



Stereotypes and teacher characteristics as an explanation for the class-specific disciplinary practices of pre-service teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Pre-service teachers keep more negative stereotypes on low-class than on middle class children.
- Respondents with negative stereotypes on low-class children use a harsher discipline style on them.
- Particularly indicators of social contact are related to low-class stereotypes.
- Mainly indicators of social identity are related to harsher discipline styles on low-class children.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of class-related stereotypes for the discipline practice of pre-service teachers and whether stereotypes and discipline practice are related to their students' outward appearance. Pre-service teachers were asked to assign adjectives to photographs of children from the lower and middle social classes and to choose disciplinary actions for photographs of disruptive situations involving children from these classes. Results show that 40% of pre-service teachers treated children unfairly based on class affiliation, of these 50% punished lower-class children more harshly. The unfair treatment of lower-class children was linked to class-related stereotypes and to indicators of social identity.

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1. Introduction

The issue of stereotypes for certain social groups is a sensitive topic and one which has been closely studied in social psychology and sociology. In these fields, special attention has been paid to gender, ethnicity, and social class. Social class is of crucial significance for educational attainment and participation in many countries (see, for instance, OECD, 2014),² but the school-related reasons for this are not very clear. For this reason we will focus in the following on social class. We use the term “social class” to refer to a

basic and internationally accepted concept of sociology by which the position of groups within the social structure of societies is described.

Roughly, central characteristics for the differentiation of social classes are their possession of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1987), which is empirically measured for instance by the amount of income and property, and by occupation and qualifications. When we refer to “lower social class”, we mean the class with the lowest amount of capital, which is mainly composed of skilled and unskilled manual workers in industry and agriculture. By “middle class” we mean a class whose members possess more capital than the lower class and which is composed for instance of business people, craftsmen and craftswomen, and those in service occupations. The “upper social class” (bourgeoisie) has more economic and cultural capital than the other classes. It includes occupations such as managers in the public and private sectors, employers with a large workforce, engineers, and teachers in higher education (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1987, p. 199).

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² Note that there are a number of programs and projects which aim at weaken the relationship between schooling outcomes and social class (see for instance Pears et al., 2014; Januszzyk, Miller, & Lee, 2014).

Compared to members of the middle-class, those from the lower-class have been linked with rather negative traits, such as laziness and stupidity, and they are seen as more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs (USA: Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Gorski, 2012). On the other hand, members of the middle-class have been rated as having more positive traits, such as being diligent, intelligent, and friendly. One intensively explored context is the school setting. It has been shown that school teachers have strong negative stereotype views regarding the behavior and personal characteristics of lower-class children, such as lacking in discipline and concentration, and being disrespectful and noisy (Germany: Schuchart & Dunkake, 2014; UK: Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). On the other hand, they have positive stereotype views of middle-class children, such as being respectful, motivated and high-performing (Schuchart & Dunkake, 2014).

There has been some discussion on the effect that teacher stereotypes have on their own behavior and on the achievement and the behavior of students. While some studies indicate that stereotypes have no effect on the achievement of students (USA: Madon et al., 1998), others have suggested that students are affected by the influence of teacher stereotypes on their diagnostic decisions regarding students (Israel: Guttmann & Bar-Tal, 1982; Luxemburg: Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth, & Böhmer, 2013; USA: Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Ready & Wright, 2011) as well as on their interactional behavior toward students, such as providing feedback, giving emotional support, and recommending disciplinary measures (USA: Good, 1987; Harber et al., 2012; Jones & Wheatley, 1990; Rist, 1970). It is well documented that students from ethnic minorities and socially disadvantaged groups are more often subject to disciplinary sanctions, and they are treated more harshly than other students, even if other variables such as achievement and behavior are controlled for (USA: Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Ialongo, & Kellam, 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Although disciplinary measures are an aspect of classroom management and are intended to encourage a calm learning climate (Australia: Lewis, Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2008; USA: Emmer, 1994), previous research has shown that, independently of the teacher's individual teaching style, harsher disciplinary measures in general can fail to achieve pedagogical goals such as social competence and responsibility (Australia: Lewis, 2001). Furthermore, they can even lead to the development of aggression and disruptive behavior (USA: Coie & Dodge, 1998; Way, 2011). For socially disadvantaged groups, a trusting, supportive, and warm teacher–student relationship is particularly important, as this increases the likelihood that the students will successfully graduate from school (USA: Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Landsman, 2014; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014) and decreases the probability of them becoming “at-risk” students (USA: Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Lam, 2014; Pianta, 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Against this backdrop, it is important to understand the reasons for the unfair treatment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the present study, we explore the relationship between teachers' class-related stereotypes and their disciplinary practices. Since some studies indicate that these are influenced by the teachers' individual and family characteristics (USA: Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987; Bates & Glick, 2013; Downey & Pribesh, 2004), we pay special attention to these. We focus on social class-related stereotypes and behavior because in Germany (where our study took place) the effects of social background on a wide range of student outcomes are quite strong and moderate the effect of ethnicity (Germany: Becker, 2011; Diefenbach, 2004; Stanat, Rauch, & Segeritz, 2010; see for similar results for the Netherlands: Speybroeck et al., 2012). However, since some of the

studies which address the discipline practice of teachers or the stereotypes of teachers focus on race, and race is associated with social class, we report the results of these studies if we consider them to be of importance for our line of argument.

The paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we first present studies on the group-specific disciplinary practice of teachers (Section 2.1). As teachers' stereotypes can be considered one central reason for this, we then show that teachers indeed have strong class-related stereotypes which can be expected to be linked to their behavior (Section 2.2). In Section 2.3 we discuss teachers' characteristics and experiences such as their social identity or contact with members of other social groups, which are assumed to increase or decrease the degree of stereotypes and stereotyped behavior. We present our research questions in Section 2.4 and describe in Section 3 our study and the analysis methods used. The presentation of results (Section 4) consists of two parts: We first analyze the strength of stereotypes of the participants and a number of individual and family characteristics to which they can be traced back (Section 4.1). Then we explore the group-specific disciplinary practice of the participants and examine to what extent they can be explained by stereotypes and other characteristics and experiences (Section 4.2). We discuss our results in Section 5 and draw our conclusions in Section 6.

2. Current state of research

2.1. Teachers' disciplinary practice and student social class

Most of the research on the group-specific disciplinary practice of teachers has been done in the USA.³ For these studies, ethnic minority groups, gender, and social class affiliation were examined (Nichols, 2004; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Petras et al., 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). In general, there is an overrepresentation of boys, African Americans, and lower-class students among those who are subject to harsh school disciplinary sanctions such as office referral, suspension, and expulsion (Nichols, 2004; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Petras et al., 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Moreover, Brantlinger (1991) showed for Germany that students with a high-income background⁴ reported receiving mild and moderate punishment (e.g. a teacher reprimand, seat reassignment) more often than those from low-income backgrounds. Low-income students, on the other hand, reported receiving more severe punishment which was sometimes administered in questionable ways, such as being shouted at in front of the class (Brantlinger, 1991). While many studies have focused on secondary school students, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) and Petras et al. (2011) demonstrated that disadvantaged groups were already unfairly disciplined in elementary school.

From this perspective, the poor performances of these groups in school and their lack of school attachment are at least partly preceded by a long history of unfair and inappropriate punishment. There is some evidence that race and social background have an

³ Where studies in this field that are referred to were conducted in other countries, this will be mentioned.

⁴ According to the operationalization of the variables of the authors, we use their description of the variables. If the authors analyzed the income background and not the social class, we adapted this description to distinguish the different analytical elements of social origin.

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