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MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT GOOD TEACHING

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Abstract

Teaching in the contemporary period seems to be a challenge for some teachers. Easy access to varied information as well as the preoccupation for the virtual environment of communication make today's students a generation, called the digital or Y generation, with its specific peculiarities. There are opinions that teachers complain about the non-involvement of students in their own education, their lack of motivation or the lack of a real partnership between family and school. However, this study comes to prove the opposite. Students want to learn, want to be successful in learning, and also have a clear picture of the type of teacher that can help them excel. This research aims to investigate the perceptions of preadolescents concerning the skills that an accomplished teacher has to possess. This transversal study is based on a nonexperimental, qualitative design. The research was conducted between February and March 2018, using semi-structured interviews. The obtained answers revealed that students are not indifferent to learning. The vast majority of students desire to succeed, to self-indulge. Students highly value the teacher who explains the new content so that everyone understands, who is attentive to students' feedback, to their non-verbal expressions. They value positively teachers who transmits self-confidence, have a correct diction, master the pedagogical skills specific to the constructivist approach, but who pays attention to the management strategies of the student group.

Keywords: Urban middle school, effective teaching, engaged learning, student perceptions.

1. Introduction

Today's teaching process in Romania is provocative and more refined compared to the past. The teaching process today in Romania is provocative and more refined compared to the past. Classes of crowded students with a consistent number of students, frequent legislative changes, the multitude of roles and tasks of the teacher, the oversized curriculum, the socio-cultural diversity of students, the educational paradigms promoted are just a few of the arguments behind the previous statement.

Even more, these challenges take place in a historical societal context, strong and rapid development and technological innovation. The generation of students that teachers are addressing today is extremely heterogeneous, from pupils with special educational needs and the category of students called "functional illiterates" to "Google generation", "digital or Y generation". They have easy access to information, have the ability to communicate virtually unrestrictedly and much more possibilities for development. But are they really taught to use technology for their benefit? Is there really a concern to help them discern between types of information or create new data?

In order to achieve a higher quality level in educational activity, lifelong learning becomes imperative and not an option. Teachers learn in order to: improve students' achievement, extend teaching competences and accumulate new knowledge (Dârjan, 2010). They also have to form a set of social attitudes that underpin the start of a quality educational process (Gavreliuc & Gavreliuc, 2012).

The literature reveals that there are discrepancies between beliefs, attitudes of teachers and teaching practices (Popa, &Voinea, 2016). The contextual limitations mentioned above, the competing attitudes, incomplete professional training are some of the elements that maintain this incongruity (Li, 2016).

1.1. Teaching as a factor influences learning engagement

Academic achievement depends not only by internal state of students (eg. cognitive structure, learning style, interests, etc.) but also by the context of their lives – culture, community, family, classroom's characteristics, learning group, teacher's personality and teaching style (Iucu, 2008).

The manner in which the teacher professes, the way he interacts with students influences substantially the level of student involvement in learning (Gordon, & Burch, 2011). The duty of the teacher is to produce those changes in students 'behavior that are considered desirable and to allow the development of pupils' skills and the formation of attitudes valued by contemporary society (Ojo, & Adu, 2017).

There are opinions that teachers complain about the non-involvement of students in their own education, their lack of motivation or the lack of a real partnership between family and school (Okeke, 2004). On the other side, other specialists consider them brilliant and say that the source of poor student achievement, disinterest and even student hostility is the poor relationship established between the teacher and students (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorhan, 2009).

To achieve efficacy in teaching process means that teacher has to reflect upon "his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783). A recent meta-analysis shows that „preservice and inservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to their commitment to the teaching profession" (Chesnut, & Burley, 2015, p. 12). There is a rich literature in the field, inquiring into the factors that sustain students' motivation and learning (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Skinner, Pitzer,

& Steele, 2016). Teachers' beliefs and the subsequent instructional contexts that he/she creates, are one of the strongest predictors of students' engagement in learning (Zee, & Koomen, 2016).

1.2. Good teaching

The specialized literature highlighted over time the portraits of the ideal teacher: as a role model (Aristotel), as trainer (Watson); „as mediator (Feuerstein); as child centred (Neill); and as postmodernist (Foucault)" (Arnon, & Reichel, 2007, p. 444). In the last 20 years, the ideal teacher features focus on the cultural dimension (being a relay of culture), on his role in student socialization (encouraging pupils not only to assume the agreed social norms, but also to develop appropriate civic attitudes), on the skill-enhancing side and skills development and on the extent of expertise in the field of teaching, being well acquainted with the science that he reveals and communicates to the students (Arnon, & Reichel, 2007). Dressel (1987) highlighted that students value teachers who demonstrate a good knowledge of the scientific field, who can also transmit science to others in order to understand the lessons taught and which gives importance to the development of harmonious relationships with students. Researchers agree that the concept of *good teaching* is multifaceted and express a perspective in which the students are encouraged to develop a deep-level learning (Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Rytkönen, (2011).

Recent studies highlight more nuanced needs to which the ideal teacher must answer. Thus, students appreciate teachers who make an obvious effort to have a holistic view of teaching, which relate with them directly, in the planning of lessons both in accordance with the curriculum programs and their needs, being transparent and clear in expressing the learning requirements.

Another aspect appreciated by students is commitment to engaging students, summing up in this dimension the personality, the charisma, the enthusiasm of the teacher, the approach of a student-centred teaching. Also, students appreciate those teachers who create partnerships with students and who support their interests and needs, who build learning communities. The stability of the support is greatly appreciated by students, being visible through the teacher's willingness to discuss and provide additional material, the permanent emotional support of the student (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Since 1970, researchers have been interested in evaluating teaching through the points of view of direct beneficiaries, students. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used. The investigation of the quality and efficiency of teaching through pupils' points of view brings new perspectives in defining good teaching (Telli, Den Brok, & Cakiroglu, 2008; Bakx Koopman de Kruijf & den Brok, 2015). It also allows teaching to be adjusted according to students' learning needs, targeting the educational process to achieve relevant visible results. Given the particular characteristics of the *digital generation* of Romanian pupils, we ask ourselves whether their perceptions of *good teaching* are close to those presented in the scientific literature. Besides, there is a limited number of studies that approach both sides of teaching: the good/ effective one and the opposite.

3. Research Questions

The main question of this research is: Which characteristics should a teacher express in order to be considered a good teacher by middle school pupils?

Specific questions: What are the characteristics of the teaching that secondary school students consider to be the most important? What are the issues that secondary school students dislike in teaching? How much students value digital technology in the teaching process?

4. Purpose of the Study

This research aims to investigate the perceptions of preadolescents concerning the skills that an accomplished teacher has to possess.

The objectives of the research are: 1. To identify the characteristics that make teaching efficient. 2. Identifying the aspects of teaching activity that drive away learners from engaging in learning. 3. Evaluating the level of valorisation of digital technology in the teaching process.

5. Research Methods

This transversal study is based on a nonexperimental, qualitative design. The research was conducted between February and March 2018, using semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. Because the participants are minors, the informed consent was requested from both children and parents. The rights of the participants were made known with the announcement of the specific aspects of the research (purpose, methods and research tools, investigation procedures, duration of the interview, assumed risks).

5.1. Description of participants

The group of participants consists of 68 students from Brasov, from 3 different schools in terms of the results obtained by pupils and located in different areas of the city. All students who participated in the research are aged between 11 and 13 years (20% of the total are 11-year-olds, 65% are 12-year-olds, and 15% are 13 years of age). The group is not homogeneous in terms of gender distribution (67% of the total are girls and 33% are boys). The vast majority (76%) are students in the 6th grade at gymnasium. 40% of participants are bilingual. Although they are learning at urban schools, 12% of children live in rural areas.

5.2. Description of research tools

The semi-structured interview contained 12 open ended questions, structured in three dimensions that correspond to the three research objectives: 1. the characteristics of effective teaching; 2. Undesirable characteristics of the teacher; 3. Valorisation of digital technology in the teaching process. All the questions were addressed in the same way to all respondents with the opportunity to rephrase some items.

6. Findings

The obtained answers revealed that students are aware of the effective teacher's attribute. Using their simple language, students demonstrate a profound knowledge of the essential aspects of teaching. We have collected all the characteristics mentioned by students, in an Excel document. Synonyms were counted to

one characteristic. The number of students, who have chosen a certain feature, even if expressed by different synonyms, has been shown in brackets in the tables below. In the interest of categorizing the data, we conducted a content analysis. There were 67 unique characteristics of the teacher after the elimination of synonyms. Placing features in the established categories was done with the help of an independent researcher. The descriptive statistical analysis was used to respond in detail to the research questions.

6.1. What are the characteristics of the teaching that secondary school students consider to be the most important?

Analysis of the thematic content describes and groups the data obtained from students' answers into four sub-categories: personality characteristics, scientific competences, teaching skills and student relationship, as can be seen in *Table 01. The characteristics of effective teaching.* We note the strong valorisation of those personality traits that facilitate communication between teacher and student, such as humour, friendly attitude of the teacher, but "not too friendly", his kindness, patience and understanding. The investigated students appreciate the teacher who transmits reliability and self-control, show passion and enthusiasm in his scientific field and in the chosen profession, the strong adult who calmly and perseveringly directs the class of students in the desired direction.

Students appreciate teachers who allow themselves to cross the boundaries of the curriculum and show the practical applications of the subject taught in life or the current reality. Teacher's ability to connect with other disciplines or to design trans- and / or interdisciplinary educational approaches raises the curiosity and interest of the investigated students. Also, research participants appreciate the hidden curriculum elements or the informal curriculum, namely, those learning experiences that were not designed to be didactic, thus making contact with the man behind the profession.

Table 01. The characteristics of effective teaching.

Personality characteristics	Scientific competencies	Teaching competencies	Relationship with students
Humour (53) Friendly (51) Kind (47) Patient (43) Understanding (38) „Treat us well" (37) "Honor his commitments" (26) "Talk nicely" (21) Calm (19) Honest (16) Enthusiasm, passion (15) Wise (7) Communicative (3)	Do other exciting things outside of the curriculum (eg experiments, fun math, creative writing, etc.) (28) Knowledge of the curriculum (23) Knowledge of the subject taught (16) General knowledge (7)	The ability to explain coherently and clearly (66) Ensuring Feedback in Teaching Communication (59) Interactive ways to solve tasks (54) Frequent use of projects as a teaching method (32) Frequent use of educational games (25) Valuing students' creativity imagination (23) The ability to make the lesson fun (19) The ability to turn learning into a pleasant and easy activity (17) The ability to tell science (7) Write intelligible (4)	Firm, strict and master class (57) Keep quiet and calm in class (53) Student Surveillance (32) Treating students equally (31) Solving conflicts between students in private, not in front of the whole class (12)

An overwhelmingly large number of students (66) in the investigated group appreciate the teacher's ability to explain clearly and coherently the lessons and give importance to obtaining feedback from students to ensure the understanding of the lesson taught. Students appreciate the valorisation of the constructivist perspective of conceiving lessons, giving great importance to the building of knowledge, starting from the students' experience. Participants value student-centred teaching and stimulation not only of memory and intelligence but also of imagination and creativity. Among the specific skills of student classroom management, students focus their preferences on those characteristics that allow maintaining a harmonious and stable socio-emotional climate of the student class. Thus, students want the teacher to show firmness in establishing and maintaining the rules in the decisions taken. They want a quiet and secure school climate, allowing them better school adaptation and achieving a higher level of attention concentration. The participants in the research want the teacher to treat all students alike, not to have discriminatory or favourable attitudes to some pupils. Interesting is the way students appreciate the manner in which the professor addresses conflicts between students. We find that 18.5% of participants prefer conflict resolution in private, with the help of teachers, thus expressing the need for privacy and protecting self-esteem.

6.2. What are the aspects that secondary school students dislike in teaching?

We considered necessary to address in interviews a less pleasant aspect of teaching in order to find out where the main issues are, if conflicts between students and teachers occur. Students stated that teachers perceived as aggressive, with inappropriate behaviour: scream at students, (61) threatens to lower the grade or other means of punishment (57), those that are ironic, offend students in didactic communication (54), those that are not able to control their violent reactions ("they are annoyed with us"), and focus primarily to discover the mistakes and to sanction them, are the most feared and detestable (table 02). A large part of the respondents stated that they have come to learn because they feel forced, proving rejection also for the discipline taught by the teachers described above. In the worst case, some of the children said they no longer like school, or feel less motivated to come to school after seeing a negative model of a professor. Students also complain about the clutter with homework and projects that has to be done in the same week, or the lack of communication between teachers, which determines too much volume in some school periods. Discrepancy between the teacher's professional and teaching level and the level of competence expected from the students is the frustration's object for the respondents.

Table 02. The teacher's undesirable characteristics

Personality characteristics	Level of scientific training	Teaching activity	Relationship with students
Aggressive (37) "The kind of teacher you are afraid of" (33) Arrogant (30) Bad (26) No sense of humor (25) Stutterered (7) Flustered (4) He appropriates goods that do not belong to him (2)	Lack of knowledge of taught subject (17) Poorly trained (13) Cannot solve the problem (9) "He will not know an answer if ask him" (4)	Focus on student mistakes (53) Excessive criticism (51) Poor classroom management (48) Very severe or very careless (45) Agglomeration with homework and projects in the same week (39) "The professor who thinks his discipline is the most important" (36) Do not respect breaks (29) Exaggerated claims in student assessment (22) "Teachers who do not teach and ask us to lecture from the manual" (19) "The teacher who does not answer the students' because they say the questions are stupid" (11)	Inappropriate behaviour: Screaming, (61) Threatening, (57) Offends, (54) "Is annoyed by us" (49) Favours Certain Students (37) Causes panic in students (23) "Has crises in class" (12)

6.3. How much do students value digital technology being brought in teaching process?

The vast majority of surveyed students stated that their teachers do not use digital technology in their teaching activity. The most commonly used are PowerPoint and educational videos. They have frequent contact with them, especially in the Special Week (the week of extracurricular activities). Students consider that their teachers are more concerned with following lessons from the manual and less interested in using new, attractive and exciting technologies for students (table 03).

Internet-based learning or proposing homework in which to use the Internet as a source of documentation are activities agreed by students, but which do not have a high frequency in school practice. In particular, the projects are the ones that enable students to practice digital skills. Virtual social media groups are used extensively to establish quick and permanent contact not only between professors and students, but also between teachers and parents / relatives.

Table 03. Valuing digital technology in the teaching process

ICT in classroom	Educational applications
Use of PowerPoint, films and educational software (52)	Use groups from social networks to communicate effectively (61)
Suggesting topics in which to use the Internet as a source of documentation (34)	Using collaborative writing documents for projects (1)
Internet based learning (1)	Using educational apps compatible with Android systems (1)

7. Conclusion

The opinions of the students in this study on the characteristics a good professor have formed a comprehensive picture. The middle school students were able to respond to all questions included in the interviews. They have demonstrated to have a clear image about what means to be an effective teacher and also for those which represent the opposite side. We used semi-structured interview with open ended questions which were appropiate for the respondents. They had the opportunity to express themselves in their own words. Thus, researchers have discovered more specific nuances of the subjects under consideration. The discovered features can be used to build a new research instrument suitable for a quantitative design. In total, 67 unique characteristics of the teacher were reported in 10 different categories. Students appreciate the teacher who has the sense of humour, act friendly, that is perceived as kind, patient, calm and understanding, treat students equally and he/she loves his job. Students highly value the teacher who explains the new content so that everyone understands, who is attentive to students' feedback, to their non-verbal expressions. They value positively teachers who transmit self-confidence, have a correct diction, master the pedagogical skills specific to the constructivist approach, but who also pays attention to the management strategies of the student group.

The results show that the level of use of digital competences is quite low. Students also want to make more use of digital competences in the teaching process. They want to learn to do something constructive with all the opportunities that the owned devices present. Incorporating information technology in teaching can increase student interest in school. The obtained answers revealed that students are not indifferent to learning. The vast majority of students desire to succeed, to self-indulge. They know and can say openly what they want in order to make the teaching - learning process efficient.

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