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## **Everybody wants ‘good teachers’ – but they are hard to define A common narrative of model educators: from fictional teachers through exceptional educators to current educators’ professional perceptions**

**ABSTRACT:** Bar Gosen, Noah, *Everybody wants ‘good teachers’ – but they are hard to define A common narrative of model educators: from fictional teachers through exceptional educators to current educators’ professional perceptions*. Interdisciplinary Contexts of Special Pedagogy, No. 18, Poznań 2017. Pp. 181-197. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 2300-391X

Throughout the years, researchers searched for the definition of a good teacher. This article offers to learn from model educators, fictional and historical, how to define values, perception and practices which characterize good teachers.

Four fictional teachers were chosen based on two characteristics: First, author’s descriptions that underline their good qualities as a person and as a teacher. Second, remarks from their students’ and/or students’ parents or guardians, stating their acknowledgment of the teachers’ special qualities, and their gratitude for the learning experience they shared. A qualitative narrative analysis of these teachers – ‘Jane Eyre’, ‘Ann of Green Gables’ and his sequel ‘Anne from Avonlea’, ‘Up the down Staircase’ and ‘Goodbye Mr. Chips’ – defined five major characteristics which represent the exceptional teacher: holistic perception of the student, identifying and addressing students’ unique needs, emphasis on student-teacher relationship, creative teaching, a sense of mission and an inspiring personality.

Examining the work of exceptional educators such as Ann Sullivan (Helen Keller’s tutor), Janusz Korczak, and Haime Escelante, reveals common themes which corresponds with fictional model teachers characteristics.

Qualitative interviews with 14 Israeli rural high school teachers (7 homeroom educators and 7 subject teachers) emphasized similar characteristics of their role perceptions and practices.

The key to higher achievements, educational and academic alike, lies in the hands of the teachers. If these traits characterize the 'good teacher' we should consider merging them into teachers' preparatory and in-work professional training, as well as teachers' evaluation processes. Let us learn from good examples how to become 'good teachers'.

**KEY WORDS:** good teacher, Student perception, teacher-student relationship

The search after the definition of a 'good teacher' continues since the days of the Greeks<sup>1</sup>. Centuries later, endless inquiries, stories about fictional teachers – bad and excellent, books, movies and documentaries about exceptional teachers, we are still searching for the ideal teachers, but not more confident about their characteristics. Many of us hold images of 'good teachers' based on books, films and personal memories. These images may not be identical but it can be assumed there are similarities among them.

Teachers evaluation processes relate to role perceptions, knowledge mastering, instruction and educational skills and professional relevant skills<sup>2</sup>. There is an ongoing debate regarding the components of these procedures since teachers' role far surpasses passing knowledge and endowing literacy skills. Based on the notion that their main role is educating the younger generation and mentoring it into adult society, well equipped morally, socially and scholastically<sup>3</sup>, it can be assumed that their personal features and their role perception could be accountable for their success, alongside, if not prior to, their instruction skills<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Goldhaber, *The Mystery Of Good Teaching*, 2002, Education Next.

<sup>2</sup> RAMA – Israel national Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education, Ministry of Education. Israel 2017. (Hebrew)

<sup>3</sup> V. Perrone, *A Letter To Teachers – Reflections On Schooling And The Art Of Teaching*, San Francisco, 1991. M. Karniely, *Inquisitiveness And Inquiring – Foundations For Teacher Growth And Development* Tel Aviv, 2010. (Hebrew)

<sup>4</sup> S. Carothers, *To Become A Teacher – Making A Difference In Children Lives* Columbia University, 1995. pp. 23-33. F.A.G. Kurthagen, *In Search Of Essence Of A Good*

Many attempts were taken to crack the genome of the 'good teachers'. Evaluation tests based on defined perceptions of teachers' role<sup>5</sup>, traits inquiry through autobiographies' review<sup>6</sup>, teachers' perceptions<sup>7</sup>, and defined qualities and practices based on psychological theories, and performance comparison<sup>8</sup>. There was also an appliance to the wisdom of the masses as annual contest for choosing "Teacher of the state" rank six exceptional teachers, every year, based on people recommendation and voting<sup>9</sup>.

In this article, a positive psychological approach will be incorporated in search of the qualities of the 'good teacher'. Positive psychology concentrates on researching positive emotional experiences and traits to improve men condition in life. The study of the exceptional bright and successful teachers will widen our understanding regarding traits, perceptions and practices of the 'good teachers'<sup>10</sup>. In other words -let us learn from the best how to be the best.

We all have an inner vision of 'the good teacher'. It started in our childhood when we read stories about different teachers and their influence on their students. We could tell David Copperfield met horrible teachers at the boarding school he was sent to in the

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*Teacher: Toward A More Holistic Approach In Teacher Education.* Teaching and Teachers' Education, 20, pp. 77-97. P.J. Palmer, *The Courage To Teach – Exploring The Inner Landscape Of A Teacher's Life.* 2007. J.H. Strange, T.J. Ward, and L.W. Grant, *What Makes Good Teachers Good? A Cross – Case Analysis Between Teacher Effectiveness And Students Achievements* Journal Of Teacher Education, 62, pp. 339-355

<sup>5</sup> D.R. Cruickahank, and D. Haeefe, *Good Teachers.* Plural Educational Leadership. 2001. Pp. 26-30

<sup>6</sup> R.P. Traina, *What Makes A Good Teacher* Education Week. 1999.

<sup>7</sup> D.C. Loretie, *School Teachers – A Sociological Study* University of Chicago Press. 1975. Ch. %, pp. 109-133.

<sup>8</sup> S.F. Heck, and C.R. Williams, *The Complex Roles Of The Teachers – An Ecological Perspective.* Columbia University. Pp. 14-27, Kurthagen, et. Al. P. Sahlberg, *The Professional Educator: Lessons From Finland.* American Educator. Pp. 34-38, Strange and co. et. al.

<sup>9</sup> Ynet, *Teacher Of The State Contest,*

<sup>10</sup> M. Zeidner, G. Matthews and R.D. Roberts, *What Do We Know About Emotional Intelligence – How It Affects Learning, Work, Relationships And Our Mental Health* Yisrael Academic College. 2012, (Hebrew).

order of his villain stepfather<sup>11</sup>. Sara Crue was sentenced to life of exploitation being subordinate to the Minchin sisters, head teachers of an exclusive boarding school, after presumably losing her father wealth and support<sup>12</sup>. But what about the good teachers? Teachers we aspired to meet and be sheltered under their wings? What perceptions, attitudes and practices made them a symbol for the ideal teacher?

### Fictional notable teachers

Many novels were written on teachers – as tutors, in schools or in boarding schools. Other than our personal intuition – how do we recognize good teachers? For this article two parameters were chosen. First: the author description of the teacher looks, behavior, special characteristics and instruction practices. Second: the evaluation the teachers got from their students stating their acknowledgment of the teachers' special qualities. and their gratitude for the learning experience they shared. The chosen teachers were highly praised both by the author and by their students and/or students' parents or guardians. They are described in five remarkable novels – Jane Eyre<sup>13</sup>, Ann of green Gables and its sequel – Anne from Avonlea<sup>14</sup>, Good Bye Mr., Chips<sup>15</sup>, and Up the Down Staircase<sup>16</sup>. All novels were also transmitted to the big screen as films, some were repeatedly filmed in different versions.

Although these novels were written in different times and places there are common qualities among the teachers that can be indicated. Based on that it can be presumed that a core image of the

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<sup>11</sup> C. Dickens, *David Copperfield*. (Trans.: Y. Lavit) 2001. (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> F.H. Barnett, *A Little Princess*. (Trans. : T.Bar) 2010. (Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> C. Bronte *Jane Eyre* (Trans.: T. Bar) 1986. (Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> L.M. Montgomery, *Anne From Green Gables* (Trans: Y. Fishman) 1985. (Hebrew), L.M. Montgomery, *Anne From Avonlea* (Trans: Y. Fishman) 1985. (Hebrew).

<sup>15</sup> J. Hilton, *Good Bye Mr. Chips* (Trans. Y. Levanon) 1947. (Hebrew).

<sup>16</sup> B. Kaufman *Up The Down Staircase* (Trans. D. Ron) 1968. (Hebrew).

'good teacher' remains stable through time. A narrative review of these stories reveals common perceptions and practices among the different teachers described in these novels.

#### A. A unique and inspiring personality

In all the novels, the teachers are described as having a unique personality to whom the child is drawn. Miss Stacey, Anne's adored teacher had a precious virtue to win her students' hearts and make the best out of their moral and scholastic abilities. Anne, who followed her footsteps, preferred to base her teaching practices on her personality rather than strict rules<sup>17</sup>. Miss Temple, Jane Eyre model of a teacher, was considered superior from all the others due to her vast knowledge. she encouraged students with her kind words and by setting an example<sup>18</sup>. Sylvia Barret, an inner city high school teacher, wrote to her friend about the few teachers that have remarkable virtues. that create magic in their classroom and others who truly love human beings. These are the teachers she looked up to<sup>19</sup>.

#### B. A holistic perception of the students and attendance to all his needs: personal, social, and scholastic

Good teachers don't concentrate on scholastic achievements alone. Their relationship with their students relies on individualization. They realize children have different needs. Their personal and social characteristics should be taking into an account while striving to reach scholastic achievements. Miss Stacey. Anne's example for a teacher, tried to ease the pain caused by Anne's separation from her bossom friend Diana<sup>20</sup>. Mr. Chips made it a habit to invite freshman students to tea at his house. thus, eases their acclimatization in the new school. He would ask them where they reside and inquire

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<sup>17</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

<sup>18</sup> C. Bronte, et.al.

<sup>19</sup> B. Kaufman, et.al.

<sup>20</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

about their relatives who studied in Brookfield<sup>21</sup>. Miss Barret quoted her teacher, Pr. Winters, who advised not to teach the subject but to teach the child. She mentioned times when events from students' lives affected daily learning. She came to realize the need to help students in problems un related to school, since school is affected by them<sup>22</sup>.

#### C. Investment in interpersonal reciprocal relationships based on love, caring and respect

In all the novels, the teachers invest a lot of resources in establishing an ongoing relationship with their students based on love, acceptance and respect. They consider it an essential part of their teaching. Anne, as a teacher, wanted to know her students' inner thoughts and wishes. She gathered them by the fire and spoke to them as equals. She also invited them to write her personal letters on subjects by their choice<sup>23</sup>. Jane Eyre reflected on her relationship with Miss Temple. She stated that her constant friendship was her constant consolation. Later, as a teacher herself, she conducted house calls and informal personal conversation with her students thus revealing their personal virtues and good talents<sup>24</sup>. Mr. Chips gained his students love by being attentive, good and caring<sup>25</sup>. Miss Barret acknowledged her students' needs to be loved and cared for. In that manner, she felt they were just like her<sup>26</sup>.

#### D. Attending to student' unique characteristics

Common arenas for teachers' stories are boarding school, public or rural school and on the other hand, private tutoring. Nevertheless, the attendance to student's unique characteristics and needs is

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<sup>21</sup> J. Hilton, et.al.

<sup>22</sup> B. Kaufman, et.al.

<sup>23</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

<sup>24</sup> C. Bronte, et.al.

<sup>25</sup> J. Hilton, et.al.

<sup>26</sup> B. Kaufman, et.al.

a prominent characteristic in good teachers' attitudes. Anne wanted to win her disobedient student's heart, by reaching out to him and win his love rather than use harsh disciplinary methods<sup>27</sup>. Jane Eyre, as a personal tutor, found her student quite obedient. Yet, since she wasn't accustomed to systematic activity of any kind, it felt unfair to confine her to long hours of studying. Later, as a teacher in a rural school, she was surprised to reveal differences among her students, regarding their fine character and their motivation to self-improvement<sup>28</sup>. Mr. Chips, while addressing a student in distress, offered understanding and acceptance rather than rapprochement on his latest failure<sup>29</sup>. Miss Barret learned to recognize students' distress. When a student couldn't get his father signature, it was because his father was in jail. When a student fell asleep in class, it was because he worked all night in a garage. A student neglected her homework because she had no place to prepare them. She realized there is a lot of work to be done<sup>30</sup>.

#### E. Creative teaching practices

Along with their appealing character, their pleasant interaction with their students and their investment in their welfare, all teachers were also praised on their instruction methods and practices which contributed to their students' progress and achievements. Miss Stacey used to take her students to the woods where she taught them about nature<sup>31</sup>. Jane Eyre regarded Miss Temple as the ultimate teacher who always taught her exactly what she wanted to learn in a pleasant manner<sup>32</sup>. Mr. Chips was known for his distinguished sense of humor. He taught Latin while school surrounding was bombed during WW1, choosing phrases relating to Germans

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<sup>27</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

<sup>28</sup> C. Bronte, et.al.

<sup>29</sup> J. Hilton, et.al.

<sup>30</sup> B. Kaufman, et.al.

<sup>31</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

<sup>32</sup> C. Bronte, et.al.

war tactics, thus adding a sense of humor to a frightening experience<sup>33</sup>. Miss Barret imitated a trial scene with her students. By playing the roles of the judge, prosecutor, defender and witnesses, the students not only practiced rhetorical skills but were also empowered by the experience<sup>34</sup>.

## Actual Notable Teachers

These fictional ideal teachers acted according to author vision and aspirations. Though not all authors were experts in education philosophies and practices, they had an idea of 'what a good teacher should be like'. Now we turn to actual exceptional educators to see if their perceptions of teachers' role definitions and their assumption of teachers' prominent traits and practices are equivalent to those mentioned in fiction novels. If that be the case, it could emphasize the importance of these traits and practices as part of a 'good teacher' definition.

One of the most famous teachers, who was set as an example for others to follow, was Ann Sullivan, Helen Keller's private teacher who literally led her from darkness to light. Janusz Korczak, a famous Jewish Polish educator, was the manager of several orphanage schools in Warsaw ghetto. He provided his misfortunate students an enriching educational surrounding until the bitter end. Jaime Escalante, an American math teacher proved his underachiever's students that hard work and determination conquered all. Are the same attributes found in the fictional teachers can be found in these exceptional teachers as well?

### A. A unique and inspiring personality

Ann Sullivan, devoted her life to Helen Keller<sup>35</sup>. She felt she followed the footstep of innovative teachers who fought ignorance and

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<sup>33</sup> J. Hilton, et.al.

<sup>34</sup> B. Kaufman, et.al.

<sup>35</sup> M. Davidson, *Helen Keller's Teacher* Scholastic Inc. 1965.



narrow mindness<sup>36</sup>. Korczak, a notable doctor and a philosopher devoted his life to his children. His educational doctrine is studied and followed even today<sup>37</sup>. Jaime Escalante shaped the lives of his students and was remembered by them long after they finished school<sup>38</sup>.

#### B. A holistic perception of the students and attendance to all his needs: personal, social, and scholastic

Ann Sullivan was Helen Keller's private tutor. Her role perception had far surpassed teaching elements as Helen disabilities required guidance in all her daily activities<sup>39</sup>. Korczak's perceptions of the children regarded them as people deserved to be respected and listened to. His goal as an educator was to enhance self-growth and cultivate virtues such as respect, acceptance, compassion and justice<sup>40</sup>. He believed it was the educator role to get to know the children's world and attend to the child in every need<sup>41</sup>. Escalante believed that a good teacher touched the life of his students and paved the way to their success, while overcoming obstacles and difficulties<sup>42</sup>.

#### C. Investment in interpersonal reciprocal relationships based on love, caring and respect.

The relationship between Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller lasted until Sullivan passed away in 1936. Helen called her 'teacher' but their relationships were based on mutual respect, acceptance and

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<sup>36</sup> H. Keller, *The Teacher – Ann Sullivan Macey* 1956. (Hebrew).

<sup>37</sup> S. Adan, *Henryk Goldszmit – Janusz Korczak – The Man, The Educator, The Author*. Jerusalem. 2000. (Hebrew), M. Sner, *What Did Korczak Learned from The Ancient Greeks?* Galil Maarvy College. 2008. (Hebrew).

<sup>38</sup> J. Escalante, *On Being A Teacher* The future Channel. 2010.

<sup>39</sup> H. Keller, et.al. M. Davidson, et.al.

<sup>40</sup> S. Adan, et.al.

<sup>41</sup> J. Korczak, *The Child Religion* Israel. 1978. (Hebrew).

<sup>42</sup> J. Escalante, et.al.

love. Hellen considered her a loving gifted guide who willingly shared her knowledge with others<sup>43</sup>. Korczak was addressed as 'the Doctor' by the children and his colleagues, but they felt his love and knew that he believed education to be an everlasting dialogue between the educator and the children<sup>44</sup>. Escalante believed that to succeed, the teacher must always be available to his students and encourage them to make the best out of their abilities<sup>45</sup> (NBC, 2010)

#### D. Attending to student' unique characteristics

Hellen needed Sullivan's guidance and support in various, almost endless, needs. Sullivan was the teacher and the guide, the personal assistant and the secretary, the reader and the eyes wherever they went. She was also Helen's closest friend<sup>46</sup>. Korczak used to write notes about daily events, children's needs and problems that needed to be attended<sup>47</sup>. He believed an educator must listen to the child, get to know him, and help him in every way he can<sup>48</sup>. Escalante attendance to students needs became evident in a film released on 1988 titled '*Stand and Deliver*'. Problems like acquiring books, mediating with parents or listening to students' pain and distress were part of his daily work as a teacher and he considered them as his responsibility<sup>49</sup>.

#### E. Creative teaching practices

As a tutor to a blind-deaf and dumb child, Sullivan had to incorporate endless creativity into her instruction methods. Making Hellen realizes the meaning of words signing while touching water or teaching Hellen how to speak while inserting fingers down her

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<sup>43</sup> H. Keller, et.al.

<sup>44</sup> S. Adan, et.al.

<sup>45</sup> NBC News *Making A Difference* 2010.

<sup>46</sup> H. Keller, et.al. M. Davidson, et.al.

<sup>47</sup> J. Korczak, *How To Love Children?* Israel. 1963 (Hebrew).

<sup>48</sup> J. Korczak, et.al.

<sup>49</sup> *Stand and Deliver* Warner Brothers. 1988.

throat are examples of numerous creative practices Sullivan applied<sup>50</sup>. To prepare students to their lives as adults, Korczak established at his school a formal social group based on roles and guidelines. Through meetings, publishing newspapers, executing trials and performing at plays, students could imitate and practice independence, cooperation, reciprocity and even justice<sup>51</sup>. Escalante believed that as a teacher you should always renew your instruction methods, and love your work as a teacher. In the film (1988) there were various examples of his creative teaching – wearing costumes, humor, relaxations exercises and using props for illustration<sup>52</sup>.

A word of caution – though it may seem that these traits tend to emphasize educational, personal and social aspects of learning while neglecting the academic aspect – it is clearly not so. The aspirations for high academic achievements were evident both among fiction teachers – Miss Stacey who pushed her rural students to study in college<sup>53</sup>, to name one, and among actual teachers as well. Ann Sullivan tutored Hellen, while studying in the university<sup>54</sup>. Haime Escalante demanded hard work from his students as he intended them to continue studying in college and university. Five students of his were hired by NASA<sup>55</sup>. Their educational perception and practices were the tool to enhance studying and reach higher academic achievements.

## Homeroom Educators' Role and Role Perceptions

Based on these findings it can be assumed that the role of the teacher far surpasses his instruction methods and vast knowledge. To be a 'good teacher' is to encompass these traits and to incorpo-

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<sup>50</sup> H. Keller, et.al. M. Davidson, et.al.

<sup>51</sup> M. Sner, et.al.

<sup>52</sup> *Stand and Deliver*, et.al.

<sup>53</sup> L.M. Montgomery, et.al.

<sup>54</sup> M. Davidson, et.al.

<sup>55</sup> NBC News, et.al.

rate them into daily instruction practices. Education is not all about preparing the younger generation for economic life or civil participation. It is also about preparing them for family life, living in a community and moral sensitivity. It is about adding the caring fragment to education and teaching through the work of the teachers involved<sup>56</sup>. The ability to inspire, the combination of holistic perception and individualized attendance to students' various needs, the ongoing investment in interpersonal relationships and creative instruction are all embodied the image of a good and attentive teacher.

A combination of caring components, interpersonal traits and instruction abilities can be seen in the role definition of homeroom educator<sup>57</sup> in the Israeli education system. Homeroom educators, by definition, are teachers who are responsible for a class of approximately 20-40 students during the school year. They are meaningful professionals who take full responsibility over their class students, attend to their various needs, concentrate on their personal, social and moral growth and their availability for them is nearly endless<sup>58</sup>. Their main concern are educational processes at student level, class level and school level<sup>59</sup>.

A qualitative research executed among 14 Israeli rural high school teachers (7 homeroom educators and 7 subject teachers) reveals the following themes regarding homeroom educators' role perceptions<sup>60</sup>.

Homeroom educators expresses a more holistic view of the students, underling their availability and their attendance to all the

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<sup>56</sup> N. Noddings *Care, Justice And Equity* Columbia University 1999. Pp. 7-20.

<sup>57</sup> In other researches, this role can be referred to as homeroom teacher. I find the term 'homeroom educator' to be more precise since it emphasized the educating role rather than the teaching role in this specific role definition.

<sup>58</sup> N. Bar Gosen, *Different Role Perceptions And Student-Teacher Relationship Characteristics, Among High School Homeroom Educators And Subject Teachers - Results From A Qualitative Research*. *Studia Edukacyjne* 36. 2015, pp. 381-400.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Education, Israel. 2017.

<sup>60</sup> N. Bar Gosen, et.al.

students' needs. D. (He, 45) states: „to know the kids in depth and to be there for them. Especially if they have problems, they can't overcome themselves. it is a 24/7 responsibility..". M (He, 38) adds: My availability for them is endless..".

Homeroom educators and subject teachers both valued the importance of ongoing relationships with their students. Homeroom educators invested more time and resources to deepen their acquaintance with their students and familiarize themselves with the students' world. H. (He, 55) stated:" I don't have transparent students.. many conversations, endless conversations..".

Homeroom educators and subject teachers emphasized educational aspects and academic aspects of their roles. Homeroom educators tend to emphasize educational roles over the academic roles D. (He, 48) stated: „to be good people is more important than success or a career..". Y. (He. 50) wanted to „make them believe in themselves. make them believe they can finish high school".

These findings show, that role perception and definitions of Israeli homeroom educators can encapsulate some of the traits and practices that are embodied in the figure called 'the good teacher'.

## Summary

Let us return to the question we started with: What is a 'good teacher? Fictional and realistic examples of 'good teachers' offer us five domains, or qualities, that seem to be the common thread among them all: holistic perception of the student, identifying and addressing students' unique needs, emphasis on student-teacher relationship, creative teaching, a sense of mission and an inspiring personality.

It is evident from these finding that homeroom educators imply much of the eminent features characterizing 'good teachers' – fictional and realistic alike. However, their role description and role perception encourage them to enact these characteristics daily. What about other teachers, whose role definition. expectations or

perceptions emphasize academic achievements and acquiring knowledge above all? What are the chances they will embrace these traits and practices if they are not encouraged to do so?

Do teachers' preparatory processes emphasize these traits as part of the teachers' role? Do teachers role definitions emphasize these traits as part of teachers' role? Do evaluation processes of schools, teachers and students achievements take into consideration the existence and the implementation of these characteristics?

The importance of a significant teacher – a good teacher – as a promoter of good education for all, and a key factor for higher academic achievements was acknowledged by OECD research and publications<sup>61</sup> (OECD, 2010). If we could define what characteristics embodied a 'good teacher' – we will be able to incorporate these practices and perception into teachers' preparatory process, teachers' role definitions and teachers' evaluations.

Good teachers are hard to define, but examples are easier to follow. Exceptional teachers exist, in our perception, in fiction and in real life. They paved us the way. Why won't we follow?

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<sup>61</sup> OECD *PIZA Results – Overcoming Social Background, Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes, 2010, Vol. 2.*

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