

What Does It Mean to Be a Good Teacher? Beliefs of Future Secondary School Teachers During Their Initial Training in Spain

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Abstract

Teachers play a key role in students' learning, especially when it comes to students who have more difficulties in the classroom. Initial teacher training contributes to achieving more competent teachers who are capable of successfully facing the start of their teaching profession, and students' beliefs about what it means to be a good teacher are key. The prior beliefs and ideas with which future teachers come to university classrooms determine their first teaching identity and the beginning of their professional practice. In this paper, research focused on the beliefs of future secondary school teachers regarding what they consider constitutes a good teacher. A qualitative, biographical-descriptive methodology was used, in which the teaching students' narratives were used as a starting point to establish what characterizes a good teacher. The results show that future secondary school teachers place the relationship between the teacher and the students as the key factor when it comes to being a good teacher, above any other factor, which includes aspects related to the way in which the curriculum is taught.

Keywords: secondary education, initial teacher training, teacher identity, students with learning difficulties, beliefs.

Introduction

In Spain, the initial training of future teachers is different for preschool and primary education compared to secondary education. A simultaneous training model is followed for the first stages of education. However, at the age of 18 preschool and primary teachers begin their teaching trajectory with the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood and Primary Education, in which the different curricular subjects of these stages (mathematics, social sciences, Spanish language, etc.) and their pedagogical training is intermingled. The initial training of secondary teachers in Spain, which will be the subject of our study, follows a consecutive model: first, individuals complete a four-year Bachelor's degree in any specific speciality (Geography and History, English, Mathematics, Economics, etc.) and then they go on to complete a one-year

Master's degree which enables professionals to teach at this stage (Imbernón, 2019). One of the consequences of following this type of training model to become a secondary school teacher is that some students who study the Master's degree had no educational vocation when they began their Bachelor's degree, unlike those who directly started their studies at the Faculty of Education, who have very clear professional preferences and a predilection for teaching.

Students entering this master's degree in Secondary Teacher Training bring with them certain beliefs about what constitutes a good teacher and what does not, as a result of the time they have spent watching teachers work throughout their academic trajectory. Between the ages of 12 and 15, they have spent many hours observing teachers carrying out their practice and their performance in the classroom. This is what Bandura (1982) called observational learning, vicarious learning. In fact, quite a few of these students found a vocation for teaching because of the presence of some teachers who were a reference for them, some who were concerned not only about their learning, but also their more personal problems. Also, a good number of them go on to study a certain university degree related to the subject taught at school by their favourite teacher.

In spite of what they are taught by teachers in university classrooms during their initial training, future teachers will often resort, at the beginning of their teaching practice, to repeating the practices of teachers who have been an example and reference for them. Some authors argue that these beliefs are deeply rooted in the future teacher, and are not changed and transformed, in most cases, during their university training. They are therefore very important in the definition of an initial teacher identity (Garza et al., 2016; Vaillant and Marcelo, 2015).

The term professional teacher identity is a complex concept, which mainly answers questions such as: What am I like as a teacher? How do I exercise my profession? Every teacher has a teaching identity that is different from the rest and which is formed over time and throughout life. This identity comes from observing teachers in the classroom throughout their childhood and is developed until the end of the teacher's time in the profession. A teacher's professional identity is never finished (Berger and Lê Van, 2019; Buitrago-Bonilla and Cárdenas-Soler, 2017). Their first identity is a mixture of their previous beliefs, their initial university training and even the internships carried out in educational centres as part of their university education (Souto,

2018). We have already mentioned that these prior beliefs and ideas play a key role in the beginning of a teacher's career (Farren, 2016).

Good initial teacher training should be based on reflection and addressing these beliefs in university classes, questioning them, or confirming them as relevant to the professional practice. Students in training often complain of excessively theoretical classes. These beliefs could serve to escape this tendency towards theory and replace it with experiences closer to the reality of the classroom. Students who are being trained in the Secondary Teacher Training master's degree also complain about their initial training not being useful for the practical aspect of their profession (García-Rubio, 2021). According to the students themselves, the lack of practicality of the classes, together with the lack of coordination of the teaching staff in the teaching of the contents, are issues which could be improved.

On the other hand, the future teacher, having spent much of his or her life observing teaching, may think that teaching is easy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many teachers, at the beginning of their professional practice, have great difficulties in being able to properly manage a class and find that the role of the teacher in the classroom is very complex. Significant competences are needed to be able to adequately carry out this profession (Hahl and Mikulec, 2018). Moreover, at the secondary school stage, the difficulties are increased as students with very different interests and motivations coexist in the classroom. In the same classroom, there are students who want to continue studying Bachillerato (non-compulsory secondary education or 11th and 12th grade), others who want to do Vocational Training, and also some who are waiting to turn 16, the compulsory age to be in school in Spain, to abandon their educational trajectory and look for a job.

We cannot forget that numerous studies consider teachers to be the main resource for improving students' educational performance (Gimeno, 2013; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). This is even more so in the case of students with severe learning difficulties. If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is the importance of going to school to interact with other students, but also the value of direct contact with teachers. If anyone needs good teachers, it is the students who have the most difficulties and the most negative educational trajectories. Students who are doing well do not need excellent teachers to the same extent because they have already acquired good habits.

The aim of this paper is to find out what beliefs and preconceptions future secondary school teachers in Spain have about what makes a good teacher:

What do they think constitutes being a good teacher? What qualities do they need to have?

Methodology

Secondary education is characterised by the presence of young people with very different attitudes and interests, some with significant learning difficulties. This makes adequate teacher training all the more important. A teacher has to be trained throughout his or her life, but initial training is of fundamental importance in order to stay in the profession and not abandon it prematurely. The TALIS Report indicates that in some countries, such as the United Kingdom, the drop-out rate is as high as 50% (OECD, 2019). And in this initial training, as we have already mentioned, the beliefs of university students who are training to become teachers play a fundamental role.

To find out the beliefs of future secondary school teachers regarding what they consider it means to be a good teacher, we resorted to qualitative research from a biographical-narrative perspective (Bolívar et al., 2014). Through individual narratives, in this case of master's students, we were able to learn about their feelings, experiences and emotions, something that could not have been achieved with other research instruments. These narratives regarding what, in their opinion, constitutes a good teacher helped us access their memories and explore their beliefs and previous conceptions of teaching and learning (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019; Rodrigues and Mogarro, 2020).

Eighty university students participated. They were studying the master's degree in Education to become secondary school teachers during the 2021-22 academic year, in two different specialisations with 40 students each. At the beginning of the course, during the first classes, the students were asked to think about who their best teachers during their time at school had been and what their qualities made them the best. The students' narratives were identified with the letter E (student) and a number from 1 to 80.

Once all the narratives had been collected, in documents written by the students, an exhaustive data analysis was carried out, from which common characteristics emerged about what they considered were the qualities of a good teacher, and these were classified into different categories and subcategories. Following this content analysis, we identified the following categories and subcategories:

- Personal aspects of the teacher: which provides us with information about the most personal characteristics of the teacher and their commitment to the profession. It is divided into two other categories: relationship with students

(how they deal with students) and their attitude towards their profession (their commitment, motivation, vocation, etc.).

- Pedagogical aspects: which collects information on how teaching practice is carried out in the classroom in relation to the curriculum.

Results

The research yielded results regarding the aspects that the future secondary school teachers most valued in their schoolteachers. Below is a summary of the overall results broken down into categories. The number appearing in the tables describes the frequency, the number of times students referred to these categories in their narratives. For ease of interpretation, they are also expressed in percentage terms.

Table 1

Overall results of positive personal and pedagogical aspects of the teaching staff as reported by students

Categories	Beginning of the Master's	
	n	%
Relationship with students	153	49,35
Professional attitude	42	13,55
Pedagogical aspects	115	37,10
Total	310	100

Source: Own elaboration

Table 1 shows how the personal aspects - the relationship with students and the attitude towards the profession - are more important for future secondary school teachers than the pedagogical aspects, with regard to the teachers they remember as having the most positive influence on their lives. Almost half of them, 49.35%, highlighted aspects concerning their relationship with the students as qualities of a good teacher, and less than 40%, 37.10%, pointed out the pedagogical aspects concerning the methodology used in the classroom, the preparation of classes, the type of assessment carried out, etc., as important qualities.

One of the students made the following comment: "This person was such a bad teacher that the only thing they knew how to do was explain" (E57). This sentence sums up the previous table of results very well, as the student tries to emphasize that in addition to the curricular aspects, there are other aspects that they value much more highly in teachers. It is not enough to teach classes in the right way; the teaching staff must have human qualities which are highly valued and taken into account by the students.

Another student pointed out that "the teacher explained things to us with such enthusiasm that it was difficult not to pay attention. You could see that he liked what he was doing" (E24). A total of 13.55% highlighted the passion shown in the teaching activity, the enthusiasm transmitted to the students in order to achieve a good level of learning as one of the keys to being a good teacher. This raises the question of whether teachers need to have a vocation for the profession. In any profession, and even more so in this one, where you are working with young people all the time, you need to like what you do. This is certainly transmitted to the class and the young students perceive it.

In the results presented here, we intend to place special emphasis on the aspects that stand out about the relationship between teachers and students, which are presented below.

Table 2

Subcategories found within the category relationship with the student

Relationship with the student	Beginning of the Master's	
	n	%
Concern for everything that happens to students both in and out of class	43	53,75
Proximity to students, treating students as equals	28	35,00
Pleasant, kind, friendly and affectionate	25	31,25
Calm, serene, with a lot of patience.	20	25,00
An empathetic and very human person, listens and advises the student	17	21,25
A cheerful person, in a good mood, even funny	7	8,75
Respectful always with the students	6	7,50
A serious person, but friendly, pleasant	4	5,00
Equal treatment of all students	1	1,25

A leader and charismatic	1	1,25
Knows how to apply and maintain discipline	1	1,25

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2 shows the subcategories identified in the master's students' narratives of teachers' relationship with students. One of the aspects that stands out the most is "Concern for everything that happens to them". If the teacher shows interest in the student beyond pedagogical terms, it will generate a very important stimulus that will help the student connect with the teacher. One participant commented: "You knew that he was always there, for better or worse, and not only for class-related issues, but for everything" (E14). Teachers share a lot of time during the day in classrooms with students, but also in corridors and playgrounds. A relationship of mutual affection can be created, especially if the same teacher is present for several years.

Far from considering closeness as a problem, in their narratives, this quality, together with being empathetic, pleasant, and having a good dose of patience, is one of the most important: "It is not by raising your voice too much and keeping your distance too much that you achieve order in the classroom. This teacher managed to keep the order in class because we all respected and appreciated him" (E38). The calmness and serenity, away from any stridency with which the teacher teaches the class, is seen as a great value. They detested the teachers who were always grumpy and constantly losing their temper, and constantly threatening them with punishment. This is one of the main problems beginner teachers tend to have, knowing how to keep their cool and calm in the face of any problem that arises in the classroom. Good training, together with the necessary experience, will help teachers achieve this way of acting.

Being serious or cheerful is not the most important thing. One of the students commented: "He was very serious, but he was very approachable, and you knew that if you had a problem, he was attentive and concerned about solving it" (E7). Each teacher has his or her own personality, it is not about being different, but about showing interest in the students and creating a connection with them. If the teacher makes that connection, he/she has everything to gain with the student: "Whenever he spoke to us, we always listened to him, because we really loved and appreciated him. He was a good person." (E31). This does not mean that students do not value teachers' ability to impose themselves when it is time, nor that teachers have to do what students want in order to be liked.

Discussion and Conclusions

As a result of the conducted research, it has been possible to discover the beliefs and ideas held by future teachers at the beginning of the master's degree that will enable them to become teachers in an educational stage in which they will encounter significant difficulties to be solved in the day-to-day classroom.

It may come as a surprise to some that personal aspects, specifically the relationship between teachers and students, are what university students and future teachers value most when it comes to being a "good teacher". Therefore, as indicated by authors such as Day (2006), the connection established between teacher and student is what motivates one to continue teaching and the other to continue learning. Students do not highlight the teacher who taught their classes with a very innovative methodology so much, although they valued this aspect positively. Above all, they remember the teacher who cared about them and who was always there when they needed them. Those who were close and interested in the young person, in all their dimensions, and not only in their progress at school.

If teachers want to get students' attention, they have to establish a good rapport with their students, paying attention to their academic but also personal needs. Teachers' first mission is to ensure that students do not hate their subject, and to this end, the relationship established with the student is fundamental (Yoo and Carter, 2017). One of the main concerns for teachers starting to teach in schools is to maintain order in the classroom. A good relationship with students and a good classroom climate is the best help they can find to achieve this. Students shy away from teachers who are excessively authoritarian, constantly scolding and in a state of permanent tension (García-Rubio, 2022).

However, although the results obtained leave pedagogical issues in the background, this does not mean that they are not important for the students. It is not the most important, but it is important. They appreciate teachers who have good classroom practice, and who know how to teach knowledge. They appreciate teachers who use an appropriate methodology, and who make classes attractive and participatory (Tardif, 2004). Many authors advocate playful and creative teaching to make students feel interested in the curricular content. If students are bored in class, learning will be more complicated and costly. Learning does not have to be incompatible with having a good time in

class and even having fun; on the contrary, if something motivates you and you like it, it will make learning easier.

The study that has been carried out has focused on university students who are training for the secondary school profession. Future research could be conducted in the field of future preschool and primary school teachers, where, as we have pointed out above, the training model is different, with a mixture of pedagogy and the learning of academic subjects from the very beginning. The results could then be compared to see if they are similar, despite having different models of initial teacher training.

On the other hand, university classes for the initial training of these future secondary school teachers would be better and would reach them more if the problems addressed in them had a more practical utility for their professional practice and for the real problems they will encounter in schools. Combining practice and theory should be one of the main objectives of university teachers in this training. Starting with students' beliefs could contribute to achieving this purpose, and thus question or confirm the previous beliefs and ideas with which students come to the classroom.

The results obtained in this research should serve to highlight the importance of the relationship established between teachers and students and its influence on their motivation to learn. In initial teacher training, this aspect, which is sometimes thought to be of little importance, must be carefully taken care of and future teachers must be made aware of its enormous importance. Far from thinking that it is only important to learn how to plan classes in a methodologically appropriate way, teachers should take care of another series of aspects which have an even greater influence on whether students consider them to be good teachers.

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