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What Makes a Good Teacher? Perceptions from Third and Fifth Grade Students

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What Makes a Good Teacher?
Perceptions From Third and Fifth Grade Students

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development

State University of New York

College at Brockport

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science in Education

by

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Abstract

Teachers are evaluated daily by their students. By examining students' criteria for teacher evaluation, teachers are able to broaden their existing base of understanding and develop a greater perception of the complex dynamics of the classroom. Because students at the elementary level have rarely in the past been asked their opinions, four groups of elementary students participated in this study.

This study was conducted to determine whether third and fifth grade students had perceptions of "good" teacher and "bad" teachers and to see if they used similar criteria when evaluating teachers. Three themes emerged from the student responses: (1) personality of the teacher; (2) classroom management; and (3) instruction.

The responses of the students indicated to that they find a caring teacher, who is supportive and encouraging to be the most positive. Students also responded that teachers who manage their classrooms without yelling or raising his or her voice were also extremely important characteristics. Overall, personal characteristics, such as patience with children, being willing to laugh with the students, and sensitivity were far more important to the students than any teaching strategy or other professional skill.

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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

Teacher accountability, higher standards for all students, smaller class sizes in the early elementary grades and merit pay for teachers are issues at the forefront of the educational reform movement today.

Across the nation parents, politicians and even the President of the United States discuss and debate these issues. At the heart of it all are the teachers and the students.

Traditionally, teaching has been looked at as a “how-to” skill. If a teacher were provided with enough background information then the job became simple. All any teacher had to do was to find an easy way to deliver the information to students. This mechanical, simplistic view of teaching seems to pervade our society. While those closely involved with education would not disagree that methods and the

delivery of information is important, most would agree that there is much more to the profession.

Teachers enter their classrooms each day with a new set of goals to accomplish and a new set of problems to solve. How they accomplish these things depends on knowing their students, knowing their subject matter, and having an understanding of themselves and how they relate to students (Combs, 1991).

While the debates rage on in the nation's capital and in legislative forums across the country, many teachers continue to receive feedback from parents and administrators that better teaching is the key. Few would argue that quality education stems from quality teaching and more effective teaching is a desired outcome for all educators.

Recent research on effective teaching tells us that good teachers are positive thinkers who are people oriented rather than product oriented. Good teachers have the ability to relate to those that they work with (Combs, 1991). Other studies have linked teacher

personality with student achievement and some feel that teacher personality and character traits are the defining factor that separates the good and bad teacher.

As we learn more about teaching, teachers will be better prepared to enhance the learning in the classroom, and as our knowledge about the nature of teaching improves, so too will our ability to become more effective teachers. The question which arises from this is, “What constitutes effective teaching and who is qualified to establish the criteria necessary to evaluate teacher effectiveness?”

The public and administrators alike would take a methods approach to answer this question. However, research in this area has established that no single method is more effective than another, so teacher effectiveness needs to be measured from a different perspective. Doyle (1983) states, “The principal sources of evaluation information are the people who have had the opportunity to observe the process, materials and results of teaching” (p. 17). While students experience all three of Doyle’s stated criteria, administrators and

parents are only able to observe the materials used in the classroom and the results of the teaching through student achievement levels.

Who then is best able to evaluate the teachers?

Rarely in past research have adults asked children what they perceive to be good teaching, yet these are the people who see teachers in action every day. Children are the consumers of our educational system. They are the young lives that are directly affected by the actions of the teacher. When asking for criteria on effective teaching, children can provide a unique perspective, which will focus on teacher behaviors, rather than methods. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine third and fifth grade students' perceptions of effective teachers based on their own experiences in school and the relationships they have developed with their teachers. The dynamic between teachers and students within the classroom setting will be looked at through the eyes of the students.

Questions to be Answered

Throughout the history of education, there has always been the issue of teacher effectiveness. From a methods perspective or a more personal one, there has always been a difference in opinion in how to evaluate teaching performance. Teacher evaluation plans have focused on many different aspects. Some have looked at things that are beyond the control of the teacher, such as class size and teaching experience. Others have focused on teacher behaviors through supervisor evaluations and standard student evaluations. A third group has focused on student outcomes (student performance) as a way to evaluate teaching (Braskamp, 1984). Few research studies have been conducted where students were asked their opinions of teachers.

↘ This study has addressed the need for additional student-centered research. By interviewing elementary students this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What do third and fifth grade students perceive to be the qualities of their “good” teachers?

2. What do third and fifth grade students perceive to be the qualities of their “bad” teachers?
3. Do third and fifth graders have common criteria in defining qualities of both “good” and “bad” teachers?

Need for the Study

Who are the good teachers and how can we identify the qualities and characteristics that make them unique? This question is essential when we live in a society where such a focus is put on education and so much blame and doubt is placed on the shoulders of the teachers.

People count on schools to help prepare youths for the future, whatever that may be. This becomes an increasingly difficult task due to the impact of technology on the future. Most can not fathom the amount of change that is expected to occur in the first two decades of the 21st century. The children of today need to be better prepared than ever before to deal with our complex society.

Great lengths have been taken to poll parents, teachers and administrators about improving education to meet these ever changing goals. Students are rarely, if ever, included in these dialogues, except at the college level. Universities have a long history of gathering student input through course evaluation surveys and the information is used by the course instructor and the university directors. However, student input is uncommon at the elementary and secondary level. Adults have fallen into a pattern of making assumptions about how young students feel about school and their teachers.

The need for student-centered research at levels preceding college is essential. College and university evaluations usually occur through the use of a standard form, which forces the student to make choices rather than write reflections about a particular instructor and course. This research project was less formal, allowing for student driven discussion. An open-ended format for written responses was used. The research focused on elementary students' perceptions of good teachers in general, not individual teachers.

Limitations of the Study

1. Students will be coming to this with many different backgrounds. Some may have had very positive experiences with teachers, while others may be bringing negative experiences. Hopefully all the participants in the study will be able to find a balance and give equal thought and reflection to both sides of the study.
2. Even though the students will be told up front the purpose of their participation in the study, some may feel that their responses could get back to their teacher and be used against them. Therefore, some may feel that they need to state what the teacher “wants to hear” rather than their true feelings.
3. Responses from the children may be ambiguous and some could be limited by the student’s ability to articulate his or her response.
4. The presence of the tape recorder may inhibit oral responses or make the participants feel uncomfortable.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine third and fifth grade students' perceptions of effective teachers based on their own experiences in school and the relationships they have developed with their teachers. The dynamic between teachers and students within the classroom setting will be looked at through the eyes of the students.

The Effective Teacher

Much research has been done in the area of teacher effectiveness. According to Anderson (1991) (cited in Papandrea, 1995) "effective teachers are those who achieve the goals they set for themselves or the goals set for them by others" (p. 2). While some would argue that effective teaching is more than just delivering

information and meeting goals, educators can not deny that this is very important. In his book on teacher effectiveness, Medley (1982) related the use of knowledge and skills by the classroom teacher to the accomplishment of teacher goals. These goals included the meeting of objectives, as well as student achievement.

Papandrea (1995) outlined many research studies throughout the past 20 years that attempted to define quality instruction. She reported that using clear and simple language, presenting information in a clear and organized manner, and relating information back to the students' background knowledge were just a few of the methods that past researchers have found effective teachers to use. Amazingly enough, this methods approach in educational research has shown that no one teaching method is more effective than another (Braskamp, Brandenburg & Ory, 1984; McGreal, 1983). There is no "best" way of teaching. In fact, the most effective teachers use a wide variety of teaching methods and strategies (Borich, 1988).

What separates the competent teachers from the incompetent teachers? From the early 1900's through the 1960's thousands of studies tried to locate the personality traits or attitudes that predicted teacher effectiveness (Wubbels, Levy & Brekelmans, 1997). While most studies came up empty handed, the questions still existed. If methods don't draw the line of distinction between effective teachers and non-effective teachers, personality and classroom atmosphere must play a role. The problem with this was establishing criteria. What criteria should be used for evaluation and who should identify it? In the mid-1970's a new approach was taken to try to establish this criteria - ask the students. After all, the students were the people most directly affected by the day to day teacher behaviors in the classroom.

Student Perceptions of Teachers

“According to students, the best teachers are strong classroom leaders who are friendlier and more understanding and less uncertain, dissatisfied, and critical than most teachers” (Wubbels et al., 1997, p.

83). These student perceptions of teachers were compiled in over fifteen years of extended research. Exceptional teachers, as perceived by students, fell into two categories, the dominant teacher and the student-oriented teacher. The dominant teacher displayed high leadership skills and strictness within the classroom, and student achievement tended to be high. The student-oriented teacher, on the other hand, allowed students greater responsibility in their own learning. The achievement levels were not as high as the dominant colleagues, but these teachers created a better affective atmosphere, or climate, within the classroom (Wubbels et al.). According to the students, neither one was perceived to be better than the other.

Mergendoller and Packer (1985) interviewed seventh graders about their perceptions of teachers. They described good teachers as being effective communicators, willing to help them fully understand the material, and were available to the students. Gorham (1987) worked with sixth grade students to learn about their perceptions of teachers. These students described good teachers as being able to

teach in exciting and interesting ways. On a more personal level, they also reported that good teachers were willing to invest extra time with students to make sure that they understood the concepts being covered. In a study of 279 academically talented students, Dorhout (1983) found that the greatest learning occurred when students were taught by a teacher who displayed behaviors that the children enjoyed. These behaviors included enthusiasm, warmth and a sense of humor.

Research by Ogden (1994) showed that gender does play a role in how students perceive effective teachers. The males in the study felt that effective teachers displayed fairness, good communication skills, responsibility and humor. The females in the study felt that good teachers displayed understanding, enthusiasm, creativity and organization. Both groups, however, felt that the personality traits of the teacher were as important as the teacher's "technical skills".

Cravens (1996), however, suggested that college students do not always agree on specific characteristics and behaviors that exemplified excellent teaching. In fact, an initial open-ended survey, to 497

students, recorded over 200 different characteristics. The 20 most frequent results were then tabulated into a second survey. Sets of conflicting statements appeared, such as “is flexible” and “adheres to regulations.” Two of the top five characteristics, however, were uses humor and projects enthusiasm, which are supported by past research.

What happens when students have a pre-conceived notion about a particular teacher? Widmeyer and Loy (1988) studied 240 university students about their perceptions of their college professor. When students were told the professor was “cold”, they perceived him to be less sociable, lacking humor and unpleasant. They also perceived him to be a less effective teacher. Students who were told that the professor was “warm” perceived opposite traits. In fact, these students found the professor to be a more effective teacher with a very positive approach towards teaching. This immeasurable aspect called “warmth” was perceived to be a very important quality or characteristic of teaching ability for these students.

Jamieson, Lyndon, Stewart and Zanna (1987) completed a similar study with eleventh grade high school students. Students participating in the study were told ahead of time that their new English teacher was a highly motivated, very effective teacher. These students received higher test grades and performed better in class than the students who were not given this information prior to starting the term. Motivation of students, therefore, can be influenced by their own expectations about a particular teacher. This self-motivation led to higher standards for all of the participants in the study.

The Teacher-Student Relationship

Superior teachers were viewed as being effective by their students because of their interpersonal skills, not their classroom management or their knowledge of content (Wilson & Cameron, 1996). “While instructional methodology is an important consideration, exceptional teaching can be described in terms of teacher-student relationships. A teacher’s interpersonal skills are

crucial to creating and maintaining a positive working climate” (Wubbels, Levy & Brekelmans, 1997, p. 82). The personality of the teacher is a major factor in the make up of the overall classroom climate and it is this climate that either facilitates or obstructs learning. George (1987) calls this a “positive structure,” where the classroom setting is highly structured, focused on the appropriate method, but the atmosphere allows for students to truly enjoy the learning process.

The relationships established between students and teachers are an integral part of daily instructions within the classroom. Sometimes the interpersonal relationship a student has with a teacher is the one thing that keeps that student in school. The fact that someone cares about them and about the success they have in school is enough to motivate them to do their best and stick with it, even when the subject matter is challenging (Moje, 1996).

Moje’s case study on one particular high school science teacher, focused on how the teacher motivated her students to be successful in chemistry. She found the major factor to be the teacher’s positive

approach to the class and the students in it. “Personal banter, humor and interesting discussions were all parts of the classroom climate”

(p.183). A student within this particular chemistry class said this about his teacher and the students in the class:

She never puts someone down. She keeps them focused and makes them want to do the work more and more and more.... That's why I like the class so much even though I'm not an A student in there. She's positive so she keeps me into it so I'll keep trying harder. I'd be flunking chemistry if I didn't have a positive teacher. You need something to keep you going. (p. 187)

Weinstein and Middlestadt (1979) demonstrated that even very young children pay attention to teacher/student relationships and are extremely sensitive to any partial behaviors on the part of their teachers. They reported that 102 grade school children (gr. 1-6) felt that teachers treated male high achievers and male low achievers differently in the classroom. Younger students perceived the teacher as being more critical of the high achieving male than the low achiever, yet upper-grade students reported perceiving the opposite.

Babad (1990), in his study of Israeli students, came to a similar conclusion. He reported that students consistently saw differential behavior, or “playing favorites”, from their teachers. He stated that students perceived their teachers as putting more pressure on high achieving students than low achievers, but also that high achievers received more warmth and emotional support. Low achievers, however, were perceived to be given more learning support than the high achievers.

A more recent trend in education has placed the relationships built between students and teachers as a top priority, a dynamic that is extremely valuable to instruction (Burke, 1996). Within these schools, they have experimented with keeping entire classes with the same teacher from year to year. Based on the principle that the same doctor monitors a child’s physical growth and development year after year, the same rule should apply with children’s educational growth and development. “These long-term relationships established between

teachers and students have improved both student performance as well as job satisfaction for teachers” (p. 360).

Ann Ratzki, headmistress of a German school where students and teachers are kept together for six years, noted:

We don't lose several weeks each September learning a new set of names, teaching the basic rules to a new set of students, and figuring out exactly what they learned the previous year. Most important... teachers get to know how each student learns.... The importance of this is incalculable (Burke, 1996, p. 361).

Despite the overwhelming positive enthusiasm of participants in these programs, it remains a relatively uncommon practice.

Student Evaluations of Teachers

The question for educators is, “What can we learn from our students?” Formal evaluations of classroom instructors has happened on college campuses throughout the United States on a regular basis since the early 1970's (Hepworth & Oviatt, 1985). The roots of this movement for student input were started at Harvard University in the 1920's when a group of students published a manual for other students

to use when choosing courses. This guide outlined comments on the course, as well as the instructor (Doyle, 1983). Can educators take this information and use it to improve their teaching?

In a recent study, college professors who displayed “immediacy behaviors” by providing verbal and written feedback to students were rated more positively by students than professors who lacked this characteristic. The question then became whether or not the course instructors who were given low ratings in this area could improve based upon student-generated feedback. The researchers asked these lower rated professors to use more immediate feedback in class with their students, and as the study continued, these instructors were rated more positively as the frequency of their immediacy behaviors increased (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996).

A commentary by Michael Platt (1993) is skeptical. In his essay, he supported the idea of student evaluations, but he effectively disregards the evaluations currently used by colleges and universities. It is his opinion that questions are rarely open ended enough to allow

for more than a short response, that the questions are ambiguous, and that the questions asked tend to get more at the feelings a student has about the class than the actual learning that occurred.

Pardeck and FitzPatrick (1994) concluded that instructors can be involved in the distribution and collection of course evaluations with no effect on the student ratings. Research by Aleamoni and Hexner (cited in Pardeck and FitzPatrick, 1994) found that age and course level also had no effect on how students rated their instructors. Students were consistent in how they rated individual teachers from semester to semester.

In research by Blai (1982), students from three different colleges in New York State were asked to choose three instructor characteristics that had the greatest impact on their thinking from a list of 13 choices. The students rated an expert knowledge of the subject, the ability to stimulate student interest, and an enthusiastic attitude toward the subject as the three most powerful characteristics a university instructor has upon thinking.

Stroh (1991) found that high school students could be just as objective and reliable as professionals when evaluating student teachers. The evaluations of the high school students were extremely similar to the evaluations of the university professors for the student teachers in this study. This gives support to the reliability of student evaluations at a high school level.

In an essay on good teaching, Wise, Darling-Hammond and Klein (1995) state the following:

Good teachers cheer up children who are discouraged, rechannel the energies of those who are aimless or nonproductive, and challenge those who are bored. They listen to students to understand what the students know and think, evaluate papers and performance, give assignments that move students forward, and provide feedback that offers constructive information and directions. They must be well organized and able to concentrate to keep all of these balls in the air at once, yet their structures must be permeable, allowing them to maintain an openness to unexpected events, problems, and opportunities. (p. 43)

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine third and fifth grade students' perceptions of effective teachers based on their own experiences in school and the relationships they have developed with their teachers. The dynamic between teachers and students within the classroom setting will be looked at through the eyes of the students.

Research Questions

This study has addressed the following questions

1. What do third and fifth grade students perceive to be the qualities of their "good" teachers?
2. What do third and fifth grade students perceive to be the qualities of their "bad" teachers?

3. Do third and fifth graders have common criteria in defining qualities of both “good” and “bad” teachers?

Methodology

The subjects of this study were made up of two third-grade classrooms and two fifth-grade classrooms. Each class consisted of approximately 20 students.

Grade 3A = 21

Grade 3B = 21

Grade 5A = 26

Grade 5B = 22

The total number of students in the initial survey was 90 (n=90). From each classroom, three students were chosen randomly for one of the two follow-up group interviews (n=12).

Students were from heterogeneously grouped classrooms. The children in the study all attended a public suburban school in Monroe County.

Procedure

The researcher went into each classroom involved in the study for a 30 minute session while the classroom teacher was not present. The first 10-15 minutes was spent discussing the best and worst teachers the children had encountered, as well as discussing hypothetical teachers and what their qualities would be.

The children were led through this discussion by the researcher and were encouraged to be as specific as possible when they stated their opinions. For example, if a student said, "He is fun" the student was asked to give examples of how the teacher was fun or what he did that was fun. These sessions were audio-taped so the researcher could facilitate the discussion in the classroom.

The final 15 minutes of the session were spent recording the written comments of the students. The children were asked to write their perceptions of a "good" and "bad" teacher. Again, the researcher instructed them to be as specific as possible in their responses.

Students were also told that grammar and mechanics did not have to be perfect. They just needed to get across the meaning of their comment.

To keep the atmosphere as open as possible, students were told that their responses would be kept anonymous. They were also asked to refrain from naming any individual teachers.

Following the collecting and analyzing of the initial data, the researcher met with six third-grade students and six fifth-grade students, chosen randomly, for a follow-up interview. These two small group discussions were facilitated by the researcher and centered around questions which arose from the initial large group interview. Both groups were asked what they would tell a new teacher about what to do in the classroom to become a good teacher. Discussions followed. These sessions were both audio-taped.

Analysis of Data

The students' responses were examined for consistent themes in order to determine if students were using similar criteria when

evaluating teachers. The themes were sorted into categories and then evaluated for frequency.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine third and fifth grade students' perceptions of effective teachers based on their own experiences in school and the relationships they have developed with their teachers. The dynamic between teachers and students within the classroom setting was looked at through the eyes of the students.

Analysis

From the four classes the researcher surveyed, over 300 positive comments and over 275 negative comments were made about teachers by the students. Following the initial screening of the comments and observations, the researcher looked for common themes among the responses. Three distinct categories were found including instructional

practices, classroom management, and more overwhelmingly than both of these, teacher personality.

In the area of instruction, students frequently mentioned homework, student understanding of concepts, and amount of teacher help. The area of classroom management fell into two subcategories: how the teacher rewarded students, and how the teacher disciplined. The last category, teacher personality, defined itself in two ways: teachers who display qualities that are “nice”, and teachers who display qualities that are “not nice”.

Instructional Comments

The researcher found that there were similar responses between the third graders and the fifth graders in these responses. For example one third grade student wrote, “A good teacher challenges you in math and reading.” While a fifth grade student wrote, “A good teacher teaches you how to learn things the easy way and gives kids work they can understand.”

Another area where the third and fifth graders were in agreement was the area of homework. Time and time again comments were made such as, “A good teacher gives just the right amount of homework,” or “A good teacher doesn’t flood you with homework.” The flip side of this were comments such as, “A bad teacher gives tons of homework.” These kids were so much in agreement with this that nearly every paper had some type of comment about homework, and many had more than one! The most vivid of all the quotes about homework had to be the following from a third grade student, “A bad teacher gives you homework on Fridays! Enough for four weeks and she expects you to finish it in one weekend!”

One of the third grade groups of students had just received a new bank of computers in their classroom, so many of their comments centered around the use of these computers and how their teacher used these in instruction. They said things such as, “She lets us go on the computer,” and “She teaches us how to use the computer,” and even

some negative comments such as “She doesn’t let us use the computers enough,” and “She doesn’t give us enough time on the computers.”

The researcher did find one area within the instructional category where the fifth graders made many comments and the third graders did not. Of the fifth grade positive responses nearly half of the students surveyed made a comment that a good teacher would make learning fun, while a bad teacher would make school boring. Only one of the third grade students made a similar comment. This was one area where the researcher questioned a smaller group of students in a follow-up group. The third grade students could not offer much insight into this, as they, for the most part, felt that school in general was fun. The fifth grade students, however, were full of responses to this question. They felt that the work became much harder and there was much more responsibility placed on them as they got older. One fifth grade boy said, “Anytime a teacher makes learning fun or different, I like it a lot more.” The feeling from the group was that

even though the work load becomes harder and more demanding, these students miss the “fun” projects of early elementary school.

Also in the area of instruction several students, in both grade levels, made comments about how a teacher helps them learn. One student wrote, “A good teacher will encourage you to do your best, but will explain something again when you don’t get it.” Another student wrote, “A good teacher will take you out in the hallway and explain how to do what you’re supposed to do.” A third student commented, “A good teacher will help you if you aren’t good at something and doesn’t make you feel bad.” On the negative side of things, another student wrote, “A bad teacher goes too fast and won’t stop to help you.” One student also wrote, “A bad teacher tells the kids to do something and then doesn’t pay any attention to the kids.”

Classroom Management Comments

The comments here were quite overwhelming in some regards. Most of the comments that fell into this category had to do with

classroom discipline and rewards. It seems that both third and fifth graders were in agreement here. In total there were 75 different comments made by the students about teachers that yell. Most made a negative comment such as, “A bad teacher yells all the time.” A few however, put this into a positive light by saying, “A good teacher doesn’t ever yell.” This is a real issue for students and how some teachers tend to discipline their students.

Because of the frequency of this response, the researcher asked the students in the follow-up groups to explain why this was such an issue for the students. The third graders, again, were not as open as the fifth graders, but stated that they just didn’t like being yelled at. The fifth graders, on the other hand, were very forthcoming. They said that often when a teacher yelled at the class it was because one or two students were acting up. They felt that it was unfair to punish the whole class due to the actions of only a few. They also stated that when a teacher yelled at just one person in particular, it was embarrassing and humiliating for the student. When the researcher

asked them if they thought discipline was a necessary part of school, they all agreed that it was. They felt, however, that a student should be reprimanded in private.

Another area that astounded the researcher were the number of comments made about teachers slapping and hitting students. Several students wrote, “Bad teachers are teachers who hit kids,” and “A bad teacher hits kids with rulers.” Due to the climate in today’s schools and the disciplinary action that would be taken if a teacher were to inappropriately handle a child, the researcher found these comments to be utterly astounding. Again, the question was posed to the follow-up groups for further clarification. The third grade students jumped on this question and were ready to answer! All stated that they had never actually seen a teacher strike a child, but they had just finished reading a book where the teacher did hit the students regularly. Because both classes had read the book, these ideas were fresh in their heads.

The fifth grade students were a little bit more vague with their responses. No one could pinpoint where they came up with the idea,

but some suggested that they had heard things on TV and saw things on the news. After they suggested this media influence, the researcher followed with a question about why they thought a student might have written the following, “A bad teacher brings a shotgun to school.”

Although they could not give a definite answer to the question, some felt that it was due to all of the recent media attention on shootings in schools.

Another area that fell into this area of classroom management was how strict a teacher should be. Some students were adamant that bad teachers were very strict. Others felt that some degree of strictness was necessary for the students to learn, and that a good teacher could in fact be strict. One student wrote, “A good teacher is a really strict teacher because that shows you that she cares about you.” Another student wrote, “A good teacher is nice, but is kind of strict so that you get your work done.”

The comments for rewards in the classroom were very typical of the age group of the students surveyed. Overwhelmingly the most

popular reward was some sort of recess during the day. Third and fifth graders alike felt that good teachers gave free time and bad teachers did not. Other comments for rewards were about teachers giving out candy and letting the students have parties in school. Again the researcher wanted some further insight into why recess was so important to these students, so the follow-up groups were asked. Both groups were in agreement with their answers. They felt that because a lot was being asked of them every day, that they deserved a chance to go outside to play, or to stay inside and have some time to themselves. They said that their teachers gave about 15-20 minutes of recess when it was given and they firmly believed that this was only fair. One fifth grade girl said, "I have to be in school for six hours every day and it seems like we are always working! It is nice to have some time with your friends. I think that if the class works hard all day, then we deserve recess."

Teacher Personality Comments

It seems that teachers can throw their methods out the window as far as the students are concerned. Third and fifth grade students overwhelmingly agreed that good teachers were nice people who genuinely cared about their students. Over fifty comments were made stating that good teachers were “nice”. Their perceptions of bad teachers painted the opposite picture. Just under fifty comments were made stating that bad teachers were “mean” or “not nice” and nearly an equal amount of comment were made stating that bad teachers “hate kids”.

Good teachers were considered to have qualities such as patience with their students, a sense of humor, an understanding of kids, a sense of fairness, and the ability to accept any child for who he or she is. Some of the quotes from the students were as follows: “A good teacher understands the kids she teaches.”; “A good teacher respects all children for what they are.”; “A good teacher keeps her promises and treats everyone fairly.”; “A good teacher enjoys school

as much as the kids, tells jokes and laughs when the kids do.”; “A good teacher is patient with the kids and is willing to give them a second chance.”

The researcher asked the follow-up groups to discuss the issue of teacher personality and the impact it has on them. They were asked why a teacher’s personality has anything to do with whether a teacher is a good teacher because a teacher’s job has nothing to do with being nice, but rather to instruct children and make them learn. They were very insightful in their responses. The third grade students agreed that the primary role of the teacher was to teach, but they stated that they learn better from people who were patient with them. They also stated that it is no fun to be in a classroom all year with someone that they do not like. One boy said, “I would do less work for a teacher that wasn’t nice to me.”

The fifth grade students in the follow-up group surprised the researcher by disagreeing with the premise that a teacher’s job was to teach. They felt that it was also part of the teacher’s job to respect the

students and to be nice to them. They also stated that they felt more comfortable with a teacher that displayed such characteristics as patience and fairness. They said that they were more motivated to do the assignments and were more willing to put forth their best effort if they respected the teacher and knew that the teacher respected them.

Finally, the researcher asked these students if they thought that “bad” teachers could improve their classroom practices and become “good” teachers. Most felt that the teachers could if they knew what things to change, but a few were skeptical. They felt that student evaluations of teachers could be a very valuable tool. They felt that even though they were young, they could be influential in helping the “bad” teachers see what they could improve upon. As one girl stated, “After all, we are the ones who see what the teachers do every day.”

Summary

In the analysis of the writing of third and fifth grade students and in follow-up conversations with the small groups, these youths

have provided a glimpse into what constitutes an ideal learning environment for them. For those so young, the students had definite opinions on what constitutes good teaching and bad teaching. Overall, they were happy and excited to share their opinions with the researcher and felt that they had good ideas to share.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine third and fifth grade students' perceptions of effective teachers based on their own experiences in school and the relationships they have developed with their teachers. The dynamic between teachers and students within the classroom setting was looked at through the eyes of the students.

Conclusions

This study has shown that students' perceptions about teachers are honest and valuable to the educators who care to listen to them. Through the students' comments teachers can glimpse much more than the students' understanding of good teachers. The students' needs, desires, fears and motivations are revealed when given the chance and

educators are then able to look inside the classroom from a different perspective. Teachers can see the challenges that students face every day that they spend in school.

This study shows that not only are third and fifth grade students actively evaluating teachers, but are doing so in a consistent manner. From the comments made by these four groups of students, common criteria emerged from each group regarding the evaluation of good and bad teachers.

Personality played a more prominent role than one might have expected, and was as prominent as comments about homework. Many of the children made comments about a teacher caring about them, or the negative, hating them. It would, therefore, appear that placing children in an educational setting that lacked this human compassion would be dreadfully negligent to the children involved. Also central to the caring atmosphere of the classroom was that of laughter and happiness. Students mentioned that teachers who were “grouchy” and

“never laughed” were less likely to motivate them to like school and in turn, do their work.

Many students were also concerned with classroom management and discipline, which at times reflected the personality of the teacher and his or her particular style.

When the demands of good teachers were reasonable and children were given the support necessary to succeed, students were willing to work hard and rise to the challenge. They responded to the sense of accomplishment and seemed to feel very good about themselves. They were very willing to share that sense of glory with the teacher who was willing to help them succeed, many stating, “It’s the teacher who pushed me to do my best.”

Students were very willing to praise the teachers who unconditionally accepted them, as well as their thoughts, ideas and feelings. They respected the adults who respected them. Although the students were asked not to specify a teacher by name, some did so during the follow-up group sessions. When this happened, they were

always supported by nods of agreement and positive comments from other students who had similar experiences with that same teacher.

Students wanted teachers who were fair to all students, although this did not necessarily mean that they treated everyone the exact same way. It was all right for a teacher to impose a different consequence on different students. They also wanted teachers who kept the intensity of their voice to a minimum, or in other words, don't yell. They expected that teachers recognize the individual and his or her talents, strengths and weaknesses, and are patient with every student. A willingness to help a student gain a concept in a different way, or with an additional explanation was also appreciated by the students.

All in all, these students were willing partners in helping this researcher gain insight into their world. They follow-up groups would have talked on and on, and the regular classroom discussions and interviews could have taken twice as long had time been made available. These students had strong opinions and were more than happy to share them.

Implications for Future Research

1. Further research could be gained by looking at gender differences. Do girls hold the same perceptions as boys?
2. Another area for further research would be to repeat this study with a wider span of ages. A similar study comparing elementary students, middle school students and high school students could shed additional light on the idea of students' perceptions of their teachers.
3. Further research could also be gained by holding individual interviews with students. In a non-threatening atmosphere, students were very willing to share their opinions. They might be even more forthcoming if they were talking exclusively to the researcher without their peers being present.

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