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International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Students' perception of "good" and "bad" teachers—Results of a qualitative thematic analysis with German adolescents



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 January 2015

Received in revised form 9 October 2015

Accepted 23 November 2015

Available online 8 December 2015

Keywords:

Bad teacher

Good teacher

Teacher–student relationship

Adolescence

Thematic analysis

ABSTRACT

There is a large amount of research concerning the qualities of a good teacher. However, students' perception is rarely considered in both educational research and practice, although their daily school life is dominated by relationships with teachers. Semi-structured interviews with 86 7th and 8th graders from German secondary schools were conducted to examine how students perceive "good" and "bad" teachers based on their daily school experiences. A thematic analysis was used to extract themes and subthemes that describe the students' perception of "good" and "bad" teachers, and that might function as potential starting points to improve the teacher–student relationship. Interestingly, the qualities of bad teachers were not always opposed to those of good teachers. Overall, the findings show that students prioritize teachers' (inter)personal dimensions over their academic abilities in everyday classroom interactions when evaluating them as educators. The study discusses practical implications as well as future research direction.

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The question of what constitutes a good teacher dates back to Ancient Greece. At that time good teachers were primarily described as mentors¹ fulfilling career and psychosocial functions for their prote'ge's/mentees (Kram, 1985): While career functions helped prote'ge's "learn the ropes", psychosocial functions based on trust, intimacy, and interpersonal bonds, worked to enhance professional and personal growth, identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy (Ragins & Kram, 2007). In other words, they implied a balance between academic and (inter-) personal dimensions in educational practice.

Similarly, Böhnisch (1996) distinguishes between "teacher-role" and "teacher-being". While "being" describes someone's actual mental state affecting the whole personality and (inter-) personal dimensions, the "role" describes a particular role-identity in certain situations (e.g., the role of a student, a teacher, a social worker, etc.) (Böhnisch, 1996; Nohl, 1933/1957). This distinction also applies to students as a "student-role" and "student-being" (Raufelder, 2007). However, schools in modern Western societies are characterized by an imbalance between the role and being dimensions as their highly institutionalized status focuses mainly on students' and teachers' roles (Böhnisch, 1996; Raufelder,

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¹ The word "mentor" is inspired by a Greek mythological character that appears in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Bukowski et al., 2013). In other words, (inter-) personal and being-related dimensions are hardly accounted for (Raufelder, Bukowski et al., 2013). The results of an ethnographic field study proved that this imbalance is uncomfortable for students and teachers alike (Raufelder, Bukowski et al., 2013). This is particularly relevant for adolescents' transition from primary to secondary school, when students perceive new teachers as distant and less friendly or supportive than their elementary school teachers (Harter, 1996; Hawkins & Berndt, 1985), due to the increased focus on academics and institutional roles.

At the same time, teachers immensely influence both students' learning and personal development. Students' relationships with their teachers are two-fold: on the *professional level* (addressing teacher's role-identity), teachers are important for cultivating interest, curiosity, and motivation (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1996, 1997; Raufelder, Drury et al., 2013), providing learning support (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Raufelder, & Mohr, 2011), and offering feedback on academic performance (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Pianta et al., 2003; Radel, Sarrazin, Legrain, & Wild, 2010). On the *(inter) personal level* (addressing teachers' and students' being), teachers communicate their approval or disapproval for the student as a person (Birch & Ladd, 1996) which can affect students' sense of identity (Alerby & Hertting, 2007; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). According to Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013), these two levels of the teacher–student relationship are inexorably linked in that the interpersonal dimensions characterizing a positive teacher–student relationship (openness, courtesy, honesty) are a prerequisite for any productive learning relationship on a professional level. In fact, teachers act as adult role models alongside parents (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Raufelder, 2007), which is particularly important during adolescence when the focus of socialization shifts away from the family (Eccles et al., 1993).

As Hattie's meta-analysis showed, teachers have the greatest social impact on students' learning processes compared to other factors (i.e., peer relationships, the classroom environment, parental influences, etc.), and a trusting relationship can support students by encouraging them to learn and develop their skills (Hattie, 2009). This means that the learning progress is optimized when students and teachers can build a relationship that balances their roles and being dimensions (Raufelder, 2007). Since teachers have a major impact on both students' academic *and* personal development, the establishment and maintenance of a positive teacher–student relationship, including both academic and (inter-) personal dimensions, should become a primary goal for all educational establishments.

However, the characteristics of a “good teacher” remain unclear. Previous research identified certain personal qualities, such as the ability to create and sustain an emotionally supportive environment (Luckner & Pianta, 2011), as well as professional aspects, such as setting high expectations (Proctor, 1984; Pickets & Eick, 2009) in order to optimize learning processes. Positive feedback and praise also represent powerful motivating factors in this respect (Burnett, 2002; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Schweinle, Meyer & Turner, 2006). In sum, researchers agree that a “good teacher” should know how to balance academic *and* personal dimensions in his or her profession on a daily basis (Kaplan, 2000). Surprisingly, the research that underpins this widely accepted notion of a “good” teacher rarely includes students' perspective (Fraser, Fischer, & McRobbie, 1996; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Wubbels, Brekelmans, Brok, & den Tartwijk, 2006) and commonly uses quantitative methods. Qualitative studies addressing students' perception are still rare in both educational research and practice (Cook-Sather, 2003; Könings, Brand-Gruwel, & Elen, 2012; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Hence, it is still unclear whether students agree with the formally recognized criteria. The current study foregrounds the viewpoint of German adolescent students, thereby offering important insights into adolescent students' needs and expectations from the teachers.

1. Research aims

Our major research aim was to explore how adolescent students perceive and imagine “good” or “bad” teachers in an attempt to identify potential starting points for improving teacher–student relationships in secondary schools. We followed a qualitative research design and analyzed data using thematic analysis, which promises greater objectivity than a questionnaire-based research approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Overall, this study aimed to identify effective starting points for improving teacher–student relationships in class by considering students' experiences and insights into everyday school life.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A random subsample of 86 adolescents was selected from the participant pool of a larger quantitative study ($N = 1088$; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.7$; $SD = .53$) examining students' self-reported perception of socio-emotional learning factors (SELF project). Data was collected in 23 randomly selected schools from a pool of 124 secondary schools in Brandenburg, Germany. Five of the participating schools were recruited from the biggest cities in Brandenburg (i.e., Potsdam, Cottbus, Brandenburg, Prenzlau) while the remaining schools were located in rural areas. Permission to conduct the study was granted by Department of Education, Youth, and Sports of Brandenburg. The students were recruited through personal letters requesting parental approval. Participation was voluntary and students were assured that their answers would remain confidential.

As a result, girls comprised 51.2% of the subsample ($n = 44$); boys 48.8% ($n = 42$). The participants were between 13 and 16 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.8$; $SD = .45$).

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