

Contribution

The relationship between teacher personality and teacher quality: lifting a tip of a veil of a teacher's X-factor?

The ideology of inclusive education signifies that every child should be able to attend a regular school, unless there are insoluble barriers which make this impossible. This principle is voiced in treaties such as the Salamanca Statement and the No Child Left Behind Act. Accordingly, many countries nowadays aim at integrating students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education.

A specific challenge for teachers who apply for inclusive education is teaching students who show challenging behaviour in the classroom¹. A growing number of teachers report feelings of professional inadequacy in teaching students with behavioural difficulties².

Feelings of professional inadequacy are said to occur when a teacher lacks pedagogic and/or didactic skills to act adequately in demanding classroom situations³.

Teachers of students with behavioural difficulties are found to be particularly at risk for experiencing occupational stress⁴. Moreover, these teachers are more likely to end their career in education earlier than teachers who are teaching students with other SEN or without⁵. Many teachers of students with behavioural difficulties tend to pay too much attention to controlling student behaviour rather than to teaching⁶.

At the same time, in this respect, students with behavioural difficulties are a population at risk as well. Regardless of the underlying cause of their behavioural problems, students with behavioural difficulties gain less academic progress than students who go through a normal development⁷. Strikingly, this academic delay appears to increase rapidly over the years⁸.

For all the feelings of professional inadequacy, there are also teachers who are somehow able to bring out the best in all their students. These teachers are able to engage students, meet their differing needs and increase their potential. These teachers are commonly said to be equipped with a teacher's X-factor⁹; an enigmatic, yet unexplained talent causing a teacher's excellence in the classroom.

A widely accepted key determinant of successful schooling is teacher quality. Accordingly, the competencies of expert teachers have already been studied in detail¹⁰. However, recent evidence points at personality as an underlying core factor from which these competencies may arise¹¹. In the literature, personality is defined as relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours¹².

Much literature has already been published on the relationship between personality and job performance. Virtually all studies on the subject report strong correlations between the Five-Factor Model of Personality and job performance¹³. However, until recently, these relations were not explored in the field of education. A first study of this kind was conducted by the authors¹⁴. The results of this study were presented at last year's ECER in Istanbul.

The personality dimensions of Conscientiousness (facets of competence, self-discipline, ambition) and Neuroticism (facets of depression, vulnerability, shame) were found to discriminate expert teachers from non-experts. Furthermore, significant relationships were found between teacher personality and teacher quality in teaching students with behavioural difficulties for Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Extraversion (assertiveness).

With the aim of contributing to finding ways to accurately recruit expert teachers of students with behavioural difficulties, a cohort of in-service teacher-trainees was studied on their personality and performance in teaching students with behavioural difficulties. The authors wondered whether the relationships found in the previous study could be established or replicated in teacher education?

Method

Participants came from an initial cohort of teacher-trainees (N=147) from the Department of Teacher Education of The Hanze University of Applied Sciences in the Northern Region of The Netherlands. The study comprised a two-phased data collection in 2012 and 2013. First, in the second year of teacher education, participation of teacher-trainees was requested on three different occasions (verbal, digital, phone). A total number of 70 teacher-trainees responded to either one of these attempts and filled out a personality questionnaire (NEO-PI-R). The questionnaire comprised 5 personality dimensions measured by 45 items each on a 5-point Likert scale. In the third year of teacher education, the participating teacher-trainees served in-service a whole school year for two days a week. In that period of time, teacher quality in teaching students with behavioural difficulties was measured by means of application of an observation instrument, a self-efficacy measure and a nomination procedure. These instruments had been validated by the authors¹⁵ in previous research. On the basis of 3 to 4 observations during that school year, teacher educators who served as job coaches of the participating teacher-trainees rated the extent to which teacher-trainees met the basic psychological needs (i.e. competence, autonomy and relatedness) of randomly selected students with behavioural difficulties by means of the CARS¹⁵. A translated and modified version of a self-efficacy scale¹⁶ was filled out by teacher-trainees with regard to teaching students with behavioural problems. Job coaches from the first up to the third year of teacher education (N= 20) participated in a nomination procedure. Each job coach was asked the question: is this particular student, according to your opinion an expert in teaching students with behavioural difficulties? Unfortunately, the authors faced major drop out numbers in this study. To know, from the 70 teacher trainees who filled out a personality questionnaire, more than half either quit or delayed teacher education. Further, a number of colleagues in teacher education was not able to complete the CARS or the nomination procedure due to memory problems, sickness, resignation and retirement. The relationship between teacher-trainee's personality traits and their quality in teaching students with behavioural difficulties was analyzed by means of calculating Pearson's correlation coefficients. Sum scores on the three instruments measuring teacher quality were correlated with the dimensions of the Five Factor Model of Personality. In the case of significant positive linear relationships, these were analyzed in depth on facet level.

Expected Outcomes

The relationship between teacher personality and teacher quality in teaching students with behavioural difficulties found in previous research was expected to be established or replicated in the cohort of teacher-trainees. This concerned significant relations on the personality dimensions of Neuroticism (facets of depression, shame, vulnerability), Conscientiousness (competence, self-discipline, ambition) and Extraversion (assertiveness). The results of this study will be presented at the ECER in Porto in September 2014. The present study provides pioneering input for personality research, specifically for the link between personality and job performance. It, however, also leaves many questions unanswered and raises new ones. Further research is needed in order to be able to supply (pre-service) teachers with the specific tools needed to effectively engage, teach, and guide students with behavioural difficulties in mainstream education. In the case that the results of the previous study will be established or replicated, it would be interesting to find out whether teacher quality in teaching students with behavioural difficulties can perhaps be assessed in an early phase of teacher education. If that would be the case, this could have implications for assessment and honours programs. Another interesting direction for follow-up research could be attempting to operationalize the evident thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that arise from the personality dimensions found to make a difference. That is, not on a general level, but in-depth, on facet level and specifically focused on the field of inclusive education. Examination of these specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviours offers possibilities to improve teacher education. For instance, future research could aim at the development and testing of interventions regarding changing teacher beliefs (thoughts, feelings) and actions (behaviours).

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