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A Qualitative Study of Excellent Teachers' Beliefs of Good Teacher

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Abstract: The number of students enrolling at International schools in Malaysia is increasing each year. A number of parents are paying substantial amount of money in order to seek for a quality education for their children. However, the quality of a teacher is not always easy to measure, particularly the personality, attitudes and beliefs of a teacher. There have been numerical quantitative researches on the quality of a teacher but it is argued that a qualitative approach would add to existing knowledge by providing deeper insights and from a different point of views. The purpose of the present study was to explore excellent teachers' views of a good teacher through individual in-depth interviews. Six excellent teachers from different schools were selected for this study. Various themes emerged from the interviews, some of which have not yet been uncovered in past research investigating quality teacher. The findings provide evidence that teacher's personality, student-centred approach, nurturing students, moral and social awareness, level of professionalism and effective management skills are the elements leading to the establishment of a good teacher. This study also provides support for the employment of qualitative methods in the study of a good teacher.

Keywords: Good teacher: Views: Characteristics: Quality education.

1. Introduction

There has been an increase in the enrolment of students in the international schools and an increasing number of parents are sending their children to the national-type schools in Malaysia. Could it be due to the quality of the teachers? Can one say that great teacher is paralleled to great teaching? According to Coe *et al.* (2014), great teaching could only happen with the support of a good teacher or vice versa. However, there is no absolute definition of a good teacher because of the transient nature of teaching and the complexity of a teacher's role. Furthermore, what constitutes of a good teacher varies for different teacher's age group at different era and from different context (Ko *et al.*, 2013).

Previous studies (Bullock, 2015; Dunkin, 2002; Liakopoulou, 2011; Oruc, 2006) have identified prevalent qualities of a good teacher and bringing them together provides a richer information and wider representation of the concepts of a good teacher. Bullock (2015) combined a list of characteristics to describe a good teacher namely personality, behaviour, abilities and relationships. A good teacher is an effective and a competent educator that lead to better student outcomes, as well as contributing positively to the culture of a school. Likewise, Liakopoulou (2011) suggested that a good teacher should have a wide range of qualities. They were personality traits, attitudes and beliefs, pedagogical skills and knowledge.

Similarly, Stronge (2007) discussed on the positive qualities of effective teachers. He listed seven specific characteristics of teacher responsibilities and behaviours that contribute directly to being a good teacher such as teacher as a person, classroom management and organization, organising and orienting for instruction, implementing instruction, monitoring student progress and potential and professionalism. It is important to know how teachers view at their own practice and as a professional. The qualities of a teacher affect learners' learning experiences and teachers' didactic, pedagogical skills and also pedagogical knowledge. The qualities of a good teacher have important implications both to teacher education and learners' educational experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate teacher beliefs regarding the qualities of a good teacher.

2. Methodology

2.1. Respondents

The purpose of the study is to understand teachers' beliefs on the quality of a good teacher. Therefore the contributions of working teachers is of primary importance "as they have the experience gained from actual practice and are therefore in a position to evaluate their needs in terms of the qualification that can facilitate their work and guarantee their effectiveness" (Liakopoulou, 2011). Data was collected primarily through interviews with six of the excellent teachers in various fields of study. All the respondents are secondary school teachers who have had experiences teaching in schools ranging from urban to rural. The selection of respondents for this study was based on their academic qualifications and years of experience in the teaching profession. Excellent teachers were awarded by the Ministry of Education for their outstanding and impressive in the subjects they teach or in their specialisation fields. The implementation of the excellent teacher concept is aimed at making the selected teachers role models to inspire and motivate other teachers to strive to raise the quality of teaching and learning in their respective schools. Thus, these teachers were able to extensively describe their opinions and beliefs, as their views were substantiated by their own experience and qualifications.

2.2. Collection and Analysis of Data

One-to-one interview sessions were carried out with the permission of each interviewee. A semi-structured interview consisting of 12 open-ended questions was constructed. Interviewees were allowed to freely and extensively discuss their beliefs regarding qualities of a good teacher, while also allowing the interviewer to prompt interviewees for more comprehensive and relevant input. The interview sessions were held in the comfort of each respondent's home. Each interview session lasted for an hour and was audio-taped with the interviewees' consent. Respondents were first asked about their general views regarding the qualities of a good teacher. After that, they were asked about their beliefs more specifically in terms of a good teacher's knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as personality traits. Each audio-taped interview was transcribed immediately upon completion.

After transcription, the relevant data is highlighted and organised into sections for easier retrieval. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym from T1 to T6. Data was analysed inductively in this study, whereby codes and themes related to the study were developed based on the interview transcription and document analysis. The process of open coding was used whereby the interview audio-recordings and transcripts were examined, relevant sections of text units were extracted and different codes were assigned to each of those text units. Codes, which were developed based on emerging patterns in the data were later listed in a separate document chronologically. Finally, a list of recurrent themes and their respective subthemes was developed based on the categories of codes listed. For purposes of addressing validity and reliability issues, data triangulation was carried out by cross-checking the data analysis from the interviews with the previously analysed data from the document analysis. The different interviewees' data was also compared and tabulated to identify the qualities of a good teacher that seemed most important to teachers.

An inter-rater reliability test was done to ensure the reliability of data analysis in this qualitative data analysis. Two raters were selected from among teachers in a secondary school and were given a list of the data samples and a list of the emergent themes generated from the data analysis. They were asked to match the themes to the data samples. Any discrepancies were resolved by discussion. This was done as a verification process which is necessary as some amount of subjectivity may be unavoidable in coding transcripts. For both Rater 1 and Rater 2, the percentage of agreement is more than 75% indicating a high inter-rater reliability. This means that the researcher has matched the data samples to the themes is agreed upon by the two raters. This indicates the data collected was reliable, acceptable with low subjectivity.

3. Findings

Education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction especially school and university. Teacher plays an important role in the process of learning. Hence, this study investigates teacher beliefs of a good teacher. Hence the significance of this study lies in its findings which are a general framework of qualities that describe a good teacher based on teachers' view. The findings of this study are important as it provides a set of criteria for teachers to work towards. In addition, the findings also serve as a reference point or benchmark for teachers to compare and assess their performance as teachers. Different themes were emerged based on the data analysis conducted from the 6 respondents. The themes are personality, student-centred approach, nurturing students, moral and social awareness, level of professionalism and effective management skills.

3.1. Personality

All the respondents acknowledged that teacher's personality was more important than knowledge. Positive personality traits contribute positively to the quality of a good teacher. As the saying goes, "First impression counts" rings loudly in the context of discussion. The first impression that learners have on a teacher counts because it gives them a sense of security which could help them to settle down and ready to learn in any learning context. Teachers' attitudes on teaching and learning and their roles affect the degree of commitment to their duties, the way they teach and the way they treat students. Therefore positive attitudes of teachers contribute toward the quality of a good teacher. A few teachers described their views regarding great personality:

'Good' teachers were those who deliberately modelled a form of positive behaviour which students would be encouraged consciously or unconsciously to emulate. (T1)

... It should be like... the skill to be able to adapt at that moment to enthuse and to excite the students, we have to be actors la, in a way, in the classroom. (T5)

A teacher who err... has bad err... you know, bad attitude, bad behaviour and all that will somehow err... influence some student. (T6)

A good teacher has a personality that promotes positive learning environment. They have a warm and approachable personality that attracts learners and thus affecting their mood to learn. A good teacher has a positive attitude towards their work. This can be seen in their commitment to their roles and responsibilities to the learners as well as to the educational community. Their love for teaching and their learners are the motivating factor for them to work hard and willing to sacrifice their time and willing to walk the extra mile for learners' sake.

3.2. Student-centred Approach

A good teacher is one who places the students in the centre of the learning process. The student-centred approach emphasises the development of students' capacity and capability by cultivating individual differences (Seng, 2014). There are many examples of individual differences among students that can be cultivated in this approach. Firstly, different learning styles among students have to be cultivated as a classroom can consist of visual learners, auditory learners and kinaesthetic learners. Thus, a good teacher is one who addresses students' distinct learning styles. In this respect, the excerpts from the interviews showed the following perspective:

A good teacher will be able to come up with the good technique or good approach for individual students, only then her lesson will be engaging for the students. (T2)

[The teacher] must find out exactly what is the best way for students to be able to learn. (T5)

Secondly, different learner needs among students also contribute to individual differences that have to be catered for in the student-centred approach. Thus, a good teacher is one who caters for diverse learner needs by tailoring the teaching and learning to students' background, learning readiness, internal security and interests. Two of the teachers described the benefit of student-centred learning by saying:

...to reach out to the younger generation. So teachers need to adapt to find out what is it in the twenty-first century teaching style, learning styles? (T1)

...construct the lesson [in such a way that] the learning environment must not be threatening for the student. (T2)

Thirdly, different potentials and pace of learning also contribute to individual differences that have to be catered for. For example, some students may be weak in the use of verbal-linguistic but may excel in the use of visual-spatial; while other students may be weak in the use of visual-spatial but may excel in the use of verbal-linguistic. This shows a difference in intelligence types whereby different learners have different potentials. On top of that, there are some students who take time to grasp a new concept while some who are quick learners. This shows a difference in learning pace among individual learners. Thus, a good teacher would allow students to work with their own potentials and at their own pace in the student-centred approach because it requires a teacher to carry out thoughtful facilitation of learning. Teachers who preferred this student-centred learning approach mentioned:

[A good teacher is one who] recognises the potential in his students and highlights it. (T1)

[To have the quality of] patience, because when we teach, we cannot expect the students to... learn immediately... it takes time. (T3).

3.3. Nurturing Students

Nurture is to care for and encourage the growth or development. A good teacher is one who displays genuine warmth and compassion to students. This way, the teacher can build a relationship of trust and respect with students to break down communication barriers which can inhibit student learning (Overby, 2011). Thus, a good teacher should be empathic towards students, genuinely care about them and have a good rapport with them. Teachers who preferred nurture with care offered the following perspectives:

...should be a person who is compassionate... have to show kindness... (T2)

[A good teacher would] empathise... be in other people's shoes and try to understand. (T3)

A good teacher is also one who encourages students to excel and grow. The teacher can stimulate an interest or motive in students to learn and excel in their learning. Some forms of encouragement come through guiding and supporting students to excel, as well as through cooperating with and supporting parents' involvement in student learning. Two of the teachers stated:

[A good teacher once] encouraged me a lot, he got me involved... always praising me and using me as an example. (T4)

...motivate the parents on how to improve their child's performance academically. (T2)

Basically, lack of support and guidance are big contributors to students' lack of interest and commitment in their learning, leading to a decline in their performance.

3.4. Level of Professionalism

Good teachers know their subject matter and content and also they have good pedagogical skills to help learners understand and achieve desirable goals and objective of schooling. They did it by personalizing learners' learning and understanding learners' non-verbal language. Professionalism refers to the competence or skill expected of a

professional as opposed to an amateur. This means that a good teacher is one who has a good grasp over the knowledge and skills expected of a professionally trained teacher. In other words, a good teacher is well-equipped with his or her content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Teachers who emphasized the importance of content knowledge pointed out:

[If you are a good teacher] know your subject matter... well-equipped with your knowledge. (T6)

We have to have this (pedagogical) knowledge to solve problems in the teaching. (T3)

A teacher who has insufficient content knowledge will not have much to offer for students' knowledge gain and a teacher who has insufficient pedagogical skills will not be able to engage students in a meaningful learning experience. Moreover, having sufficient knowledge and skills alone is not enough to maintain a high level of professionalism. This is because as time passes, knowledge expands and society evolves, requiring teachers to upgrade and update their competence to suit the current classrooms. The excerpts below portrayed teachers' views of knowledge acquisition:

...be equipped with the latest knowledge... the teacher has to have that knowledge too. If not, the teacher will be like, at a lost. (T6)

... be continually upgrading his knowledge, especially on the core subject. (T3)

Good teachers do not stagnate in their knowledge. They are always seeking, searching, and learning to keep themselves abreast with the latest development in the subject content, pedagogy and better approaches in their own teaching and learning context. They hone their instructional and pedagogical skills by searching the internet, asking senior teachers, peer feedbacks, attending seminars and training.

3.5. Moral and Social Awareness

Good teachers communicate expectation and impart good moral values effectively and help learners to believe in themselves. A good teacher is one who is morally and socially aware because it is crucial for a teacher to play the role of developing students holistically. This role is related to the broader 'mission' of teaching in terms of the social and moral formation of individual students (Devine *et al.*, 2013). A teacher who is morally aware has high moral standards and tries to emulate them by portraying high moral values. Two teachers believed that good teachers portrayed and uphold moral standards by saying:

Teaching them that if you make a promise, you must know how to keep it... being trustworthy. (T4)

...attitude of tolerance, empathy, respect, you as your own self being a person who is responsible. (T3)

Furthermore, a teacher who is socially aware possesses good interpersonal skills and cooperates well with the school organisation. Good teachers deliberately model a form of positive behaviour which students would be encouraged, either consciously or unconsciously to emulate (Devine *et al.*, 2013). Teachers with good social skills would be able to function better in the school organisation and ultimately as a teacher. Teachers who have strong sense of social awareness gave the following comments:

Honesty is very important, being straight forward, and confronting issues when they are small... don't carry tales about your colleagues. (T4)

Should be able to cooperate well... adjust himself according to the levels of which he is communicating. (T3)

Good teachers are also strong in building relationships with the parents. They act as a bridge between parents and their children. They build strong relationship with students by being fair, impartial and never exhibit favouritism as all these bring negative impression to learners. Good teachers know that they need others to build positive education community. So they are willing to work as a team. They are team players working together for a greater good by helping each other and sharing resources. They also contribute positively to the working environment by creating and promoting good work culture because they don't assume and don't judge and know how and what to speak at the right time. Most important of all is they respect not just the students, they respect their colleagues and also their superiors.

3.6. Effective Management Skills

Good teachers also have good leadership skills. With these intrinsic natures, they are able to lead with integrity and they are polite in their dealings with others. They manage their roles and duties well by being flexible and with good planning of daily tasks, lesson plans and charting learners' progress. A good teacher has effective management skills like classroom management skills and time management skills. This is because such a teacher will be thoroughly prepared and well organised and only then be able to structure his or her teaching carefully to ultimately enhance student learning (Dunkin, 2002). The following interview excerpts explained the important of time management:

Time management is very important... so the teacher has enough time preparing for the lesson. (T5)

...not all that you plan in the classroom will take place... there might be some problems... so you have to be prepared. (T2)

The teaching profession is currently dubbed as the most hectic profession with teachers working the longest over-time. This is because there is a lot more to a teacher's job than teaching in the classroom. Hence without effective management skills, teachers' inability to cope would affect the effectiveness of their core business which is teaching and in turn affect students' learning.

4. Conclusion

The respondents of this study had shared their points of views of a good teacher that contribute positively to learners' outcomes and contribute positively to the culture of a school. Good teachers are essential for the wholesome or holistic development of the students and also the development of the profile of the school. Therefore it is important to know what contribute or influence the growth and the process of developing a good teacher. As a whole, evidence shows that the value of a teacher revolves around how well he or she places the students as the utmost priority. Although there are different themes to describe good teacher, namely personality, the qualities of nurturing students, having a high level of professionalism, being morally and socially aware and having effective management skills. This shows that being a good teacher is about a lot more than just what a teacher does in the classroom, rather it is about being an all-rounder. Only then can a teacher be fully capable of fulfilling the entirety of their job scope which is primarily emphasises students' holistic development.

The implications for this study is both personal and for wider education community. It adds to the existing body of research showing that teacher's personality, attitudes, skills, beliefs, professional development and professionalism encompass the qualities that resemble a good teacher. The findings are beneficial to both the individual teachers and to the educational community. For a school to create, maintain and promote good work ethic and school culture, it definitely need good teachers who can contribute positively to remove toxic culture and thus heightens the good and healthy culture. For individual teachers who see their roles and take their responsibilities as educators who desire to be good teachers, they could use the findings to refine their teaching practices and strive towards their journey of being labelled as a good teacher.

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