize your potential.* Center Street.

Maxwell, J. C. (2012). *The complete 101 collection: What every leader needs to know.* HarperCollins Leadership.

Maxwell, J. C. (2018). *Leadershift: The 11 essential changes every leader must embrace*. HarperCollins Leadership.

Maxwell, J. C. (2023). *The 16 undeniable laws of communication: Apply them and make the most of your message.* Maxwell Leadership.

OECD. (2026). *PISA 2025 results (Volume I): Future-ready students*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/73451bc5-en

Oeun, S., & Heng, K. (2025). Examining grade 12 students' underperformance in English essay writing in national exams in Cambodia: Insights from a qualitative study. *Sage Open*, *15*(4), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251408556

Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2011). *Practice teaching: A reflective approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning teaching: Essential guide to English language teaching (3rd ed.).* Macmillan Education.

Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N., Huang, Y., Western, M., McCourt, B., & McCarthy, I. (2022). The impact of effective teaching practices on academic achievement when mediated by student engagement: Evidence from Australian high schools. *Education Sciences*, *12*(5), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12050358

Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Wiseman, D. G., & Hunt, G. H. (2014). *Best practice in motivation and management in the classroom (3rd ed.).* Charles C Thomas.

Witcher, A. E., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Minor, L. C. (2001). Chrematistics of effective teachers: Perceptions of preservice teachers. *Research in the Schools*, *8*(2), 45–57.

Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. (2001). Crafting a job: Employees as active crafters of their work. *The Academy of Management Review*, 179–201. https://doi.org/10.2307/259118