

Students' perception of their teachers' behaviour in the classroom and its coherence with teachers' own understandings

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Summary

From the 1920s onwards student evaluations as a method of assessing the effectiveness of teachers' work have been a topic of research (Dowell & Neal, 1982; Fauth et al., 2014; Hudelson, 1951; Kember & Leung, 2011; McKeachie, 1997; McKeachie et al., 1971; Remmers, 1934; Rezler, 1965; Stehle et al., 2012; Way et al., 2007). For example, research is focused on how students evaluate their teachers' ability to motivate them and include them in different activities, structure lessons and manage classwork in general (Wagner et al., 2013). Different authors have examined the eligibility of this method – students' evaluations in depth (Anderson & Walberg, 1974; Fauth et al., 2014; Fraser, 1989; Kunter & Baumert, 2006; McKeachie et al., 1971; Scriven, 1988).

This study aims to investigate how basic education students perceive their teachers' behaviour in the classroom and what differences the students' perceive of novice and experienced teachers' behavioural patterns.

Theoretical background

The literature on studies of student ratings of teaching has been characterised as extensive, contradictory and highly variably concerning the quality (Lüdtke et al., 2009). While the feedback from university students on subject courses taken is seen as a natural evaluation method of teaching quality in higher education (Marsh, 2007), the use of feedback from school students as a research method is considered subjective, i.e. it is highly dependent on whether students like or dislike their teachers (De Jong & Westerhof, 2001; Kunter & Baumert, 2006).

At the same time, several researchers claim that although students' evaluations of their teachers are not identical to the teachers' real behaviour,

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these evaluations – even with a certain degree of subjectivity – still reflect the reality (Krips, 2008, 2011). Many researchers advise paying more attention to studying teacher behaviour and recommend using student evaluations in addition to other assessment methods (Den Brok et al., 2009; Duffield et al., 2000; Fauth et al., 2014).

Numerous studies show that the quality of teachers' own evaluation of their teaching is not always adequate (Pham et al., 2012). Furthermore, teachers typically do not really know how students perceive their activity (teaching) in the classroom. Receiving students' feedback and constructive reflection could allow teachers to discover new viewpoints in their teaching (ibid.).

Becoming a successful teacher, one who can work with children of different ages, greatly depends on how well someone is able to adapt to students' expectations and behave according to their ideas of a good teacher (Krull, 2000). A modern definition of the learning-teaching process is described as creating a stimulating and safe learning environment for students. This means that teachers base their work on students' needs and interests (Byman & Kansanen, 2008). In order to be liked by students a teacher must have authority in the eyes of her or his students. According to the literature, a teacher must first have certain character traits that are generally required to guide people: cheerfulness, friendliness, sincerity, an ability to control their emotions and other characteristics indicative of good mental health and personal emotional intelligence. Students often have quite clear expectations as to what makes a good teacher and their expectations depend on their experience at school and their cultural background (Krull, 2000).

To summarise, students want to see their teacher as an authoritative figure in the classroom who can create a predictable structure for working, react decisively to students' unacceptable behaviour and understand students individually and the class as a whole (Krull, 2000).

According to Fuller (1969), one of the relevant features of teachers' professional development is their ability to recognise problems. Using data obtained directly from 50 student teachers and indirectly from other databases and reports of similar surveys, Fuller inferred a three-stage model of teacher development that focused on teachers' concerns. In the early phase, the main concerns regard classroom management in order to control a class of pupils. More generally, they are concerned with self-adequacy. As a teacher becomes more competent and his/her self-confidence grows, the emphasis shifts to more serious concerns related to teaching and learning. Another approach to describe developmental stages of teachers is a

model of teachers' professional thinking and decision-making by Berliner (1986, 1994). This model points out that the development of teachers' professional decision making starts from following context-free rules as the lowest level, with only a small fraction of teachers reaching the highest, so-called expert teacher level. According to Good and Brophy (1995) there are two things which separate a novice and a professional. A professional can classify problem situations and events more effectively and more swiftly by moving smoothly from one level of generalisation to another to find the right pedagogic solution. A professional teacher is faster than a novice in determining whether misbehaviour is caused by problems relating to the student's personality or simply by e.g. hooliganism. In addition, professional teachers know many practical standard solutions, often honed to perfection, which they apply with skill and success.

The empirical study

The research questions were:

1. How do basic education students (aged 12 to 16) perceive their teachers' behaviour during activities/instruction in the classroom and how does this behaviour of novice and experienced teachers differ as perceived by their students?
2. What connections can be made between what the students perceive and the teachers' own views of their professionalism?

314 Estonian basic school students (Grades 6–9) and their twenty teachers (10 novice and 10 experienced) participated in the study. A questionnaire (Van der Schaaf, 2005) was used to collect feedback from students on the behaviour (activity) of their teachers in the classroom. The students' perceptions were compared with ideas on teaching drawn from reflective essays of teachers' (published in Okas et al., 2014) and interviews (published in Okas et al., 2013b).

The comparison of the students' perceptions with the teachers' ideas was implemented by a two-fold procedure: step one, the teacher statements that matched with, or were related to, 15 questions in the students' questionnaire were identified and step two, the teachers' ideas on specific topics were compared with the students' questionnaire replies.

The analysis of the data drawn from the students' questionnaires showed that students' perceptions of their teachers' behaviour depended on the teachers' work experience – experienced teachers received higher evaluations than novice teachers. Students felt more confident in the classes

of experienced teachers in that they had satisfactory studying conditions in the classroom. Since there was a noticeable difference between the evaluations given to novice and experienced teachers, one issue was probably the discipline. In the students' perception, experienced teachers were more enthusiastic than novice teachers; with higher expectations in students, showing greater interest in their students and in their ideas, and having more faith in students than novice teachers. Compared to novices, experienced teachers gave more practical and clearer instructions. According to the students they were also more willing to repeat explanations than novices. Experienced teachers paid more supportive attention to contacts between students than novice teachers. However, students of experienced teachers were more positive about teachers' checks for understanding, and a sense of control was more prevalent in experienced teachers' classes. Experienced teachers set the objective of the lesson more clearly than novice teachers. The clarity of tasks given in lessons was rated more highly in experienced teachers' classes.

The comparison of the students' perceptions of teachers' behaviour with statements from the teachers' reflective writings and aspects that teachers mentioned in interviews revealed that there was a good match between the perceptions on both sides. Students were able to perceive the moments during novice teachers' lessons when the teachers felt unsure of themselves. The experienced teachers named a number of different aspects related to supervising the students, presenting them as their strengths. Students' feedback on teachers' behaviour can serve as an indicator of teachers' professionalism.

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