The ideal teacher. Theoretical and investigative approach

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Abstract

Any action to improve education is doomed to fail if the attributes of the teacher's own role are omitted - that of educating a person with which he interacts constantly. 77 students from the Faculty of Letters and the Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science answer with an essay to the question "What are the characteristics of the ideal teacher?" Correlation of responses has allowed a description of an ideal teacher profile that emphasizes relational and communicational competences as the most important ones.

Keywords: teacher's personality; attitudes; interpersonal relationships; teaching behavior; learning environment

1. Teacher’s Recruitment - Then and Now

The teacher has a pivotal role in the process of education. Among the features of this profession, Poenaru (1997, p. 10) stresses that its representatives "were trained in a socio-school environment where they return to train others". Theoretically and practically, no teacher will become totally ideal. That correlation would mean that the teacher has achieved such a level of perfection that she or he no longer requires further effort toward improvement. Currently, there is no question of "finding" the ideal teacher because the individuals today are those who choose the profession, and no longer are they chosen by the profession. When teaching practice is seen as a profession regulated and paid accordingly to the law, the teacher forgets the value of personal relationship that is established between him and the student. Steiner (2005, p. 19) in Lessons of the Masters asks rhetorically: "how to place the vocation on the payroll?" In their study, Harris and Sass (2009) distinguish three categories of teachers a) those that have innate talent, b) those who prove the vocation, but do not have the required professional skills and c) those that are not

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suitable for this role, but practice it for various reasons. In everyday practice, these realities mark the start of many cognitive, affective and behavioral differences among teachers with impact on students’ development and learning. The relationships between teacher and students can adjust the students experience in the classroom, they stabilize the emotional experience of the students, serve as a safety source that support the knowledge and learning and provide interactions that help develop student self-regulation (Pianta, 1997, p. 9). The educator's action becomes a way of being for him and for others, as most students only learn from the teacher whom they have an intellectual and emotional affinity with ("I learn this subject because I like the teacher" or vice versa). The assessment of teachers should start from qualities in action, valued in the school work, qualities that are best observed by students who can provide useful feedback for teachers’ work. The teachers' skills only represent a potential for behavior, and not the behavior itself, there are a number of other circumstances that determine whether these features become observed behavior or not. It is essential that teaching is adapted to the potential and learning needs of the students, before establishing other criteria for assessing educational practice, since, as Senge et al. (2000, p. 129) note "many children struggle in schools not because they are "disabled", but because the way they are being taught is incompatible with the way they learn". The teacher's personality and behavior should be reported to student interest, as it is evident that some teachers are able to determine the motivation of some students, while others having the same knowledge and skills, can’t do that.

2. The ideal teacher from students’ perspective

2.1. Purpose and sample

The case study was conducted on a group of 77 students from two faculties of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi. The reason for this approach derived from the need to obtain additional clues on what students meant with “ideal teacher”. For the research the students received the task to write an essay about “The characteristics of an ideal teacher” during the seminar on "Educational Communication. The distribution of subject was almost equal – 36 students from the Faculty of Letters and 41 students from the Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science (98% females, age between 20 to 22, terminal year).

2.2. Methodology

The information related to characteristics of teachers was collected from students’ essays and then correlated with more general descriptive categories that we will present above. Frequencies for each section were calculated for the entire group using the necessary functions (without data filtering on genre or specialization). We will develop only the first five qualities mentioned by the majority of the students.

Table 1. The hierarchy of ideal teacher features from students’ perspective (N=77)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Ideal teacher features</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Human relations skills</td>
<td>Psycho-social</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71, 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Fair assessment</td>
<td>Psycho-pedagogical</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>66, 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Knowledge of the subject</td>
<td>Cognitive and informational</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58, 44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Facilitator of students' intellectual development</td>
<td>Psycho-pedagogical</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55, 84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td>Moral and psychological</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45, 45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Dynamic lecturer</td>
<td>Psycho-pedagogical</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37, 66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Availability / good listener</td>
<td>Psycho-social</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35, 06%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3. Results

The data exemplifies that our respondents appreciate to a teacher as the most important quality the human relations skills (71, 42%). Communication and human relation skills are vital factors that enhance the teaching and learning process. Classical person-centered education embraces flexibility in teaching methods; transparent relation with students. In order for the teacher to perform his organizer’s mission and the decision maker’s role in establishing the strategies of education, he needs to know the student’s psychology and to demonstrate the ability to transpose in the student’s way of being, feeling and acting.

E.g. “...a sympathetic man, a second parent, who communicates with his students, to be a relationship based on trust and genuine interest...” (S. A., fem., Faculty of Letters); “...a calm man, patient, temperate, gentle, who knows how to approach students, turning them into his own children...” (N. E., fem., Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science).

The second feature that appears in our research to be more important is the fair assessment (66, 23%). The evaluation of student performance must be objective, even if teachers are not scoring machines. An ideal teacher will make these measurements based on professional assumptions and values. Basic and universal assessment principles can be utilized to increase student learning and teacher effectiveness, without stereotypes.

E.g. “...a correct attitude towards the act of evaluation, it is absolutely necessary to avoid distractions: halo, Pygmalion, the effect of contrast, the effect of order, logic error...” (S. L., fem., Faculty of Letters); “...above all is very fair, he sees all students as one, consider them equal...” (M. L., masc., Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science).

Knowledge of the subject (58, 44%) it is ranked the 3rd. From students’ perspective the ideal teacher demonstrate expertise in the subject he is teaching and spends a lot of time trying to gain new knowledge. This feature equally highlights the self-knowledge, the self introspection and the tendency of continuous advancing personally and professionally in terms of competence.

Ex. “...being a teacher it means you take a risk, to teach others how to learn is a work never completed that involve many hours of study; specialized training of high quality is required...” (M.G., fem., Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science).

The fourth factor, in order of students’ preference – facilitator of students' intellectual development (55, 84%) - indicates the need for the teacher not only to know, but to know how to transfer his knowledge, thus answering the main educational purpose of stimulating and encouraging intellectual development. More than a quality, this factor is designed as a duty and a responsibility, inherent in the educational act. The teacher is one who sets the appropriate framework, who presents the material in an enthusiastic manner and transfers to their students the desire to learn more on their own. Many decisions are taken spontaneously; there are responses to the class action as a whole and to students as individuals, so it is necessary to continuously adapt the behavior to stimulus (class / students) to promote students' learning.

E.g. “...the first feature that I claim is to fulfill his duty properly, to teach the lesson comprehensible to all, to return whenever he has the impression that something has not been understood...” (S.A., fem.,
Faculty of Letters): “… makes the class interesting by doing something other than lecturing all the time…” (S.L., fem., Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science).

The last among the five qualities mentioned is respectful (45, 45%) that is expressed not only during discussions which the teacher initiates with students, but also in the tone that he uses, that kindness felt and the modesty in communication. This indicates that relations developed between the teacher and students require respect for diversity and otherness necessarily manifested in the opinions, traditions, feelings and attitudes, in essence the identity of the other.

E.g. “…has respect for the students; treats them maturely and waits until he knows the character of the student, understands that neither we nor they, are perfect…” (F.B., fem., Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science).

3. Discussions

Students have preferences for specific teacher’ characteristics because some of them lead to results that students desire. Throughout school life, a student has dozens of teachers and each student will have his “ideal” type of teacher, as each teacher will have a preferred “ideal” type of student. This study was conducted to describe the desirable characteristic of an ideal teacher in terms of students’ perceptions. The results prioritize relational competencies of an ideal teacher. The relevance of a good communication between teachers and students is not new. Rogers (2006) reported in his research that many students indicated that it was “the teacher job to control the class and make them behave”. He concluded that good interactions with teachers will make students more motivated and confident. Equally, one important finding is revealed by Porter (cited by Kennedy, 1997, p. 6) who mentions “that teachers teach most content only for exposure, not for understanding; their aim is not to assure that students really understand the concepts they present, but rather only that they have been exposed to them”. Furthermore, in his research Willingham (2009) believes that a good teacher should pay careful attention to what an assignment will make students think about (not what you hope they will think about), because that is what they will remember. He suggests that teacher’ personality (funny, good listener, empathetic etc.) is only one factor of a good teaching. The other property of being a good teacher comes from organizing the ideas in a lesson plan in a coherent way so that students will understand and remember.

3. Conclusions

Teachers are considered “ideal” for different reasons. First of all, they work in various ways with different kinds of requirements and standards for quality. Student’ perceptions play a crucial role in developing conceptual models of great teaching. We don’t have access to all the information that we want for each dimension of teacher evaluation, but beyond the personal barriers that occur, what is valid and appropriate for all direct beneficiaries remains essential. This study identifies precisely those core features agreed by the most subjects and we appreciate that the outcomes of this study can support future research about the relevant competencies required in teaching.
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