

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide answers to the research question, “What teacher characteristics do London upper Secondary school students value?” Using convenient or opportunity sampling, 51 Grade 12 and 13 students ages 16-18 in a south-west London secondary school were interviewed using a face-to-face method. The analysis of the data revealed that students in this study valued teacher affective and pedagogic characteristics. These include teachers being caring, ‘relatable’ and empathic. Possessing personal traits (agreeableness—characterized by soft-voice, gentle disposition, patience, high expectation of self and students and helpfulness), pedagogic practices (articulativeness, teaching that connects with their out-of-school life and takes their perspective in mind; passion; discipline; professionalism and teaching material free of errors) and the infusion of humour during lessons. Firstly, the study reinforced the idea that London, upper secondary students do hold views about teacher characteristics they value and should be given the opportunity to express their opinions. Secondly, Teachers use of humour as appropriate is recommended even though there seems to be no consensus in the literature in this regard. Finally, beginning teachers or newly qualified teachers (NQTs) as well as seasoned teachers should nurture and utilise their affective characteristics. This is so because, as shown in this study, not doing so can result in students being negatively impacted long-term.

Keywords: Teacher Characteristics, London, upper secondary, Students, School

“Teacher Characteristics They Value”: London Upper Secondary Students’ Perspectives.

Introduction

The aim of this qualitative study was to provide answers to the research question, “What teacher characteristics do London upper secondary school students value?” Given the nature of this research question, there is of necessity a sociological underpinning to this study. This is so because the main components, teacher characteristics and values, are social constructs.

Bainbridge (2018) states that social constructs do not exist in objective reality but are a result of human thoughts and social interaction. For this study, teacher characteristics such as ‘Knowledgeable-ness’, pedagogical skill, sense of humour, enthusiasm and a caring disposition cannot be touched, physically manipulated or exist apart from the human mind. They are not objective realities, but constructs or ideas used to categorize or make sense of aspects of the teacher-student relationship which is social interaction. The same can be said of values which are beliefs made up of affective and cognitive elements used to determine what is correct, desirable and proper in social situations and encounters (Farooq, 2014).

There are several research articles on social constructs such as teacher quality, effectiveness and characteristics. These reflect the views of teachers, teacher educators and educational researchers. For example, Taneri (2017) examination of instructors’ views on teachers’ affective characteristics; Sachs (2004) use of teachers to evaluate ‘teacher attributes’ that are relevant to successful teaching in Urban Schools and Hopkins and Stern (1996) research on quality teachers and quality schools in regards to policy and from an international perspective.

There are, however, a limited number that focuses on the specific social construct of teacher characteristics from the perspective of students—and particularly those from London England. In fact, contemporary writers such as Delaney (2007), Groves and Welsh (2010) and Klonari (2009) help to indicate the breadth of this issue and bring it into sharper focus by asserting that there are few studies that focus on students' perceptions of various aspects of regular schooling, irrespective of geographical locations. While there may be a limited number of studies with a focus on the views of London upper secondary school students and teacher characteristics they value, there are those which look at the issue generally. Therefore, this report commences with a review of the literature which suggests that teacher characteristics students' value can be grouped under two broad headings: teacher affective characteristics and teacher pedagogic characteristics. Next, the research which formed the basis of the paper is outlined and the findings and conclusions presented.

Literature review

There are several studies which examines students' perspective on various aspects of schooling. For example, Delaney (2007) study of how high school students perceive effective teachers; Cristian and Manea, (2014) study of students' opinions regarding the qualities and skills of teachers; Kalin, Peklaj, Pecjak, Levpuscek, and Valencic, (2017) study of classroom management; and McCabe (1995) study on how twelve high school 11th grade students examine their best teachers. As indicated in the foregoing discussion, a careful reading of these and other studies reveal teacher characteristics students' value can be grouped under two broad headings: teacher affective characteristics and teacher pedagogic characteristics.

Teacher affective characteristics.

The role of the 'affective' in teaching is well documented in the literature. Taneri (2017), researching teacher education programmes' ability to develop the 'affective' in student teachers, concludes that future teachers are expected to exhibit numerous affective competencies such as empathy, sensitivity and love. The writer further argues that teacher affective skills can improve or constrain student learning. For example, the teacher with a positive attitude or enthusiasm for learning can motivate student learning in the future. The fact that Taneri (2017) highlights the importance of the 'affective' to future teachers' development suggests that it is important for all teachers to have and continue to develop their affective skills. This is important because as will be shown later in this paper, students place a high value on teacher affective characteristics and are affected positively and sometimes negatively. There are three elements of teacher affective characteristics that are regularly highlighted in the literature, care, 'relatable-ness' and empathy.

Care

Van Manen (1995) made the point that the concept of teacher as pedagogue assumes that a caring interest in the growth and welfare of the students motivate their practice. I can infer from the study of Gao and Shum (2010) of teaching assistants in Hong Kong that a disposition to care generally, and care and nurture students specifically, should be an inherent characteristic of those who teach. For in addition to their roles of helping learner from South Asian background to acquire the Chinese language, teaching assistant also act as cultural mediators for those students who now lived in Hong Kong.

Care as a valued teacher affective characteristic is further highlighted by Klonari (2009), who states that students want teachers who care about them and their interests and Gunn and Fisk (2013), in their discussion of quality teaching include care for students as an aspect of teaching

excellence. Author (2017), in the study of teachers' personal attributes made the point that the absence of care in an individual may be an indication that teaching may not be a suitable career choice. Fink (2005), states that successful teachers are those who care, and their caring attitude is discernible. This means they care about what they teach, their students and about teaching and learning in general. Rogers (1983) continues this trend of thought, made the point that the development of students' creativity, problem-solving abilities and ability to learn the basics are linked to teachers' ability to care for, empathise and understand their students.

'Relatable-ness' and empathy

Closely related to 'relatable-ness' is empathy. The teacher's ability to put him or herself in the students' position and sensing what the student may be feeling indicate an ability to relate and empathize. Marina & Meriav (2016) concluded that these actions, which are indicative of empathetic teachers help to build relationships between teacher and students and to motivate students and Paul & Philip (2015), in their study of empathy and mentalization for teachers, remind readers that empathy is an important skill for educators who wish to create a positive learning environment with students and it is a standard professional responsibility of teachers in teacher standard frameworks worldwide. There are indications in the literature that the ability to relate and empathize is linked to teachers' personal traits. John and Srivastava (1999) in their study of personality traits include such words as: good-natured, warm, kind, considerate, cooperative, trustful and tolerant. Patrick (2011), examining students' evaluation in relation to the 'big five' personality traits, states that teachers with personal traits such as agreeableness which includes actions such as being considerate and the ability to empathize were rated higher by students in evaluation exercises.

Teacher pedagogic characteristics

Klonari (2009) states that students want teachers who know to teach. Pedagogic characteristics teacher may be required to display may include skills in presentation, knowledge and creative use of resources (Gunn and Fisk, 2013); respond to students' varied needs, questions and queries, ensure that what is being taught connects with students out of school life, discipline students, illustrate concepts, i.e., theories taught through examples (Cristian and Manea, 2014).

For the teacher as 'pedagogue', it seems much is required. For students at the elementary and secondary levels are of the opinion that the teacher should be able to 'make them' concentrate and pay attention all the time; lay down clear rules for behaviour and strives to make the atmosphere in the class as relaxing as possible (Kalin, Peklaj, Pecjak, Levpuscek and Valencic, 2017). An aspect of teacher pedagogic characteristic that is a 'thorny' subject in the literature is that of a sense of humour. Although this teacher pedagogical characteristic and its importance to student learning has been rated in a low position by (Cristian and Manea, 2014), it seems to be valued by students in some studies. Students in some studies commented that a good sense of humour was of importance to their learning and school experiences (Groves and Welsh, 2010), because its use in the classroom helps them pay more attention to what is being taught. Additionally, teachers with a sense of humour tend to set a more relaxed learning environment and make students interested in what is being taught.

While this literature review highlights potentially the teacher characteristics students' value, what was still unknown was what teacher characteristics do London upper secondary school students' value and highlight as important. Therefore, a study was launched.

Given the assertions in the foregoing discussion, the importance of this study rests in the fact that, firstly, it provides evidence to support the idea that students—through their experiences

of various teacher-student interactions—are able to identify teacher characteristics they value (Delaney, 2007). Secondly, and more importantly, it aids in filling a seeming literary shortage, thus giving London upper secondary students a ‘voice’ in the research literature about teacher characteristics they value.

The seeming shortage and muted ‘voice’ of these students in the research literature can be seen in the fact that a search of various databases (ERIC, JSTOR, EBSCO, British Educational Index (BEI) and the Australian Council for Education Research) using the following search terms—London, students, teacher characteristics, upper secondary school(s)—returned a total of 3 ‘hits’. None addressed student perspective on teacher characteristics they value but focus on disruptive behaviour and difficulties existing in city schools.

The Study

Participants selection and ethical issue

Using convenient or opportunity sampling 51 Grade 12 and 13 students ages 16-18 in a south-west London secondary school were interviewed face-to face. These students were in various classes that I taught; therefore, it was convenient for me to interview them and I took the opportunity to do so. Students in the upper grades were selected because they worked with several classroom teachers (Early years, primary/elementary, lower and upper secondary) for a few years. They were able to consider interview questions seriously and objectively and express their ideas about teacher characteristics they valued. Students were also told that their names and that of the school will not be mentioned in the project report. This was adhered to for, as will be shown later in this paper, they were identified by grade levels, for example, Grade 12¹, 13¹, 12,² etc.

Data collection and research question

Data was collected over a one-month period through individual face-to-face interviews conducted in the school where I worked as a supply or substitute teacher. I chose to interview students, for there was the need to get in-depth information. However, the main reason for employing this method is that it provides the opportunity to include follow-up as well as supplementary or probing questions thought of during the actual interview and used as necessary to illuminate or clarify, thus facilitating depth in responses, as suggested by Joffe (2001). Each interview were 5-10 minutes and focused on the students' experience of schools and teachers. During each session, I made field notes of all that was said, and clarification and follow-up questions were sought and asked during the actual interview. Examples of questions include such as, 'Please tell me what is meant when you say the teacher was human, showing understanding of situations?' And 'tell me what you mean when you said, the teacher was hard?'. Also, participants were contacted later to check the wordings of what I wrote and say if what was written faithfully represents their views (Elliott 1991). Only minor changes were necessary.

One open-ended interview question designed to elicit teacher characteristics valued by upper secondary school students in the school was used during each interview session. The students were asked the following: "Think about any teacher you like or admire (Early years, Primary and/or Secondary); what is it you like or admire about that teacher?"

Data Analysis

Powell and Renner (2003) support the use of pre-set categories when analyzing data. They also state that pre-set categories provide direction for what to look for in the data. Considering this, the data for the study were analyzed using the following broad categories taken from the literature, teacher affective characteristics and teacher pedagogic characteristics and

subcategories also identified in the literature. Through a process of careful analysis, which involved reading and rereading and using my own judgment and experience data were matched with the categories. For example, responses including words and phrases— indicating various personal traits— such as not condescending, not patronizing, relatable, understanding, soft-voice, patient, gentle, care, help, respect and empathy were placed under the category of ‘Teacher affective characteristics’. Responses which include phrases such as a passion for the subject and making the lesson fit the students’ interests were placed under the category of Teacher pedagogic characteristics. These categories are used — in the next section — to discuss the teacher characteristics students in this study valued.

Findings and discussion

An interesting thing to note is that one student in this study made the point that she never had a teacher she admired or liked. This was so because she normally just focused on her work at school and continues doing so. While this may be the case, the analysis of the data points to the fact that other students (n=50) valued teacher affective and pedagogic characteristics displayed in selected personal traits, pedagogic practices and the infusion of humour during lessons. As indicated in the foregoing discussion, the broad categories (affective and pedagogic characteristics) are used as headings to guide this section of the paper.

Teacher affective characteristics.

As highlighted in the foregoing review of the literature, the role of the ‘affective’ in teaching which includes such as care, ‘relatable-ness’ and empathy is well documented and is of extreme importance in the teaching-learning dynamics (Taneri, 2017). Its importance is also displayed in the finding of this study. In this study, students place a high value on teacher affective characteristics and is affected positively and sometimes negatively. The following

example vividly points to the fact that teachers underutilising skills associated with the affective can negatively impact students for life. A student responding to the interview question said:

Not being negative or angry: “I remember in grade 3—and I am now in grade 13—that a teacher stormed out of the classroom and shouted to us as she got her lunch kit from the area in which it was, ‘you are so stupid you can’t understand what I am teaching’, I will never forget that; I can still remember it now” (Grade 13², student).

It is interesting to note that this student remembered this event intensely and after a little over 10 years. What is telling and supports my conclusion on teachers’ use, non-use or void of affective skills and the potential to negatively affect students greatly, is the phrase ‘I will never forget that; I can still remember it now’. Additionally, what was evident was the sadness on the face of the student as she recounted this teacher-student interaction.

The affective characteristics students in this study value include ‘not being condescending or patronizing’, ‘treating a student like a person’, ‘relatable-ness’, ‘understanding’, ‘patience’, ‘gentleness’, ‘caring’, ‘helpfulness’, ‘being respectful and empathetic’. Here are examples of responses. ‘She focussed on students, cared and was willing to help. She is relatable, can relate to the students and was closer in age to the students’ (Grade 12¹). ‘Relatable. He was young and the first black teacher in my primary school. It is not that I could not relate to teachers of other gender and ethnicity, but he was patient too’ (Grade 13⁴). ‘He treated you like a friend so that when he disciplined, you can respect him. Rather than just being someone that just teaches you or gives you information’ (Grade 13²).

She was a person who is human, showing understanding of situations. For example, if a student genuinely left the homework at home she would say, “Please take it in tomorrow and do not forget it” and would not get angry with the student. She also believed in her students and this is shown in action and activities - ‘no lip service’ (Grade 12²).

‘He understands something I really like (music). Not patronizing...very understanding, and you could share problems with him’ (Grade 13³).

Further analysis of these responses reveals the affective characteristics can be summed up in the following words: care, 'relatable-ness' and empathy.

Care

In addition to the fact that care is explicitly highlighted in the above responses as a teacher affective characteristic, it is also implicit in all responses. This is so because a willingness to help students, treat them as humans and friends, not being condescending or patronizing requires a caring disposition by the teacher. This idea can be supported by the thoughts of Van Manen (1995) who made the point that the concept of teacher as pedagogue assumes that a caring interest in the growth and welfare of the students motivate their practice. Additionally, Gao and Shum (2010) made the point that a disposition to care generally, and care and nurture students specifically, should be an inherent characteristic of those who teach and Fink (2005), states that successful teachers are those who care and their caring attitude is discernible. This means they care about what they teach, their students and about teaching and learning in general. Rogers (1983) in discussing care, add the dimension of empathy when the writer states that the development of students' creativity, problem-solving abilities and ability to learn the basics are linked to teachers' ability to care for, empathise and understand their students.

'Relatable-ness' and empathy

The students in this study pointed out relatable-ness and empathy as teacher affective characteristics they value. Interestingly, they linked 'relatable-ness' to the teacher's age or youthfulness and to a lesser degree ethnicity. While the word is not used by students, a careful reading of their responses in the foregoing discussion will reveal that the word 'understand', referenced empathy. For example, the students state, based on the teachers' understanding, they

found it easy to share problems with him (Grade 13³) and the teacher showing understanding when a student genuinely forgets the homework at home (Grade 12²). It is safe to argue that it is the teacher's ability to put him or herself in the students' position and sensing what the student may be feeling that resulted in these actions. Marina & Meriav (2016) concluded that these kinds of actions which are indicative of empathetic teachers help to build relationships between teacher and students and to motivate students and Paul & Philip (2015) remind readers that empathy is an important skill for educators who wish to create a positive learning environment with students and it is a standard professional responsibility of teachers in teacher standard frameworks worldwide.

Students in this study also placed a high value on teacher affective characteristics displayed in a selected personal trait—primarily that of agreeableness. John and Srivastava (1999) in their study of personality traits define the broad area of agreeableness as including such words as: good-natured, warm, kind, considerate, cooperative, trustful and tolerant. In this study, agreeableness is characterised by a teacher with a soft-voice, gentle disposition, patience, high expectation of self and students, tolerance and helpfulness. Here are examples of responses which highlight these. 'The teacher was gentle in manner. She gave me the confidence to be able to ask questions' (Grade13¹). 'He had a high expectation of himself and others and was patient too' (Grade 12²). 'Soft voice - not shouting, she was like an angel' (Grade 13²).

The teacher personality trait students in this study highlight are congruent with the literature (Patrick, 2011 and Hussain and Hussain, 2017). This quotation from Grade 12⁵ helps to support this inference. Here the students highlight the helpfulness of the teacher.

She is supportive and was always there to help and to listen to me. She helped me when I was struggling with my work, she gave me extra lessons and when I got into trouble, she was there to help me (Grade 12⁵).

The analysis of the data also points to the fact that students in this study valued teacher pedagogic characteristics displayed in selected pedagogic practices and the infusion of humour during lessons.

Teacher pedagogic characteristics

It should be unsurprising that the idea of pedagogy surfaced in the discussion of teacher characteristics. Additionally, the findings of this study complement the literature. For example, Klonari (2009) states that students want teachers who know to teach. The analysis of the data reveals the following pedagogic characteristics of teachers that students valued: teacher articulateness, teaching that connects with their out-of-school life and takes their perspective in mind. ‘The teacher was articulate (spoke clearly using simple words), she spoke well and was engaging’ (Grade 13¹). ‘Talks about non-academic things that relate to students out of school life. Give an opportunity to explore other areas apart from what is being taught in the lesson’ (Grade 12²). ‘Takes the students’ perspective in mind when teaching. Make the lesson fit the interests and perspective of the student (Grade 12²). Passion: ‘Passionate about teaching. This is displayed in being engaging and in the person’s actions’ (Grade 12²). Discipline:

She was hard (strong but caring) - she wants us to learn. When it is time to work—do your work when it is time to talk—let’s talk or play and have fun. She was able to compartmentalize things (Grade 13²).

Professional: ‘She did not cross the student-teacher relationship and made sure it stayed professional and did not get personal (Grade 13²). Teaching material free of errors: ‘Make their own power-point slides, sometimes there are errors on the ones they may get elsewhere, and this is not picked up before being used in the classroom’ (Grade 12²).

Firstly, while a seasoned teacher in action makes teaching seem effortless and seamless, we are reminded of its complexity by a careful reading of the pedagogical characteristics

highlighted by students here. This complexity can be seen in the fact that during a single teaching episode teachers may be required to, and are able to display: passion for a subject reflected in, for example, skills in presentation, knowledge and creative use of resources (Gunn and Fisk, 2013), respond to students' varied needs, questions and queries, ensure that what is being taught connects with students out of school life, discipline students, illustrate concepts, i.e., theories taught through examples (Cristian and Manea, 2014) and, above all, remain professional. Secondly, the literature is not silent regarding the complexity of teaching for a search of the phrase 'teaching complexity' on the ERIC database returned a total of 5,388.

Interestingly, of all the pedagogic characteristics highlighted here, the value placed by students on 'error-free' teaching material seems to be unique. This is so because it is seldom, if at all, mentioned in the literature. When the idea of error-free teaching is mentioned, it is usually discussed in the context of EFL and correcting students' error (Lessard-Clouston, 2017), the use of computer software in error correction (Chacón-Beltrán, 2017) and error in relation to students' work, especially in mathematics.

Finally, for the teacher as 'pedagogue', it seems much is required. For students at the elementary and secondary levels are of the opinion that the teacher should be able to 'make them' concentrate and pay attention all the time (Kalin, Peklaj, Pecjak, Levpuscek and Valencic, 2017). These and other student expectations add to the complexity of teaching.

Humour

Students' responses highlight two things: one, humour was used by teachers and valued by students and, two, it was used by both male and female teachers. Students said, 'He made the lesson fun, not boring, he used jokes in class' (Grade 12¹). 'Light-hearted not condescending' (Grade 13²). 'She was humorous. She was very jovial, and she made the lessons fun and

interesting. But she was also serious about you doing the work; this teacher was young and funny' (Grade 13⁴).

Although this teacher characteristic and its importance to student learning has been rated in a low position by (Cristian and Manea, 2014), it seems to be valued by students in this study. Students in some studies commented that a good sense of humour was of importance to their learning and school experiences (Groves and Welsh, 2010), because its use in the classroom helps them pay more attention to what is being taught. Additionally, teachers with a sense of humour tend to set a more relaxed learning environment and makes students interested in what is being taught.

Conclusion

Firstly, the study reinforced the idea that London, upper secondary students do hold views about teacher characteristics they value and, when given the opportunity, they can and do express their opinions clearly. This suggests that their 'voice' should be included (as appropriate) in any discourse regarding teaching and learning. These students value teacher affective and pedagogic characteristics. These include teachers being caring, 'relatable' and empathic. Possessing personal traits (agreeableness—characterized by soft-voice, gentle disposition, patience, high expectation of self and students and helpfulness), pedagogic practices (articulateness, teaching that connects with their out-of-school life and takes their perspective in mind; passion; discipline; professionalism and teaching material free of errors) and the infusion of humour during lessons.

Secondly, the students' perceptions of teacher characteristics appear to be congruent with that which exists in the literature. Noticeably, is the fact that they highlight a sense of humour as

important. This teacher characteristic and its usefulness in the teaching learning dynamics continues to be problematic for researchers and there seems to be no consensus in the literature.

Finally, beginning teachers or newly qualified teachers (NQTs) as well as seasoned teachers should nurture and utilise their affective characteristics. This is so because, as shown in this study, not doing so can result in students being negatively impacted long-term.

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