TEACHERS' TEACHING AND TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract
This paper presents findings from a cross-sectional qualitative case study conducted at a public junior high school in Banda Aceh, focusing on students' views of their teachers' teaching practice and teacher-students relationships. In general, students' views about the phenomenon under investigation were in deficit terms. These included students' deficit views of teachers' teaching practice and commitment, and interaction with students at the school affecting the learning of the young people at school. Research in the field provides evidences that quality teachers' teaching and positive teacher-students relationships are among important factors for students' social, emotional, and academic achievement.

Keywords: *Students' views, teachers' teaching, teacher-student relationship.*

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that how students learn very much depends on their teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Meanwhile, what teachers do in classrooms depends upon their knowledge of pedagogy, acquired primarily through their practical experience in the classroom (Bassey, 1999). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) claim:

> ...competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioural guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of prosocial behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg p. 492).

According to Shulman (2006), "effective teaching deals with creating classrooms as places with a minimum of disruption and distraction where learners can attend to instructional tasks, orient themselves toward learning and receive a fair and adequate opportunity to learn" (p. 65). In other words, effective teaching involves teachers' ability to create classroom environments that encourage an effective learning atmosphere (Stoll, 1992). Learning becomes more enjoyable when students perceive their classroom and its environment as encouraging their participation in the process of that learning (Ames & Archer, 1988). This paper presents findings from a study conducted in 2010 in one public junior high school severely affected by the tsunami in Banda Aceh about students' views of teachers' teaching practice and teacher-student relationships at the school.

METHODS

Using case study as the method of inquiry, this cross-sectional qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with 10 students who were purposively selected, and supported by observations in the study school to gain insights into students' views about their teachers.

Collected data were coded, conceptualised, and then organised in the form of issues to report (Douglas, 2003). I used a constant comparison method (Bowen, 2008; Lindlof, 1995) with the aim to look for commonalities and differences on the central issue to report as findings (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). I used extensive quotes from participants to fully represent their perceptions (Bailey & Jackson, 2003).

FINDINGS

Students' comments about their teachers were generally in negative terms. These included students' deficit views of teachers' teaching practice and commitment, and interaction with students at the school affecting the learning of the young people at school.

Teacher Teaching Practice

In interviews with students based on observational data, I asked their opinions about the cause of students' lack of engagement with the lessons in classrooms. The common responses included that the teachers' teaching was not interesting and engaging as teachers generally only wrote the lesson for them to copy or simply lectured the lesson and the way they taught was difficult to understand. In addition, some students mentioned that many teachers arrived at the class late and often left the class unattended during the lesson allowing students to engage in off-task activities including misbehaving which in the end put them in troubles. One student critically commented, "They asked students to write from the textbooks and then they left the class. They just sit over there. ... How can we not make noise when there is no teacher in class? If they are in the class, it is impossible to be noisy or go in and out of the classroom". When I challenged one student in the interview as to whether teachers in the school had put every effort to teach well so students could learn well, the student believed that "Teachers effort in teaching was yet to be maximal".

In the interview, I also intended to find out what students expect from their teacher in terms of teaching so that they could learn better. Although students found it difficult to articulate, they in general expected teachers to deliver their lessons in a way that was easy for students to understand, teach in a fun way with some humour so students would not be bored or explain the lesson first to students until they understand it and be willing to repeat if students do not understand. Indeed, students mentioned some teachers whom they liked because their teaching was seen as interesting and easy to understand. One particular student mentioned group work or discussion as useful and helpful to help him learn better at school. The student noted that, "Group work gives me the opportunity to discuss the lesson that I do not understand with other students who understand it".

Teachers' Interaction with Students

In general, students' views of teachers' interaction with students were also in deficit terms. Some students perceived their teachers as not caring and not understanding of their problems. In this sense, two students who were particularly critical commented that teachers tended to reprimand students if they happened to make mistakes and exaggerated the problems including calling for parents to come to school without considering that parents might not be available when they wanted them to come to school. This situation had affected the students' participation and engagement with school and learning. One of the students commented:

If we made a little mistake, they would taunt us with vile language, for example when we arrived late to school. Then it is not comfortable anymore. They would say nasty things. So we lose our mood and were unmotivated after that.

About a particular teacher, the other student said:

Like when I was in the first and second year. There was one particular teacher that I did not like. I did not attend the class if the teacher was there. I waited until the teacher finished the

lesson, and then I would enter the class. The teacher was very cruel forcing students to buy textbooks, oppressing students, and speaking dirty language.

In addition, some students in the interviews expressed their disappointment as teachers seemed to give priority to clever students over the not-clever ones. As when I asked one male student what he did not like about school, he said: "The teachers…because they do not care about students…They only care about students who are clever. Those who are not clever are ignored. Another male student who sat at the back row in his class commented:

That (subject) teacher never asks me whether I have understood the lesson or not. But she asks other students…other teachers are also the same. They do not ask me…They only ask those who sit in the front row.

The student criticised teachers who just sat on their desk during the lesson without controlling the class to make sure that all students were doing the set tasks. He said:

Teachers should not just sit on their desk. They should come to the back rows of the class to monitor whether or not students at the back rows are doing the tasks…If they do not do that, students at the back rows simply do not do their task…For example I do not feel like to learn today because I know teachers will not even bother to come to the back row. Why should I bother to learn?

When asked about their perception of a 'good teacher', understanding and care were the two most common attributes that students wanted the teachers to have to be good teachers. In addition, there was a female student who quietly took a photo of me when I was talking to a student in the school yard during the lesson break. When I asked her why she photographed me, she said, "I want teachers to be like you who come to students and talk to them". According to her, rarely did teachers approach students for a conversation outside the classroom. This was confirmed by another student in the interview as he asserted: "I just feel hesitant towards teachers. If they do not begin a conversation then I would not start. If they ask me about something then I would talk to them. But rarely do teachers begin a conversation."

Discussion

Research emphasises the importance of teacher-student relationships for a successful educational experience. In this sense, teaching and learning which involve instructional and interactional processes between and among students and teachers are among important factors for students' social, emotional, and academic achievement (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Gnetz, 2007, p. 478). On this note, Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer(2004) assert:

Teaching is an intensely psychological process and that teachers' ability to maintain productive classroom environments, motivate students, and make decisions depends on personal qualities and ability to create personal relationships with students (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, p. 322).

Baker (2006, p. 212) argues that a positive teacher-child relationship is associated with a range of positive school outcomes as it provides children with the emotional security necessary to fully engage in their learning activities and scaffold the development of key social, behavioural, and self-regulatory competencies needed in the school environment and school success. In contrast, according to Baker (2006), negative relationships including conflict between teachers and students, a low degree of warmth and trust are positively associated with poor academic and social behaviour concurrently. Birch and Ladd (1997, 1998) summarise three distinct aspects of teacher-student relationships: (1) closeness that encompasses the degree of warmth and open communication that can function as a support for young people's involvement and engagement in school, (2) dependency, which has negative connotations, refers to students' overreliance on teachers in which students become tentative in their explorations of school environment and social relationships, and (3) conflict, which as a stressor, can impair students' successful adjustment, academic performance

and achievement because conflict between teacher and student can foster feelings of anger, anxiety, and alienations in students, and thus they withdraw from the school arena.

It is important to keep in mind that any issue that arises as well as its solutions within the school including in the context of students' school experience are not merely about individual students (Murray-Harvey, 2010, p. 112). An important message for schools/teachers is to not easily blame students alone along with their families as a sole source of problems arisen at school rather to view students' problems including in their adjustment and achievement as a systemic and inter-relationship that involve teachers, peers, and families (Murray-Harvey, 2010, p. 112). Focusing on relationships that build social-emotional competence is beneficial for both young people's lives and academic outcomes since teachers' "explicit and tacit judgments" toward students affect students' feelings about their school, academic motivation and achievement (Murray-Harvey, 2010, p. 105). With this in mind, it is important that teachers pay attention to the importance of relationships with students, particularly in 'instructional' related relationships as the ways teachers manage their classrooms, interact with students including modelling behaviours and providing feedback to students and fostering effective learning are influenced by their relationships (Murray-Harvey, 2010). Data from students in the study clearly showed that positive student-teacher relationships were important for better teaching and learning at the school as indicated by students' expectations of caring teachers while teachers expected young people to show respect to them. The interactions between students and teachers in this sense is what Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory calls a "bi-directional influence" (Paquette & Ryan, 2001) in which students affect the belief and behaviour of teachers while teachers also influence the behaviour and belief of their students.

CONCLUSION

Teachers had a role to provide young people with opportunities to thrive through their learning experience that happened in school (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010). As teachers may respond to students' discipline and misbehaviour in inappropriate ways such as becoming upset, angry, reprimanding, or using physical punishment or coercion or even ignoring the students and their problems, students perceive their teachers as not caring and not understanding their circumstance leading to poor teacher-student relationships at school. Having quality teachers' teaching practice and positive teacher-student relationship are critical for a successful educational experience for young people.

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