

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 810

SP 041 612

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TITLE Preservice Teacher Perceptions of Their Best and Worst K-12 Teachers.
PUB DATE 2002-11-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (29th, Chattanooga, TN, November 6-8, 2002).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethical Instruction; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; Student Behavior; *Student Centered Curriculum ; *Student Teacher Attitudes; Student Teachers; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Competencies; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Knowledge; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This study investigated student teachers' views on their best and worst teachers' characteristics. Students in four sections of a sophomore-level teacher education program prerequisite course were required to write half-page descriptions of their best and worst teachers from elementary and high school, focusing on the behaviors and attitudes that made these teachers the best or worst. These descriptions were coded for six themes of teacher effectiveness: student centeredness, enthusiasm for teaching, ethicalness, classroom and behavior management, teaching methodology, and knowledge of subject. Data analysis indicated that the predominant theme in descriptions of good teachers was student-centeredness, followed by teaching methodology. The same two major themes were present (at a lower rate and in reverse order) in descriptions of the worst teachers. Students' views differed by gender in regard to teaching methodology and ethical behavior. (Contains 14 references and 3 tables.) (SM)

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Preservice Teacher Perceptions of Their Best and Worst K-12 Teachers

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association

Chattanooga, TN, November 7, 2002

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Preservice Teacher Perceptions of Their Best and Worst K-12 Teachers

As Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans (1997) note, the search for The Effective Teacher has been going on for a hundred years or more. There was an initial surge of interest in finding teacher personality traits that ensured effectiveness in the classroom, only to be replaced by the search for sure-fire teaching strategies (Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans, 1997). Much of the literature in the area of effective teachers concedes that both personal characteristics (such as positive attitudes toward and warm relationships with students) and teaching methods seem to be important (Cotton, 1995; Gresh, 1995; Norton, 1997; Demmon-Berger, 1986; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). An exception is Traina (1999), who analyzed the autobiographies of 125 “prominent Americans” and found the descriptions of good teachers included only considerable knowledge of content, deep caring for students, and distinctive character.

The current study was conceptualized just before the article by Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor appeared late in 2001. That article, plus the increasingly widespread use of dispositions screening for teacher education candidates and first-year teachers, spurred the research process and our thinking along the lines of effective teacher characteristics. When asked about their previous best and worst teachers, would college students planning on entering the teacher education program think more about the methods of their past teachers, or would they consider the personal characteristics – the dispositions? And which dispositions and which methods would they see as important? Would they be the same ones for which they would be screened as they advanced through the teacher education program?

Method

The 112 participants were enrolled in a sophomore-level Teacher Education Program prerequisite course at a regional university in the mid-south. All students in the four sections of the course were given an assignment to write half-page descriptions of their best and worst teachers from elementary and high school, focusing on what behaviors or attitudes made those teachers the best or worst. One hundred forty-five students completed the assignment and 112 (81 females and 31 males) signed informed consents allowing their work to be included in this study.

One of the authors coded all 448 teacher descriptions for the six themes of effective teacher characteristics reported by Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor (2001):

1. Student-centeredness (loves students, caring, supportive, kind, patient);

representative of this theme were these comments:

--“She was my best teacher because she cared for me as a student and a friend.”

--“This particular teacher was very caring and understanding.”

--“He had a great attitude. He was always upbeat and he also showed a concern for his students. He took the time to see what he could help us with and he would do what he could do. ...He was very supportive.”

--“The patience that the teacher showed to her students was one of her great qualities. ...She took the time to sit down and talk if someone had a problem other than class work.”

2. Enthusiasm for teaching (loves subject, truly loves job, untiring); comments

coded with this theme include:

--“He...sincerely enjoyed what he taught, unlike many other teachers.”

--“She was very passionate about her job and seemed to enjoy it very much.”

3. *Ethicalness (impartial, unbiased, honest, fair)*; representative of this theme was text such as:

--“Mrs. X treated all the kids the same. She never singled anyone out and did not put anyone down.”

--“When assignments were due she never accepted late work without an excuse, and she never made exceptions. Both grades were treated equally with no favorites played, which I found to be a real problem in some schools.”

--“Everyone’s opinion [was] as important as the rest. She had no favorites, but was nurturing to us all.”

4. *Classroom and behavior management (good disciplinarian, good leader)*; text coded with this theme included:

--“She was very clear and concise with her rules. You [knew] not to cross her because of the final reward. You collected stars as the year went on. If you acquired enough through good deeds, you went to a year-end party at her house. She would tempt you throughout the year with the fun details of her extravaganza. Worked like a charm. There was nothing we could do; the class was putty in the palm of her hands.”

--“She gave us bubble gum and let us chew it in class when we were good.”

--“She knew when to be strict and she knew when we deserved to be rewarded.”

5. *Teaching methodology (knowing how to teach, variety of teaching methods)*; comments coded with this theme included:

--“She used videos and vivid pictures to illustrate certain topics that we were learning in class.”

--“Her methods of teaching were unique to me as a sixth grader. She did not sit at her desk. She was always up walking throughout the room. ...She combined the subject matter with hands-on activities.”

--“My [geography] teacher...decorated the classroom with really neat artifacts he had collected throughout all his years of traveling. There were serapes from Mexico hung on the walls, which was considered to be very cool. There was pottery, tools, hats, clothing and beads from every country imaginable. He even had a gigantic suit of armor.... He made every lesson ‘up to date’ with his stories and slides of vacations he and his wife went on every summer, making sure he captured on film all the things we would be talking about in class. That dreadful subject came alive through the things we could see, touch and feel with all our senses.”

--“She made learning easy and fun by making every lesson like a game. She would often tell humorous stories about her former students, which were used sometimes to teach us or sometimes just for our entertainment. She had uncountable little tricks that she taught us to make retaining the information she was going over extremely easy.”

6. *Knowledge of subject (intelligent, smart, master of the content)*. Representative of this theme were comments such as:

--“My psychology/sociology teacher was a very intelligent man who had many interesting facts that he provided us with every day.”

--“When it came to English, she knew everything that was going on.”

In the cases of teachers described as “worst,” it was the opposite of these themes that appeared in the descriptions, e.g. not caring for students and being unkind. Only descriptive analyses were conducted due to the dependency created in the data as a result of each subject producing four teacher descriptions.

Results

The predominant theme in descriptions of good teachers (shown in Table 1) was student-centeredness, as was also reported by Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor (2001). Teaching methodology was a close second, being mentioned in 70 percent of the “best” teacher descriptions. The four other themes were evident in fewer than 25 percent of the descriptions of good teachers, with knowledge of the subject being the lowest at 5 percent.

In the descriptions of worst teachers, the same two major themes were present, but at a lower rate and in reverse order (see Table 1). Poor teaching methodology showed up in 61 percent of the worst teacher descriptions and lack of student-centeredness in 54 percent. Poor classroom management (too strict, too lax, or inappropriate – such as throwing things at students) and being unfair / playing favorites each were present in about one third of the worst teacher descriptions.

Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor (2001) reported that females were more likely to indicate student-centeredness as an effective teacher characteristic than were males and males more often cited classroom and behavior management than did females. A visual inspection of the data for this study, when broken down by the gender of the students writing the descriptions, revealed little difference between males and females on those

two themes (see Table 2). Descriptions written by females, however, more often mentioned teaching methodology as a characteristic of good teachers (75 percent) than did descriptions written by males (58 percent). Males were also somewhat more likely (40 percent of descriptions) to note a lack of ethical behavior in “worst” teachers than were females (30 percent).

Looking at the data when broken down by the gender of the teachers described showed more differences that were larger than ten percent. As seen in Table 3, descriptions of female “best” teachers contained the student-centered theme a bit more often (85 percent) than did descriptions of male teachers (74 percent). Likewise, descriptions of female “worst” teachers more often noted the absence of student-centeredness than did descriptions of male teachers. Poor female teachers also were described more often (42 percent) as having bad classroom management skills in comparison to poor male teachers (30 percent).

Male “worst” teachers were much more often known (76 percent) for their poor teaching methodology than were the worst female teachers (54 percent). Finally, poor male teachers were somewhat more often (27 percent) described as having no enthusiasm for teaching than were poor female teachers (14 percent).

Discussion

Whether recalling the best or worst teachers from their school experiences, the present study confirms Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor’s (2001) finding that preservice education students put a major emphasis on the factor classified as student-centeredness. Carl Rogers believed much the same thing, noting that “the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal

relationship between the facilitator and the learner” (emphasis in original) (Rogers, 1984, p.70). Schools of education are already doing a lot of overt instruction regarding teaching methodology (the second highest factor in descriptions of good teachers in this study), but what are they doing or should they be doing about student-centeredness?

In order to plan a course of action, we need to consider whether this trait is innate or can it be acquired (i.e., learned) relative to one’s experience? If deemed to be an innate construct, then perhaps we should screen teacher candidates for student-centered dispositions. But how is that best done? Are psychological assessments (e.g., personality inventories) appropriate or would some other means be appropriate? On the other hand, if student-centeredness can be learned during the college years or later, then we should promote and develop that disposition during the teacher education program, employing pre and post measures to see if we were successful. But what courses or experiences would increase student-centeredness? Humanistic psychology courses? Communications courses? More experience with actual K-12 students?

The problem of identifying and assessing dispositions is substantial and thorny (Maylone, 2002). Some education programs, including Morehead State University (MSU), are screening for dispositions now, using particular checklists, interview procedures, or inventories.

The dispositions list at MSU includes the following factors (Morehead State University, n.d.):

1. Passionate about learning (curiosity, playing with ideas, questions assumptions);

2. Enthusiastic about teaching (enjoyment of teaching, high expectations of students, culture of classroom);
3. Committed to teaching responsibilities (ability to work unsupervised, honest, punctuality, attendance, and dress);
4. Self-reflective;
5. Hardworking;
6. Resourceful problem-solver (regarding student needs and problems);
7. Sensitive to differences (awareness of differences and fairness);
8. Able to establish rapport (with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators).

The only place student centeredness is seen in the MSU rubric is under point number eight, but it is extremely diluted, as relationships with other adults are included on the same point.

Some school districts are using the Gallup Teacher Perceiver interview as a screening device for new teachers, which would imply that they do not expect teachers to improve on those qualities through experience. The website for the Gallup Teacher Perceiver interview notes two themes that seem to approximate the student-centered attributes identified by the preservice teachers in this study (*Perceiver interviews*, 2002).

EMPATHY – empathy is the apprehension and acceptance of the state of mind of another person. Practically, we say we put ourselves into the other person’s place. Empathy is the phenomenon that provides the teacher feedback about the individual student’s feelings and thoughts.

RAPPORT DRIVE – The rapport drive is evidenced by the teacher’s ability to have an approving and mutually favorable relationship with each student. The teacher likes students and expects them to reciprocate. Rapport is seen by the teacher as a favorable and necessary condition of learning. (paragraphs 2 and 3)

This “ethic of caring” identified by students as a major descriptor of “best” teachers sounds much like the highest stage of moral development proposed by Carol Gilligan (1982). Does that mean an assessment of moral reasoning theoretically grounded in Gilligan’s perspective would be an appropriate screening device? As she developed this theory based on females, perhaps we ought to be screening with sex role inventories (Bem, 1974; 1975), looking for androgynous teacher candidates?

We do not have the answers to any of these questions and we have not taken a firm position on any of the issues. What we need is wide-spread discussion of this notion of student-centered teachers among our colleagues in teacher education programs and in the K-12 schools to see if some conclusions can be reached. Caring relationships appear to be an extremely important aspect of good teaching, and thus need to be encouraged and modeled at all levels of education (including professors in the teacher education programs). A commitment to good teaching for all students demands that we take the issue seriously because terrific methodology is not enough.

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Table 1

Presence of Characteristic Themes in Teacher Descriptions

Theme	Type of Teacher	
	Best (n=224): Theme present % (#)	Worst (n=224): Theme's <i>opposite</i> present % (#)
Student-centered	81 (182)	54 (122)
Enthusiasm for Teaching	17 (38)	18 (40)
Ethicalness	13 (29)	33 (73)
Classroom/behavior Management	21 (47)	38 (84)
Teaching methodology	70 (157)	61 (137)
Knowledge of subject	5 (11)	3 (7)

Table 2

***Themes in Teacher Descriptions,
by Gender of Students Writing the Descriptions***

Theme	Best teachers (n=224): Theme present		Worst teachers (n=224): Theme's <i>opposite</i> present	
	Gender of students writing descriptions			
	Female (n=162)	Male (n=62)	Female (n=162)	Male (n=62)
	% (#)	% (#)	% (#)	% (#)
Student-centered	82 (133)	79 (49)	54 (88)	55 (34)
Enthusiasm for Teaching	17 (28)	16 (10)	19 (31)	15 (9)
Ethicalness	15 (24)	8 (5)	30 (48)	40 (25)
Classroom/behavior Management	20 (33)	23 (14)	39 (63)	34 (21)
Teaching methodology	75 (121)	58 (36)	62 (101)	58 (36)
Knowledge of subject	6 (9)	3 (2)	4 (6)	2 (1)

Table 3

Themes in Teacher Descriptions, by Gender of Teacher

Theme	Best teachers (n=223): Theme present		Worst teachers (n=219): Theme's <i>opposite</i> present	
	Female (n=151)	Male (n=72)	Female (n=140)	Male (n=79)
	% (#)	% (#)	% (#)	% (#)
Student-centered	85 (129)	74 (53)	59 (83)	47 (37)
Enthusiasm for Teaching	17 (26)	17 (12)	14 (19)	27 (21)
Ethicalness	15 (22)	10 (7)	34 (47)	30 (24)
Classroom/behavior Management	24 (36)	15 (11)	42 (59)	30 (24)
Teaching methodology	68 (102)	75 (54)	54 (76)	76 (60)
Knowledge of subject	3 (4)	10 (7)	4 (5)	3 (2)

Note: the gender of six teachers was not identified in their descriptions.



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