Primary students’ perceptions of good teachers

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KEY POINTS

• Teachers matter and good teachers really matter
• Many people and groups have argued what it is that they believe makes a good teacher, but what about the students in the classroom. What do they think?
• Primary-aged students are able to articulate what makes a good teacher for them.
• These primary students want teachers able to form student–teacher relationships based on emotional support and trust.
• These primary students see the two teacher attributes of helpful and nice as evidence of a good teacher.
• These primary students want teachers who are able to provide both fun and interesting lessons, and who are seen as firm but fair.
This article reports on a study of primary-aged students’ perceptions of what makes a good teacher for them. In 2012, as a result of a government directive, the three schools in this study merged into one but still operated across the three school sites. The focus of the study was on the students’ perceptions of their teachers, not the merger. Specifically, this study sought to include students’ self-reporting of how they saw good teachers and teaching. The results indicate that, for these students, the teacher–student relationship, two specific teacher attributes, and two sets of teaching ability characteristics were most important.

Introduction

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. (Ginott, 1972, as cited in Jones, Jenkins, & Lord, 2006, p. 1)

The above quotation is a telling reminder of the influence teachers can have in the classroom. Teacher quality matters and has been argued as the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2003; Kane & Mallon, 2006; Whitaker, 2004). Teachers’ actions, no matter how large or small, have the potential to affect not only children’s achievement, but also their self-esteem and experience of school in major and ongoing ways (Palmer, 2007).

The question “What makes a good teacher?” is important. Whitaker (2004) reminds us of the lasting effect teachers can have on our lives: “Great teachers impact others in more ways than they can ever know. The legacies we build last far beyond our years. Students care about great teachers because they know great teachers care about them” (p. 122).

New Zealand research has investigated quality teachers and teaching (Alton-Lee, 2003; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Kane & Mallon, 2006). Alton-Lee’s (2003) Best Evidence Synthesis identified 10 characteristics of quality teaching. These characteristics were drawn from the research literature; the purpose was to “contribute to ongoing, evidence-based and evolving dialogue about pedagogy amongst policy makers, educators and researchers that can inform development and optimise outcomes for students in New Zealand schooling” (p. v). Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) argue that students require both behavioural and emotional engagement prior to cognitive engagement. For the students in Years 7–10 in their study, Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) noted that good teachers care about their students, know their students as individuals, and demonstrate fairness. Kane and Mallon (2006) reported on the most important attributes of a good and effective teacher from the point of view of teachers, principals and board of trustees/management committee, and student teachers. These researchers noted the importance of establishing caring relationships. Common attributes across all participants were that they loved their work; were trusted and respected; and had high personal integrity.

Murphy, Delli, and Edwards (2004) highlighted that students were also able to discern teaching competencies. Through listening to children’s perspectives, it is possible to gain a truer, more honest and accurate insight into the characteristics and attributes that make a good teacher. It is important to hear the voices of primary-aged children as students as young as six begin to inform views and opinions as to what constitutes a good teacher (Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004). Therefore, this article argues that it is children, who spend much of their time with teachers, who are able to inform us about “what makes a good teacher”.

Research purpose and question

The role of the teacher is vital in the success of children at school (Hattie, 2003). However, describing what type of teachers children need is a more complicated task. Teachers need to understand not only their students but also their students’ learning (Bourke, 2008). Bourke (2008) goes further and states that “we must look at learning from the learners’ point of view” (p. 155). This article reports on a Master of
Education study which sought the perceptions of the students to answer the research question “What makes a good teacher for students?” The purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of what children view as the qualities a good teacher.

Method

The method of data collection had to be conducive to working with children in a safe and ethical manner. It also needed to obtain data of a rich and extensive nature in order to generate truthful and honest answers to the research question. The students’ voices were sought with the aim of understanding them and their life experiences. Therefore, this study used focus groups.

Focus groups

Focus groups are group interviews and are a way of listening to people and learning from their experiences (Morgan, 1993; Litosseliti, 2003). In this case, the emphasis was on listening to children, and learning what makes a good teacher to them. Krueger and Casey (2000) provide a useful description:

Focus group interviewing is about listening. It is about paying attention. It is about being open to hear what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgemental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share.

Focus groups capitalise on the communication and interactions among group members in order to generate rich research data (Kitzinger, 1993), and they have been shown to “reveal dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by more conventional data collection techniques” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 2). Therefore, focus groups not only explore new ideas but also consolidate old ones as they provide the participants a platform to speak and to be heard. Thus, in the current study, this methodology allowed students to explore and discuss their stories regarding teachers in a safe and positive environment with their peers.

The aim for the focus-group discussions was to allow students the opportunity to participate collaboratively in the interview process; therefore, the sessions were largely unstructured, and, as much as possible, the students controlled the dynamics. The focus groups encouraged the students to interact and respond to each other as they articulated their ideas and related their lived experiences.

Participants

The study took place within a full primary school on the South Island. The participants included 57 students from Year 1 to Year 8. Of these, 16 were Year 1 and 2 students, 12 were Year 3 and 4 students, 17 were Year 5 and 6 students, and 12 were Year 7 and 8 students. Forty-four of the students self-identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā, seven as Māori, and one each as Asian, Tongan, and Pacific Islander. Three students chose not to answer this question.

Procedure

In 2012, the study sought and was given ethics approval from The University of Otago. The lead author then approached the study’s school principal and discussed the project. A board of trustees’ meeting discussed the proposed study and permission was granted for the study to be conducted.

Classroom teachers gave students and their parents/caregivers information sheets and consent forms. The information sheets outlined the purpose of the study and all relevant information, including what the students would be asked to do. The student versions of the forms included language that was both child-centred and easily understood (Carroll-Lind, Chapman, Gregory, & Maxwell, 2006). This included informing everybody involved that the children could withdraw at any stage if they did not wish to continue, without any negative consequences.

The study included 11 focus groups. This process involved consulting the students’ teachers and looking at the participants who had given full informed consent (this included parent/caregiver permission), and then allocating each child to a suitable group. The focus groups took account of already established friendship circles, as it was hoped the children would interact more naturally among friends (Carroll-Lind & Raskauskas, 2014). Carroll-Lind and Raskauskas (2014) highlight the social connectedness that students develop by the time they reach 8 years of age. They noted that working with established friendship circles can provide students with a sense of stability.

The lead author discussed the study’s purpose with all students before their focus-group sessions as a means to further reduce any stress or concerns the students may have talking about their teachers. The focus-group interviews averaged approximately 20 minutes in duration. This was long enough to engage the students in conversation without compromising the content or allowing students’ concentration to falter. The focus groups allowed each discussion to come to a natural finishing point. These sessions occurred in a familiar setting within the school grounds where a person known to the students, such as the school librarian, was present. However, there were never any of the students’ teachers present, as this could have affected the responses made in the focus-group sessions.
To facilitate the data collection, the sessions were audiotaped so each session could focus on the students and not on note-taking. The students were informed both verbally and on their consent forms that none of their comments would be connected to them personally and that neither they nor their school would be identified. Students were reminded before the focus-group sessions that at no point would any of their comments be reported back to their teachers or fellow students (Carroll-Lind et al., 2006). The words they said, however, might be included in publications. To help ensure anonymity of both students and their school, individual comments are referred to only as a student in Year 1/2, Year 3/4, Year 5/6, or Year 7/8.

Results

In the analysis of data, three themes emerged about what makes a good teacher for these students: the student–teacher relationship, a teacher’s personal attributes, and a teacher’s teaching ability.

The student–teacher relationship

As teachers, we, the authors, expected the importance of the relationship that forms between a student and teacher to emerge from the data. Over the course of our teaching careers, we have noticed that when there is a good student–teacher relationship, there is more open communication, learning, and mutual respect than if the relationship is not good. For the students in this study, the student–teacher relationship was of utmost importance. And for these students, a good student–teacher relationship was one that provided both emotional support and established trust.

Provides emotional support

The students in this study voiced a need to feel a connection with their teacher and to feel emotionally supported by them: “a person that supports you” (Year 7/8 student). The students had a range of reasons for needing emotional support, such as bullying, problems at home, or being hurt physically in the playground. One participant simply stated: “When you are crying they can make you happy” (Year 1/2 student). Through understanding and showing empathy, teachers can cater better for their students’ learning needs and style.

The students were well aware of teachers who they felt genuinely understood and cared about them: “Someone that can actually talk to you. And someone that actually knows you, if you are like having any trouble at school or anything” (Year 7/8 student). These students preferred teachers who showed an interest in them as people, both as a group and as individuals.

Many of the Year 5–8 students viewed a good teacher’s emotional support as taking a genuine interest in their lives, whether that be through encouraging them at sports games or sincerely asking them how they were: “In the mornings, they say, how are you this morning? ... and say hello when you are coming in” (Year 5/6 student). Likewise, as another student described, “[good teachers] encourage you at doing sports or something like that. Something you have never done before” (Year 7/8 student). These students believed that relating to children on a more personal level was a highly important component of being a good teacher. This way the teacher could respond more readily to the children’s needs and be more understanding. Hill and Hawk (2000) described teachers “giving of themselves” as they are willing to share aspects of their lives and feelings with the students in the classroom. This, in turn, can make the students feel special as their teacher is disclosing personal information to them.

Trust

Being able to trust the teacher was an important aspect. These students were more likely to express themselves and reveal their needs if they were able to trust the teacher. For example, “like if you’ve got any problems like about bullying and you don’t want them to tell who said that and you’ve just got to be able to trust them because otherwise, because otherwise you don’t feel safe around them” (Year 5/6 student). These students wanted teachers who were trustworthy as this helped them feel safe at school:

As soon as you tell a teacher that you trust [about being bullied], you feel safe because you know that they can just stop it and also if you’re feeling a bit down they can cheer you up by giving you, like by letting you be star of the week. (Year 5/6 student)

Hawk and Hill (1996) support this description of trust. They stated that confidentiality is an important component of trust, which in turn creates an environment where students are more relaxed and open around their teacher. For these students being able to trust your teacher meant they would support you, be there for you even when you had made mistakes, or had done something wrong. In fact, students suggested that the relationship between teacher and student should be unconditional, similar to that of a close family member:

A good teacher is someone that if you are having trouble at home, like a parent or maybe you do not have any, like a parent at home and then that teacher will be like family to you, a good teacher. (Year 7/8 student)

The students in this study support Gibbs and Poskitt’s (2010) assertion that teachers who support students emotionally and are trusted by their students have a positive effect on their students’ learning.
Teachers’ personal attributes
The theme of personal attributes came across clearly in the focus groups. The two most important attributes for these students were teachers who were helpful and nice.

Helpful
Tomlinson (2003), Kane and Mallon (2006), Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2008) contend that teachers need to be responsive to the different needs of the students in their classroom. The students in the current study described how helpfulness was a key attribute that good teachers should have. Helpful meant different things. For some, it meant helpful when you were hurt physically: “A good teacher, they like, help you when you are hurt” (Year 3/4 student). For others, helpful when they felt confused about personal issues: “Someone who helps you get over your fears and get over all your problems” (Year 3/4 student). One student was more explicit: “Like if someone is being mean to you and you feel like they’re putting you down, then they sometimes, like you talk to them about it and they tell the other person to not do it anymore” (Year 5/6 student). These students reported that it was important for them that their teachers were helpful.

Nice
For many students, nice meant not grouchy or grumpy. One student described a good teacher as “a nice person, not someone that is all screamy and someone that actually smiles at you” (Year 7/8 student). When one group of students was asked to explore further on the topic of which teachers were nice, one student asserted that it did not matter whether their teacher was male or female “as long as they are nice and not grouchy” (Year 7/8 student).

Other students stated that good teachers did not have to be nice all of the time, and were aware of the need for boundaries to be set. When asked what makes a good teacher, one Year 7/8 student responded with: “It is like being firm. They are not always nice and sweet when you do something wrong and they can be firm about it.” Another spoke of a circumstance where it might be okay for a teacher to get grumpy: “I think it is good to just get a little grumpy sometimes so they will not do it again. Like, they learn from their mistake” (Year 5/6 student).

Another student agreed and described a circumstance where a teacher might be forced into being grumpy: “Some teachers have to, have to be a little bit grumpy like if people, like they don’t respond. Like if you tell them to go over there and they do not and they answer back, they might have to” (Year 5/6 student). It would appear from the evidence of these focus groups that being nice is important for children; however, they also acknowledge that a nice teacher needs to be firm and set boundaries when required.

Teaching ability
The focus groups mentioned the instructional skills of good teachers frequently throughout the sessions. Although the statements “teaches well” or “helps us learn” can be viewed as vague or unclear, many students could identify ways in which good teachers engaged them in their learning. The students in this study discussed two sets of good teaching abilities: making learning fun and interesting; and being firm but fair.

Fun and interesting
The children in this study suggested that in order to engage them in their learning, the lessons needed to be fun and interesting. Good and Brophy (2008) discussed that there is general agreement that learning should be fun, although not fun in the same manner that recreational games are fun. They believed that students should find meaning and worth in their learning activities. According to the students in this study, good teachers make learning fun or not boring. “Make it fun while we learn. It gets really boring if you are just doing the same thing” (Year 5/6 student).

The children described explicitly what they wanted the learning in their classroom to be like. They had real ideas, and perhaps teachers need to ask children more often how, and in what ways, they want to learn about certain topics:

- Someone who, instead of just doing boring stuff, they could, like for maths, instead of just doing all these like boring little plastic things, you could actually have food and cut them up and see third and quarters and that for maths. (Year 3/4 student)

Providing fun and interesting learning opportunities is a way in which teachers can motivate their students and keep them engaged in their learning (Bourke, 2008; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). The current study shows these children consider these attributes are important in being a good teacher.

Firm but fair
The children in this study often spoke of having a teacher who was fair and there was a genuine sense of social justice that arose throughout the group interviews. For example, as one participant stated:

- There are kids in our class who are a bit naughty. Like there is nothing wrong with them, they are just plain naughty and like if they are good for a week or something, they get a lolly at the end of the week in front of the whole class and that is not very good because we are being good as well and we don’t get anything. (Year 5/6 student)

Some of the students could recognise when a teacher was not being fair, and they wanted a teacher who equitably
gave rewards and consequences: “Someone who is fair. Like does not pick favourites. Someone who gives consequences and does not just let you off with everything and gives you consequences to right and wrong actions” (Year 7/8 student). Being firm but fair was an important attribute for these children, while they also accepted that if you did something wrong then you would face the consequences. Even the youngest students understood and appreciated a teacher who was firm: “She needs to tell us off if we do something naughty” (Year 1/2 student).

Conclusions

The New Zealand government and media have highlighted teaching standards as a significant factor in raising student achievement in New Zealand (Giddens, 2012; Parata, 2012). The possible implementation of performance-based pay as a way to lift student achievement has ignited much discussion surrounding what really makes a good teacher (Belanger-Taylor, 2012; Bennett, 2012). It appears that much of this discussion has relied on the perspectives of teachers, parents, educators, and researchers, as opposed to the perspectives of children.

Therefore, this study sought to explore students’ perspectives on what makes a good teacher for them. The views of the student participants have provided many characteristics that they believe to be important in determining whether a teacher is good. The responses of the students in this study support much of the New Zealand and international research, which validates that the ability to form strong relationships with students is a necessity for effective learning (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2008; Bourke, 2008; Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Gibb & Poskitt, 2010; Kane & Mallon, 2006). This study’s findings also suggest that a teacher’s personality is integral to being a good teacher. Additionally, a teacher’s teaching ability is important to these participants. The ability to connect students with their learning, to be interesting and fun, to provide clear boundaries, and to be firm but fair are all part of what makes a good teacher for these students.

Implications of the study

The increasing complexity of the contemporary education system has placed greater demands on teachers. In New Zealand, there is mounting pressure on teachers to improve their skills and attitude in the classroom and, as a result, get a lift in student achievement. This is what Martin Thrupp (2009) calls the “politics of blame”. This means that in the eyes of the government and policy makers, student underachievement may be directly linked to teachers and school-related factors, and not to wider issues such as the effects of poverty (Thrupp, 2011).

As part of the New Zealand government’s drive to lift student achievement, teacher effectiveness has come under greater scrutiny (Thrupp, 2009). For example, New Zealand’s Minister of Education Hekia Parata (2012) stated that an appraisal system is being investigated to enhance current teaching standards. She stated that performance-based pay could be a tool used to measure teacher quality.

An interesting question, then, is how will good teachers in New Zealand be judged? Will it be on standardised test scores and meeting “graduation” targets, or will students be asked for their perspectives on good teachers? The responses of students in the current study indicate that students want a teacher who cares about them, who treats them fairly, and someone who helps them get better at their schoolwork.

This study indicates that teachers should seriously consider children’s perspectives. By examining students’ perspectives of teachers, educators are privy to a unique and individual examination of the classroom environment. Finally, in the words of a Year 5/6 student, “a good teacher knows what they are doing, and they know what the children need to learn in the future”.

References


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