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Title:

Teacher and student voices: Perspectives from ‘inspiring’ classrooms

Abstract:

This paper presents selected findings from a small-scale mixed methods study of ‘inspiring’ teaching, commissioned and funded by CfBT. The overall aims of the study were to explore what inspiring teachers say about their practice, what they do in their classrooms, and the views of their students. The present paper focuses specifically on teacher and student voices in the project, with the aim of understanding how the perspectives and understandings of these groups align, what they prioritize about teachers and lessons, and in what ways their opinions and experiences might differ with respect to their classroom relationships, activities and interactions.

Sources of data relevant to teachers’ voices include face-to-face individual teacher interviews and an exercise in which teachers ranked 17 teacher attributes in perceived order of importance. Students’ views were accessed through questionnaire surveys with a combination of Likert-scale items and one open response question. The sample included 17 teachers from English primary and secondary schools. 203 students, from classes corresponding to 11 of the teachers, were surveyed.

Findings showed that both teachers and students prioritized positive relationships and enthusiasm or enjoyment as key teacher and lesson characteristics; this was supported by both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data elaborated upon some more specific relationship dynamics and lesson activities connected to these dominant themes.

These results contribute to a previously unclear definition of 'inspirational' teaching, and also have the potential to guide practice and development for teachers.

Extended Summary:

Aims:

The overall study was designed to address three main research questions (Sammons et al., 2014):

- 1) What do inspiring teachers say about their practice?
- 2) What do inspiring teachers do in their classrooms?
- 3) What are their students' views and experiences?

This paper in particular focuses on evidence relevant to teacher and student perspectives, and examines the alignment of these participants' views.

Background

The design for the study, modeled on previous mixed methods research (Day et al., 2007; Kington et al., 2014), is inherently connected to the theoretical perspective, linking research questions to methodological approach. The theoretical perspective additionally drew on the educational effectiveness and teacher effectiveness knowledge bases (e.g. Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008).

There is precedent for inclusion and integrated analysis of teacher and student perspectives in empirical research. Previous studies have compared, contrasted or related teachers' and students' perspectives relevant to a wide variety of educational topics (e.g. Beyhan, 2013; Fisher & Larkin, 2008; Miller & McKenna, 2011; See & Arthur, 2011; Soutter, O'Steen, & Gilmore, 2012).

Methodology/methods:

The sample for the present study included 17 primary and secondary teachers in 9 schools. Teachers were selected for in-depth case studies after being nominated as 'inspirational' by their head teachers.

Teachers' perspectives were accessed through semi-structured interviews and a ranking task requiring teachers to rate the relative importance of various teacher attributes.

To investigate student perspectives, researchers administered a questionnaire survey with Likert-scale items in four sections ('My school', 'My teacher', 'My classroom', and 'About you in this class') and one optional open-ended question. 203 total students were surveyed in 11 classes.

Participation was strictly voluntary, and researchers made every effort to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings:

Teacher interviews

Enthusiasm for teaching and positive relationships with students emerged as the two most commonly mentioned characteristics associated with inspirational teaching. Teachers related enthusiasm for teaching to transmitting enjoyment and excitement to students, and to sustaining and improving teachers' own practice. Positive relationships were discussed largely in terms of knowing students as individuals and knowing their learning needs.

Teacher ranking sheets

Ranking sheet results from teachers showed a similar emphasis; 11 of the 17 teachers ranked "Enthusiasm for teaching" in their top three teacher attribute selections, and 10 ranked "Positive relationships with children" within their top 3 choices.

Pupil surveys (quantitative items)

Descriptive analysis showed that students' responses were positively skewed in all four thematic sections of the survey. Hedge's g effect size was used to measure differences between groups. Girls' responses were slightly more positive than boys' ($g < 0.6$ for each section), and primary students responded more positively than secondary, especially in the 'My school' section ($g > 0.8$).

Overall, 'high' (closer to the most positive score of 1) means in the 'My school' section (1.83-1.93).indicated students' feelings of safety, security and belonging. Even stronger positive responses (means 1.28-1.63) in the 'My teacher' section indicated that students felt teachers had high expectations for them and enthusiasm for teaching.

Responses in the 'My classroom' section were also positive, although less so for items relating to teacher feedback and classroom resources. Response means in the 'About you in this class' section indicated that students generally had positive attitudes toward learning and felt motivated and confident.

Pupil surveys (open-response)

Approximately 80% of surveyed students answered the optional open-response item, which asked what they thought made a good lesson, and things they enjoyed that supported their learning.

Lesson activities formed a prominent theme in the students' responses, most commonly connected to group work, task or group variety, and specific resources. Enjoyment, clarity, interaction, individual support, questioning and feedback also emerged as recurring themes.

"Fun" was mentioned frequently as a lesson descriptor, and "friendly", "nice", and "kind" were common adjectives describing teachers. Where teacher-student relationships were discussed, students mentioned teacher qualities and behaviours (humour, kindness, mutual respect, knowledge of students' targets and progress, and listening to students).

Discussion:

There was great similarity between the two groups in their emphasis on positive teacher-student relationships and reference to enthusiasm/enjoyment as important features of teachers and lessons. Students, however, were more likely than teachers to mention specific lesson activities.

Quantitative findings reinforced themes from qualitative data, but elaborated on other aspects of lessons, teachers and participation in the classroom experience that were not discussed spontaneously by participants.

Despite limitations to interpretation due to small sample size, using mixed methods allowed for stronger conclusions and a more comprehensive contribution to previously ill-defined notions of 'inspirational' teaching, than could have been achieved with quantitative or qualitative approaches alone.

Theoretical and educational significance:

The current study makes a key contribution by combining evidence from multiple perspectives (teachers' and students') and multiple approaches (qualitative and quantitative), facilitating a richer interpretation of 'inspirational' practice.

From a practical perspective, these findings have the potential to help teachers develop their classroom practice and reflect on the needs and preferences of their students.

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